THE ONGOING CREATION OF HUMANITY: 
EMMANUEL LEVINAS AND THE ETHICAL SENSE OF “CHOSEN PEOPLE”

A Thesis 
submitted to the Faculty of 
The School of Continuing Studies 
and of 
The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences 
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the 
degree of 
Doctor of Liberal Studies

By

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October 15, 2012
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ABSTRACT

This thesis frames and examines fully an understanding of the ethical sense of a “chosen people,” described through the phenomenological lens of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. In working toward a means to animate the tenor of customary “chosen people” discourse the religious, historical, and cultural expressions of “choseness” within Judaism are traced from biblical sources until the present day. This is followed by an elucidation of Levinas’ phenomenological description of subjectivity as “substitution,” or as the infinite responsibility of the one-for-the-other, as rendered in his major philosophical texts, Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority, and Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence.

It is argued in this thesis that Levinas’ depiction of “choseness,” not as exceptional privilege and inflated self-esteem, but rather as the fundamental characteristic of the morally responsible human, found primarily in his “confessional” writings, translates to the notion of a “chosen people,” whose unremitting obligation to respond to the needs of the other, is ultimately for the benefit of all humanity. This thesis proceeds to explore contested notions of universalism and particularism, which are, then, discussed in relation to “chosen people” discourse, reflected in philosopher
Jacques Derrida’s work on “exemplarity” in his “Philosophical Nationality” seminars, as examined by Dana Hollander and Sarah Hammerschlag.

A critical proposal is finally made for a compelling appreciation of human “creatureliness” and the ongoing work of the goodness of creation, which it implies, outside of any conventional religious comprehension, although finding resonance in biblical narrative. The value in approaching the idea of a “chosen people” through its ethical considerations lies in the opportunity that such an approach could provide for inter-religious and cross cultural dialogue, in the contemporary pursuit of peaceful relations among people, and among nations.
To my partner Barbara, and to our daughters, Deena and Winnie

I flourish in my family’s embrace
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you, Dr. Debra Bergoffen, Dr. Wayne Froman, and Dr. Alex Scheinman, for provoking and prodding me at the start of my mid-life adventure in scholarship, at George Mason University. You opened up possibilities for me limited only by the reach of my imagination.

I also wish to say thank you, Laina Saul, my student colleague in graduate Liberal Studies, and in the Masters of Philosophy program, at George Mason University, for sharing the dream of doctoral level study and for your continuing friendship and support.

Abundant thanks to my professors at Georgetown University DLS program. Thank you, Dr. Terrence Reynolds, for giving me a chance, after my interview, to be part of the DLS community, and for graciously and enthusiastically taking on the role of a challenging interlocutor during your course, “The Rise of the Modern Spirit.”

Special thanks to my readers, Dr. Tod Linafelt, and Dr. Frank Ambrosio. I value your keen insights and your confidence in my undertaking. Thank you, Dr. Linafelt, for your thought provoking work on the promise of a post-Holocaust reading of the Hebrew Bible. Many thanks, Dr. Ambrosio, for co-chairing my thesis committee, and for teaching a Dante course that made studying inferno feel like paradise.

Finally, thank you, thank you Dr. Froman for your generous guidance in the writing of my doctoral thesis. More than a committee chair and greater than a mentor, you are, in the fullest sense of the word, a teacher and a “rebbe.” My life is forever
enriched by your steadfast belief in the relevance of my project, and by your sage
counsel, so essential in bringing it to fruition. Your judicious contribution is rivaled only
by your patience and your kindness.
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the possibility that the reclamation of an ethical sense of “chosenness” as caught sight of through the phenomenological lens of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is a viable means to enrich and vitalize the tenor of customary “chosen people” discourse. In order to trace the development of the idea of “chosenness” I will, in this introduction, prior to examining its ethical dimensions in later chapters, explore its more sedimented religious, historical and cultural threads as they are significant for an understanding of how we, in our time, have inherited the notion of “chosenness.” I am particularly interested in the relevance of these factors to the thinking of contemporary scholars. The claims of this thesis include first that “chosenness” is multidimensional or polysemous with religious, historical, cultural and ethical aspects. Secondly I argue that the idea of “chosenness” or of a “chosen people” remains open to interpretation. Next, I contend that in researching past and current discussions of “chosenness,” its ethical character appears muted, if not utterly silent. Finally, the central assertion made by this thesis is that in the process of retrieving an ethical sense of the idea of a “chosen people,” by drawing on Levinas’ phenomenological description of human subjectivity as the one-for-the-other of responsibility, a truly dialogical relationship across its many and varied aspects can develop.

The idea of “chosenness” is initially encountered in the Hebrew Bible in the
story of the covenant between God and Abram\(^1\) (Abraham) that is renewed communally in the story of God’s revelation to Moses and the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai. Mark S. Smith notes in his book *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism* that according to the Bible story, monotheism was not the original condition of the world; it stepped onto the world stage with the revelation of the one God at Mt. Sinai. Ancient Israel’s monotheism has been thought of as a revolution against what is often described as the polytheistic thought of its near Eastern neighbors. However, various biblical passages refer to signs of polytheism within Israelite culture, such as the passage found in Exodus 15:11, “Who is like you among the gods, O Lord, who is like you, mighty in holiness?” Recent studies suggest that monotheism and Israel’s perception of itself as a separate culture and religion from its neighbors, and in a covenantal relation with God, developed over a long period of time. Universal divine claims are not unambiguous until the time of Second Isaiah, in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E. (Smith 2001, 23, 29, 33,182).

What is important about the revelation of God at Mt. Sinai, for the purposes of elucidating the idea of “chosenness,” is that the revelation of the one God elevates the role of people themselves, for by following God’s commandments humans can now be partners with God in the daily work of creation (Eisen 1983, 65, 150). The unconditional sense of “chosenness” found in the story of Abram is recast at Sinai as conditional on strict observance of God’s commandments.

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\(^1\) The first covenant God makes is with Noah, a righteous man, blameless in his time, following the flood, promising never to destroy the earth again by flood. (Genesis 9:8) The “chosenness,” of Abram seems to be of a different order. Berlin, et al, note in *The Jewish Study Bible* (Berlin, et al 2004, 30) that the promises of land, progeny, and blessing bestowed on Abram come like a bolt from the blue, an act of God’s grace alone. There is no indication of why, or even if, Abram merits them.
Prior to and particularly during the Middle Ages, the Christian Church disputed Judaism’s claim to “chosenness,” proclaiming a new “chosenness” or in Christian theological terms, election, based on the belief in the saving power of Jesus rather than in the law. Reuven Firestone, in his text *Who are the Real Chosen People, The Meaning of Chosenness in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, claims that Christian belief espouses that Abram having been chosen by God on account of his faith consequently includes by extension faith in resurrection and salvation through Jesus. On another level Jesus himself is identified as the “chosen one,” (“then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, My Chosen One; listen to him. And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone.” Luke 9:35) because of his relationship as the son of God, divinely chosen descendent of the house of David and it is faith in Jesus that brings a certain merit upon his believers. The New Testament seems to claim that Christianity’s status as the “new chosen” or the “new Israel” is a reflection of the most perfect articulation of divine will. Hebrews 8:6-8 reads in part, ‘But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old…Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel…not like the covenant that I made with their fathers…For they did not continue my covenant….’’ The Qur’an, Islam’s Holy Scriptures dating from the seventh century CE, also recast “choseness” making the case that both Judaism and Christianity have forfeited their claim to being God’s “chosen” by neglecting the requirements that being “chosen” entail. These requirements pertain to proper behavior including doing good works and belief in or total submission to God. In the Qur’an 3.110 it is written, “You are the best community
that has been brought forth for humanity…If the People of the Book had believed it would have been better for them.” Abram’s merit is that he was able to find God through human reason and to submit fully to God. The Jewish and Christian covenants rather than being superseded are declared in the Qur’an to be “corrected” (Firestone 2008, 49-51, 62-64, 70, 73, 78-82).²

The controversy over who legitimately merits the designation of God’s “chosen people,” or in more popular terms, whom does God love and bless best, continues into present day religious, cultural and political (nation-state) concerns and debates. The idea, on the one hand, is so attractive that groups of people vie for its title, and on the other hand it is so anathema that many religious leaders, Jewish and otherwise, have called for its repudiation. The perspective hypothesized in this thesis is that the ongoing challenge of a “chosen people” deserves a closer, more nuanced consideration than merely proclaiming oneself or one’s group as superior because chosen by God or conversely rejecting the entire concept as morally and politically corrupt. In order to orient “chosen people” discourse in the direction of its ethical connotations as drawn from a Levinasian philosophical perspective, I will first trace the historical evolution of “chosenness” discourse as encountered in the Hebrew Bible and in Judaism’s acceptance or rejection of its promise as played out expressly in reaction to Christian doctrine and opinion.

² New Testament passages are from the English Standard Version online. Qur’an passages are taken from Sahih International Qur’an.
In order to trace the development of the multi-faceted notion of a “chosen people,” I have opted to start in the middle, in the Medieval period, so as to both reflect back to its biblical references and look ahead to modern and post-Holocaust responses to its provocations in a manner that suggests that “chosenness” can be understood in both its historical/cultural and its a-historical or ethical dimensions. Medieval Jewish scholars found themselves primarily occupied with responding to the Christian Church’s claim that the Jewish people were no longer God’s “chosen,” Christianity having assumed that particular distinction. Judah Halevi (1075-1141), a major apologist for Judaism, writing in his book The Kuzari claims that Jewish people are hereditarily endowed with a unique religious sensibility and that their special relationship with God and their observance of Jewish law are the essential elements of their existence as a “chosen people.” He envisions the role of Jews in the Diaspora as that of a “light unto the nations,” spreading the idea of monotheism and Jewish values. Most importantly Halevi claims that redemption of the land of Israel is a central imperative of Judaism (Beker 2008, 32-33). Halevi understands “chosen people” in terms of land, law, and “light unto the nations.” His beliefs regarding the redemptive qualities of the land can put one in mind of the following biblical passages:³

And the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your land and your birthplace and your father’s house to the land I will show you. And I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. (Genesis 12:1-3)

Genesis 17:8 reads in part:

And I will give unto you and your seed after you the land in which you sojourn, the whole land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding, and I will be their God.

Looking forward these passages also resonate with modern Israeli nation-state “chosen people” discourse. Both Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (1891-1982), leader of the Israeli settler movement, and his father, the noted Torah scholar and Chief Rabbi of the British mandate for Palestine, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), emphasize the sanctity of the land of Israel in partnership with faith as a fulfillment of the Zionist dream (Gitlin 2010, 29). In Abraham Isaac Kook’s work *Igrot ha-Raaya*, he writes, “We have here also a great positive force, a deep love for our people, a firm dedication to extend the practical work of rebuilding Eretz Yisrael, to direct the spirit of our generation to draw closer to the land and the nation, in keeping with the historic character of our people” (Kook 1962, 16).

The significance of the law as a central component of “chosenness” and one closely linked to the sanctity of the land can be found in Deuteronomy Chapter 4:1, which reads:

And now, Israel, hear the statutes and the laws that I am about to teach you to do, so you may live, and you shall come and take hold of the land that the Lord God of your father is about to give to you. You shall not add to the word that I charge you and you shall not subtract from it, to keep the commands of the Lord your God which I charge you.

And in Deuteronomy 4:6 we find the following:

And you shall keep and do, for that is your wisdom and your understanding….And what great nation is there that has just statutes and law like all this teaching that I am about to set before you today.
Modern Orthodox Judaism holds dear an understanding of “chosenness” as an obligation to keep Halakhah (Jewish law) received at Mt. Sinai. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (1903-1993) described as a man of both spiritual and rational faith makes no distinction between moral and ritual holiness, both being the order of creation commanded by God. Orthodox Judaism believes that it is precisely through voluntary assumption of Halakhah that Jews can realize their full human potential and they consider legal texts authoritative in that human existence, (existence of the universe through justice, or a thought of the distinctive human character of loving kindness bestowed on the world by Israel) can be earned through the performance of the commandments (Eisen 1983, 103-104, 165). In his text *Halakhic Man*, Ssoleveitchik writes, “When halakhic man approaches reality he comes with his Torah, given to him at Sinai, in hand. He orients himself to the world by means of fixed statutes and firm principles. An entire corpus of precepts and laws guides him along the path leading to existence” (Soloveitchik 1983, 19).

Lastly we come to Halevi’s idea of Jewish “chosenness” as a “light unto the nations.” This idea resonates with Isaiah 42:6-7:

I the Lord, in My grace, have summoned you,
And I have grasped you by the hand.
I created you, and appointed you
A covenant people, a light of nations—
Opening eyes deprived of light
Rescuing prisoners from confinement,
From the dungeon those who sit in darkness.
This notion of mission found a home in the 20th century reform movement of American Judaism, superseding the overall notion of “chosenness,” which since the time of emancipation of European Jews in the nineteenth century, was de-emphasized or outright rejected. The assertion of a mission to humanity as the core of Judaism was later challenged by Jews who started to feel more and more at home in an American culture that rested upon the belief that “all men are created equal” (Eisen 1983, 19-21).

Writing in the second half of the 12th century Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon, 1138-1204), born only several years before Halevi’s death, is arguably the most well known of all Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages. What I find most striking in his celebrated work *Thirteen Principles of Faith* is the absence of the notion of “chosenness.” He does weigh in on it in other writings, such as in his “Epistle to the Jews of Yemen,” claiming that the Jewish people benefit from their progenitors’ righteous response to God, granted that this be constantly renewed through adhering in the present to God’s commandments (Beker 2008, 16, 18). Perhaps the absence of direct reference to “chosenness” in the *Thirteen Principles of Faith* is a result of the relatively infrequent reference to “chosenness” in the Torah. Passages referring to “chosenness” include: “You the Lord has chosen to become for Him a treasured people

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4 The rabbis of the first conference of the American Reform Rabbis, in Philadelphia in 1869, declared that the destruction of the Temple had served God’s purpose by dispersing the Jews “for the realization of their high priestly mission to lead the nation to the true knowledge and worship of God” (Eisen 1983, 188 n.54). Previously, in 1885 Reform Judaism’s Declaration of Principles (1885 Pittsburgh Platform), emphasized ethics in a universalist context, while reaffirming the commitment to Jewish particularism through the expression of the religious idea of the mission of Israel, one in which the biblical prophets serve as advocates of ethical monotheism. The mission of Israel was to stand as an example to the world of the highest standards of ethics, justifying the continued existence of the Jewish people (jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaica/ ejud0002).
among all the peoples…because of the Lord’s love for you” (Deuteronomy 7:6-9) and “For you are a holy people to the Lord your God, and you has the Lord chosen to be a treasured people to Him of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth” (Deuteronomy 14:2). “A treasured people” (am segulah) can be noted as having a far different ring to it than that of a “chosen people.” One can almost hear an echo of inclusive family love, a structure demanding of obligation to others, rather than the mark of exclusive superiority. In the phrase “you has the Lord chosen to be a treasured people to him,” treasured is modifying the meaning of “chosenness,” rather than “chosenness” modifying the meaning of treasured. Rabbi Gilbert S. Rosenthal⁵ explains that the Hebrew verb “bahar” connotes several different things including “choose,” but it also can mean love, take delight in, test, refine, bring near, set aside, single out, and sanctify. Indeed, he writes, all nuances of this complex verb appear in biblical texts (Rosenthal www.bc.edu). The numerous and varied connotations of “chosenness” found in the Hebrew Bible make it difficult to develop one overriding context for its meaning.

A perhaps less well known, but distinguished Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages, Gersonides (Levi ben Gershon, 1288-1344), writing a century after Maimonides, also espouses the idea that providence can be passed on to one’s descendents, although his Aristotelian conception of an impersonal God demands that it is “man’s” and not God’s initiative that brings this about. Gersonides is of interest to my thesis regarding a Levinasian interpretation of “chosenness” because he, not unlike Levinas, stands at the intersection of philosophy and religion, in particular Talmudic study. Gersonides also

⁵ Rabbi Rosenthal is Executive Director of the National Council of Synagogues.
writes in both genres, believing that the interpretation of covenant, the central concept for the interpretation of Jewish “chosenness” straddles the threshold between philosophical and biblical commentary. The dialogical relationship between religion and philosophy is exemplified in Gersonides understanding of Moses’ prophecy not as prognostication but as the acquisition of moral and theoretical knowledge. Reading Gersonides, the Torah is depicted as providing assistance for philosophical speculation regarding science and metaphysics, which once more points to the similarities between his and Levinas’ exegetical and philosophical modes of discourse serving different, but complementary functions. Gersonides’ philosophical writings are considered universal in nature and his biblical and Talmudic writings, more particular, though the former can be applied to Jewish history (Eisen 1995, 1, 15-16, 36, 75-76, 92, 180).

Returning once again to an earlier era of the Middle Ages we discover Rashi (Rabbi Schlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105), unquestionably the most prominent Talmudic scholar of his or perhaps any time, examining the seeming paradox of the concurrent characteristics of a universal and of a particular notion of Jewish “chosenness.” Levinas describes this paradox in terms of Judaism’s aspiration to a universal morality, the responsibility to one’s neighbor, through the particular revelation of God’s commandments to the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai (Levinas 1990b, 21-22). Most well known for his interpretation of Jewish law, Rashi considers the Torah’s importance as lying in its teachings concerning human values and morality and it is within this context that an understanding of “chosenness” should be approached. He supports the Jewish people’s claim to the land of Israel, but he also writes of a universal vision of Jerusalem.
shared by the many nations of the world (Beker 2008, 35, 132, 176). Rashi’s Talmudic commentaries remain to this day an authoritative lens through which to approach the Hebrew Bible.

The apprehension of Jewish “chosenness” in both its universality and particularity, or the question of whether the “chosenness” of the Jewish people has universal implications or not, remains relevant for many modern and post-modern religious and philosophical thinkers such as Franz Rosenzweig, Levinas, and Jacques Derrida. Rosenzweig (1886-1929) was a German Jewish theologian and philosopher. His major work, *The Star of Redemption*, describes the relationships among God, humanity and the world in terms of creation, revelation and redemption. Dana Hollander’s writing in her text *Exemplarity and Chosenness, Rosenzweig and Derrida in the Nation of Philosophy* brings forward Rosenzweig’s belief that the core insights about “chosenness” are constitutive both of human individuality and of Jewish existence. Rosenzweig regards “chosenness” as a form of individuation between universality and particularity. His influence on Levinas’ thinking is perhaps most evident in the notion that a universality is not the same as a totality into which the human being is subsumed. As I will elaborate on in future chapters, Levinas expands on Rosenzweig’s understanding of the self as absolutely singular in his description of the ethical or human condition as one of being absolutely commanded by the “other.” Hollander observes that Rosenzweig and Levinas “share a view of the self as obligated or responsible by virtue of an intertwining of particularity-- the absolute singularity
involved in the relationship of obligation--and universality--obligation as a universal human condition” (Hollander 2008, 114).

How post-modern French philosopher Derrida (1930-2004), best known for his deconstruction or dismantling of hierarchical binary opposites, engages with the challenges of “chosenness” will be more thoroughly examined in a later chapter of this thesis. Suffice it to say here that he also investigates the question of whether or not the idea of a “chosen people” is one of particularity and/or universality. Hollander writes that in the opening session of the 1986-87 “Theological Nationality” seminars, Derrida defines “chosenness” or election as “a general structure by virtue of which a singular people or particular nation claims itself to be invested with a mission or a responsibility that it regards as universal” (Hollander 2008, 3, 28, 114, 126).

Returning to the early modern period it should be noted that not all Jewish scholars supported the idea of “a chosen people” in either its particularity or universality. Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), a critic of organized religion’s authority, can be considered a bridge between Medieval and Enlightenment/modern philosophical reflection. Spinoza, a Dutch philosopher was the child of Portuguese ex-conversos. Conversos were Jews who were for the most part forced to convert to Christianity during the Spanish and Portuguese inquisitions of the 1500s. Spinoza asserts that the bible is not a divinely revealed text and that it contains logical and temporal inconsistencies. It does, he contends, teach morality and politics, though not exceptionally. What it does not do is teach philosophy or science or contain any hidden truths of universal import (Berlin 2004, 1964). Spinoza addresses the troublesome issue
of “chosenness” in his work *Theological –Political Treatise*. He denies the notion that the ancient Hebrews surpassed other communities in intellect or morality so that Jews could not be considered a “chosen people,” except in the limited sense of their historical, social and governmental successes. He considers the reference to “God’s election” an empty phrase (Nadler 2007, 15, 24-25).

This claim resonates with many modern and contemporary Jewish thinkers, perhaps none more so than Reconstructionist Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983), who persistently attacks the idea of “chosenness,” calling for its repudiation. The doctrine of Israel’s election, he claims, bars complete identification with the state. This concern recalls Spinoza’s commitment to the joint consideration of the theological and of the political in order to locate the proper role of religion in the modern state. Kaplan also asserts that the supernatural revelation implicit in the idea of “chosenness” is incompatible with a modern scientific and social equality world view. Although, unlike Spinoza, Kaplan remained true to his Jewish faith, he demanded that all passages referring to “chosenness” be erased from the Reconstructionist prayer book (Eisen 1983, 49, 73-77, 90). ⁶The modern rejection of Jewish “chosenness” can also be found in the writings of scholar Richard L. Rubenstein (b. 1924) who argues that the notion of a “chosen” people flounders in a post-Holocaust world. He asserts that an ethical person must give up the doctrine of “chosenness” or suffering for God’s sake after witnessing

⁶ Dan Cohn-Sherbok notes in *The Vision of Judaism, Wrestling with God* that the doctrine of the chosen people is a constant theme in rabbinic literature (Cohn-Sherbok, 2004, p.116). “Chosen people” references are, therefore, considerable within Jewish liturgy in contrast to their more limited expression in the Hebrew Bible.
the evil that that Nazis perpetrated on the Jewish people. After the atrocities of Auschwitz, he beseeches, Jews should renounce the notion of their appointment as God’s suffering servants (Borowitz 1995, 193). In *After Auschwitz: History, Theology and Contemporary Judaism*, Rubenstein states, “If I truly believed in God as the omnipotent author of the historical drama and in Israel as his Chosen People, I had no choice but to accept [the] …conclusion that Hitler unwittingly acted as God’s agent in committing six million Jews to slaughter. I could not believe in such a God, nor could I believe in Israel as the Chosen People of God after Auschwitz” (Rubenstein 1992, 3).

Kaplan and Rubenstein’s call for the erasure of Jewish “chosenness” has recently found a home among secular and more heterodox American Jewish leaders as well.

Eugene Borowitz (b. 1924), a rabbi, theologian and ethicist refutes Kaplan’s call for the erasure of “chosenness” arguing that a doctrine should be evaluated in terms of its intrinsic merit for the reason that relinquishing one’s doctrine does not change general social realities. Other supporters of a renewed understanding of “chosenness” include the German-Polish rabbi and scholar Leo Baeck (1873-1956) who writes of the ethical merit that inheres in the idea of “chosenness.” Baeck served as the liberal rabbi of Berlin before World War II and was the president of the controversial umbrella Jewish organization that existed under Nazi government control during the war. After deportation he served as rabbi in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. Baeck embraces the conviction that God’s relationship with a people has a universal ethical structure, precluding any notion of “chosenness” as preference. The particularity of the Jewish people, he explains, is situated in their perception of themselves as a people who
stake their existence on their religious insight, ethical monotheism (Borowitz 1995, 66-67, 120).

More recently theologian, ethicist, and scholar Rabbi David Novak (b. 1941), in investigating the philosophical retrieval of the biblical doctrine of election, highlights the role of Israel as a people stating that election is primarily generic and only secondarily individual in that each member of this people is called upon to respond to her or his election because of the desire for good. Philosophy professor Michael Wyschogrod (b. 1928) supports the notion of a “chosen people,” describing it in terms of an act of love bestowed by God on Abraham and through him on the people of Israel. This is personal and concrete love, genuinely directed to the uniqueness of the other, not an undifferentiated love, which Wyschogrod describes as just an abstraction, precluding the possibility of encountering the existing human being in her or his reality. The question as to why God choose Abraham is, Wyschogrod claims, not explained because it is an act of love, requiring no explanation. But why, many ask, is “chosenness” a mark of a particular people or community, rather than of particular individuals? Wyschogrod alleges that the domain of the state is the most difficult challenge of all, but by sanctifying the nationhood of Israel God expresses his love for individuals in their all too human, national settings (Wyschogrod 1999, 253).

During the last twenty years or so various contemporary readers of Levinas have begun to examine the relationship between his description of “ethical subjectivity” and the notion of a “chosen people” as rooted in biblical and rabbinic writings. The questions and demands posed by these theorists are the warrant for my present
investigation. Scholar Dana Hollander urges seizing the ethical meaning of election and covenant, which religion and theology have tended to obscure and relativize (Hollander 2008, 26). Philosopher Richard A. Cohen asks if Jewish election can be defended or even defined and if so what resources do post-Enlightenment Jews have to make this a vital and viable concept (Cohen 1994, 5-6), and finally religion Professor Leora Batnitzky asks, “On what ethical grounds could adherence to a doctrine of election possibly rest” (Batnitzky 2000, 224)? In a subsequent chapter of my thesis I will respond to these challenges, in light of the support provided by Levinas’ phenomenological description of “choseness,” for rethinking the valuable contribution “chosen people” discourse can have in contemporary society.

By broaching, in this introduction, the various strands of “chosen people” discourse I have tried to reveal both the ambiguity of this notion, as well as reveal just how provocative “chosen people” discourse has proven to be, from Biblical times until the present. The illusive and problematic nature of “choseness,” as reflected through biblical allusions, political realities and cultural manifestations, proves to be alternately embraced and discredited, but above all its ethical dimensions appear to be lost, muted or if noted, not fully examined. I intend in the following pages of this thesis to draw on some of the insights gained from my introductory inquiry into the historical, cultural and religious scale of the idea of a “chosen people.” The medieval notion of land, law and being “a light unto the nations” can be viewed from the ethical standpoint of promise, obligation and calling, and as noted previously, the designation of a people as treasured (am segulah) can be embraced as an act of love and commitment. Building on centuries
of “chosen people” discourse provides recourse to an appreciation of the intuition of the human qua human as being absolutely commanded by the other. In order to take a closer, more nuanced look at the consideration of “chosenness” as a universal ethical structure, I suggest in this thesis that Levinas’ investigation of human singularity and his phenomenological description of human subjectivity as the one-for-the-other of responsibility is key to opening up a space for reflection that may astonishingly radicalize the meaning and the creative work that “chosen people” discourse can accomplish.

I begin in the first chapter by tracking Levinas’ phenomenological description of the underlying structure of human subjectivity, from its origination in separation of the “I” from the totality of the “il y a” or impersonal elements to the rupture of the encounter with the human other, a relation with alterity that inaugurates one’s unassailable freedom as revealed in his text, *Totality and Infinity, an Essay on Exteriority*. In order to better comprehend what Levinas, perhaps uniquely, considers within the purview of phenomenology, I provide introductory information on the phenomenological theory of Edmund Husserl, after which I situate Levinas within the domain of “dialogical philosophy,” explicating the differences between his and Martin Buber’s description of interpersonal relations.

Levinas critiques metaphysics as first philosophy, offering in its stead the startling proposal of ethics as first philosophy. In support of this proposal I elucidate the unexpected importance of a-theism, the almost childlike quality of enjoyment, the controversial depiction of the feminine dwelling and its counterpart labor, followed by
the robust role of desire, language, responsibility and transcendence in founding the ethical face to face encounter, noting how concern for the other in the face to face encounter is, at the same time, a concern for all others, in its demand for the pursuit of social justice. I, also importantly, introduce Levinas’ notion that one’s sense of responsibility for others promotes one’s freedom by arousing one’s goodness, in his apparent response to existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre’s account of intersubjective conflict as the condition of being-for-others. An encapsulation of Derrida’s critical response to Totality and Infinity serves as a bridge to the next chapter. Above all, my ambition in this chapter is to provide clear and concise grounds for undertaking an apprehension of an ethical notion of “chosen people” as seen through the interpretive lens of Levinas.

In chapter two I continue tracking Levinas’ rendering of subjectivity as the one-for-the-other of responsibility, discussing how in his second major work Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, the egoity of the “I” is transfigured by “election.” Departing from exteriority to interiority Levinas turns to the ethical dimension of language as address, expression, command and prophecy. Other key concepts such as human creatureliness and radical passivity, time understood as a diachrony, the phenomenological reduction of the “said” and the ethical signification of proximity, persecution and “substitution” are examined in a movement towards understanding subjectivity as the offering of oneself (“here I am”) in the fullness of the unlimited responsibility of the “chosen” one. Levinas’ interpretation of the biblical account of the binding of Isaac, in contrast to that of Søren Kierkegaard’s is discussed in consideration
of Levinas’ use of one of the Hebrew Bible’s examples of the ethical response, “hineni” or “here I am,” to the other’s call, in support of his phenomenological description of human responsibility. Critical to the development of my thesis is my exploration of the sense of the other, in her or his expression, not limiting but promoting my freedom, by arousing my goodness, introduced by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (Levinas 1969, 200).

The next chapter broadens my analysis of the notion of “chosenness” to include the concept of “chosenness” or the call to respond with responsibility (“here I am”) as existing in a people. Raphael Jospe, a specialist in medieval Jewish philosophy, writing on the conceptions and misconceptions of the concept “chosen people” states that in the Torah both ritual and ethical commandments are equally commanded by God and they are commanded together (Jospe 1994, 183). Medieval Jewish scholars such as Halevi and Maimonides stress biblical ritual or the following of commandments in pursuit of an understanding of what it means to be a “chosen people.” Following God’s commandments keeps one in covenantal relation with God, rather than otherworldly or mystical relation with God, by its very sanctification of the mundane. This helps us grasp how “chosen” status is maintained, but the structure of “choseness” remains a mystery. Turning, once again, to the biblical “hineni” (“here I am”) passages in the Hebrew Bible may better serve the quest for an ethical discernment of what it means for any individual or for any group of individuals to consider themselves “chosen.”

It is precisely in the “here I am” response of responsibility that Levinas finds both the core of human subjectivity and the trace of the infinite. The “here I am” is in no
way an act of self-positing, but rather “a dispossession of the self, the self leaving the clandestinity of its identification” (Levinas 1998, 145). The “here I am” is of particular relevance to my thesis because it serves to highlight a point of creative tension between philosophy and religion where dialogue can occur. Having noted, in chapter two’s discussion of the binding of Isaac narrative (Genesis 22) how the “here I am” of “ethical subjectivity” seems to share the same structure as the personal and communal “hineni” of the Hebrew Bible, I now turn to the example set by the people’s response, “We will do and understand,” when presented with God’s commandments at Mt. Sinai, what Levinas considers to be a pact with an originary good before the choice of good and evil.

In his confessional writings Levinas asks if the “chosenness” of the Jews is not moral conscience itself, election originally expressing the awareness of “an indisputable summons which gives life to ethics” (Levinas 1994, 139). I discuss the juxtaposition of individual human responsibility to that of the “chosenness” of a people as rooted in biblical and rabbinic writings, specifying what Levinas accomplishes in this regard in terms of the sense of “ethical subjectivity,” and I address how contemporary readers of Levinas examine this relationship. In pursuit of a richer understanding of what it means to be a “chosen people” I undertake in this chapter deliberation on the thought of universality and particularity, investigating how “chosen people” discourse can challenge the expression of human meaning that conventionally arises from standard, but perhaps less gracious, expressions of shared humanity. In this same vein I investigate Derrida’s examination of “exemplarity,” as advanced by him in his
“philosophical-nationality” project, employing as secondary sources the thought
provoking commentaries of Dana Hollander, and Sarah Hammerschlag. In Derrida’s
project, he explores the “exemplary” structure of national affirmation discourses and the
paradox of asserting the most universal “philosophical” values in the name of the most
particular national, cultural or linguistic entities, claiming that in this paradox is
contained the ethical injunction to open ourselves, our national or cultural communities
as well as philosophy itself, to the future and to what is other than or excluded from
such communities (Hollander 2008, 3, 5).

The work in chapter 4 deepens the exploration, introduced in the previous
chapter, of the enigma of the ethical sense of a “chosen people.” My central claim is that
listening for the echoes of an ethical sense of a “chosen people” arises from an
understanding of responsible human subjectivity as being correlative with that of
“choseness,” and that the Jewish people that emerge, both in the past and present, from
an ongoing call to obligation (Caputo 1997, xx). I consider Levinas’ appeal to an ethical
freedom that is invested by the “other” rather than by one’s own initiative, will or
engagement in one’s own projects as a mark of the created character of the human
being. This requires close consideration of issues related to notions of good and evil, as
well as Levinas’ description of a radical passivity that inheres in the human, which I
examine through his re-working of the trope of “creation ex-nihilo,” supported by his
interpretation of the biblical story of Job. I, finally, discuss the accusations leveled
against Levinas that his thought of the radical passivity of the human is a form of
political quietism, as well as address Derrida’s concern that “chosen people” discourse can easily fall into the trap of a totalizing universalism.

In my concluding remarks I pull together the religious, historical, cultural and philosophical background of my research problematic, the skillfully argued analyses and critiques of “chosen people” discourse by contemporary theorists who draw on Levinas’ characterization of “ethical subjectivity,” and the pertinent phenomenological and confessional writings of Levinas. My thesis ultimately suggests that the possibility of approaching the idea of “a chosen people” in light of its ethical implication, the irrefutable obligation to give to each, and every other, in goodness, can open up a space within sedimented “chosen people” discourse for an understanding of “choseness” as the ongoing creation of the human, as such. This, in turn, may lead to a more vibrant and a more productive dialogical relation among all passionately involved participants in the conversation.
CHAPTER ONE

ETHICAL ENCOUNTER: INVESTIGATING HUMAN SUBJECTIVITY
IN LEVINAS’ TOTALITY AND INFINITY

…the essential of ethics is in its transcendent intention…

--Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity

The notion of “ethical subjectivity,” which characterizes Levinas’ understanding of “chosenness,” is of major concern throughout the philosophical and “confessional” writings of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995). Levinas was born in Lithuania, moving to France as a young college student in 1923. In 1940 he was captured by the Nazis and imprisoned in a labor camp for French military officers. Although his wife and daughter, hidden in a Christian religious order in France, survived the Holocaust, the rest of his family unfortunately did not. Following the Second World War Levinas published several philosophical works, including Existence and Existents and Time and the Other. In 1961 he published his doctoral dissertation Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority, provocatively defending the notion of subjectivity, founded in the idea of infinity (Levinas 1969, 26), a notion that post-structuralist detractors will view, along with that of “the subject,” as no more than a humanist illusion in need of de-mystifying and de-centering (Davis 1996, 2). Rather than jettisoning the idea of “humanism” altogether, Levinas proposes a different approach, substituting an infinitely responsible subject for the imperialist subject of Western philosophical thought and in so doing is able to secure a place for ethics within a postmodern philosophical context.
In order to support the one-for-the-other of responsibility as a human possibility, Levinas uses phenomenological techniques to describe the human being’s meaningful interactions with the environment, with the home, with work, and with other human beings, or the face-to-face encounter. It is precisely in the face-to-face encounter, in the responsibility of the one-for-the-other as a response to the supplication of the neighbor, that phenomenological intentionality is repudiated for the radical passivity of the “chosen one.” In this opening chapter I discuss how Levinas safeguards and how he surpasses both phenomenological and dialogical philosophical foundations in support of ethics as first philosophy, re-orienting subjectivity away from egoic self-determination toward a notion of one’s freedom as bestowed by the other, ultimately advancing the understanding of “chosenness” as residing in an ethical injunction to which the human being finds herself or himself disposed to respond, prior to any consideration, as both a privilege and a subordination (Levinas 1969, 279).

Levinas’ phenomenological description of subjectivity has its roots in Husserlian phenomenological theory and technique, which he introduced to French philosophers with his translation of Edmund Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* in 1931. He was one of the initial interpreters of Husserl (1859-1938) and of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and would go on to challenge not only some of the main tenets of phenomenology that Husserl laid down but also challenge Heidegger’s emphasis on the ontological characteristics of phenomenology, questioning the primacy of ontology itself in relation to ethics (Handelman 1991, 179). Husserl’s phenomenological philosophy emphasizes the role of intentionality. It posits that all consciousness is consciousness of something
and that the two, consciousness and the intended object of consciousness, cannot be separated. The primacy of consciousness is achieved by “going back to the things themselves,” accomplished by bracketing off all assumptions or habitual, pre-given ways of reflecting, perceiving, and experiencing things. This bracketing off of everything which can be doubted is referred to as the phenomenological reduction or epoché.

Levinas utilizes the phenomenological method to describe the repeated and varied patterns of human experience, and in the process finds something that exceeds the self-encounter or closing-in-on-itself of phenomenological intentionality. In his description of human subjectivity, consciousness no longer encounters itself, alone, but is more readily formed in the opening of the self or same to the non-self or other (Davis 1996, 10-11, 17-20). Levinas’ idiosyncratic understanding of phenomenological intentionality points to a transcendent orientation, questioning the limits of phenomenology in its suggestion of a pre-cognitive hither side notion of radical passivity, described as “sensibility” and “vulnerability” in Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence, the second of Levinas’ major works, which will be discussed in some detail in the next chapter.

Perhaps, the technique of bracketing in Totality and Infinity is most evident in Levinas’ putting aside the common interpretation of need as the basis of desire. Through phenomenological analysis Levinas is able to distinguish between the two; on the one hand finding that human need, being material, and capable of satisfaction by way of possession, is a closing off to alterity, and on the other hand catching sight of an
intuition that human desire, transcending the ego, looking toward an unspecified future, and lacking in any ultimate satisfaction, is a metaphysical opening to the other, and incongruously the rise of one’s own subjectivity (Levinas 1969, 16, 33, 117). This is stated most succinctly in the conclusion to his text where Levinas writes:

We have posited metaphysics as Desire. We have described desire as the ‘measure’ of the Infinite which no term, no satisfaction arrests (Desire opposed to Need). The discontinuity of generations, that is, death and fecundity, releases Desire from the prison of its own subjectivity and puts an end to the monotony of its own identity. To posit metaphysics as Desire is to interpret the production of being—desire engendering Desire—as goodness and as beyond happiness; it is to interpret the production of being as being for the Other. But “being for the Other” is not the negation of the I, engulfed in the universal….Goodness…issues from an I, is subjective…It precedes, in going without knowing where. Goodness is transcendence itself. Transcendence is the transcendence of an I. Only an I can respond to the injunction of a face. The I is conserved then in goodness….To posit being as Desire is to decline at the same time the ontology of isolated subjectivity and the ontology of impersonal reason realizing itself in history. (Levinas 1969, 304-305)

Another example of bracketing, inferred from reading Totality and Infinity and made explicit in Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, is the suspension of the Hobbesian belief in man as a beast of prey in relation to his fellow man, only capable of acting morally within the context of a political order. Levinas notably affirms,

It is not without importance to know if the egalitarian and just State in which man is fulfilled (and which is set up and especially to be maintained) proceeds from a war of all against all, or from the irreducible responsibility of the one for all…. (Levinas 1998, 159)

His phenomenological investigation of human subjectivity leads Levinas to think otherwise than British philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) who in his acclaimed work, Leviathan, claims that the life of men living “without a common power to keep them all in awe” positions them in a condition called war, living in continual fear and
danger of violent death “wherein the life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” (Hughes 1998, 80). Hobbes’ view of human nature or human character is a widely held perspective that Levinas challenges, appealing to a human response of welcome in lieu of one of belligerence, and to a sense of responsibility rather than one of “egoic freedom,” generating not a warlike *homo lupus* (man is a wolf to man), but a peace that originates in the non-egoic “I,” responding and responsible for one’s fellow human. I will clarify in the remainder of this chapter just how Levinas’ description and analysis of human subjectivity leads one, against common wisdom, to these hopeful conclusions, but first I wish to say a few words regarding a genre of philosophy, separate from phenomenology, which claims Levinas as a member or practitioner and that is sometimes referred to as “dialogical philosophy” or “the philosophy of dialogue.”

Martin Buber (1878-1965), if not the originator of “dialogical philosophy,” is at least the most well known of its practitioners. Buber, born in Vienna, is also well-known for his revival of interest in Hasidism, the mystical movement that resonated within much of the Eastern European Jewish population in the 18th and 19th centuries, through the publication of various Hasidic tales. His interests, both wide and varied, include involvement with the Zionist movement and co-publication of a modern German translation of the Bible with Rosenzweig. In his philosophical text *I and Thou*, Buber makes a clear distinction between I-Thou and I–It relations, the latter being those between persons and objects or between persons when one or both are treated as objects, and the former being relationships of mutual openness and regard between persons. While finding it necessary to situate Levinas in regard to Buber I cannot do justice to
Buber’s complex thought, other than to mark some of his main contributions to Levinas’ thinking. In *I and Thou* Buber underscores the primacy of, and the innate human longing for relation and how it is only through a “thou” or a “you” that a person becomes an “I,” mutuality itself being what he calls the gate of entry into human existence. The I-Thou relation in contradistinction to the I-It relation demands genuine dialogue, producing, in turn, a genuine encounter not only with another human, but with God. Buber introduces the notion, also of great significance to Levinas, that God can only be addressed and not asserted or expressed (Buber 1970, 22, 26, 28, 80, 177).

Levinas parts ways from Buber, most significantly, concerning the idea of intersubjective mutuality. In an interview with writer François Poirie, Levinas states that Buber distinguishes the interpersonal relation from the object relation in “a very convincing and brilliant way, and with much finesse,” but what separates their thought is that Buber posits the interpersonal relation as a reciprocity whereas Levinas posits it as the asymmetrical radical separation of the same and the other, famously quoting 19th Century Russian writer, Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, “Each of us is guilty before everyone and for everything, and I more than the others” (Levinas 2001, 72). Levinas contends, though contested by some and having undergone change over time in Levinas’ own thinking, that Buber’s description of reciprocal human encounter is, philosopher, Claire Elise Katz writes, insufficiently ethical, “mutuality leading to exchange rather than obligation, an economics and not an ethics” (Katz 2003, 79-80).

Although perhaps less well known than Buber, Rosenzweig’s (1886-1929) influence on Levinas’ thought is equally profound. Rosenzweig, writing after the First
World War, attempts to synthesize philosophy and theology in a way that he calls “new thinking.” His account of revelation is that of a call from the absolute other, so that the dialogue between “I” and “you” is constitutive of selfhood and of communal redemption (Pollack 2009). Rosenzweig, author of *Star of Redemption*, proposes a dialogical or speech-based philosophical method. Speaking, as opposed to solitary thinking, he writes, is time-bound and time nourished, not knowing in advance where it will arrive, living in general from the life of the other, making way in conversation for something to happen, and ultimately leading one by way of recognition of the singularity and novelty of one’s interlocutor to the recognition of not knowing even oneself, fully (Stawarska 2009, 147-149). Human experience, through dialogical encounter, thus exceeds totalization. This point is most importantly taken up by Levinas in his ethical description of the infinite other, immune to being encompassed in a totality, a phenomenological description and analysis of what he calls the face-to-face relation that I will proceed to explicate at this time.

Levinas begins his defense of subjectivity with the description of the human experience of being immersed in the world. How does the individual human or the “I” radically separate herself or himself from the overwhelming elements of nature in which she or he is steeped? Levinas suggests that this occurs by way of formation of an inner life, what he names a “psychism.” In acquiring an inner life the “I” is able to experience the joy of being at home with itself, for in separating from the persistency of the amorphous elements, the “I” is offered the possibility of a personal history consisting of a life bookended by its own singular and unique birth and death. This separation from
the elements, or interiority, makes it possible for each human being to have her or his own destiny and not derive her or his meaning, and the meaning of her or his death, from history. The birth of a separated being proceeds from nothingness and in that way interrupts historical time. The time of the one does not fall into the time of the other.

“Interiority,” writes Levinas, “is the refusal to be transformed into a pure loss figuring in an alien accounting system” (Levinas 1969, 56).

Levinas, somewhat startlingly, posits the possibility of calling this notion of the completely separated being, maintaining herself or himself in existence all by herself or himself: atheism. As a separated being I live at home with myself, outside of God. Atheism is meant here to be a breaking with participation in what can be described as “the throb of undifferentiated being” (Ajzenstat 2001, 34), or as the horror of the totality of nature, also termed the “il y a,” or “there is,” by which the psychism or “I” posits itself as the “I” of enjoyment. Levinas celebrates the human love of life for its own sake, and his characterization of the human being living from all of the things in the world that nourish it should not be underestimated in his eventual description of each person as the “chosen one,” responsible for all the others. Paradoxically this primordial and atheistic experience of enjoyment or living from my own needs (jouissance) and my self- relation to nature, is what eventually leads me out of my ego or my separated self (the same), to the absolutely other. Each person must go through the pagan (the mythical, impersonal gods), and then out of the pagan through atheism (living outside of God, at home with oneself), in order to experience the trace of the transcendent or Infinite (Levinas 1969, 12, 55-58 110-113).
The inner life, experienced as both a pulling myself out of and a plunging back into the world, occurs in the domicile where my self becomes more fully formed through inhabitation, labor and possession. I find myself sheltering in a home because despite the overall exhilaration of enjoyment I also experience a creeping feeling of disquietude or fear for my future. My human animal-like complacency is incited to reach outside of itself for something greater than purely egoic pleasure, and it is precisely in the home that this immediate pleasure is adjourned and delayed. But this longing for something exterior to my self is continually counter-balanced by my separated self; I circulate between visibility and invisibility. The “il y a” recedes as I take command of the anonymous and impersonal elements, the medium in which I am steeped. The body, Levinas explains, is not only what is steeped in the elements of wind, earth, sea, sky and air, but what dwells or inhabits and possesses. My passage from egoic enjoyment to the fabrication of things (labor and possession) refers to habitation, which presupposes the welcoming of the other. By laboring I am able to bring durable goods into my home, yet the importance of home lies not in my possessions, but in the hospitality or in the welcome of inhabitation. My separated self is now characterized as domiciled, no longer just an “I” opposed to the elements but an “I” receiving a welcome and living in what Levinas refers to as “gentleness” or “the warmth of intimacy.” The domicile or home provides me with the space and time to stop and reflect on the outside world, a reprieve that Levinas identifies with the “feminine face” (Levinas 1969, 131-132, 137,143-151, 156-157). The home’s welcome intimates a welcome of the other as well as a refuge for myself. It may be helpful to make note at this time of Derrida’s
reading of Levinas’ thought as a philosophy of hospitality. In *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, Derrida defines ethics as hospitality and hospitality as ethics. Hospitality is not, he proclaims, a part of ethics, but the whole and principle of ethics. This closely shared understanding of hospitality, between the two philosophers, assumes more prominence in Levinas’ discussion of subjectivity as “substitution” and being taken as hostage, found in his text, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (Westmoreland 2008 2, 7).

Levinas’ depiction of the pre-ethical (in terms of the pre face-to –face encounter) intimacy of the home as “feminine” has raised concerns regarding an implicit and unquestioning socially conditioned male perspective from which he draws his notion of ethics. The “feminine” welcome, as a characterization of the home, even if no woman is present in that home, is understood to be prior to speech, ethics and human access to transcendence. The role and meaning of the “feminine” in *Totality and Infinity* has been extensively examined and although I am unable to give these critiques their full due in the laying out of my thesis, I will note here in an introductory manner some of the more prominent responses to Levinas’ controversial account of gender. Derrida alleges that what looks like neutrality in Levinas’ writing is really male privilege masquerading as neutrality, the philosophical subject of *Totality and Infinity* being “man.” Levinas assumes the stance of the male subject without, Derrida says, fully acknowledging that position (Katz 2003, 74-75). Levinas seems to follow in the footsteps of male authors who confine women to the private realm of home and hearth, excluded from the “masculine” public and political domain (Chanter 2005, 332).
Diane Perpich notes specifically that the images Levinas employs to describe feminine alterity, including modesty and virginity and their antitheses, voluptuosity and animality, can be taken to be stereotypically sexist. She discusses how the feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray attempts to valorize possibilities opened up in what is generally taken to be Levinas’ sexist descriptions of erotic love and fecundity, suggesting that the subject of ethical relation is shaped from the start by and within a matrix of sexual difference, requiring the constitution of a possible place for each sex, body and flesh to inhabit (Perpich 2005, 303-308). Katz also identifies the ambiguous position of the “feminine” in Levinas’ thought, suggesting that his notions of the feminine necessity of relationships and of the creation of life, perhaps, interrupt virility. The “feminine,” though not participating in the ethical relationship conditions it or makes it possible (Katz 2003, 74-77), a difficult position, in my opinion, to assume. A generous reading of the “feminine” welcome in the home would foreshadow the trope of maternity or the “other- in- the- same” that Levinas develops more explicitly in his text Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, the subject matter of my next chapter. Suffice it to say, here, that in Totality and Infinity Levinas both encourages and troubles the notion of fundamental sexual difference and how it plays out in Western philosophy’s economy of the “same.”

Putting aside, but not dismissing, the ambiguity of gendered ethical subjectivity, the possibility of the home, resting upon my labor, appears as a refuge from the world and from life’s uncertainties. Venturing into the outside world, I can return home, bringing things from that world to enjoy within the welcome of the home. Labor, is here
described by Levinas as acquisition and not transcendence. Labor as transcendence puts one in mind of Marxist characterizations of labor as transcending self-alienation, whereas Levinas’ sense of labor and possession is more of a movement toward oneself. The acquisition of things, attainable through labor, in turn, leads to the potential for comparison, quantification and exchange, where an object is no longer considered in terms of its own identity, but is valued instead in terms of its monetary worth. Control of labor and its economy brings with it a certain mastery and domination of the elements that allows me to say “yes” to life, as if spitting in the face of death. Instead of feeling always threatened by death’s approach, I am able to labor and find a sense of security in the home, which provides the time at my disposal to ward off the threat of demise. At the same time, I can never really be in control of the contingencies of laboring because the products of my own hands can be taken over by others and used for means and purposes intended by them, and as mentioned earlier, these same products can become “lost” in the anonymity of exchange.

In laboring outside of the home I find myself submerged in social relations, and surrounded by other human beings it dawns on me that I am not the unique beneficiary of all that the world has to offer. How do I respond to this questioning and challenging of my egoic sovereignty? I can, Levinas claims, simply treat other persons as a different version of myself, placing them under my own categories and using them for my own purposes. Others; however, resist being subsumed into my world and one of the principal questions running through all of Levinas’ work is: How can I exist, without violating the other person’s otherness? It is suggested that this is accomplished neither
by moral reasoning nor by feelings of compassion, but rather by a pre-reflective welcoming response to the other through which I become aware of my desire for that which points beyond me and my self-centered needs. Metaphysical desire, states Levinas, is first of all enacted in conversation, where the other person presents herself or himself, exceeding any preconceived ideas that I may harbor. This characterization of the expression of a person’s own manifestation, always exceeding that manifestation, Levinas calls “face.”

The “face” of the other is not its plastic image, but rather a nudity or an appeal, for in turning toward me, it makes demands on me to both recognize its destitution or hunger and to give of myself to nourish that hunger. The “face” is not eyes, nose and mouth, but supplication and solicitation. Metaphorically speaking, Levinas describes the other in the biblical terms of the widow, orphan and stranger and it is in the destitution of their faces that the transcendent, infinitely other solicits me, and appeals to me. My relationship to transcendence is here understood to be an ethical behavior, the face of the other the site of metaphysical truth. It is not that the stranger, widow and orphan are an incarnation of God; rather, they are the manifestation of the height in which the Infinite is revealed. In the “face’s” nudity I catch sight of both the destitution of the lowest and the manifestation of the height of the most high, promoting my freedom by arousing my goodness, rather than engaging me in a violent conflict of “freedoms” (Levinas 1969, 13, 158-168, 200, 251).

Here Levinas is referencing Jean-Paul Sartre’s notion of freedom. Sartre (1905-1980) was a world-renowned existentialist philosopher, writer and political activist. It is
beneficial to spend some time in understanding his assertions regarding the relationship between self and other in order to differentiate clearly Levinas’ thought from Sartre’s.

Turning to Sartre’s discussion of “The Look,” in *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, Sartre contends that the ground of meaning of being for the other in the world is conflict. He speaks phenomenologically of my realization that there are perceiving human beings with their own relations to objects in my field of perception. The other’s existence within my field of perception unfolds a spatiality and point of view through which to organize the world that is not the same as mine. The other, also unfolds time for me by her or his simultaneous existence with my own. From the point of view of the other my body is seen as an object in her or his field and it is through this revelation of my body as an object that I apprehend the other as a subject that sees me, as opposed to an object seen by me. Alone I am my own acts, my own possibilities. My freedom resides in these possibilities and in the free performance of my acts or projects. But, when the other looks at me, through her or his gaze, I lose the internality of my grounding to the externality of the other. I see myself because somebody sees me and in that moment I become conscious of escaping myself. I have become a mere reference to the other and I am aware of this because I react with shame or pride to the other’s gaze.

This experience of being separated from myself is the way that my own freedom escapes me and is instead written in and by the other’s freedom, an experience Sartre refers to as “radical nothingness.” When freedom is no longer mine I become an instrument of possibilities that are not my possibilities, making me no more than a slave.
When my possibilities, which are my transcendence, are transcended by the other’s possibilities it causes me extreme discomfort, unease or perhaps even shock. I desperately want to regain my freedom by taking charge of my own possibilities and creating my own life’s meaning. And so, I strike back, looking at the other from my own perspective and in the process making the other an object for me. In this way I gain my subjectivity, but, alas, one look by the other and I am hurled back into my being an object and the other a subject. It is this constant concern to contain the other within her or his objectivity and my repeated failure to do so that is the ground of inter-subjective conflict, which does not follow from, but is the condition of being-for-others (Sartre 1956, 228-278).

In regards to this encounter with the other, which Sartre declares threatens my freedom, and which is equivalent to my freedom’s fall under the gaze of the other’s freedom, Levinas asks: “Does not the presence of the Other put in question the naïve legitimacy of freedom?” and “Does not freedom appear to itself as a shame for itself…and reduced to itself, as a usurpation?” (Levinas 1969, 303) My freedom is aroused not by conflict, but by “the non-allergic presence of the other” as peace itself. Levinas is asserting an ethical sense of freedom, or the freedom of responsibility. This sense of freedom is not one of spontaneity or inclination; it is not an outcome of free choice. Levinas’ critique of spontaneity calls into question the central place that the “I,” as ego, occupies in the world. “I am not,” Levinas writes, “innocent spontaneity but usurper and murderer…. Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent.” The “face” of the other proclaims “thou
shall not kill.” Summoned and addressed by the other, my whole being called into question, I cannot help but wonder who am I to claim the world as my own, wreaking havoc and doing violence to the other as a consequence. My insistence on being for myself and my lack of response to the other person’s needs may well lead to the other’s death or perhaps I may imagine killing another individual, even attempt it, and possibly succeed, but in spite of all that, the intended target, otherness, the non-encompassable other that overflows every idea I can have of her or him, can never be killed. “Murder,” Levinas states, “exercises power over what escapes power” (Levinas 1969, 83-84, 198-199).

At this time I want to revisit Levinas’ distinctive use of the phenomenological method to rupture or exceed the primacy of Heideggarian ontology, the favored role that Heidegger assigns to Being. The phenomenon, according to Heidegger, is the site where Being reveals itself. Colin Davis explains Being as follows: “Being is not a static essence existing outside time, but an event or process…Being is the mode of existence of beings; it is not fully identifiable with beings, but neither can it be abstracted from them” (Davis 1996, 15). Levinas argues that Heidegger’s notion that the fundamental encounter for humans is not with other beings, but with Being itself is wrong-headed and that beings should be preserved in their specificity and not subsumed under the general category of Being. Levinas asks if ontology exhausts the possibilities of relationship with Being or is there something exceeding and more fundamental than ontology. We find Levinas’ answer to this question in his phenomenological description of the summons of the non-corporeal “face,” where the trace of infinity, disturbing the
privileged role of a consciousness no longer turned in on itself and its own meanings, instead opens it to finding meanings and mysteries outside of itself. This position, taken up by Levinas, owes a debt to the philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) who in addition to the assertion that I, as a human being, confirm my own existence as beyond doubt, also suggests that I, as a human being, find myself to be created by something which transcends me. In his “Third Meditation” Descartes questions whether or not the subject can regard itself as the source of all the ideas it contains, arguing that the subject cannot be the source of ideas which are greater or more perfect than itself; the idea of God being just such an idea. For Levinas the significance of this lies in the encounter with the infinite or the “trace of infinity” as something beyond knowledge (Davis 1996, 14-17, 23-24, 34, 39), signifying goodness.

The non-corporeal face is an attempt to describe the “face” that does not appear, a notion that although supported by phenomenological description, exceeds phenomenological intentionality. This surpassing of “the direct knowledge by consciousness of its own intentional objects” (Davis 1996, 12) pronounces itself in the experience of the “face to face” encounter. It begins when I am required to respond, even if that response is a non-response, when confronted with the “face” of the other. My relationship with another person is that of interlocutor; to put it simply my relationship with the other person is speech or discourse, the first action above and beyond labor, an action that produces meaning. Cognition is a result of and not the grounds of discourse. Levinas describes discourse not as an unfolding of a prefabricated internal logic, but the constitution of truth in a struggle between interlocutors, which
carries with it all the risks of freedom. The relationship of language, he writes, implies
transcendence or the revelation of the other to me. Discourse, by opening oneself to the
other, through the oft times divergent views or cross purposes of communication, is thus
welcome and generosity.

The presence of the other, who, according to Plato, comes to her or his own assistance, because what is said cannot be separated from who is saying it, is the teaching characteristic of all speech. Levinas’ understanding of the constitution of truth in the writings of the ancient philosopher Plato, speaking at times in the voice of his beloved teacher Socrates and at times speaking as himself, though the distinction is not always clear-cut, occurs through the struggle between thinkers and not by the display of an already-in-possession-of rationality. The relationship of dialogue implies transcendence and not representation; the latter, which discovers nothing but itself, is described by Levinas as a movement with no searchlight preceding it (Levinas 1969, 66, 73, 124). Discourse, according to Levinas, is an ethical teaching of the very freedom of the other, revealing my willfulness as a false sense of the primacy of my own freedom. In the agonizing questioning of the sovereignty of my will, I sense a responsibility to my interlocutor, and my freedom is paradoxically formed not by retreat into myself as egoic enjoyment backed up by the safety mechanisms of home and labor, but by going out of my egoic self and giving to the other in goodness.

In the “face to face” encounter, my freedom is not involved in a violent confrontation with another’s freedom; it is not offended by, as in Sartre, but rather mobilized by, the non-violence of responsibility. My self, having overcome its egoic
separation in enjoyment in order to become responsible for the other has been “elected” and this “election” is singular, obligating me and me alone, for no one can replace me or release me from my responsibilities (Levinas 1969, 203, 244). To be uniquely called into a relationship of responsibility for the other is the heart of what it means to be “chosen,” opening the possibility for meaning in the world. This opening is none other than the event of creation and the continuous task of re-creating the world (Fagenblat 2010, 49, 52). We find here the stirrings of the responsible “I’s” relationship to a creator and not for the first time. In Levinas’ account of the atheistic “I” he states:

The marvel of creation does not only consist in being a creation ex nihilo, but in that it results in a being capable of receiving a revelation, learning that it is created, and putting itself into question. The miracle of creation lies in creating a moral being. (Levinas 1969, 89)

To find oneself, moving from a position of atheism to the unceasingly indebted relationship of creator and creature places one on the path of understanding, in ethical terms, precisely what it means to be “chosen.”

Levinas proceeds to discuss notions of creation in terms of fecundity and fraternity. Using persistently male language and imagery he describes each son of the father as both the unique son for his father and as non-unique in the son’s being a brother among brothers, “chosen” from among equally “chosen” ones. Levinas’ reference to the son, which I will henceforth refer to as the child, represents the subjectivity of the “I” as being for the other or put differently, the other- in- the- same. The child is at the same time both me and not me, a possibility of myself and of the other. The child’s time cuts across my time, establishing a relationship with the future, a
relationship with infinite time. The child, who makes this possible, is engendered by eros or voluptuosity, an intimate, private and therefore, non-public love of another. It is important to note that although Levinas uses the trope of parenthood he also clearly states that a being capable of another fate than its own is a fecund being as the biological is only one form of the fecundity of subjectivity.

In fraternity the public relation, the “face to face” encounter, as opposed to the extremely non-public erotic relationship, is at the same time open to the other of the others, to the “third party,” to the whole of humanity, the very status of the human, according to Levinas, implying fraternity. It is the nudity of the other’s face that opens humanity, setting forth a common world of shared parentage, a kinship inherent in monotheism, and one that demands not the clandestine character of love, but the accessible, through language, condition of justice. Before turning to language, I want to consider Levinas’ understanding of the meaning and importance of time or temporality. In the above description of paternity Levinas notes how the child’s time, both synchronous and diachronous with my time establishes a relationship with the future. Human freedom, Levinas claims, resides in the future, in anticipation of the possible. This requires a rupture of continuity and at the same time a continuation across this rupture. Paternity or being for the future, is to have time, to forestall death, to retreat before it; death is not, as Levinas understands Heidegger to say, an end of being, but an unknown (Levinas 1969, 264-269, 278-284).

Speech/ language/ discourse, as portrayed by Levinas, is the necessary condition for the creation of human subjectivity and for consciousness itself. His unique
contribution to “dialogical” philosophy is his characterization of the asymmetry of the
dialogical relationship, described in terms of destitution and height that together institute
a teaching whose very constitution is ethical. For the purposes of my thesis it should be
duly noted that” election” or “choseness” originates in just such a dialogical
relationship where the irrefutable “command’ of the other person shocks me out of my
self-complacency to the awareness of the true transcendence or radical otherness of the
other, which is experienced by me as no less than truth itself. Throughout Levinas’
phenomenological description of human subjectivity we find a turn not only to language
and discourse, but to ethics. It is essential to understand what Levinas means by ethics in
order to fully embrace his exposition that ethics and not metaphysics, is first philosophy.

Levinas’ sense of ethics is not a system of rules, in that he is not suggesting the
establishment of norms or standards for moral behavior nor is he talking about virtue,
rights, or duties. Ethics understood as virtue or how to live a good life harkens back to
Aristotle’s text, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which he writes that the proper function of a
man is a life consisting of actions performed in conjunction with his rational element
and that a man of high moral character/virtue is he who performs these actions well and
properly, in accordance with the excellence appropriate to it. Aristotle notes two classes
of virtue, the intellectual and the moral; the former consists of theoretical and practical
wisdom and the latter consists of such characteristics as courage, self-control (mastery),
generosity, high-mindedness, ambition, gentleness, friendliness, truthfulness, wittiness
and shame. The virtuous agent, Aristotle states, acts effortlessly, perceives the right
reason, has the harmonious right desire and has an inner state of virtue that flows
smoothly into action (Aristotle NE, 1098a15, 1103, a5, 1129b30). Unlike Aristotle, Levinas is not investigating right action grounded in intellectual and moral reasoning, rather he is enquiring into the underpinnings of a humane and just society founded in the encounter of one human being with another. His concern is with the nature of the ethical, itself (Davis 1996, 3). Consideration of ethics as rights can be found in the work of Hobbes who declares that morality is based on each individual’s right to preserve his life, to pursue his own good and to do as he wishes. In a hypothetical state of nature, self-interest is, according to Hobbes, the fundamental human response (Hughes 1998, 80). Levinas would counter that in responding to the address of, and to the summons to responsibility for, one’s neighbor, one is aware of the shame and guilt attached to the ceaseless pursuit of one’s own good and the drive to always do as one wishes.

Last, but certainly not least, in its far reaching moral appeal is Immanuel Kant’s (1724-1804) understanding of morality as duty. Kant professes that humans arrive at the supreme principle of morality through the exercise of pure practical reason and that every person is capable of reasoning, acting and choosing freely. To act freely, Kant explains, is to act autonomously, or according to laws one gives oneself, as opposed to those laws given by nature or social convention, which are outside of oneself or heteronymous. The moral worth of an action does not consist in the consequences that flow from it, but in the intention from which the act is accomplished. It is motive that matters, doing the right thing because it is right, doing the right thing out of a sense of duty and not out of a sense of compassion. The sense of duty means acting morally for the sake of the moral law. The moral law is unconditional or categorical because an
action good in itself is necessary for a will which accords with reason. Kant presents two formulations of what he holds to be a categorical imperative. The first is to act only on the maxim in regard to which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law and the second is to act in such a way that you will always treat humanity never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end (Sandel 2009, 109-124). Levinas rejects Kant’s rational foundation for ethics, due to the non-dialogical characterization of reason as the source of consensus among rational subjects, allowing for no experience of encounter between one person and another (Davis 1996, 53).

Until now I have only described Levinas’ sense of ethics negatively or according to what it is not; however, Levinas does tell us what ethics is. Simply stated, ethics is the calling into question of myself, brought about by the other. In his exposition of Levinasian ethics, Colin Davis draws attention to how the relationship between the same and the other is the site where both ethics and knowledge are at stake (Davis, 1996, 37), most evident when Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity* notably states:

A calling into question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same—is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the other by the same, of the Other by me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the same by the other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge. (Levinas 1969, 43)

The situation of the other calling my egoic sense of freedom into question is ethical, Davis claims, because much depends on how I respond. What means of persuasion can the other muster to back up “do not commit murder,” the command
discussed previously in this chapter. There is no force to back up this prohibition besides the other’s appeal, “do not kill me,” a resistance to my intentions, purposes and designs to appropriate the world for my own purposes: an ethical resistance. It is by way of this resistance that I find myself ethical in my very foundations, personally involved in compelling ethical relations, like it or not. I find myself ethical in my response, “here I am,” to the other’s plea for help. Furthermore, the epiphany of the face opens humanity so that at the very moment of the face-to-face encounter my concern for the others of the other, the human community, involves me in the pursuit of social justice. Social justice, although requiring a measure of equality, rests on the asymmetry of the face-to-face encounter or ethical relation (Davis 1996, 48, 50-53).

This asymmetry, according to Levinas, is not an ontology like most of Western philosophy, starting with Socrates’ teaching that learning is merely recollection of what we already know, thereby reducing the other to the same. To thematize and conceptualize the other is to take possession or to appropriate what comes to oneself from the outside. This kind of power issues in the State, an impersonal universality that Levinas poignantly affirms to be another inhumanity. Aristotelian theory describes metaphysics or being qua being as first philosophy; Levinas advances, in its stead, a critical theory that calls into question this exercise of the same. The ethical relation is a relationship with the other as interlocutor, preceding all ontology, and cutting across the mystical (a union with the transcendent through participation) as well, making it possible for the trace of the infinite to be caught sight of in interpersonal expression and discourse (Levinas 1969, 42-48, 77), disturbing the ground(s) on which Westerners
stand. “To be or not to be” has been replaced by “to respond or not to respond” in the face of the other’s appeal. Levinas reworks the notion of human subjectivity, of humanism, of what it means to be human in a pluralistic society, replacing the imperialist subject with the ethical subject of the one-for-the other of responsibility. In this way ethics as first philosophy privileges peace over war so that individual human lives no longer gain meaning through being either winners or losers in the long march of an impersonal, totalizing history (Levinas 1969, 22).

Levinas will refine and re-animate the notion of ethics as first philosophy in his book *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, but prior to turning to that text it will be beneficial to comment on the critique of Levinas’ groundbreaking work, *Totality and Infinity*, by Derrida, whose response to Levinas, both in terms of Levinas’ own philosophical trajectory and in terms of the thesis presented here, is preeminently found in Derrida’s 1964 essay, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas.” Derrida is best known for his way of reading, known as “deconstruction,” described by Penelope Deutscher as the thought that familiar texts contain hidden and unexpected meanings, so that when reading one must pay close attention to instabilities, contradictions and marginalizations that undermine taken for granted ideas and ideals. Derrida’s deconstructive notions have influenced my attempt, in this thesis, to retrieve the ethical dimension of “chosenness” from entrenched historical, religious and cultural conceptualizations, as specified in my Introduction. I aim to do what Derrida refers to as reading at the limit; I intend to find a definition of
the devalued term “chosenness” broad enough to incorporate something of value within it (Deutscher 2005, xii, 21, 78).

In his essay “Violence and Metaphysics” Derrida deconstructs *Totality and Infinity* and in so doing reveals that Levinas, although attempting to reject the violence of ontology in favor of ethics as first philosophy, continues to use metaphysical terminology such as truth, essence, light, and interiority/exteriority, and to use metaphysical metaphors such as “the curvature of space” and ethics as an “optics,” relying on allusions to the metaphysics of presence, which Levinas purportedly discounts (Derrida 1978, 83, 96, 112). In Levinas’ own words:

> The truth of being…is the being situated in a subjective field which deforms vision, but precisely thus allows exteriority to state itself….This curvature of the intersubjective space inflects distance into elevation….This “curvature of space” expresses the relation between human beings…Man as Other comes to us from the outside, a separated--or holy--face. His exteriority, that is, his appeal to me, is his truth. My response…produces his truth…This surplus of truth over being and over its idea, which we suggest by the metaphor of the “curvature of intersubjective space,” signifies the divine intention of all truth. This “curvature of space” is, perhaps, the very presence of God. (Levinas 1969, 291)

In relation to ethics as an “optics” Levinas imagines ethics as “a relationship with a surplus always exterior to the totality.” He posits ethics as beyond the totalizing judgment of history as found in the philosophy of German idealist philosopher, G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), writing:

> …the “beyond” of history, draws beings out of the jurisdiction of history and the future; it arouses them in and calls them forth to their full responsibility….It is not the last judgment that is decisive, but the judgment of all the instants in time….The idea of being overflowing history makes possible existents…that can speak. Peace is produced as this aptitude for speech. The eschatological vision breaks with the totality of wars and empires in which one does not speak. It…institutes a relation with the infinity of being which exceeds the totality. The first
“vision” of eschatology…reveals the breach of the totality….The experience of morality does not proceed from this vision---it consummates this vision; ethics is an optics. (Levinas 1969, 22-23)

Derrida is, as Deutscher describes in her explication of Derridean deconstruction, juxtaposing the text’s declared [non-metaphysical] and described [metaphysical] levels, producing in that process, a different text (Deutscher 2005, 28). Derrida also expounds on what he considers a misreading on Levinas’ part of Husserl and of Heidegger, yet what is most valuable in pursuit of my expressed objective of reawakening the ethical dimension of “chosenness,” set in motion by Levinas’ description of subjectivity as the one-for-the-other of responsibility, is to focus my discussion of Levinas’ second major work, Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence, in the following chapter, on the seriousness with which Levinas responds to Derrida’s critique of his use of ontological language even as he is attempting to undermine the primacy of ontology. I will pay particular attention to how the nuances of language relay philosophical meaning, exploring the expression of pre-linguistic inter-personal encounter and address, and the possibility for human subjectivity, understood as “chosenness,” that opens in its wake.
CHAPTER TWO

ETHICAL INTRIGUE: SUBJECTIVITY AS THE ONE-FOR-THE-OTHER OF UNLIMITED RESPONSIBILITY IN LEVINAS’ OTHERWISE THAN BEING OR BEYOND ESSENCE

All of my inwardness is invested in the form of a despite-me, for another.  
--Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence

The human subject--me--called on the brink of tears and laughter to responsibility….
-- Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence

The plot of the radical alterity of the other, phenomenologically described in Totality and Infinity, thickens, so to speak, in Levinas’ account of the moral subject arising in subjection or despite itself, described in his follow-up text Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence. In this current chapter I pursue what Levinas refers to as the plot or intrigue of ethics (Levinas 1998, xii, 77), using the trope of “chosenness,” finding myself sanctioned in doing so by Derrida’s pronouncement that “the theme of election is everywhere at work in Levinas’ analysis of ethical responsibility.” (Derrida 1999, 70) Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence was published three years following Derrida’s critique of Totality and Infinity, in his essay “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” and for many readers, Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence is Levinas’ attempt to write otherwise than being, or without recourse to the ontological categories, metaphors, and vocabulary that Derrida, in his essay, has suggested undermine Levinas’ critique of ontology and epistemology. Levinas’ critique is described by Derrida as “reason… receiving only
what it gives itself, neutralizing the other in every sense of the word” (Derrida 1978, 96).

In the preceding chapter I quoted several passages from *Totality and Infinity* that call attention to Levinas’ use of the spatial and visual concepts, exteriority and optics, which he employs to describe the ethical face-to-face encounter, and the trace of infinity. The question we must now address is whether or not writing is at all possible without relying on representational language to get one’s point across. Levinas, in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, attempts just this, primarily, by departing from descriptions of exteriority to those of interiority, a turning from the language of representation to the ethical dimension of language as address, expression, command and prophecy (Levinas 1998, xii). We experience in Levinas’ continuing exploration of “ethics as first philosophy,” both the thrill of his unconventional use of conventional vocabulary in the quest to move beyond seemingly contradictory ontological descriptions of the non-ontological characterization of ethics, and the disquietude or uneasiness produced by his persistent use of hyperbole as well as by the ambiguities that issue forth from his break with more traditional, information-based understandings of discourse.

As specifically noted in my last chapter the summons of the “face” of the other puts my egoic self into question, requiring me to respond, even if that response is one of ignoring, or a non-response. My response to the other’s address is prior to consciousness, so immediate that there is no time for me to reflect on the how and why of it. Levinas claims that what is prior to consciousness, and what is prior to essence and
identification is sensibility, affect and vulnerability, described as a sensibility to being
affected. Sensibility, affect and vulnerability characterize, what is referred to in

*Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, as “saying.” “Saying,” or the radically
passive exposure to the other is Levinas’ attempt to recover the ethical grounds of
discourse. He describes “saying” as “the very signifyingness of signification,” and as “a
weaving of an intrigue of responsibility” (Levinas 1998, xxiv, 5-6). And yet, as soon as I
or the other speaks we are no longer in the “saying,” but ensnared in the “said,” which
has to do with statements, and propositions about the world, truth, and being (Davis
1996, 75) and about rights, laws and philosophy, itself. The “said” makes a theme of the
“saying,” both comprising, and compromising its “message.” It comprises its “message”
by conveying content, information and substance, and it compromises its ethical
“message” of a dispossessed ego, responsible at all costs for the other. The “said” is the
price we pay for any chance at communal justice and equality.

But not to despair, for the “saying” or ethical underpinning of discourse, does
not give way completely. The “saying” is not,” Levinas writes, “exhausted in the said”
(Levinas 1998, 46), rather its trace, as the condition of possibility of discourse, (Bergo
1999, 154) which he describes as the disturbance of the sincerity of exposure and
contact, remains. This movement back to the signification of the “saying” in the “said,”
exploring the ways in which the “said” can be unsaid, reduced or interrupted is, for
Levinas, the phenomenological reduction surpassing the Husserlian idea of an
intentionality always adequate to its object. It is not adequation, Levinas claims, but the
ethical interruption of essence that energizes reduction. Any discussion of the “saying,”
or of the exposure to and responsibility for the other prior to any knowledge of the other, and of the “said,” or of the birth of cognition where everything is conveyed before us, needs to take into account the coexistence of two dimensions of time. In the domain of the “said” language signifies as synchrony, a site where everything can be presented and represented to the ego, allowing the ego to coincide with itself. Synchronic temporalization is characterized by retention, memory and history. To speak of consciousness is to speak of time that can be recuperated; nothing interrupts the flow of time and the consciousness produced in the form of this flow. The synchrony of the “said,” allowing for thematization, is, according to Levinas, the birthplace of ontology (Levinas 1998, 5-9 32-33, 42-44).

In order to think otherwise than the synchrony of the “said, “ “being,” and “time” would have to, according to Levinas, fall into ruins. There would have to be signaled, within recuperating or synchronic time, a lapse of time, with no return possible. Levinas refers to this as a “transcending diachrony,” whose mode of transcendence, “saying,” is an ethical interruption, in that the responsibility of the one for the other disengages subjectivity from essence (Levinas 1998, 9, 43-44). In the “saying,” time takes on a diachrony because the disturbance of the other is a state of vulnerability so complete that my consciousness cannot gather its moments together, and integrate them into the flow of temporality (Bergo 1999, 16). The “saying” is a lapse of time, irrecoverable, unrepresentable and immemorial. Its diachrony is the disjunction of identity, my self torn up from itself in the core of its unity. It is an absolute non-coinciding, or the supreme passivity of exposure. This non-synthesis of my
identity comes to me from outside, in the form of the uniqueness of someone assigned, where no slipping away is possible, or in other words, it comes to me as “the diachrony of an election,” or as “choseness” (Levinas 1998, 38, 47-52, 57). The ethical “saying” distinguished by exposure, diachrony, and “choseness,” and the juridical “said,” informed by representation, synchrony, and choice, provide the context for what is to follow, next, in this chapter: the orderly and careful unpacking of Levinas’ ethical characterization of the human subject as the one-for-the-other of unlimited responsibility, or as “chosen.”

Levinas describes the signification of the “saying” as an exposure to the other in terms of “sensibility.” “Sensibility” is introduced in Totality and Infinity as enjoyment and self-satisfaction. In Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence, Levinas enriches our understanding of sensibility so that it refers to a sense of vulnerability. The exposure to another is described as a physical pain that interrupts my egoic enjoyment, tearing me from myself. Sensibility, as a suffering for the other, is felt as a restlessness, as too tight in my skin, or as a wounding. These, Levinas claims, are the terms of “proximity,” used here not as a spatial description, nor as belonging to the movement of cognition, but rather described as the approach of the neighbor to whom I am bound despite myself and against all logic, because the neighbor’s approach is a burden on me and an interruption of my egoistic joy in life. “Proximity” is a sense of the immediacy of contact, or the neighbor pressed up against me (Levinas 1998, xiv, 51, 91). It is despite myself because it is just the person whom I ignore, marginalize, exclude, and possibly fear, or despise who is the one for whom I am responsible (Nelson 2005, ix). And it is
against all logic because the passivity of the one-for-the-other is a sense in which no reference positive or negative to a prior will enters. In “proximity” I am obsessed by the neighbor, the idea of obsession, itself, precluding any notion of reciprocity (Levinas 1998, 51, 84).

In order to fully understand the role of “proximity” in the plot of ethical subjectivity it is of highest importance to understand how Levinas uses the term “neighbor.” He comments in Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence that, perhaps, due to widely known moral maxims in which the word neighbor occurs we have ceased to be surprised by all that is involved in “proximity” and approach. We, his readers, are aroused from the very start of his text, by the possibility of an ethically rich phenomenological description of human subjectivity. The other, Levinas says, more so than being my neighbor, interrupts my egoic self, making me approach the other, and thus making me the other’s neighbor. The neighbor is not a thing or an essence, but a relation, and not one of reciprocity, but rather, a relation of “proximity.” In approaching a neighbor, my being, turned to another, is turned, Levinas insists, inside out. I am assigned as responsible before any liaison between us can occur, for no other reason than that I am the first one on the scene. I am in relation, or in community with my neighbor, beginning in my obligation; it is an assignation of me by another. I do not love my neighbor because of some ethical prescription; rather the call to love my neighbor is nothing less than the condition for my own subjectivity (Levinas 1998, 11, 49, 87). To love one’s neighbor is oneself; to care for the other is to care for the self (Levinas 2003, xxvi). David Patterson intriguingly suggests that given the possibilities of meaning for
the Hebrew word “kamokha,” (“as yourself”) in the Biblical injunction “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” (Leviticus 19:18) an alternative translation would be “You shall love your neighbor, for that loving is yourself” (Patterson 2006, 12). Levinas and Patterson seem to concur on this interesting reading of this well known passage in Leviticus, for to love my neighbor, for that loving is myself, means that subjectivity arises from the responsibility for the neighbor’s life, and thus for the neighbor’s death.

It is, also, in the face of the neighbor that the trace of infinity passes. Not unlike the experience of the neighbor, the experience of infinity is not one of essence, but is rather one of relationship. Phenomenologically, the Infinite is an absence, experienced only in the positive movement toward the neighbor. If neighbor signifies an assignation of me by another, then obedience to that assignation is the way that the infinite comes to pass, and the only evidence there is that an infinite has passed by is my obsession with my responsibility for the neighbor (Ajzenstat 2001, 67-68, 94-95, 119). In order to make a distinction between the relation to the Infinite and the dialogical relation to the other person, Levinas employs the term “illeity,” to characterize the distance, respect and separation between the human and the Infinite. The radical alterity of the other person is preserved, and her or his stature as higher than my own is safeguarded, only if the “face” of the other is in the “trace” of illeity. It is the “trace” of a sufficiently separate illeity that keeps the other from becoming a thou of reciprocity, or keeps the other from being assimilated by the same (Smith 2005, 88-89, 173). Interpreting Levinas’ “Infinite” in God language or interpreting it as my self inhabited by what is other than my own
finitude (Bergo 1999, 165-166) must be held in tension as we continue to explore Levinas’ phenomenological description of ethical subjectivity.

Pushed back to the point where I find nowhere to flee the assignation of the neighbor (Bergo 1999, 162) I experience the shock of being shaken out of the complacency of feeling at home in myself. Vulnerable to the otherness of the neighbor, I am taken over, traumatized, and persecuted, unable to escape the domination of the other without relinquishing my own subjectivity (Davis 1996, 80), which with the loss of my autonomous self, is now a subjectivity under accusation. My inability to decline, or to escape the accusation of the other, without losing the grounds of my own self, makes it seem as though the accusation is coming not from the other, but from me. I am its source, and so I become my own accuser, my own persecutor. I gnaw away at myself in remorse. Remorse is a shift from a thematizing self to a self bound and responsive to the other, and yet despite being bound I am not enslaved, for the other frees me from the prison of my own will (Gibbs 1992, 212-213, 217-219). Obsessed with feeling the traumatic persecution from the other, my ego stripped of its pride, and of its dominating imperialist characteristic, I am driven to expiation, just for being. Here Levinas quotes from Lamentations: “To tend the cheek to the smiter and to be filled with shame.” (Lamentations 3:30) In the trauma of persecution, my self passes from outrages undergone to taking responsibility for the persecutor, from suffering to expiation, for the other, and it is in expiation that I reach the point of what Levinas calls “substitution” for the other (Levinas 1998, 110-112).
Robert Bernasconi suggests that Levinas introduces the concept of substitution in order to address the question of what the subject must be like for ethics to be possible, and also to describe what underlies ethical behavior. A working definition of substitution, Bernasconi writes, is the one-for-the-other, which cannot be accounted for in the Western philosophical tradition (Bernasconi 2002, 234-236). “Substitution” is central to Levinas’ challenge that ethics, and not metaphysics, is first philosophy, and to that end Levinas employs the trope of maternity or the maternal body. Maternity, as gestation of the other-in-the-same, recognizes how we humans are implicated in each other’s lives from the start. It is an example of being claimed by another, responsibility in place prior to choice. This giving oneself over completely, or the possibility of sacrificing one’s life for another is, for Levinas, the ethical relation par excellence (Katz 2003, 3, 129, 133, 145). Levinas describes “substitution” as the giving of the very bread that I enjoy from my mouth so that I am giving myself in giving it. The for-the other is the ethical deliverance of the self through substitution (Levinas 1998, 72, 164). What is at stake in such a deliverance is not, Levinas argues, being, but the good: the responsible self, as goodness, despite itself (Kosky 2001, 91).

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas discusses the idea of the good within a broader examination of the notion of infinity, noting that Greek metaphysics (Plato) conceived the good as separate from the totality of essences, and in this way caught sight of a structure such that totality could admit of a beyond or a transcendence that surpassed it (Levinas 1969, 102-103). Levinas is referring to Plato’s statement in *Republic* 509b that although the very existence and essence of the objects of knowledge are derived from
the good, “the good itself is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power” (Plato, Hamilton and Cairns 1989, 744). In surpassing the phenomenal, Levinas writes, one offers the other one’s own being, and the ground of this offering, or of this expression of oneself, is goodness (Levinas 1969, 183). Richard A. Cohen suggests that the good is both farther and closer than presence. It is farther in that it always remains transcendent, or irreducibly other, and it is closer because it imposes more pressing demands on me than I could ever impose on myself, by myself, alone (Cohen 1994, 124).

The importance of goodness to Levinas’ exploration of “ethics as first philosophy” in Totality and Infinity is heightened in his account of “substitution” as the one-for-the-other of unlimited responsibility in Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence, and it is directly related to the notion of “chosenness.” As previously noted in this discussion, my self has reached the point of substitution in expiation for my feelings of persecution and suffering. I find myself in the state of being hostage, held accountable for what I did not do. My self is a subjectum, responsible for everything with a debt that can never be repaid, because I am never finished with my responsibilities; the more I respond, the more I am responsible (Levinas 1998, xix, 116). Diane Perpich explains this to mean that the better I accomplish my obligations the more demands I find addressed to me, and that it is not a matter of the number of demands increasing, but rather a matter of my increased sensitivity to these demands (Perpich 2008, 89). It is only through this extreme condition of being hostage that my imperialist egoic self can move beyond being. Levinas poignantly writes how being
hostage is the condition for all solidarity, stating, “It is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity--even the little there is, even the simple “After you, sir” (Levinas 1998, 117).

The language of welcome and hospitality, highlighted in *Totality and Infinity*, is conspicuously absent in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, and yet it is possible to encounter in Levinas’ discussion of the self as hostage, a resonance of hospitality. Derrida addresses the relevance of this resonance in his *Adieu to Levinas*, written after Levinas’ death. Derrida relates how in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas shows not only that the essence of language is goodness, but that it is also friendship, and hospitality, and that phenomenological intentionality is no longer a matter of consciousness and thematization, but is instead a matter of attention to speech, the welcome of the “face” and hospitality. There is no “face,” Derrida writes, without welcome, quoting Levinas as follows: “To approach the other in discourse is to welcome his expression…to receive from the other beyond the capacity of the “I” (Derrida 1999, 25). Reason, itself, Derrida suggests, is interpreted as hospitable reciprocity, or the law of hospitality. He notes that Levinas’ account of the feminine welcome in the home, the interruption of the self, and the orientation toward the other, possessing the idea of infinity, is the opening of ethics. Hospitality, Derrida proclaims, is subjectivity itself, the subject as host (Derrida 1999, 10, 22-27, 29, 45, 50-54).

How does the host of *Totality and Infinity* turn into the hostage of *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*? Derrida writes that the host is a hostage, in so far as the host is a subject put into question, obsessed, besieged and persecuted. In examining the
question of whether or not the welcome of the other remains (Derrida 1999, 58), I 
suggest that the state of being hostage can be understood as a “difficult welcome,” the 
one-for-the-other of unlimited responsibility that conditions our humanity, and 
strangely, according to Levinas, liberates oneself from oneself and from others. It is, 
Levinas surprisingly writes, in substitution, and in being hostage that the self absolved 
of itself escapes relations, liberating itself ethically from every other, and from itself. 
The self, as hostage, does not expire from unreasonable demands, but surpasses itself in 
inspiration. In substitution, the unique, because irreplaceable, subject, breaks through 
essence, through ennui and enchainment to itself (Levinas 1998, 115, 124). The self, in a 
sense, is not lost, but liberated, without it being tied to an essence (Froman 2005, 54-
56). How does one experience this paradoxical sense of being hostage as liberation, or 
how does one know in a sensible rather than cognitive way that she or he is bound to the 
other by obligation(s), without recourse to appeal?

The obligatory summons of the other is sensed, Levinas provocatively states, in 
the unqualified character of the phrase figuring its response: “here I am,” or “me voici” 
in French. “Here I am” is the “saying” that precedes and opens all dialogue in its 
exposing me to the other (Kosky 2001, 89, 153). This exposure of the “I” is not the 
same as the ego; it is not an act of self-positing, but rather a bearing witness to alterity. 
“Here I am” answers for everything, and for everyone. I am responsible for the situation 
in which I find myself, in place before I was born. “Here I am,” brings me, Levinas 
declares, out of the shadow in which I could evade my responsibility (Levinas 1998, xx, 
6-7, 150). It is in the “here I am” response to the other’s address that the passive

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characteristic of being hostage is expressed, without reservation. I feel myself responsible before any commitment to responsibility, before I even know, or understand who, or what I am responsible for. We find textual resonance for this seemingly strange and disquieting account of the ethical conditioning of interpersonal interaction in a variety of biblical and Talmudic texts (Kosky 2001, 167-170). The renowned Talmudic scholar Rashi, whose thoughts on the human values associated with “chosenness” were noted in my introduction, wrote in his exegesis of the Akedah, or the binding of Isaac that “here I am,” or “hineni,” in Hebrew, is an expression of humility, and an expression of readiness (Katz 2003, 117). Rashi’s interpretation of “hineni,” perhaps, challenges us to begin thinking about the notion of “chosenness” in a more tolerant way than that which its more accepted interpretations suggest.

Jeffrey L. Kosky, in describing the response “Here I am” or “hineni,” writes, “since the self is created by the call, being nothing before its call, the call to responsibility calls before there is an “I” to answer.” “Here I am,” accused by the demand that the other makes on me, in my singularity. The “here I am” belongs to a subject discovered after the reduction to “saying,” interpreted as responsibility. The “here I am” is a “saying” that precedes and opens all dialogue, exposing me to the other (Kosky 2001, 153, 189). Levinas writes that in saying, “here I am,” I bear witness to the infinite, signifying myself in the name of God, but in the service of human beings that look at me, without having anything to identify myself with but my own voice or gesture. “Here I am” implies a sensitivity, an orientation, and a readiness to respond, and of particular importance is that the appeal, or summons of the other, is heard in the
response (Levinas 1998, 149). What does it mean for an appeal to be heard, or to be understood, in a response? I will explain this, by referring to two paradigmatic examples in the Hebrew Bible. The first will be the story of the Akedah, or of Abraham, and the binding of Isaac, in Genesis 22. The second example, which I will only touch on in this chapter, is culled from the story of Moses reading the record of the covenant aloud to the “mixed multitude” of people at the foot of Mt. Sinai, in Exodus 24.

Let us examine, in light of Levinas’ teachings, the troubling narrative of Abraham and the binding of Isaac, when God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son, in order to prove his faith. When God calls Abraham, personally, by name, he answers “hineni.” Abraham is then told to go to the land of Moriah to make a burnt offering of his son, Isaac, the surprise and delight of his and Sarah’s old age, and the promise of the covenant that God would make Abraham and his descendents a great nation. While journeying to Moriah, Abraham, for a second time, responds, “hineni,” when his son Isaac calls, “Father!” This acknowledgement of Isaac’s presence, and the offer of his own presence to Isaac, after having offered himself to God, unreservedly, is essential to the paradox of the text, and to Levinas’ teaching that the fundamental obligation we have is that of making ourselves available to the neediness and the suffering of the other person (Putnam 2008, 74). Abraham must be feeling as if he is being pulled in two directions at once, pulled toward the personal address and command of the covenantal God, and likewise pulled toward the address of his own son, who despite being the promise of the future, stands before him at this very moment, in his singularity, and in his suffering.
Abraham proceeds to build an altar, binding Isaac, laying him on top of the altar, and raising up his knife, when an angel or messenger of God calls him twice by name, and again Abraham responds “hineni.” Abraham is then told not to harm his son, for he has proven his faith in, and his obedience to God. Philosopher, and theologian, Søren Kierkegaard, in his text *Fear and Trembling* refers to Abraham as a knight of faith, suspending the ethical for something Abraham believes to be even higher, and in so doing Abraham, who loves God, and Abraham, who strives with God, becomes greater than all. Faith, Kierkegaard explains, is the paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal or the ethical, as such. It is in the ethical that the individual must always abrogate her or his particularity, under a general rule of behavior, so as to become the universal, but it is in faith, alone, that the particular individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute, without the assistance of any mediation. Abraham must admit to himself the impossibility of God’s promise if he, Abraham, sacrifices his son, Isaac, while at the same time fervently believing the absurd, that for God, all things are possible.

In this reading, Abraham, by heeding God’s commandment to sacrifice Isaac, oversteps, or suspends, the ethical altogether, having a higher telos outside of it. For Kierkegaard, the duty to love one’s neighbor in relationship to duty to God, self-encloses humanity, making God but an impotent thought whose power is found only in the ethical, which would fill all of existence. The paradox of faith, according to Kierkegaard, is that there is an interiority that is incommensurable with exteriority. In faith the duty to love God is absolute, relegating the ethical to the relative. Each human
being is alone in her or his own faith, making one knight of faith unintelligible to another, and just as importantly, being a witness and not a teacher, no knight of faith would ever desire to show another the way. It is because of this very silence that ethics condemns the knight of faith. Silence, or keeping one’s own counsel, from friends and family alike is not easy, but is, rather, the hardest thing; it is, Kierkegaard submits, the temptation of the ethical⁷ (Kierkegaard 2006, 62-64, 68, 81-84).

In contrast to Kierkegaard, we find in Levinas’ reading of the Akedah a disallowing of ethical suspension. It is not obedience to God, Levinas claims, that takes precedence, but our primary responsibility to the other person, in particular, for Abraham, to his son, Isaac. Levinas responds to Kierkegaard’s text Fear and Trembling in his essays “Kierkegaard: Existence and Ethics” and “A Propos of “Kierkegaard vivant,” in the text Proper Names. Levinas first asks where the subjectivity of the subject resides for Kierkegaard, suggesting that for Kierkegaard the subject has a secret, forever inexpressible, which determines her or his very subjectivity. This secret, or in Levinas’ description, “thorn in the side,” is what attests to the person’s subjectivity and faith, making the solitary tête-à-tête with God the only possible going forth for that subjectivity. For Levinas, it is not an exaggeration that he describes this as a scandal. Opening up to God, in ways that involve excluding opening up to other humans, carries with it, Levinas contests, an irresponsibility (Levinas 1996b, 67, 70).

⁷ “I cannot understand Abraham, I can only admire him....He spoke neither to Sarah, to Eliezer, nor to Isaac. He passed over these three ethical authorities. Because for Abraham the ethical had no higher expression than that of family life....The ethical is the temptation” (Kierkegaard 2006, 137, 141).
Posing a second question, Levinas asks if the relation to the other is, as Kierkegaard proposes, the entry into, and the disappearing within a totalizing generality. As related previously Levinas describes ethics, in his texts *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, as an exteriority or a face-to-face relation that cannot form a totality whose parts can be compared and generalized. In “substitution,” the “I” put into question in the face-to-face encounter, is the signifying of the “I” for the other. Subjectivity is not the “I” that keeps its secret within the system, or the “I” lost in generality, but is rather the “I” of responsibility for everyone and everything, a generality that does not swallow up subjectivity, but one that is precisely the mark of subjectivity. That, Levinas writes, is what constitutes the ethical (Levinas 1996b, 72-73). The “I” of responsibility, saying “hineni,” and the description of “choseness,” all characterize the ethical. The putting into question of the “I” by the other is, according to Levinas, in actuality, an election in which the “I” is promoted to total altruism, or to that which all-that-is-not-me depends. This election then signifies the most radical commitment there is, confirming the individual’s central place in support of the universe, as opposed to transforming the individual subject into a moment of the universal order. Perhaps, Levinas, challengingly suggests, Abraham’s ear for hearing what he refers to as the second voice, the voice that brought him back to the ethical order, the voice of God’s messenger, is the highest moment in the drama (Levinas 1996b, 73-74). “That Abraham obeyed the first voice is astonishing: that he had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice – that is the essential” (Levinas 1996b, 77). Abraham’s ability to heed the voice of God’s
messenger indicates his receptivity to the other. His response “hineni” to the messenger implies that Abraham had already turned toward the ethical, already claimed by, and obligated to Isaac, for what God wants is that we respond to the other person, before all else (Katz 2003, 116-119).

In saying “hineni” the first time, Abraham responds in faith to God. In saying “hineni” to Isaac, Abraham responds in obligation to his son, another human being. It is in saying “hineni” in response to the messenger’s call for Abraham to put down his knife and spare Isaac’s life that Abraham comes to understand that in responding to the call of one’s fellow human, one is responding to God’s call, or that one is in just this way fulfilling one’s obligation to God. “Do we not,” Levinas asks, “rise to the level of the religious, precisely when we are ethical” (Levinas 1996b, 77)? Drawing on Levinas, the teaching that I take from the telling of the story of the binding of Isaac is that Abraham, “chosen” by God, ultimately, proves his faith in God by being bound to God, by the endless binding, or the infinite responsibility, of one human being toward another, which paradoxically is also the unbinding of one’s singular existence from the egoity of the self, this binding and unbinding being, perhaps, both the signifying of, and the significance of the religious.

In addition to Abraham, Moses appears to be a powerful source of ethics, for Levinas. A few examples of this are provided, as follows. In Levinas’ discussion of the “trace,” in his essay “Meaning and Gender,” he references Exodus 33:18-23.
And he [Moses] said, “Show me, pray, Your Glory,” and He [God] said, “I shall make all My goodness pass in front of you….You shall not be able to see My face, for no human can see My face and live….Look, there is a place with Me, and you shall take your stance on the crag. And so, when My glory passes over, I shall put you in the cleft of the crag and shield you with My palm until I have passed over. And I shall take away My palm and you will see My back, but My face will not be seen.”

Levinas writes that God shows himself, only by his “trace,” and to go towards God is to go towards the other who stands in that “trace” (Levinas 1996, 64). Another valuable reference to Moses can be found in Levinas’ depiction of “substitution” as maternity, or the maternal body, discussed earlier in this chapter. In Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence, Levinas refers to the Book of Numbers, chapter 11, verse 12, writing that in “proximity,” the stranger whom I have “neither conceived nor given birth to,” I already bear, “in my breast as the nurse bears the nursling” (Levinas 1998, 91). Lisa Guenther writes that at this juncture in the Book of Numbers, the Hebrew people, returning from exile in Egypt, weary from travel, begin to complain to Moses, who becomes overwhelmed by this burden. Despite this, he must pull on resources within himself so as to be a harbor for his people. Guenther suggests that Moses’ responsibility for the people requires him to be like a maternal body, bearing the stranger as a nursing child, without the reason, and perhaps without the capacity, to do so. Moses’ responsibility requires him, she concludes, to be feminized and maternalized. Maternity, in this way, is not a fixed biological identity, or a social identity, but is a response to the ethical imperative from the other (Guenther 2006, 120, 123-124, 132).

In my discussion, in the next chapter, of the idea of the “chosenness” of a people, in light of Levinas’ description of ethical subjectivity, I will re-visit Moses in
Exodus 24, as he reads the record of the covenant aloud to a mixed multitude of exiles, who become a “people” after declaring “All that God has spoken, we shall do and understand.” The understanding of the “hineni,” or “here I am” response is extended when the people commit themselves to observe (do) the Ten Commandments before hearing (understanding) them. To do and then to hear is the call or summons of the other understood in the response; it is “chosenness,” itself. Although I have spent a considerable amount of time referencing “here I am,” as found in the Hebrew Bible, I am not proposing that Levinas’ “ethics as first philosophy” is the same as Judaism, or that it rests on a belief in Jewish religion, but, I am rather making the point that his phenomenological description of subjectivity as the unlimited responsibility of one-for-the-other, is enriched by his use of biblical and Talmudic sources. It is also of principal importance to my thesis to show the connection between the philosophical grounding of the ethical trajectory of subjectivity, and the ethical trajectory of the biblical idea of “chosenness,” which I claim to be impoverished in the wake of its more solidified cultural and historical manifestations.

In his essay, “God and Philosophy,” Levinas explicitly makes the connection between ethical subjectivity and “chosenness,” as follows:

But the responsibility to which I am exposed in such a passivity does not apprehend me as an interchangeable thing, for here no one can be substituted for me; in calling upon me as someone accused who cannot reject the accusation, it obliges me as someone irreplaceable and unique, someone chosen. Inasmuch as it calls upon my responsibility it forbids me any replacement. Unreplaceable in responsibility, I cannot, without defaulting, incurring fault, or being caught up in some complex, escape the face of the neighbor; here I am pledged to the other without being able to take back my pledge. I cannot evade the face of the other (autrui), naked and without resources. (Levinas 1996, 143)
In Levinas’ account of substituting myself for the other I am not only summoned, but summoned as someone irreplaceable. The “here I am” response of someone irreplaceable makes me singular in my responsibility, or in my election to moral agency (Cohen 1994, 130). “The subject,” Levinas writes, “is inseparable from this appeal or election which cannot be declined” (Levinas 1998, 53). The bearing of the fault of the other person is, he explains, the uniqueness of the self, which, under extreme accusation, cannot be denied. At this time I will take a closer look at what Levinas means by, and the importance attached to, the notion of “singularity.” I will also make an introductory inquiry regarding his notion of passivity, and its relation to the character of “singularity,” and to that of “choseness.”

Diane Perpich, in tracing the roots of Levinas’ use of the term alterity as an early attempt at finding a way out of “ontology as first philosophy,” challenges us to understand alterity less as an indication of the other’s otherness or difference, and more as an indication of the other’s singularity. It is not how the other differs from me, but how the other’s immediate presence, in its absolutely unique skin, affects my breaking with the totality of Being. This break with Being implies no transcendence from this world to another, rather the alterity of the other is connected to transcendence because the other is what I myself am not. Levinas’ idea of transcendence is deployed according to Perpich, in the service of recuperating the sense and importance of each, singular, embodied human being, who counts as such, and not as a function of the totality of being. The singularity signified in transcendence is not discovered in the other, like a
personality characteristic; it is not a property or a quality of someone, but is produced and performed in relationship, in an orientation toward the other. The orientation to the other is a response to the other’s personal invocation. Abraham obeys God, Perpich citing Hent de Vries writes, because Abraham senses that he alone is being addressed by the voice of God. So, too, for Levinas, it is only me, singularized in the accusative, who experiences the encounter with the other as the advent of personal responsibility. To be absolutely singular is to be unique, irreplaceable and irreducible to commonality. Singularity signifies “the ethical force of the other” (Perpich 2008, 12-13, 19, 33-38, 49, 75, 98, 198), which I consider to be a powerful definition of “chosenness.”

As mentioned previously, the summons of the other can be evaded, but evasion itself is a response. To be “chosen,” is just this impossibility of taking any distance from, or slipping away from, “the Good.” It is, Levinas provocatively exclaims, “firmness more firm and more profound than that of the will” (Levinas 1998, 112-113). To be “chosen” as responsible for the other, is, Richard Kosky states, a passive supporting of the world. The passivity that Levinas speaks of is the passivity of a creature or a subject not master of its own origin. The notion of the radical passivity of human “creatureliness” will take greater shape in a later chapter; but for now it is vital to catch sight of passivity as a not knowing why or to whom one responds, having no time for conscious deliberation. The self, as witnessed, at the foot of Mt. Sinai, is responsible before it commits itself to responsibility (Kosky 2001, 94, 167), and in the passivity of responsibility for the other, or of goodness, the “I” becomes singular and unique. “Chosenness,” Levinas, maintains, is not a privilege, but rather the fundamental
characteristic of the morally responsible human; it is a principle of individuation. The “I” is unique on the basis of a “chosenness,” difficult for it to escape, because it constitutes it. The singular “I” is unique in that in substituting myself for the other, no one can take my place, while at the same time, in substituting myself, as a creature, for another creature, I am equating myself with all others. The “I” is a “chosen hostage.” It is, Levinas declares, the possibility of sacrifice as a meaning of the human adventure, despite death, for in being for the other the meaning of the future is beyond what happens to me, and continues beyond my death (Levinas 1998, 108, 148, 174, 227). In an interview with François Poirié, in 1986, Levinas responds to Poiré’s statement, “The other man is unique. But I, too”… as follows:

Where is my uniqueness? At the moment when I am responsible for the other I am unique. I am unique inasmuch as I am irreplaceable, inasmuch as I am chosen to answer to him. Responsibility lived as chosenness…The responsible I is irreplaceable, noninterchangeable, commanded to uniqueness…. I can cede my responsibility within a society organized in a State, in justice. But even then, that which founds this demand for justice, that which obligates me to find justice, is the fact that I am responsible for the other man. (Levinas and Robbins, 2001, 66)

It is at the peculiar juncture of singularity, where I alone am called, and of universality, or the humanity in everyone, that Levinas’ notion of a “humanism of the other” takes shape (Cohen 2010, 253). In Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence, Levinas discusses the modern anti-humanism movement, affirming, at least, its denial of the primacy of the Enlightenment human, free, and for herself or himself. It is by way of this denial of the imperialistic ego that Levinas is able to clear a place for a subjectivity
posited in sacrifice and in substitution, a subjectivity that precedes the will, and the conatus essendi, or one’s struggle to exist. In Levinas’ description of humanism it is the other person, and not myself that is the end; I am hostage to the other. “Humanism,” Levinas famously announces, “has to be denounced because it is not sufficiently human.” In Levinas’ re-imagining of ethics as for-the-other, he is accounting for the impossible indifference with regard to the human, which does, he insists, succeed in concealing itself in the incessant discourse about the death of God, the end of “Man,” and the disintegration of the world (Levinas 1998, 127-128, 259). Levinas is referring to the crisis of humanism, due to events such as endless war, fascism, atomic bombings, and the genocides of the 20th Century (Levinas 1990, 281). He speaks of the unburied dead of wars, and of the death camps making tragicomic the care for one’s self, and making illusory the pretensions of “Man” as a rational animal, having a privileged place in the cosmos (Levinas 2003, 45).

In 1947, Levinas’ former teacher, Heidegger, who had exerted a positive influence on Levinas’ thinking up until Heidegger’s turn to National Socialism or Nazism, published a “Letter on Humanism,” which influenced generations of post World War II thinkers. In his “Letter” he referred to humanism as misguided nostalgia for rules stating how people should live, submitting that terms such as “humanism” and “ethics” would not be great losses, for terms such as “ethics” only flourish when original thinking is suspended. Heidegger is not endorsing the inhumane or the barbaric, but rather a return to a more original sense of ethics or to thinking outside the traditional view of a rational ethics in the pursuit of right action. Heidegger’s rejection of a
rational-metaphysical sense of ethics resonates with Levinas’ critique of the totalizing metaphysics of subjectivity, although Levinas’ description of the reduction of the other to the same does not lead to Heidegger’s understanding of thinking as the thinking of Being, and the human being’s relationship to the truth and meaning of Being (Heidegger 1993, 195, 220, 227, 231-232, 245, 250), but has its point of departure from the way in which the call of the other places one’s self in question, or under accusation. Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism,” although not a wholesale rejection of ethics, did result in a climate that for several decades discredited any thinking or writing going under the name of “ethics” or of “humanism.” It was within this climate that, Perpich writes quoting the words of philosopher David Wood, Levinas came to the scene “as rain to the cracked earth of a parched landscape.” Levinas’ work, not about the specific norms involved in moral life, instead tries to say just how we come to find ourselves in a moral life at all (Perpich 2008, 9-12).

Levinas’ defense of subjectivity is not mounted in the name of Enlightenment humanism, or in the name of a post-structuralist, or post-modern expression of anti-humanism. His discussion regarding the “saying,” leads him to a conception of subjectivity that rejects the sovereign ego of Enlightenment humanism, and at the same time rejects the anti-humanist dissolution of the subject and of its responsibilities, found in the writings of some poststructuralists. Levinas revives the discredited term, humanism, referring to his philosophy as a “humanism of the other Man,” and in its wake, ethical thinking re-emerges within philosophy. In Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence, we find a humanism shorn of essences, self-possession, self-grounding
consciousness and firm moral certainties (Davis 1996, 39, 78, 123-125). There is moral hope; however, it is hope that a “humanity of the other” can redeem humanity itself. (St. Cheron 2010, xvi). In Difficult Freedom, Essays on Judaism Levinas boldly states, “the meaning of humanity is not exhausted by the humanists, or immune to a slippage that is at first imperceptible but can ultimately prove fatal.” He calls on Western humanism to begin to conceive of a history in which the vanquished and the persecuted might have some value (Levinas 1990, 281-282).

When the life of the other person, even the so-called “losers” in the history of the victors and the vanquished, is more important than my own life, the possibility for justice arises (Perpich 2008, 175). The notion of justice is introduced in Totality and Infinity, in Levinas’ discussion of the “third” or “the other of the other,” requiring principles, laws and rights. In Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence Levinas writes that “proximity,” the approach of the neighbor to whom I am bound, despite myself, becomes a problem when the third party, not only a neighbor, but also a neighbor in a relationship with my neighbor, for which I cannot answer, enters. The third party introduces notions of limitation, and of consciousness, and is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of “proximity” because justice requires that the neighbor become visible, and it is here, Levinas, claims, that there is also justice for me. My relation with my neighbor is precisely what gives meaning to my relationship with all others, the “saying,” nourishing the “said.” Levinas challenges us to understand justice as a demand, and not a degradation, of the obsession of the one-for-the-other (Levinas 1998, 157-160). His “humanism of the other” is affirmation of inter-human morality,
community, and social justice (Levinas 2003, 18). In reading *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* we can begin to make sense of the roots of social injustice. R. Clifton Spargo writes that social injustice and oppression are preeminently systemic, and they can be comprehended as sites where justice turns away from, rather than towards the ethical signification, or “saying,” from which it arises. He proclaims that all of these moments of turning away from ethical signification, moments when we are not ethically vigilant on behalf of others, make us complicit in social structures that either orchestrate, or give permission to human suffering. He suggests that Levinas’ thought can provide a political horizon for an ethics that does not seek shelter in communal, ethnic, or nationalist self-concern (Spargo 2006, 18, 117, 75).

In *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas presents the intrigue of the ethical appeal of the other in the formation of human subjectivity, within communal justice, and within politics. He turns to a language of sensibility, rather than to one of rationality, in order to describe how the human first emerges in the ethical, as a responsibility for the other. One does not know ethics; one undergoes ethics, as an election to moral agency (Cohen 1994, 124-125, 130). In the following chapter I will investigate the possibility of moral election or “chosenness,” as both arising in, and as residing in a “people.” To this end, I will examine how several contemporary readers of Levinas have considered the relation between the structure of singular election, which I have traced in this present chapter, and that of the biblical “chosenness of a people,” which I will trace in the next chapter.
CHAPTER THREE

INVISIBLE UNIVERSALITY: THE SEARCH FOR AN ETHICAL APPRECIATION OF THE “CHOSENNESS” OF “ISRAEL”

…to be persecuted, to be guilty without having committed any crime…is a responsibility for the other. It is an invisible universality.

--Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*

I am a sojourner on earth; hide not thy commandments from me.

--Psalm 119:19

In my last chapter I gave careful thought to Levinas’ use of the ethical term “substitution,” as the signification of the subjectivity of the subject, who uniquely, and incessantly obligated to the other, can precisely, in that way, be understood to be “chosen.” With this background in place, I will now address the idea of the “chosenness” of a people, building on Levinas’ insights regarding ethical subjectivity, with a nod to the debt owed to Rosenzweig. I will begin with reference to what Levinas says regarding the “chosenness” of Israel, more generally in his philosophical writings, and more specifically in his confessional works, including a discussion of the biblical story of the revelation at Mt. Sinai. In the second part of this chapter I will address the complex themes of universalism/particularism and of exemplarity, focusing on their contribution both in support of and in contestation to my thesis’ claim that Levinas’ account of ethical subjectivity can provide a path for the ethical retrieval of the notion of a “chosen people.” In addressing the ideas of universalism and particularism I rely primarily on the writings of Cohen, Ernesto Laclau, and Judith Butler. Hollander, and Sarah Hammerschlag’s texts regarding Derrida’s “philosophical-nationality” project, are
my leading resources concerning issues related to the notion of exemplarity, and to how
Derrida’s investigation of the exemplary structures of nationalisms give pause to a too
facile understanding of the idea of the good of “chosenness,” an idea that I will return to
in the following chapter.

Levinas, in his major philosophical works, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise
Than Being or Beyond Essence*, speaks sparingly of the possibility of “substitution,” or
of “chosenness” as existing in a people, as such. In the final pages of *Otherwise Than
Being or Beyond Essence* he leaves us with these words:

> We find the agglomerations or dispersions of peoples in the deserts without
> manna of this earth. But each individual of these peoples is virtually a chosen
> one, called to leave in his turn, or without awaiting his turn, the concept of the
> ego, its extension in the people, to respond with responsibility…. (Levinas 1998,
> 184-185)

In speaking of the idea of the ego’s extension in the people, Levinas orients singular
election by way of community.

We can assume that Levinas is already thinking about the relationship between
singular subjectivity and the “chosenness” of a people, having written in his preface to
*Totality and Infinity*, “We were impressed by the opposition to the idea of totality in
Franz Rosenzweig’s *Stern der Erlösung*, a work too often present in this book to be
cited” (Levinas 1969, 28). In *Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig critiques Western
philosophical tradition, and insists on the importance of Jewish “chosenness.” A
thorough discussion of Rosenzweig’s theological thinking is too complex to be carried
out here; however, his importance to Levinas’ thinking cannot go completely unnoted.

Hollander, in her text, *Exemplarity and Chosenness: Rosenzweig and Derrida on the*
*Nation of Philosophy*, describes how Rosenzweig’s charge against traditional philosophy is due to philosophy’s inability, in its attempt to account conceptually for the whole of existence, to take into account concrete individuals. Rosenzweig writes,

> Man, in the utter singularity of his being, in his being determined by a first and last name, stepped out of the world which knew itself as the thinkable world, out of the All of philosophy. (Rosenzweig 1985, 10)

In reference to “chosenness,” Hollander writes that Rosenzweig describes it as a form of individuation between a singularity, or an “utter distinctiveness,” and a universality, in which the other is in no way conceived of as a totality. Rosenzweig also claims that “chosenness” is possible for a group, as well as an individual. He suggests that this is especially true for the Jewish people, since their sacred history consists of a revelation to a people. Preserving the divine in Judaism, then, is only possible with a notion of peoplehood that transcends the peoples’ historical existence. Hollander spotlights in Rosenzweig’s thinking the potential understanding of the particular as in some sense “being already within the universal,” and it is in his analysis of the idea of neighbor love, where the “already-being with,” and the “not yet” of election merge most clearly (Hollander 2008, 5-6, 14, 17, 24, 28-29, 174, 182-183). In *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig writes:

> If then a not-yet is inscribed over all redemptive unison, there can only ensue that the end is for the time being represented by the just present moment, the universal and highest by the approximately proximate. The book of the consummate and redemptive bonding of man and the world is to begin with the neighbor and ever more only the neighbor, the well-nigh nighest. Thus the chant of all is here joined by a stanza sung by two individual voices--mine and that of my neighbor’s. The plural contains the things as individual representatives of their kind; and in the singular the soul experiences its birth…it only appears to have thus surrendered its dominion to the plural; in fact it leaves its traces
everywhere in its migration by providing the plural of things everywhere with the sign of singularity. (Rosenzweig 1985, 234-235)

Although Levinas’ philosophy is not, measure for measure, the same as Rosenzweig’s, Rosenzweig’s influence on Levinas is undeniable, in particular, when Rosenzweig writes of the ethical response demanded of one toward her or his neighbor, and in his willingness to look at both philosophical, and religious resources to that end. Cohen specifically notes that in Rosenzweig’s thinking what election requires of the Jewish people in relation to others is ethical behavior, concretized as ongoing acts of neighborly love, and the essentially anonymous work of justice (Cohen 1994, 20).

Levinas is more explicit in regard to a people’s call to responsibility in his confessional writings, and in response to interviewer questions, than he is in his philosophical works, stating clearly in the former, that it is not through pride or through grace that “Israel” feels “chosen,” but rather because the universality of the Divine exists only in the form, fulfilled in human relations, and in a civilization defined in terms of responsibilities, and not in terms of prerogatives. Every person, as a person, described by Levinas as one who is conscious of her or his own freedom, is “chosen.” “If being chosen,” he argues, “takes on a national appearance, it is because only in this form can a civilization be constituted, be maintained, be transmitted, and endure” (Levinas 1990b, 137-138). Levinas finds within the Hebrew Bible arguments for the “choseness” of a people, in that the indeclinable responsibility, or welcome given to the stranger that that Bible repeatedly asks of us, is the very content of Jewish faith. This idea is prolonged in rabbinic Judaism to the point where the notion of the just of
every nation as participating in the future world is not just eschatological, but is an assertion of the possibility of an ultimate intimacy, leading to the affirmation that the world is created for the path of peace. This ultimate intimacy is an intimacy, Levinas claims, without reserve, and the possibility of this future intimacy is, he provocatively suggests, what is meant by the universalism of Judaism. Levinas reminds us that in the cave representing the resting place of the Jewish matriarchs, and the Jewish patriarchs, the Talmud, in embracing all of humanity, also lays Adam, and Eve, to rest. To be conscious of being a nation implies, for Levinas, an awareness of an exceptional destiny, so that every nation worthy of the name is “chosen.” The choosing of each people to carry out a common task, derives, he says, from its youth, or from its long past, and in that way bears a universal meaning, prohibiting “the people” from growing old, so to speak. But “chosenness” takes on an even stronger meaning for Levinas, when it expresses the responsibilities that nations cannot evade. Nations, in being “chosen,” assume a moral, rather than a political sovereignty, demanding that each nation behave as though it were responsible for all.

As Levinas reiterates throughout his confessional writings, we are admonished not to take the idea of a “chosen people” as a sign of pride, or one of exceptional rights, but rather we should take “chosenness” as an awareness, on the part of the people, of exceptional duties. To be “chosen” suggests less the pride of someone who has been called than the humility of someone who serves, and is in Levinas’ words, “no more appalling as a condition than being the place of all moral consciousness” (Levinas 1990, 174). This last statement is perhaps exemplary of how Levinas uses hyperbole to get his
point across, making a demand that we put aside our habitual, egoic ways of thinking about what is meaningful and of value to us as humans in favor of the unremitting responsibility for one’s neighbor as the site of moral consciousness, despite its being appalling to the egoic self. “Chosenness,” understood as a characterization of human life as all-the-way-down ethical, is dismaying and horrifying, precisely for being the place of all moral consciousness, where one is not heroically in command, but is rather commanded by the ethical force exerted by the other. Speaking to the centrality of “chosenness” for the Jewish people, Levinas states that burning inward as an infinite demand on oneself as a people, moral consciousness trumps even the quest for doctrinal unanimity, in its quest for peace (Levinas 1990b, 173-176, 224).

In his text *Beyond the Verse, Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, Levinas provocatively defends the notion of Israel as a “chosen people” as follows:

Ah, the scandal of the Jews as the chosen people! Is being chosen a scandal of pride and of the will to power, or is it moral consciousness itself which, made up of responsibilities that are always urgent and non-transferrable, is the first to respond, as if it were the only one to be called? (Levinas 2007, xviii)

The chosenness of Israel, in its call to the person in her or his uniqueness, in the constitution of a pluralistic human society, under obligation, and in its awareness of an indisputable summons which gives life to ethics, is an ideal that implies, according to Levinas, the humanity of humankind (Levinas 2007, 80, 122, 132, 139). This humanity begins with the “here I am” response to a call, understood as a calling that is most importantly for the benefit of humanity, for no one who is part of the “covenant of responsibility” can attempt to save her or his own life when humanity is in distress.
(Chalier 1993, 69). Although Levinas states, in an interview with Poirié, that calling the uniqueness of the “I” in responsibility its “chosenness” is to a great extent a reference to the “chosenness” at issue in the Hebrew Bible, the notion of “chosenness” that he advances is not an already religious category, but has an ethical origin. Levinas refers to that origin as “the good,” and suggests that religions that have recourse to this term see in it the supreme dignity of the human (Levinas and Robbins 2001, 66, 163, 229).

I intend to heighten this sense of the ethical origin of “chosenness” by examining the biblical narrative of revelation, as Levinas articulates it in his essays “Revelation in the Jewish Tradition,” and “The Temptation of Temptation.” Discussion of this narrative is a step in the direction of understanding the crucial import of “the good” in relation to “chosen people” discourse. The problem of revelation, Levinas contends, insistently arises, demanding new conceptions. If each person, through her or his uniqueness, is taken to be the guarantee of a unique aspect of truth, then revelation can be thought of as constituted of multiple people, while at the same time maintaining the awareness of unity in a people, through the historical continuity of biblical readings and of readings of Talmud (oral law understood to be included, as well, in the revelation at Mt. Sinai) still pertinent today. Levinas refers to the revelation as a constant hermeneutics of the Word, always discovering new landscapes, while at the same time based on the prescription to follow God’s commandment to approach one’s neighbor with hands full. Although the Talmud upholds, he writes, the prophetic origin of the revelation, more stress is laid on the voice of the listener. It is a revelation welcomed in the form of obedience (Levinas 2007, 129-143). There exists, Levinas explains, a permanent dissonance between what
the Talmud draws from the biblical text, and what is found in that text literally, and one finds oneself always drawing a few clarifying illustrations from an allusive, enigmatic, and multivalent way of speaking. Levinas, in attempting to retrieve what he considers the ethical underpinnings of revelation, speaks of the violence done to words in order to tear from them the secret that time and conventions have covered over with their sedimentations. One must, he admonishes, “rub” the text, until it bleeds, removing the layers which corrode it (Levinas 1990, 39, 47).

Levinas rubs the text of the revelation at Mt. Sinai in his essay “The Temptation of Temptation,” allowing the ethical sense of “doing before understanding” to bleed through. Let us take a closer look at the obedience to the command of the other, as exemplified in the biblical revelation narrative of Moses recounting God’s words to the people gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai. After Moses recounts God’s sayings, or commandments, the elders of the people answer with a single voice, saying, “All the words that God has spoken we will do” (Exodus 19:7). Following ritual sacrifices, and fasting, Moses takes up the book of the covenant before all the people, who respond, “all that God has spoken we will do and we will understand” (Exodus 24:5-8). Talmudic scholars consider this response to be the supreme merit of Israel. In his search for an ethical reading of the text, Levinas juxtaposes the type of knowing represented by the people’s response to that of Western philosophical thought, wherein individuals want to taste everything themselves, with no limits attached. They are tempted to be outside everything, what some have dubbed “the view from nowhere,” and at the same time, participating in everything. The temptation of an all-encompassing knowledge, or
the temptation of the life of temptation, is what Levinas calls “the temptation of
temptation,” or philosophy itself, whose starting point is an ego simultaneously
engaged, and disengaged, the latter disengagement making it possible for one to return,
always, to a non-compromised self. Levinas says of his doubling of temptation in the
phrase “temptation of temptation” that the repetition once begun never comes to a stop.
It is infinite, the temptation of temptation, of temptation, and so forth. We want to know
before we do, but we also want a knowledge tested, fully, through our own experience.
We resist any undertaking before completely understanding just what we are getting
into. This ruthless demand to know everything, to bypass nothing, is thought of as a way
to rise above the limitations of the pure act; however, by rising above the act, Levinas
claims, the act will no longer be free, generous, or open to the otherness of the other,
one’s neighbor. Western knowledge is characterized, here, by Levinas, as a gesture of
refusal toward the generosity of a movement done without calculation.

When the people proclaim, “We will do and we will understand,” action
preceding knowledge, they are, on the one hand, unfavorably considered to be naïve,
and it is philosophy, only, that can save them from such naïveté, while on the other hand
philosophy is considered to bring with it doubts that can only be overcome by the inner
certainty of the faithful controlling what revelation proclaims. Suggesting a third way,
Levinas argues that perhaps revelation allows us to discover an order prior to the one in
which a thought “tempted by temptation” is found. He would have us displace the value
that the “temptation of temptation” has acquired for us. Does the definition of
philosophical reason, he asks, exhaust the notion of reason, and does not the meaning of
being receive a challenge from the revelation of the Torah, so that in receiving its gifts one fulfills it before consciously accepting it: practice preceding adherence? The people’s response to “do before understanding” is an acceptance of the Torah that gives meaning to reality, or to a world that is here so that the ethical order has the possibility of being fulfilled (Levinas 1990, 38, 41).

Can we just ignore the threat of violence attached to the acceptance or rejection of the Torah as found in Exodus? Is the taking on of responsibility an ethical characteristic of the human, or is it a choice made under the biblical threat of reckoning the crimes of fathers with sons, for future generations (Exodus 20: 5-6)? The Talmud speaks of Rav Abdimi bar Hasa who recounts God telling the people at Mt. Sinai that if they accept the Torah, all is well, but if not, here will be their grave. These biblical and Talmudic references, perhaps, imply that the Torah would not have been chosen freely. Levinas weighs in, proposing that the Torah cannot come to the human as a result of choice, but is that which must be received in order to make freedom of choice possible. Is not revelation, he asks, precisely a reminder of this consent prior to freedom and non-freedom? The Torah, received without violence, is just that which precedes freedom of thought. It is prior to free examination, and to temptation. Levinas challenges us to look differently at the meaning of the link between the giving of the Torah, and the threat of death. Rather than conceiving of this link as that of truth imposed through violence, he would have us understand the link to mean that the human of the Torah transforms Being into human history. “If you do not accept the Torah,” Levinas writes, “you will not leave this place of desolation and death, this desert which lays to waste all the
splendor of the earth. You will not be able to begin history…only the Torah…assures man of a place” (Levinas 1990, 39). As a consequence of rejecting the Torah, or of refusing the ethical summons of the other, being reverts back to nothingness. Accepting the Torah, at its face, is not child’s play, but is as Levinas declares, a perfectly adult effort. In rabbinic Judaism this adult effort’s astonishing connection to “the good” is described, by Rabbi Eliezer, as an order of angelic existence, and not the consciousness of children. It is also important to clarify that Levinas is not, like Buber in his Bible translation, suggesting that the Israelites are saying “we will do in order to understand,” the idea that one can only understand what a task consists of, and what is expected of one, in the actual doing of the task, but he is, rather, praising a mode of knowing that reveals the deep structure of subjectivity, as described, previously, in his account of “substitution,” in *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*. “Doing before knowing” is a pact with “the good,” an originary good sensed before the alternative of, or the choice between good and evil presents itself to us. In responding, “We will do, and we will understand,” the Israelite people, Levinas proposes, could not but feel their original connection with “the good.”

The revelation of the Torah can be likened to the face-to-face relation, which you will recall is described in Levinas’ text, *Totality and Infinity*, as an ethical encounter between myself and an other in which the other’s destitution is both a teaching and a height, arousing my goodness in response to its appeal. The encounter between self and other, like the “doing before understanding” response of revelation is what Levinas refers to as a direct optics, without cognitive mediation, where seeing the other is
already being obligated to the other (Levinas 1990, 30-50). Likening the situation of the ego before the face, to the people of Israel at the foot of Mt. Sinai, who receive the Torah with the words “we will do and we will understand,” Perpich asserts that “doing before hearing,” or before understanding, becomes the principal trope in Levinas’ later works for an event that is straightaway ethical (Perpich 2008, 204-205), and it is just this straightaway ethical character of the response of the people to the revelation that is, I suggest, the most likely reason why the Talmudic rabbis consider it the supreme merit of Israel. “The tradition,” Levinas declares, “has not exhausted all the resources of this error in logic and all the merit which consists in acting before understanding” (Levinas 1990, 42).

It is precisely in this awakening to, or the ordering of me to the other, experienced in the act of obeying the ethical commandments, that the Infinite is found. Levinas writes:

The Infinite then has glory only through subjectivity, in the human adventure of the approach to the other, through the substitution for the other, by the expiation for the other….Obedience precedes any hearing of the command. The possibility of finding…the order in the obedience itself, and of receiving the order out of oneself, this reverting of heteronomy into autonomy, is the very way the Infinite passes itself….In the responsibility for the other we are at the heart of the ambiguity of inspiration. (Levinas, 1998, 148-149)

The reverting of heteronomy into autonomy, or the possibility of finding the order in the obedience itself, is what Levinas calls “saying with inspiration.” The claim laid on the same by the other in the core of one’s self, is an inspiration, or the trace of infinity, which calling upon us as responsible for the other, undoes the ego, or, in Levinas’ own words, is “the ambiguity in the subject,” the ambiguity being one of inspiration. The
glory of the Infinite, Levinas claims, is glorified only by the signification of the one-for-the-other, as sincerity, and it is in one’s sincerity that the Infinite comes to pass, making the plot of ethics primary (Levinas 1998, 148-150). It is, he states, justice for my neighbor that gives me proximity to God, for the attributes of God are given to us not in the indicative, but in the imperative. Knowledge of God comes to us, like a commandment, so that to know God is to know what must be done, for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger (Levinas 1990b, 17-18).

Perhaps Levinas’ discernment of the ethical character of the “chosenness” of a people, as embodied in the peoples’ response at Mt. Sinai, goes a considerable way towards answering the following questions posed by Cohen, in his text, Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas, in regards to the work that the idea of the “chosenness” of a people may or may not be able to accomplish. Cohen asks the following questions, “What resources do Jews have today to defend, let alone to promote, their unique election and continued independent existence based on that election? Is there a post-Enlightenment way for Jews to take seriously their own election, to take seriously the Jewishness of their election? Can Jewishness be defended or even defined in the wake of Enlightenment universalism? Lastly, he asks if the idea of Jewish “chosenness” is an antiquated, obsolete, throwback, or can it remain vital, today (Cohen, 1994, 5-6)? In order to engage more fully with these questions I will, in the remainder of this chapter, address two important conceptions that help explain, and at the same time trouble, the idea of the “chosenness” of a people. First I will pay close attention to how the claims of particularity, and how the counter claims of universality,
animate the notion of “a chosen people,” and next, utilizing the writings of Hollander and Hammerschlag, I will examine Derrida’s investigation of the idea of “choseness” thought of as exemplarity, in his “Philosophical Nationality” project lectures.

Complex notions of universalism, and of particularism circulate within both religious and philosophical discourses. Levinas, himself, comes at these ideas from both traditions. In order to begin to understand how these ideas impact the notion of “the good,” so critical to my thesis, I will, at this time, provide a short summary of some of the pertinent historical, and contemporary interpretations of universalism and of particularism. Political theorist, Ernesto Laclau addresses these claims in his book *Emancipation(s)*. He writes that within the forms in which the relationship between universalism and particularism has been thought historically, in particular, the classic ancient philosophical forms, there is an uncontaminated dividing line between the two, with the pole of the universal thought to be entirely graspable by reason. In this scenario there is no possible mediation between universalism and particularism; particularism can only corrupt the universal, and it has only two ways to go, either it realizes itself in the universal, that is, eliminates itself as a particular, or it negates the universal by asserting its particularity. In relation to Christianity, Laclau contends that a point of view of the universal does exist, but this point of view is God’s, and not accessible to human reason. Universalism, in this sense, is only accessible to humans through the revelation of the incarnation, or of God becoming flesh and assuming a human nature. Modernity, or the turn to rational man as the measure of all things, can, then, primarily be understood as an attempt to interrupt the Christian logic of incarnation.
Enlightenment rationality postulates an autonomous, universal subject. The problem with this conception, as highlighted in postmodernist thinking, according to Laclau, is that surely universalism found its own subject, but alas, it turned out to be the subject of a certain particularity, that of 19th Century European culture, the struggle between universalism and particularism now taking on an anti-imperialist or post-colonialist cast. Marxist theory, too, privileges certain people as the agents of historical change, or as the incarnation of the universal, possessing the claim to knowledge of the objective meaning of events, while those with other viewpoints merely possess false consciousness. Laclau suggests that one needs to ask if universalism is no more than a particular that at some moment has become dominant. At the least, he submits, there is no particular which does not appeal to universal principles in the construction of its own identity, and yet in distinguishing its identity from its context, particularism paradoxically asserts the context at the same time. Laclau envisions the universal emerging as an incomplete, ever-expanding horizon that is incommensurable with the particular, but cannot exist without it, for it is only particular actors who can actualize the universal at any moment (Laclau 1996, 22-29, 34). This ambiguity, it seems to me, is central to the thought of the ambiguity of a “chosen people,” who while committed to the universal are also committed to their singular particularity, which both actualizes the universal and at the same time is put into question by the universal.

Judith Butler, in her essay “Restaging the Universal,” writes that universality is one of the most contested topics in recent social history. Some political theorists, she claims, want to account for the politically relevant features of human beings in order to
base their normative views of what a political order should be on that universal
description. Others find that use of a doctrine of universality serves, as noted above, by
Laclau, the politics of colonialism and imperialism in that what is named universal is
merely the property of the dominant culture. Commenting on Hegel in his major work
*Phenomenology of Spirit*, Butler argues that although Hegel may seem to be working
toward a true and all-inclusive universality, that is not so, for universality, according to
Hegel, cannot proceed without destroying that which it purports to include. The
assimilation of the particular into the universal always leaves a trace, or a remainder,
which Butler explains, renders universality ghostly, or spectral to itself. Universality, for
Hegel, is a doubling of the abstract and the concrete. Butler warns that although
universality at first denoted that which is self-identical to all humans, it loses precisely
that self-identity when it refuses to accommodate all human beings within its purview.
As a result, those outside of its purview do not rise to the level of the recognizably
human within its terms (Butler, et al 2000, 14-17, 23-24). The result of the latter can be
seen most prominently in the genocides of the 20th Century, continuing into today.

Central to my discussion of ethical “chosen people” discourse is Levinas’
examination of the relation between the particularism of “Israel” and the universality of
“Man,” in his texts *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, and *Difficult
Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. In the former, he writes that universality is reflected by
the execution of, and the concretization of particular laws. In a discussion of the idea of
a “chosen people” Levinas asserts that the universality of the Jewish spirit, found in the
riches of the Bible and the Talmud, involves an indelible moment of isolation and of
distancing, due to a fundamental withdrawal into one’s self in the awareness of a surplus of responsibility toward the other, with no demand of obligation in return. This, Levinas claims, is precisely what the awareness of being “chosen” is. Nevertheless, he goes on to state, how in the eyes of nations, and in the eyes of assimilated Jews themselves, this asymmetrical notion of obligation takes on the appearance of an irremediable particularism, or as a desired, or strongly sought after nationalism. What Levinas finds, and wants us to find, most distinctive about “chosenness” is how the values of “chosenness” lead “beyond” themselves; although just what the meaning of this “beyond” is has never, he argues, been formulated in Western language. What Levinas calls the peculiarity of election, demands to be made explicit to thought. The idea of a “chosen people,” is not, he claims, the symptom of an outmoded stage of existence, but is, instead, the revelation of a universalism that completes or perfects fraternity. Levinas daringly asks if particularism, thought to be an apparent limitation of universality, is not precisely what protects it from totalitarianism by arousing our attention to the murmur of inner voices (Levinas 2007, 191-193).

In his text Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism, Levinas writes that although seemingly paradoxical, Judaism has always aspired to the universal in that the revelation of morality (referring to the asymmetrical sense of obligation experienced in the face–to–face encounter, described in Totality and Infinity, as well as to “proximity,” or the obsession of obligation to one’s neighbor, described in Otherwise Than Being), which discovers a human society, or in other words, is a condition of all human social existence, also discovers the place of election. Being elected, humans feel themselves
responsible for the fate of humanity, a “position outside nations,” so that a coherent
discourse that is open to the universal is one, Levinas affirms, concerned with the inner
coherence of discourses other than its own, the truth of each attaining its true state
within universal truth (Levinas 1990b, 21-22, 94). Judaism teaches the awareness of
being “chosen,” and the centrality of this responsibility to others, a responsibility for
justice and for generosity, which is not unique to Jews (Morgan 2011, 192-193). The
notion of “Israel,” as an ideal of humanity, Levinas argues, can be separated in the
Talmud from any historical, national, local, or racial notion (Levinas 1990b, 22).

In his text, Levinasian Meditations: Ethics, Philosophy, and Religion, Cohen
speaks at length regarding the universality of Levinasian ethics, as embodied in the
particularity of a “chosen people.” Levinas, he writes, claims a universality of moral
agency, occurring as an election to a unique responsibility for the other. Although this
singular responsibility for the other is referred to, by Levinas, as “the humanity of the
human,” Cohen describes the universal, as conceived by Levinas, as different than the
Kantian universal moral law or categorical imperative, because the universal proper to
ethics, according to Levinas, is at the same time a singularity. It refers to the “each,”
rather than to the “all.” The “each,” Cohen insists, is not a reference to a form of brute
particularity, or even an indifference to the universal, for that would be a condition both
incommunicable, and unintelligible. The “each” can also not be understood as an
“exclusive universality,” or as an effort to achieve universality by violently excluding
everything other than itself, or in other words, the total negation of difference. This,
Cohen says, is particularism in disguise.
Levinasian universality is not an “exclusive universality,” nor is it what can be described as an “abstract universality,” where truth or value is located in the “same,” rather than in the “singular,” but instead includes a sense, Cohen states, of the particular as a necessary and irreducible dimension of its expression. It is described as a “concrete universality,” (or what I would call a “lived universality”) rooted in human temporal existence, and penetrated by the obligations of a pluralistic and historical world. It is in the concrete that an “ethical universality” finds a genuine, though never final manifestation. Cohen’s account of the “concrete universal” resonates for me with Laclau’s characterization of universalism as an ever expanding, though unfulfilled horizon. A “concrete universality” allows one to sense how universal morality and justice can be bound to the unique experience of a people, and to the highest hopes, Cohen eloquently articulates, of a pluralist humanity. The particularity of a people, and universal morality and justice need not be in conflict with one another, in fact what is demanded by a concrete, ethical universalism, rises from the particular (Cohen 2010, 258-271). Finally, Hollander describes the Levinasian self as responsible by virtue of an interweaving of particularity, and of universality, an interweaving of the absolute singularity of the obligated response to the summons of the other, and obligation itself, as a universal human condition. The Jewish people derive its external existence, she states, from living the chasm between the particularity and the universality of “chosenness” (Hollander 2008, 32).

The complex make-up of universalism/particularism, and the ambiguities and paradoxes inherent in the idea of a “chosen people” are taken up by Derrida in his
seminars on “Philosophical Nationality,” which I will address in the remaining portion of this chapter. In the years 1984 to 1988 Derrida conducted seminars under the title, “Nationalité et nationalisme philosophiques,” which will be referred to in this chapter as Derrida’s “Philosophical Nationality” seminars, of which the first session of the seminar cycle has been published under the title of “Onto-Theology of National-Humanism: Prolegomena to a Hypothesis,” located in the Jacques Derrida Archive at the University of California, Irvine. Underscoring the ambiguous promise of exemplary structures, Derrida also addresses the idea of the election of Israel in his essay, “A Word of Welcome,” in his text *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, calling to our attention how Levinas does not call into question the election of Israel or its universal exemplarity, but rather recognizes in “Israel” a universal message for which it has responsibility, before, or independently of the event, or the place of the revelation. Human universality, what Derrida refers to as “humanitarian hospitality,” is uprooted from any singularity of the event, and this duty, according to Levinas, Derrida continues, is essential to the relationships between “Israel,” and the nations, opening the way to the humanity of the human in general. There is in Derrida’s own words, “a daunting logic of election and exemplarity operating between the assignation of a singular responsibility and human universality” (Derrida 1999, 72). Levinas, Derrida would have us understand, wants, despite maintaining a faith in the election of a people, always to keep that election safe from any nationalist seduction (Derrida 1999, 66, 72, 118).

In characterizing the exemplary structure of national affirmation that Derrida expresses in his “Philosophical-Nationality” seminars, Hollander describes how no
discourse invoking a nationality is without a claim to universal validity, or to an assertion of the most universal philosophical values in the name of the most particular, national, cultural, or linguistic identities. In highlighting the paradoxes of exemplarism, Derrida points out exemplarism’s ethical injunction to open itself to what is yet to come, what is other than, and what is excluded from such exemplary communities. The notion of what is yet to come is essential to exemplary, or to “chosen people” narratives in that being chosen as a unique people is by virtue of a group’s past, as well as the promise that their future holds, enacted in the present in the form of hope. The importance of the paradox of being both unique, and open to that which is other, is that by simultaneously aspiring to particularity and to universality an ethical response of transformation results. The transformation that follows from this paradox, Derrida claims, is an ethical injunction to open our national and cultural communities, and philosophy itself, to what is routinely excluded from such communities, thereby, opening ourselves to what we are not, what Hollander expresses as “future lines of inquiry.”

“Israel,” or the “chosen people,” perceived, in Levinasian terms, as a plurality, and not as a totality, guides Derrida’s thinking on nationalities, in particular those of Europe, for if a nation’s particular vocation is to become universal, or to spread a universal message, it must open itself to the other, and to humanity in general, paradoxically realizing its true self by becoming less like itself, and overcoming, in the process, the tendency toward exclusivity. Hollander says of Derrida that his use of the category exemplarity comes from the insight that universals are articulated in an exemplary way through particularity. Although Derrida is extremely interested in the
phenomenon of election, or in just what it means to be claimed by a community or by an identity, he finds the culturally determinate ways in which the biblical idea of election has been passed down to us disconcerting for its use as a philosophical concept. The logic of exemplarity, as well as a sense of Jewish identity, based on this logic, is, Derrida claims, dangerous, and traumatic, because being open to the other necessarily leads to a radical instability of self-identity. A connection can be made here with Levinas’ description of the subject as a hostage, and substitution, as beyond essence, or the break-up of egoity (Hollander 2008, 2-9, 28, 113-114, 124-137).

Wayne Froman speaks to this troubling sense of self-identity, what he refers to as the strangeness of “substitution,” or to a self, liberated from any essence, in his essay, “Strangeness in the Ethical Discourse of Levinas.” His suggestion regarding Levinas’ statement that the responsibility for the other, or the proximity of the neighbor, does not signify submission to the non-egoic self, but, rather, signifies an openness in which being’s essence is surpassed in inspiration, is consistent with Judaism’s precept that the crucial content of revelation, the love of one’s neighbor, does not require losing one’s self in this love. The reason for this is that the other is no more, and no less than I am, neither the one nor the other of us being self-originating. We find within the ethical dynamic of “substitution” the remainder of a strong sense of individuality, which is tied to this sense of non self-origination, or of creatureliness (Froman 2005, 54-55), a radical notion that will be examined more closely in the following chapter.

Derrida’ thoughts on the relationship between “chosen people,” and “philosophical nationality” discourses is also explored by Hammerschlag in her essay,
“Another, Other Abraham: Derrida’s Figuring of Levinas’s Judaism,” and in her book *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought*. In her article, Hammerschlag presents Derrida’s critique of Levinas’ use of Judaism as an exemplary model of ethical thinking, unfolding how Derrida capitalizes off the tension arising from the exemplary model: the tension between election, and deracination, or uprooting, otherwise understood as the tension that arises when appropriating a call that upsets the structure of self possession, as one’s own. Derrida investigates the link between Levinas’ structure of ethical subjectivity, and his description of Judaism. It is the response to a call, be it affirmative or negative, that inaugurates the deracination, or uprooting of the subject, securing self-alienation as the criterion for ethics (Hammerschlag 2008, 74-80). Levinas’ appropriation of a positive sense of uprootedness, an expulsion that is the subject’s subjection to the other, as the very structure of ethical subjectivity, is in distinction to Hegel’s negative portrayal of the Jews, in his text “The Spirit of Christianity,” as an uprooted people alienated from nature, most prominently expressed in Hegel’s portrayal of the life of Abraham, who in leaving his home, has nothing to ground him, or no ties of love to bind him. By examining Hegel’s statement that the Jewish people are the most rejected and beyond saving of all peoples, Levinas develops a reading of Judaism as a possible path out of totalizing thought, especially that of Hegel. Levinas reorients Jewish universal “chosen people” discourse from one that requires that I am like all others, or that others ought to be like me, to a discourse demanding that I am responsible for all others (Hammerschlag 2010, 17, 27 144-145).
Derrida, too, finds in the tension between the election of the person, or of the people, and the uprooting of that person, or of that people, which inheres in the structure of exemplarity, an instantiation of some universal quality; however, he cautions that universal language is availed of even in the most sinister manifestations of exemplary national discourses. Derrida is warning us of how a discourse of universal appeal can engender violence, because any particular nation, establishing itself as the instantiation of a particular value, must try to thwart any attempt by others to take up the same position. When one’s sense of being unique is articulated through a universal structure, the possibility that others can make the same claim is granted, and at the same time, denied, by those who would guard their own unique status. When Jewish people make a claim to a universality, as the embodiment of “chosenness,” Derrida suggests that they, too, share the dangers inherent in exemplary discourses.

In his text, *Adieu to Levinas*, Derrida writes that Levinas’ work demands that we think through the space between the ethical, and the political, as well as think about the ethical in relation to the religious. “Sinai” is both a metaphor for the trace in the ethical encounter, and the site of a particular Jewish covenant. In representing the trace in the ethical encounter, “Sinai” calls for an openness to the other, and therefore, a renunciation of the claim that the revelation of “Sinai” is in some way only for the Jewish people. Derrida has us appreciating Levinas’ conception of “election,” as demanding a humility toward, and a hospitality to all others (Hammerschlag 2008, 74-90). “Election,” Derrida declares, “is inseparable from what always seems to contest it: substitution” (Derrida 1999, 70). What this means, according to Derrida, is that those
“chosen” as the bearer of the message of hospitality to the widow, orphan, and stranger, must continually question their own “chosen” status. In referencing the Hebrew Bible, Derrida is making the case for Europe to find a way to take up this double duty, out of the contradiction at the very heart of it. Following Derrida’s logic, the contradiction at the heart of Judaism’s claim to “chosen people” status is not a defect, but is, instead, an opportunity to forgo an assertion of either universality, or particularity, for the possibility of activating the difference between the two, and in that way, resisting the possible dangers inherent in both (Hammerschlag 2008, 27, 91-94, 144-146).

In her book, Hammerschlag deepens her investigation of the sense of uprootedness, found in the experience of “choseness,” as the condition for ethics. Levinas, she states, expands the conceptualization of uprooting so that it becomes a way of representing a moral subjectivity inaugurated in the response of obligation to a call. We find here the understanding of ethics as an uprooting of the self, in that the structure of ethical subjectivity, delineated in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, is an exilic model, commencing with an expulsion that is the subject’s subjection to the other. The human is marked by a call more fundamental than any attraction to belonging. Levinas is referring here to the failure of Enlightenment humanism to protect those who fall outside of doctrines of blood and of soil. He argues, according to Hammerschlag, that Judaism’s wisdom is that it, *too* (italics, mine) offers a response to the determination of the flesh and soil, or to paganism, in its emphasis on the neighbor for whom I am responsible over and beyond my own needs. Levinas, Hammerschlag suggests, contrasts this ethical orientation with that of Christianity (which claims
responsibility to the other, or love of the other, as fundamental) in its turn to the
language of transcendence in response to the doctrines of blood and soil. For Levinas,
responsibility to one’s neighbor, the fundamental teaching of Judaism, is an alternative
way of being in the world. Yet, is not this “privilege” of an ethical orientation
universally accessible, and if so, in just what manner can the Jewish community, as a
particularity, continue to exist? Derrida brings to the fore the contradiction inherent in
the compatibility of deracination and election, a contradiction also found in the
Levinasian revelation of the “face,” whose appeal or command, although uprooting me
from an imperialist sense of freedom, at the same time, orders me to responsibility,
promoting my freedom by arousing my goodness (Levinas 1969, 200, 303).

Derrida contends that neither Jewish discourses of particularity, nor Jewish
discourses of universality, can escape contamination, the question becoming how to
make the contamination productive. Judaism becomes, for him, a site where the
opposition between universality and particularity can be deconstructed, calling into
question politics of identity, and discourses of political universalism, or of humanism
(Hammerschlag 2010, 17-18, 118-121, 140, 144, 179, 205). Deconstruction can be
understood to mean, here, the exceeding of the stable borders of the presently possible,
the discourses of particularity and of universality lacking the cohesiveness, and the
closure that they claim (Caputo 1977, xix, 18). Deconstruction, according to J. Hillis
Miller, is a double gesture, the violation or the going beyond the limits imposed by the
primacy of speech or logocentric thinking, in order to locate a point of otherness in the
text, while at the same time demanding a restoration, or a reconstruction and a renewal
of the text (Miller 1987, 26, 71). Derrida’s claim, Hammerschlag advances, is not to overcome exemplarity, but to ask whether there is thought of the idiom that escapes the seeming contradiction between exemplarity’s characteristic universalism, and the “closing in on itself in such a way that it becomes a violent particularism.” Can this tension, which disrupts any self-assurance on the part of the “chosen,” become a source for a political thinking whose justice rests precisely on this lack of self-assurance? Derrida invokes uprootedness, a primary questioning of the call, as being at the very heart of responsibility (Hammerschlag 2010, 236, 248). He proposes:

That anyone responding to the call must continue to doubt, to ask himself whether he has heard right, whether there is no original misunderstanding, whether it was in fact his name that was heard, whether he is the only one or the first addressee of the call, whether he is not in the process of substituting himself violently for another, whether the law of substitution, which is also the law of responsibility, does not call for an infinite increase of vigilance and concern….The possibility of an original misunderstanding in destination is not an evil, it is the structure, perhaps the very vocation of any call worthy of that name, of all nomination, of all response and responsibility. (Derrida 2007, 34)

Derrida appears to rely on ambiguity, or the law of undecidability, to hold up any claim to election, in particular, Judaism’s claim. A just political and ethical thinking begins, Hammerschlag says of Derrida, with this aporia, or doubt: the possibility of just action found at the sites where the contradictions in the principle of election, or that of exemplarity, allow themselves to be seen. Derrida finds the Levinasian idea of election becoming politically productive only when the tensions that animate it are put into play. “Sinai” comes to represent both a claim to uniqueness, and a hospitality and humility to the equivalent claims of all others (Hammerschlag 2010, 18, 247, 251, 257). To reiterate, what was noted earlier, election is inseparable from, what at each moment
appears to contest it: substitution, or being hostage and in perpetual debt to the other. In support of further heightening the intrigue inherent in the idea of a “chosen people,” I will, in the following chapter, more closely examine Levinas’ sense of the radical passivity and “the good” of “choseness,” explicating how his phenomenological description of the sense of “creatureliness” animates ethical subjectivity, characterizing the human in a way that serves as a response to Derrida’s caveat in regard to the danger of exemplarity, or the notion of a “chosen people,” turning into a violent particularism.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE ETHICALLY CREATED SUBJECT: A PRE-ORIGINARY SUSCEPTIVENESS TO “THE GOOD”

La bonté est dans le sujet, l’an-archie même; en tant que responsabilité pour la liberté de l’autre, antérieure à toute liberté en moi, mais aussi précédent la violence en moi qui serait le contrare de la liberté.

--Emmanuel Levinas, Autrement qu’être

Goodness in the subject is anarchy itself. As a responsibility for the freedom of the other, it is prior to any freedom in me, but it also precedes violence in me, which would be the contrary of freedom.

--Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence

My discussion of the promise of the ethical, or created character of the human, inherent in the idea of a “chosen people,” must at this critical juncture extend to an exposition regarding the radical passivity of the human, characterized by Levinas, as “the necessity that the Good choose me first before I can be in a position to choose, that is, welcome its choice” (Levinas 1998, 122). In order to establish a response to Derrida’s cautionary critique of the exemplarity or “chosenness” of a people I will begin by explaining how Levinas employs the notion of an ethical sense of creation, by investigating his understanding of the age old idea of “creation ex nihilo,” the sense of diachrony in relation to creation, and the importance of the notion of separation. I will then explore in greater detail the idea that subjectivity is generated by way of the radical passivity, or the creaturely character of the human, which in turn makes the non-violent character of a “chosen people,” possible.
Levinas, as previously noted, embraces Plato’s description of the good itself as transcending essence in dignity and surpassing power. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas provocatively writes, “The Place of the Good above every essence is the most profound teaching, the definitive teaching, not of theology, but of philosophy” (Levinas 1969, 103). In order to fully understand the importance of this idea of “the good” for Levinas’ description of ethical subjectivity, or for an understanding of “chosenness,” we need to take another look at his notion of “substitution,” or of the responsibility of the one-for-the-other, always keeping in mind that this is a responsibility for which the ego is not the authority, one’s self having come on the scene before having done anything (Levinas 1996, 94). What does it mean for a person not to be the author of her or his responsibility to others? A person, Levinas explains, is a creature, a self not issued from its own initiative, and at the same time ignorant of its creation, the latter a condition he refers to as atheism (Levinas 1969, 58). There is a total passivity of the self, as a creature, suggested by the idea of creation (Levinas 1996, 89). It is imperative to point out that the sense of creation, of which he speaks, is not a religious notion centering on the concept of causality, but is rather one centering on the passivity and vulnerability of the creature, so that creation and creatureliness can be understood in ethical, and not in either theological, or scientific terms (Gibbs 1992, 215). Levinas says about creation that it contradicts the freedom of the creature when it is confused with causality, but it does not contradict the freedom of the creature when it is apprehended as a relation of transcendence, conditioning the positing of a unique being, and of her or his election (Levinas 1969, 279), an idea that I will expand upon later in this discussion.
Many religions posit creation stories, often in an attempt to make sense of the world’s existence, and of our own existence as humans in relation to the world in which we find ourselves. When appreciated ethically, creation can be comprehended as being at odds with the chaos of what Levinas calls the “il-y-a,” or a-moral existence. For Levinas, the “il y a” represents elemental indifference, a world of emptiness, without goodness, and without value. Separation from the “il y a,” or from the totality of nature is an accomplishment of the inner life or “psychism,” the “I” in love with life and all it has to offer. In separating from the “il y a” the “I” finds itself a creature among creatures, each in its own time, non-coinciding with the other’s time, and breaking with historical time itself. Creation, Levinas suggests, is not a given, but is a fragile accomplishment in constant danger of reverting back to chaos. It is just this notion of an a-moral chaos preceding creation that makes Levinas’ account a moral rather than a natural account of the origins of the world. Fagenblat, in emphasizing the ethical character of Levinas’ notion of creation, states that due to the danger of reverting back to a world indifferent to value, the created world must be continually and actively sustained and regenerated, and it is precisely ethics that accomplishes this. Creation, thus, becomes for Levinas, the governing trope of a moral narrative, and the condition for an intelligible world. In order to sustain this intelligibility, in light of the world’s seeming contingency, Fagenblat suggests that Levinas turns to the appeal of ethics to give life meaning, for a world without values would be no world at all. Fagenblat proposes that the notion of meaning without ethics is merely the betrayal of a metaphysical longing for facts without values (Fagenblat 2010, 29, 36-40, 48-50).
This suggestion of a metaphysical longing is also taken up by Richard J. Bernstein in his text *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*. Bernstein speaks of philosophy’s quest for an Archimedean point upon which to ground knowledge, quoting Descartes’ *Second Meditation*, as follows:

> Archimedes, in order that he might draw the terrestrial globe out of its place, and transport it elsewhere, demanded only that one point should be fixed and immovable; in the same way I shall have the right to conceive high hopes if I am happy enough to discover one thing only which is certain and indubitable.

Although Descartes’ cogito (“cogito ergo sum,” “I think therefore I am”) is considered, Bernstein states, the great rationalist treatise of modernism, it is not clear if the Archimedean point in Descartes’ philosophy is the cogito or God himself (Bernstein 1983, 16). In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas contends that the cogito, taken as the first certitude, already rests on the existence of God, and that to possess such an idea of infinity is already a welcoming of the Other (Levinas 1969, 92-93). Despite nuanced readings of Descartes, metaphysical longing as the seductive allure of a secure and a stable authority to which one can appeal (differing from Levinas’ description of metaphysics as the unfulfillable desire for the other), or what Bernstein names “Cartesian anxiety,” remains fundamental to modern philosophy and to modern “Man.”

It is also the grounds for what some may consider the post-modern rejection of all permanent constraints to which one can appeal, and the concomitant reliance on either invented or temporarily accepted constraints (Bernstein 1983, 18-19).

Levinas’ trope of creation provides us with a way of finding meaning in terms of ethics or of “the good,” rather than in terms of “Cartesian anxiety.” Creation is not,
Drew Dalton explains, an act which occurred sometime in the past, but should be understood as an orientation one can take in relation to the other. Creation is not a fait accompli, but a promise; it is not an account of an origin, but of a covenant. This is helpful for an understanding of creation, which according to Levinas, occurs in a time immemorial, in a time a subject cannot even conceive of, except in its trace, as the orientation of the one for the other, or what he refers to as “the good.” “The good,” rupturing totality, makes of creation something ongoing, and experienced in the present, rather than bound to a particular past time (Dalton 2009, 171, 179, 213). The ongoing ethical creation of the world particularizes existence through speech and action, by introducing singularity, and in turn multiplicity, to the indeterminacy [“il y a”] of mere existence. The created world, fragile, and vulnerable, unlike the “il y a,” or elemental existence, requires active regeneration to avoid deformation, or even as Fagenblat warns, de-creation (Fagenblat 2010, 37, 40).

Does the created world, sensed as “good,” preclude any sense or notion of “evil?” An exhaustive examination of religious and of philosophical notions of “evil” is beyond the parameters of my thesis; however, it is fitting that I comment briefly on the contemporary exploration of the discourse surrounding its highly charged meaning. In the past half century, or so, “Auschwitz” has served as a metaphor for an “evil” that raises questions regarding both human free will, and the limits of God’s involvement with human free will, raising questions in respect to “evil” itself. Regarding free will Kant writing in Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason, states, “Hence the ground of evil cannot lie in any object determining the power of choice through
inclination, nor in any natural impulses, but only in a rule that the power of choice itself produces for the exercise of its freedom, i.e., in a maxim” (Kant 1998, 46). Kant proposes that radical evil is rooted in an individual person’s evil motivation or intention (Young-Bruehl 2006, 2). “The human being is not thereby good as such, but he brings it about that he becomes either good or evil, according as he either incorporates or does not incorporate into his maxims the incentives contained in that predisposition (and this must be left entirely to his free choice)” (Kant 1998, 65). Prior to Kant’s emphasis on human intention to explain the presence of “evil,” Plato and Aquinas turn to the religious nature of “Man,” professing that when humans are dominated by impulses not aiming at the good, they are in fact straying from the goal proper to the essential nature of the soul. In contradistinction to this notion is the idea that the soul in its ultimate nature, rather than aiming at the good, is governed by its aim at evil (Schrift 2005, 18).

Friedrich Nietzsche, in an attempt to philosophize from a perspective beyond the dichotomy of good and evil, writes, in his preface to Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future, that the most dangerous of all errors is Plato’s invention of the pure spirit and of the good, as such, which is a denial of perspective (multiple takes on truth and value), what Nietzsche deems to be the basic condition of all life (Nietzsche 1989, 2). Levinas’ account of “the good,” in Totality and Infinity, can be taken as a response to Plato, and to Kant, when Levinas explains how the face of the other, soliciting a response, is not satisfied with good intention or with a Platonic benevolence, for both are attitudes requiring a subjectivity existing prior to the encounter with the other, a construct of subjectivity that Levinas rejects. Writing in 1945, following the
trauma of the Holocaust, political theorist, Hannah Arendt asserts that the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe (Schrift 2005, 51). In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, she writes of the banality of evil that results from people who stop thinking. Although Arendt’s use of the term “banal,” which can be defined as common, conventional, mundane or ordinary, is highly controversial when used in the context of an event so devastatingly destructive and so rupturing of the fabric of humanity as the Holocaust or Shoah (destruction), Arendt challenges us to examine how human thoughtlessness and complacency can be a type of evil, whereas the act of thinking may act as a deterrent, or even condition humanity against evil doing (Young-Bruehl 2006, 4, 45).

One may disagree with Arendt’s definition of evil, or with her suggested solutions that rely heavily on rationality and choice; however, one must admit that the problem of “evil” has become, as Arendt presciently suggests, if not the fundamental question, at least one of the fundamental global questions of the new century. The discourse on “evil,” observed, for example, in use of the term “axis of evil” to describe the countries Iran, Iraq and North Korea, by then President of the United States, George W. Bush, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on U.S. soil in 2001, has become both politicized as a secular phenomenon, while at the same time, remaining within a religious context. Levinas may be of some help here, in his (re) turn to the idea of “the good,” and to the trope of an ethical sense of creation, which implicitly posits the possibility of evil, but without reverting to blatant religiosity, or to “Man” as an autonomous moral authority. Levinas’ ethics of the other claims a non-violence, the
rejection of which throws the human world back into what could be considered an a-moral abyss (Schrift 2005, 196). His appeal to “the good” is a plea to prevent the world from reverting to, as it did during the Holocaust and continues to do so in contemporary genocides, elemental “evil.” Fagenblat describes Levinas’ idea of the existence of elemental evil as simply the mythological underside of the goodness of creation, a world stripped of all ethical points of view, reduced to meaninglessness.

By (re)turning to values and to meaning, Levinas affirms the idea of creation, and the notion of good and evil, without theodicy, or the without the defense of God against objections resulting from the existence of evil. Fagenblat describes this as an idea of God, suspended in a phenomenological epoché (the bracketing of conventional assumptions about the way things are) that allows the meaning of creation to present itself within the horizon of moral experience, a horizon in which both particular and multiple voices can be heard. It is no less than the responsibility of each human being to combat “evil” by respecting the other in her or his particularity and difference, for that is what sustains the good of creation in the midst of the uncreated void of the “il y a” (Fagenblat 2010, 47, 49 86, 93-94). Dalton suggests that the ethical act serves as “a kind of window to creation,” and a way that we humans can begin to understand ourselves as ethical creatures (Dalton 2009, 214). It is worthwhile reiterating, at this time, Levinas’ assertion, “The miracle of creation lies in creating a moral being” (Levinas 1969, 89). Prior to discussing the importance of understanding ourselves as radically passive, moral creatures, or as “chosen,” I intend to clarify two crucial characteristics inherent in an ethical construct of creation: diachrony, and “creation ex-nihilo.”
In my previous discussion of the diachrony of “saying,” or of the ethical interruption of the thematic “said,” by the face-to-face encounter, the diachrony of “saying” was characterized as time, and as being, falling into a state of ruin: irrecuperable, unrepresentable, and immemorial. The ego, interrupted, in this manner finds itself passively elicited as responsible for the other. In describing the ethical significance of creation, Levinas writes in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, “creation means my lateness in a world for which I am nonetheless responsible” (Levinas 1998, 113, 151). This belatedness gives rise to respecting a past, experienced by one’s self in the present. This respect of a past is a respect of the past of all of humanity, so that my lateness in a world for which I am responsible is respect for that which is outside my own ego: the other person, or the plurality of others. Levinas, interestingly, uses the biblical narrative of Job to elucidate the sense of the diachrony of creation. The story of Job is a dialogue between Job, a righteous man subjected to unremitting suffering, and his friends, concluding with God’s response. Mayer Gruber in his introduction and annotations to the book of Job in *The Jewish Study Bible* expresses that the book of Job is considered by some to be a “wisdom” book, reflecting on universal human concerns, including both individual experiences, and interpersonal relations. In it, he suggests, we find the questioning of the inevitability of rewards for living an upright life, and the questioning of the idea that human suffering is always deserved. Gruber’s suggestion resonates with chapter 9, verses 21-24 when Job cries out the following:

I am blameless—I am distraught;
I am sick of life.
It is all one; therefore I say,
“He destroys the blameless and the guilty.”
When suddenly a scourge brings death,
He mocks as the innocent fail.
The earth is handed over to the wicked one;
He covers the eyes of its judges.
If it is not He, then who?

It must be noted, as it is by Gruber himself, that Job is a very difficult book to interpret, due to its elaborate arguments and its poetic language, which is particularly ambiguous. Any translation of the book, Gruber proposes, must be taken as tentative. That said, Gruber asserts that one could, arguably, find warrant in the book of Job for the notion that even though in some cases we bring about our own suffering, for example, by neglecting our health, or by risky behavior, the real problem with suffering is when it is clearly unrelated to anything one has done or anything one has failed to do. Job’s argument is that God has acted unfairly toward him, and thus, God must be indifferent to human suffering. Job’s friends disagree, arguing that Job must be a sinner, deserving of his punishment. The inconclusive culmination to the narrative suggests that if there are reasons for suffering they may be simply beyond human comprehension (Berlin 2004, 1499-1500).

Levinas, in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, refers to the story of Job, in his account of how human beings are accustomed to reasoning in the name of the freedom of the ego, as if they, themselves, had witnessed the creation of the world, and as if they are in fact in charge of a world, issued out of their own free will. This reasoning, he claims, is the reproach found in the biblical narrative of Job due to both
Job and his friends, who share the thought that in a meaningful world one cannot be held accountable for what one has not done. According to Levinas, what Job is not taking into account is the subjectivity of a subject finding herself or himself belatedly in a world that has not issued from her or his own will, or in Levinas’ words, “from his projects” (Levinas 1998, 122). In Job 38:4, we find God demanding of Job, “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” Job, Jeffrey L. Kosky writes of Levinas’ reading of the narrative, has forgotten the ethical significance of creation. He has forgotten that creation, taking place in diachronic time must be understood as my lateness in a world for which I am nonetheless responsible. The importance of diachrony to the ethical understanding of subjectivity, and of creation, is exemplified in the fate of Job, a fate which for many appears as unintelligible, or as meaningless outside of an absolute faith in God, whose reasons are unknown and unknowable. According to Levinas’ reading of the biblical text, Job’s fate becomes understandable through the notion of responsibility as the very subjectivity of the subject, and of creation, as ongoing in the present (Kosky 2010, 151-152).

Levinas’ transformation of creation from divine causality to human responsibility is a reworking of the trope of “creation ex nihilo” (Fagenblat 2010, 68).

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8 “Where were you when I laid the earth’s Foundations? Speak if you have understanding, Do you know who fixed its dimensions Or who measured it with a line? Onto what were its bases sunk? Who set its cornerstone When the morning stars sang together And all the divine beings shouted for joy? (Job 38: 4-7)
“Creation ex nihilo” refers to the metaphysical concept of the universe coming into existence by God’s command. Levinas would have us understand “creation ex nihilo” as the production of something that is its own beginning, every human being producing her or his own self by resisting the totality, or the “il y a,” a resistance that continues throughout life (Schroeder 2008, 34). Although considered a thinker in the ontological, Greek, or Western tradition, Arendt’s investigation of the importance of the sense of “beginning” for human action in the world, can perhaps serve as a window into the Levinasian ethical sense of “creation ex nihilo.” In The Human Condition she writes, “Because they are initium, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action…This beginning is not the same as the beginning of the world: it is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself.” Arendt looks to St. Augustine, who in his political philosophy, states, “that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody.” It is the human condition of natality that according to Arendt, accounts for the actualization of the human condition of plurality, described by her as living as a distinct and unique being among equals. “Men,” though they must die are not, Arendt claims, born in order to die, but are born in order to begin (Arendt 1998, 176-178, 246).

Levinas’ idea of “creation ex nihilo” expresses a multiplicity that ruptures totality, by positing a free human being outside of every system. As noted earlier in this chapter, this freedom describes a self both created and capable of forgetting or neglecting its creator (Levinas 1969, 104-105). “Creation ex nihilo” is what accounts for the possibility of atheism (Froman 2005, 53). In appreciating the self, as atheist, and in
that manner not a part of a totality, atheism can now be understood, although somewhat paradoxically, as necessary for the experience of ongoing creation, and for the possibility of transcendence. The particular self, outside of any totalizing system, establishes for Levinas the possibility of one’s life (one’s birth, and one’s death) occurring outside of the time of universal history, where the plot of being itself is analogous to nature. It is the awareness of separation that designates the possibility for one’s own life’s destiny to be measured outside of history, such that it flows in a dimension of its own, where a triumph over death, in the diachronic responsibility of the one-for-the-other, can have meaning (Levinas 1969, 55-56). Separation, if you recall, is described in *Totality and Infinity* as being produced in the form of an inner life, or psychism, the self feeling the enjoyment of being at home with itself, living from its needs, atheist. The self, living from its needs, is the point of departure for the relation to an other (Froman 2011, 261). This relation is then made possible through language. Levinas states in *Totality and Infinity*:

> The language by which a being exists for another is his unique possibility to exist with an existence that is more than his interior existence….Between subjectivity shut up in its interiority and the subjectivity poorly heard in history there is the attendance of the subject that speaks….To be in oneself is to express oneself, that is, already to serve the Other. The ground of expression is goodness. (Levinas 1969, 182)

Arendt, too, refers to the subject that speaks, as the basis for human plurality, as well as for “Man’s” unique distinctiveness, in that only “Man” can communicate “himself,” and not merely something (Arendt 1998, 176). Phenomenologically speaking, Levinas demonstrates how it is only by my responding to the other that I become aware of the
arbitrary views and attitudes into which my freedom, uncritized, leads me. Separation, Levinas reminds us, nevertheless remains, always, as part of relation; “the same and the other at the same time maintain themselves in relation and absolve themselves from this relation, remain absolutely separated. The idea of Infinity requires this separation” (Levinas 1969, 15, 102). His insistence on the notion of separation, as fundamental to the face-to-face encounter, and to the trace of transcendence sensed in the responsibility of the one-for-the-other, makes something wholly ethical of “creation ex nihilo,” and of the radical passivity, or creatureliness of the self, to which I would now like to turn.

The significance of the notion of the human being as an absolutely passive “creature” cannot be underestimated in its importance to Levinas’ proclamation of ethics as first philosophy, and to the question that I have been exploring in these pages: Is it possible to claim, or perhaps re-claim an ethical characterization of a “chosen people,” and if so, to what end or ends? My inquiry, from this point forward, will consist of an investigation of the difference between what can be called the moral subject, and what can be called the ethical creature, as well as a probe of the idea of passivity as the so-called “logic” of creatureliness. I will also address the following issues: the accusation of quietism cast at Levinas in response to his notion of the absolutely passive subject, and his depiction of objectivity as peace, and not violence or war. Finally, I will return full circle to the characterization of human creatureliness, thought of as separate from creation itself, and, ultimately, as an escape from relation to others, making the case that in a, perhaps, startling and unexpected way “choseness,” and “chosen people”
discourse can play a crucial role in the ongoing creation of a just, pluralistic, global society.

In differentiating between the moral subject, and the ethical creature, Fagenblat explains that unlike a moral subject, an ethical creature is exposed to the other, before its own self-identification, the passivity of responsibility rendering the ethical self a creature, rather than a creator. To become what Levinas calls an ethical creature is, Fagenblat continues, “To dispel oneself of the fantasy of being a moral creature responsible for one’s free acts... In place of the moral creature we have the inspired creature” (Fagenblat 2010, 102-104). The moral subject, in Kantian terms, is responsible to a law, autonomously created. How one relates to an other depends on one’s will, one’s intentions, and one’s choices, whereas the inspired creature “bears witness,” writes Levinas, to the expiration of the other” (Levinas 1998, 181-182). It is through the face-to-face encounter, and not by one’s private ratiocination, that a subject understands herself or himself, as created, and not a creator, introducing what Simon Critchley describes as “a passivity in the heart of subjectivity” (Critchley 1999, 68).

The absolute passivity of subjectivity describes a subjectivity of the one-for-the-other in ethical language, to which reference has already been made in my discussion of substitution, not as an act, but as a passivity prior to intention, or as a state of being a hostage to the other, expiating for the violence of the “persecution” of the other’s demand, where the “persecution” is understood as a sense that the non-negotiability and inescapability of the other’s accusation is somehow the grounds of my own subjectivity, and so any feelings of persecution emanate from myself and must be atoned for. Robert
Gibbs calls this ethical vocabulary, the “logic” of a creature (Gibbs 1992, 215), a paradoxical appropriation of the word “logic,” whose meaning implies reasoning, and knowledge. If one accepts Levinas’ ethical vocabulary as the “logic” of a creature, then “chosenness,” by way of extension, can now be taken as creaturely “logic.” Levinas declares in a footnote in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, that the self “enveloped in a responsibility which it does not succeed inshouldering is the way of being a creature.” If the absolute passivity of subjectivity is prior to intentionality, then it is prior to the choice of active/passive, as noted in Levinas’ reference to the anarchic characterization of “the good” choosing me, rather than me choosing it (Levinas 1998, 122, 195n13). In his essay “Humanism and An-Archy,” Levinas states that the good is in the passivity, or in other words that “passivity is the place--or more exactly the no place of the good.” “Election by the good,” he writes, “is not action, but rather non-violence itself.” The pre-original passivity of the elected is non-violence itself because it precludes a notion of “chosenness” as a choice made by the subject that would make of subjectivity, a usurpation, or a violence (Levinas 2003, 53-55).

Is what Levinas calls non-action, or non-violence, merely political “quietism,” a charge leveled against him by some contemporary theorists? Perpich, in explicating neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty’s critique of Levinas’ ethics of the other, marks Rorty’s claim that Levinas’ notion of infinite responsibility, or in other words, election by “the good,” may be useful in the quest for private perfection, but is a nuisance, and a stumbling block when it comes to public responsibility and effective political organization (Perpich 2008, 5). John Llewellyn, thinking otherwise than Rorty,
argues that what critics identify as quietism, is to the contrary, the basis for peace, and that Levinas should not be condemned, but rather congratulated, for opening up a way to a language that speaks peace from its heart. If selfhood is defined by the dichotomy of active/passive power then the relation of oneself to another is fundamentally one of war, where peace is merely a negotiated outcome of war (Llewellyn 2002, 111, 136). Levinas opens up this language of peace when, in Totality and Infinity, his description of the face is one in which the non-totalizable other, presenting herself or himself, is preeminently the nonviolent founding of my freedom in responsibility for the other (Levinas 1969, 203). He further develops this notion of non-violent relations when, in Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, he speaks of the passivity or creatureliness inherent in “substitution,” so that the notion of “chosenness” retains, always, a non-violent universal status.

Taking a closer look at Levinas’ argument that responsibility for the other, and in extension, for all others, is “the non-violent founding of my freedom” we find an “I,” who, although responsible for the other, and responsible in a manner for peace itself, is not an ‘I” indebted to, or even in acknowledgement of a creator. Levinas’ notion of creatureliness, like that of creation, is ethical, parting ways with theology. The importance of this lies in an understanding of the relation of the creature to the creator as a relation between separated terms, which cannot be encompassed in a totality (Critchley 1999, 68). The self does not fuse, or re-unite with a creator, but relates to transcendence through relation with other human beings, maintaining its separation, both from a creator, and from other human beings (Allen 2009, 190-191). This brings us
back to Levinas’ astonishing claim, that ultimately freedom is invested by the other because it is through substitution, now understood as the “logic” of creatureliness, that one escapes passivity, and even relations, themselves. It is worthwhile quoting Levinas, fully, as he brings together the characterization of the absolutely passive, inspired subject, elected to responsibility for the other, prior to any choice between activity and any customary notion of passivity, with the liberation of a self from its ties to being.

In this substitution, in which identity is inverted, this passivity more passive still than the passivity conjoined with action, beyond the inert passivity of the designated, the self is absolved of itself. Is this freedom? It is a different freedom from that of an initiative. Through substitution for others, the oneself escapes relations. At the limits of passivity, the oneself escapes passivity or the inevitable limitation that the terms within relation undergo. In the incomparable relationship of responsibility, the other no longer limits the same; it is supported by what it limits. Here the overdetermination of the ontological categories is visible, which transforms them into ethical terms. In this most passive passivity, the self liberated itself from every other and from itself. Its responsibility for the other, the proximity of the neighbor, does not signify a submission to the non-ego; it means an openness of which respiration is a modality or a foretaste, or more exactly, of which it retains the aftertaste. Outside of any mysticism, in this respiration, the possibility of every sacrifice for the other, activity and passivity coincide. (Levinas 1998, 115)

The openness allowing for the coinciding of activity and passivity, of which Levinas tantalizingly speaks, is perhaps exemplified in the “here I am” response of oneself to the other’s call. This imperative, Llewellyn suggests, commanded by me, although coming to me from the other, must be sensed as outside the conventional dichotomy of activity and passivity, in order to commit to the primacy of my passivity, or of ethics, over that of my will (Llewellyn 2002, 69, 89). In the most passive passivity of “substitution” the “I,” despite being singularly “chosen” as responsible for the other, maintains, by way of this passivity, its creaturely status, which is a sense of self in no way imperialistic, but
rather one of being hostage to the other’s demand. And who is this other, but another creature, creatureliness being the human universal condition. It is precisely in this way that the “chosenness” of a people, or of a community, demands responsibility to all others, and not just to members of that group, alone.

The ethical creature can be understood as the one exposed to the name of the other. Fagenblat describes the Levinasian living “otherwise than being,” as living as an ethical creature caught in the grip of names, indicating singular obligation to the unthematizable other, whose uniqueness cannot be negated, nor described, although it can be honored, ignored, or even murdered (Fagenblat 2010, 132, 174). Hammerschlag, too, speaks to the importance of the uniqueness signified by the proper name, claiming that Levinas’ emphasis on the ethical claim issuing from the name of the other can be traced back to Maimonides who wrote in his text *Guide for the Perplexed*, “This name is not indicative of an attribute but of simple existence and nothing else.” It is the other’s uniqueness that matters for Levinas, not any particular attributes possessed by the other. Hammerschlag reminds us how the ethical “saying,” resists describing the other’s attributes, by attending to the uniqueness to which the proper name refers. The singularity of the other is borne by her or his name; naming itself is a creative human act. The ethical creature, exposed to the name of the other is implicated with the other, with creation, and with all of humanity (Hammerschlag 2010, 129-133). In my discussion of the “hineni” or “here I am” response found in the Torah, we find that God calls both Abraham and Moses twice, by name. This calling of their proper names not
once, but twice, can be interpreted as a sign of endearment, or at the very least as a way of confirming the call as singular, and unique to oneself, and, therefore, unavoidable.

At Mt. Sinai, the call was answered by a multitude of people, each person hearing the call as singular, and each person, tied to the others hearing the call, through responsibility for the other. Fagenblat describes this phenomenon, saying:

>The corporeal election and solidarity of the Jews as one body of faith, substituting and expiating for one another, becomes, in Levinas’ new creation, the ethical condition of creatureliness. The (Jewish) body of faith is exposed to, even infected by, “the other.” It therefore mutates into a body of ethical faithfulness for humanity at large. The effect is to conceal the ethical significance of the ‘arevut’ or substitution of the Jews for one another in order to reveal “the astonishing human fraternity” of “the extraordinary and everyday event of my responsibility for the faults or the misfortune of others” (OB, 10/AE, 12). This ethical solidarity transcends identity by preceding it. The other is first and foremost anyone. (Fagenblat 2010, 174)

Levinas, in his phenomenological description of election, or of “chosenness,” reworks, according to Fagenblat, traditional Jewish accounts of the passivity and solidarity of “chosenness.” The rabbinic notion of ‘arevut’ or of “substitution” maintains that the Israelites are bound to one another, and even to one another’s faults, undergoing what Levinas calls “expiation” for the other. The Talmudic sages interpret Leviticus 26:37: “each one shall stumble over another,” to mean that each human stumbles over her or his neighbor’s sins, each Israelite a bond for the other (Fagenblat 2010, 174).

Levinas’ distinctive reading of plurality adds much to our discussion of the radical passivity, or creatureliness, of a “chosen people.” The multitude of people, standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai, each hearing the call as singular, constitutes, for Levinas, not a multiplicity, but a plurality. If a multitude of people were not to hear the
call as singular they would appear to be participants in the totality. But pluralism is something very different from multiplicity. Pluralism is not, Levinas states, a numerical multiplicity, but rather it implies a radical alterity of the other, so that in just that way, transcendence and goodness are produced (Levinas 1969, 121, 305). Levinas’ sense of pluralism owes much to Rosenzweig’s critique of totality. In rejecting totality Levinas discovers that each human being is unique, no longer able to be subordinated as members of their class, or subsumed in the totalizing logic of universalism/particularism (Gibbs 1992, 24, 35). Each human being is valuable in her or his own right, related to another human being across an unremovable distance. The distance that Levinas speaks of is not that of a postmodern sense of the fragmentation of being, where individuals unrelated to each other draw little or no meaning from each other (Allen 2009, 91, 169). Levinas is speaking here of the relationship between separated beings that grounds one’s subjectivity; the non-totalizing face-to-face relation is referred to as an “unrelating relation,” or a “relation without relation.”

For Levinas, the relationship between separated beings is possible only if they are partially independent and partially in relation, individuals beings independent of, and yet simultaneously exposed to the other (Levinas 1969, 295, 223-224). He declares:

The alterity, the radical heterogeneity of the other, is possible only if the other is other with respect to a term whose essence is to remain the point of departure, to serve as entry into the relation, to be the same not relatively but absolutely. A term can remain absolutely at the point of departure of relationship only as an I. (Levinas 1969, 36)

My entry into that relationship, Froman writes, elaborating on this passage from Totality and Infinity, comes by way of an Egoity or I-ness, also described by Levinas as “the
same.” The point of departure for the relation to another is the enjoyment or *jouissance* of the ego, a creature living from her or his needs. Enjoyment is limited only by the face-to-face encounter, which cannot be subsumed in a totality, or in a reciprocity. It is in this sense that the relationship of myself with another is a “relation without relation” (Froman 2011, 261-262). In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas advances the notion of liberation of the self through the ethical encounter in his description of “substitution,” also referred to as election, or “chosenness.” His passage on the liberation of the self, quoted in its entirety earlier in this chapter, is key to an understanding of what it means to be “chosen,” in a collective sense, where the idea of a “chosen people” resides in the tension between the singularity or particularity of “chosenness” and the commonality or universality of creatureliness.

In considering Levinas’ thought-provoking, and perhaps enigmatic, claim that in the radical passivity or creatureliness of substitution the self is absolved of itself, it is worthwhile to re-examine his notion of a freedom that differs, fundamentally, from that of the freedom of an initiative (Levinas 1998, 115). The liberation of the self is described by Froman as a non-violent freedom, as opposed to the violent freedom of autonomy (Froman 2011, 264). Levinas claims that human freedom is invested by the other, so to be “chosen” is to be free, and to be a “chosen people,” is to be a free people. “Freedom,” Levinas humbly submits, “is borne by the responsibility it could not shoulder…But in the irreplaceable subject, unique and chosen as a responsibility and a substitution, a mode of freedom, ontologically impossible, breaks the unrendable essence.” Responsibility, or an ethical characterization of freedom, trumps the freedom
of the will, signifying the goodness of the good. Responsibility for the other, for what has not started in me, is what Levinas refers to as “the subjection or subjectivity of the subject.” The self, he goes on to say, “is the very over-emphasis of a responsibility for creation” (Levinas 1998, 122, 124-125).

The creaturely responsibility of one-for-the other, Froman suggests, points toward a phenomenological understanding of the importance of the idea of the daily character of creation (Froman 2005, 60). The unfinished and ongoing task of the human creature for creation is an alternative reading of the genesis narrative declaring that all of creation is good, with the exception of the creation of humans, which is very good. The first creation account in the Hebrew Bible reads as follows:

And God said, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered in one place so that the dry land will appear,” and so it was. And God called the dry land Earth and the gathering of waters He called Seas, and God saw that it was good. And God said, “Let the earth grow grass, plants yielding seed of each kind and trees bearing fruit of each kind”…And so it was…and God saw that it was good….And God said, “Let there be lights in the vault of the heavens to divide the day from the night…to light up the earth”…And so it was…And God saw that it was good….And God said, “Let the waters swarm with the swarm of living creatures and let fowl fly over the earth”…and God saw that it was good….And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of each kind, cattle and crawling things and wild beasts of each kind.” And so it was…and God saw that it was good. And God said, “Let us make a human in our image, by our likeness, to hold sway over the fish…and the fowl…and the cattle and the wild beasts and all the crawling things”….And God created the human in his image, in the image of God he created him, male and female He created them. (Genesis: 1-27)

There is no mention right after creation of the human that God saw that it was good. It is not until a few lines later that God, after seeing all that “he” had done says of creation that it was very good. “And God saw that it was good,” or in Hebrew, “ki tov,” can be
understood as taking on the meaning of completion, or “so be it.” Talmudic commentators propose that the absence of God saying “ki tov” following the creation of the human is because the human is not complete at the time of creation, because of her or his free will (Sefer Ha-ikkarim 3:2). I would argue, in light of Levinas, that there is no statement of “ki tov” following the description of the creation of the human, because the work of creating ourselves as human, the work of creating an ethical human society, was not completed at the so-called time of creation, but is ongoing, making of humans, as opposed to the rest of the created world, ethical creatures, the importance of human creatureliness outweighing that of any event of creation. In the second creation account, found in the book of Genesis, God, instead of summoning things into being from on high through divine speech, can be understood as portrayed more like a craftsman, blowing life into nostrils, and building woman from man’s rib. The two differing accounts create an ambiguity of human origins (Alter 2004, 20n4), and in that way support Levinas’ privileging of the ongoing creation of the ethical creature over any definitive creation-as-origin account.

When the characterization of “chosenness,” or of a “chosen people,” is appreciated as “the ethical condition of creatureliness,” we can begin to formulate a response to two of Derrida’s legitimate concerns, the first being that the distinction between exceptional duties and exceptional rights may not be enough to dull the sense of privilege that “chosenness” implies, and the second being that a “chosen people’s”

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9 The Sefer Ha-ikkarim or Book of Principles is a fifteenth century text by Rabbi Joseph Albo, a Jewish philosopher and theologian. (Britannica Online Encyclopedia)
appeal to universalism, or to humanism, engenders violence in its attempt to eliminate all others making the same claim (Hammerschlag 2010, 231-232). Let us take a closer look at what Levinas has to say regarding what he refers to as pride, and to what he has to say about duty.

…The just of every nation have a share of the future world”…leads to the affirmation that the world was created for “the paths of peace.” It is conclusions such as these that reveal the sense of being chosen, which expresses less the pride of someone who has been called than the humility of someone who serves….In Judaism, the certainty of the absolute’s hold over man—or—religion--does not turn into an imperialist expansion that devours all those who deny it. It burns inwards, as an infinite demand made on oneself, an infinite responsibility. It is experienced as something for which we are chosen. (Levinas 1990, 174)

My uniqueness lies in the responsibility I display for the other….This leads to the idea of being chosen, which can degenerate into that of pride but originally expresses the awareness of an indisputable assignation from which ethics springs. (Levinas 1990, 26)

“Each one, as an “I,” is separate from all the Others to whom the moral duty is due…I see myself obligated with respect to the Other, consequently, I am infinitely more demanding of myself than of others. (Levinas 1990, 22)

Pride, attached to the notion of “chosenness,” is a diminishment of the ethical “burning inwards” of the responsibility of the one-for-the-other. Pride is all about ego, self-enjoyment, self-satisfaction, and self love. Pride is what is traumatically interrupted, or suspended by the approach, or the address of the other, making the idea of “chosenness,” thought of as pride, a regression to egoity and therefore, not “chosenness” at all, at least not in its ethical formulation. When “chosenness,” is misinterpreted as pride, the ego claims privilege or entitlement, a perhaps understandable danger inherent in one’s or one’s group’s response to life-threatening political and social realities.
Nevertheless, pride, and privilege are defacements of the encounter with the absolute other, from which ethics springs. When Levinas speaks of the “privilege of election,” he is not talking about the privilege of the subject as an ego; instead he is talking about the privilege of the subjection of the ego in response to the other. This privilege of the subjection of the subject is not a masochism but, due to the radical passivity or creatureliness of the subject (the good choosing me before I can choose it), is something far removed from masochism; it is nothing less than the subject’s freedom from being tied to a totalizing essence that refuses transcendence (Levinas 1998, 127).

When “choseness” becomes a matter of responsibility of the one-for-the-other, then it becomes a matter of exceptional duties, putting an end to the notion of benefits, rights and privileges. How does Levinas employ, and redeploy the notion of duty? In his text *Entre-Nous*, he declares, “I have always thought that election is definitely not a privilege: it is the fundamental characteristic of the human person as morally responsible, a principle of individuation” (Levinas 1998b, 108). One’s duty is one’s moral responsibility. How does this differ from the more familiar Kantian idea of moral duty, or the moral subject? Moral duty, according to Kant, is grounded in respect for the universal validity of the law. His is a rule-based ethical order, with emphasis given to one’s reasoning, and to one’s choices premised upon that reasoning. A sense of duty that relies on human free-will, and on the knowledge to formulate correct moral decisions makes ontology and epistemology primary. When the knowing self is authoritative, do not, Levinas might ask, feelings of egoic pride and privilege follow in its wake? Levinas, in place of the egoic self, posits a moral duty that precedes self-identification,
and the pride attached to it, speaking of a “duty imposed beyond the limits of being and its annihilation, beyond death, putting being and its resources in deficit” (Levinas 2006, 7). The difference that makes a difference for the distinction between a Kantian and a Levinasian sense of moral duty is the excess, or surplus of obligation, or the ongoing work of creation, attributed to the human in her or his “creatureliness.” “There is,” Levinas argues, “in this sense an infinity that opens in responsibility, not as a given immensity of its horizons, but as the process by which its bounds do not cease to extend--an infinition of infinity. The bond with the alterity of the other is in this infinity” (Levinas 1998, xx). Being infinitely indebted to others, even over and beyond human capability, is humbling; it is persecution as “privilege,” and it rings true for communities of individuals as well as for each individual within the community.

The infinite obligation of the human creature for the ongoing, daily creation of a moral world contributes mightily to countering any rendering of “chosenness” as an appeal to a totalizing universalism that wreaks havoc on singularity, diversity, and pluralism, in the name of a specious unity, wholeness, or harmony. The universalism inherent in the idea of ethical “chosenness,” is not the self-limiting universalism of the rational autonomous subject, but is a universalism involving an awareness of a surplus of responsibility toward the other that completes fraternity (Levinas 2007, 191-193). The awareness of the created character of the human, or of the creaturely self exposed to other creaturely selves prior to the violence of egoic self-identification, to which Levinas, using Blaise Pascal’s phrase, refers as “my place in the sun,” is not an appeal to a sense of freedom, grounded in human knowledge and free will, but is rather an appeal
to a freedom endowed by the other, arousing the love of the neighbor, or in its collective form, the initiation of justice. Chalier refers to this appeal to a freedom aroused by the other as “otherwise than being violent” (Chalier 1993, 75). Peace is a feature central to the idea of a “chosen people,” called into existence by a command, heard only in the response to that command. “Responsibility for the other does not wait for the freedom of commitment to the other….It is perhaps here that ontological thinking ultimately differs from the thought which speaks of the creature rather than of being” (Levinas 1996, 89).

The status of a “chosen people” is not one of a totalizing universalism, resisting, as Derrida suggests could occur, the claims of others (Hammerschlag 2008, 84); it is the “discourse” of the radical passivity of a people whose ears are open, “hear oh Israel,” to the singularity, vulnerability, and suffering of others.

I contend that privilege and violence adhering to “chosen people” discourse remains a possibility only when a narrow, wooden, or desultory reading of the biblical text is undertaken. It is, Catherine Chalier challenges us, “every Jew’s obligation to be concerned with the meaning of election” (Chalier 1993, 65). Levinas implicitly speaks of a “chosen people” when, writing on the theme of a people following 613 commandments and “owing to the other more than one asks him for,” he boldly asserts that “Blinded by the brilliance of the sun of the West, a cursory glance distinguishes here only separation and arrogance. This is a fatal confusion” (Levinas 2007, 192). It is to this “fatal confusion,” that Derrida speaks, in that election, “chosenness,” or exemplarity cannot be disentangled from what seems to contradict it: substitution, the latter understood as the responsibility of the one-for-the other to the point of being a
hostage, whereupon, at a point beyond passivity and activity, it becomes possible that “the self liberates itself ethically from every other and from itself” (Levinas 1998, 115). “Chosenness,” is not a manifestation of the authorial stance, “here I am,” “look at me,” “I’m king of the world,” but is rather the radical passivity of a created self, responding “here I am,” “I hear your call,” “I am here for you.” Election stands against substitution when “chosenness” is interpreted simply as egoic privilege. It is inseparable from substitution when it is understood as the moral awareness of the creature, a subject founded by the other, in diachrony. Election stands against substitution when “chosenness of a people” is interpreted simply as particularity. It is inseparable from substitution when it is understood ethically, in terms of the commonality, or universality of creatureliness. If, as communities of people, and as pluralities of people in our communities, countries, and in the global community, as such, we can make the ethical sense of “chosenness” more fully explicit in our lives, then duty, responsibility, and justice have a chance to outweigh pride, privilege, and rights, and peaceful relations between individual people, and between groups of people, have a chance to surmount what seems like an ever increasing, and unrelenting violence toward others.
CONCLUSIONS

Responsibility is what enables us to catch sight of and conceive of value.
--Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*

It is by the Good that the obligation to responsibility--irrevocable, irreversible, unimpugnable but not going back to choice--is not a violence that would collide with a choice; it situates an ‘interiority’ preceding freedom and non-freedom, outside axiological bipolarity, an obedience to a unique value without anti-value, that is inescapable.
--Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*

In the preceding chapters of my thesis I sought to examine the possibility of reclaiming an ethical depiction of, as well as a revalorization of the notion of “chosen people,” by way of Emmanuel Levinas’ phenomenological description of the responsibility of the one-for-the-other, in order to broaden and to breathe life into the ordinary understanding of “chosen people” discourse. In considering Levinas’ ethics as first philosophy, or the election of each human being to an unending responsibility for the other that precedes knowledge, will, and choice, in relation to my investigation, the ethical appreciation of the created character of the human emerges in such a way as to encourage us to rethink not only the meaning of “chosenness,” but also contemporary notions of universalism, and their implications for re-envisioning the role that “the good” continues to play in our lives.

As my argument has developed I have become more and more persuaded that Levinas’ unique phenomenological understanding of human “chosenness” can significantly contribute to currently existing inter-disciplinary, cross-cultural, and
pluralistic religious “chosen people” dialogue. Ultimately Levinas’ description of the radical passivity of human beings called to responsibility for both the other, as neighbor, and for all others, captured in the biblical entreaty to heed the call of the widow, orphan, and stranger, suggests, at the least, what Bettina Bergo describes as “the possibility of goodness in human life--which is also the possibility of life having an ethical meaning” (Bergo1999, 3). I am, here, suggesting that in the freedom to respond to and take responsibility for the other, which is paradoxically the most profound signifier of the self, and when elaborated and intensified in a community of “chosen people” who in substituting (carrying the burden of the other’s vulnerability, suffering, and finitude) for one another substitute for all others, what transpires is nothing short of humanity in the making.

In recontextualizing the idea of a “chosen people” it is vital to recall the previous discussion regarding the religious, historical, and cultural expressions of “chosen people” discourse that have come down to us. We first came across the notion of “chosenness” in the biblical story of the covenant, which speaks of the promise of a unique relationship between Abraham and God, and between Abraham’s descendents and God. This promise is renewed, and enlarged to include the people of Israel, in the biblical account of God’s revelation at Mt. Sinai. Following the rise of Christianity, Judaism’s claim to being a “chosen people” was challenged by the Church, based on the Church’s claim to “chosenness” through the saving power of Jesus, rather than through the revealed law of God at Mt. Sinai. Centuries later Judaism and Christianity’s claims to “chosenness” were disputed by Islam, whose followers claimed to be God’s “chosen
people,” based on their understanding that the proper behavior crucial to deserving the mantle of “chosenness” includes good works, and most importantly, belief in total submission to God (Firestone 2008, 51).

Unable, within the constraints of my thesis, to give each of these religion’s ideas or ideals of “chosenness” the attention that they deserve I chose to trace some of the more prominent historical and cultural manifestations of “chosen people” discourse, from first encountering the idea in the Hebrew Bible to Judaism’s historical acceptance and rejection of the biblical promise of “chosenness,” most often played out against a background of being a mostly scorned or ignored minority religious presence within the larger Christian, and, on occasion, Islamic macrocosm. The challenge of living as a Jewish minority occupied most of the great Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages. In Judah Halevi’s (1075-1141) writings on the notion of the Jews as a “chosen people” we find the claim that the Jewish people are hereditarily conferred with a unique religious sensibility, making their special relationship with God and the observance of God’s laws the foundation of their existence. You may recall that Halevi speaks of a “chosen people” in terms of land, law, and being a “light unto the nations” (Beker 2008, 32-33). This calls to mind more modern characterizations of “chosenness,” for example, Israeli rabbis Abraham Isaac Kook, and his son Zvi Yehuda Kook’s emphasis on the underscoring of the sanctity of the land of Israel (Gitlin 2010, 29), Orthodox Rabbi Joseph Soloveitschik’s emphasis on the obligation to keep Halakkah (Jewish law, received at Mt. Sinai), and the 20th Century American Reform movement of Judaism’s assertion of its mission to humanity as the core of Judaism (Eisen 1983, 38).
Critics of the notion of the “chosenness” of the Jewish people include Maimonides (1135-1204), who never mentions “chosenness” in his great work, *Thirteen Principles of Faith*, perhaps due to the relative scarcity of the language of “chosenness” in the Torah, or the Five Books of Moses, and to the observance that, when mentioned, it is often described using the more benign sounding term “am segula,” meaning a special treasure. Maimonides does, however, claim in his “Epistle to the Jews of Yemen” that the Jewish people benefit from their ancestors’ righteous response to God’s commandments, although constant renewal of adherence to those commandments is required (Beker 2008, 16, 18). Centuries later, Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) criticizes organized religion, denying any theological, moral, or metaphysical sense in which the Jews are a “chosen people,” (Nadler 2007, 24-25), a view that finds contemporary resonance in the thought of Reconstructionist Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983) who calls for the repudiation of Jewish “chosenness,” due to its incompatibility with a modern scientific and social equality worldview (Eisen 1983, 75-76). Kaplan had all references to “chosenness” erased from the Reconstructionist prayer book. Richard Rubenstein also rejects the idea of Jewish “chosenness,” due to what he describes as the ethical unsupportability of the notion of Jews as God’s suffering servants, after the atrocities of Auschwitz (Borowitz 1995, 193).

In contradistinction to the rejection of the “chosenness” of a people by its critics, we begin to perceive inklings of its ethical dimensions in the writings of other illustrious religious and philosophical thinkers. Rashi (1040-1105), a renowned Talmudic scholar, considers the importance of the “chosenness” of Israel to lie in its
teachings concerning human values, morality, and universal vision (Beker 2008, 132). In turning to more modern thinkers we find Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), who states that the core insights of “chosenness” are constitutive both of human individuality and of Jewish existence, while Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) speaks to the particularity and the universality of “chosenness,” or election, defining it as a general structure by which singular people or particular nations claim to be invested with a responsibility, regarded as universal (Hollander 2008, 126). We also find support for a renewed understanding of what it is to be a “chosen people” in the writings of Rabbi Leo Baeck (1873-1956) who extols the ethical merit that inheres in the idea of “chosenness,” embracing the claim that God’s relationship with a people has a universal ethical structure (Borowitz 1995, 66). More recently Rabbi David Novak (b 1941) speaks to this ethical structure, stating that each member of a “chosen people” is called upon to respond to her or his election because of the desire for the good, while Michael Wyschogrod (b 1928) supports the notion of a “chosen people,” based on finding in God’s love for Abraham a personal or concrete love for the unique other, rather than an abstract, undifferentiated notion of love. He explains that the movement from the idea of individual “chosenness” to the idea of the “chosenness” of Israel, is due to God’s expressing “his” love for individuals, who as human, exist in communal, or national settings (Wyschogrod 1999, 253).

As I survey the sweep of historical and cultural responses to the notion of a “chosen people,” I find that the ethical dimensions of “chosenness,” when not absent, or significantly restrained, are also, unfortunately, not thoroughly examined, or explained. In my thesis I have tried to build on the insights of all the above mentioned thinkers, as
well as on the insights of more contemporary theorists, and readers of Levinas, whose work I will continue to avail myself of, as secondary sources, in drawing my conclusions regarding the possibility of re-animating “chosen people” discourse. A turn to a review of Levinas’ remarkable phenomenological description of election, or “chosenness” will, now, propel my inquiry towards those final conclusions.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas, in describing ethical subjectivity, replaces the front- and- center imperialist subject of Western philosophical thought with the radically passive, infinitely responsible, ethical subject. His description of the formation of human subjectivity arises from a phenomenological inquiry into the experience of human interaction with the environment, home, work, and the encounter with what he calls the “face” of the other, which in Sean Hand’s words, is that which “emerges as the emblem of everything that fundamentally resists categorization, containment or comprehension” (Hand 2009, 59). Levinas’ descriptive method is Husserlian in origin, Edmund Husserl having posited that all consciousness is intentional, or consciousness of something. The primacy of consciousness is made possible by going back to the things themselves, which requires the bracketing off of all habitual assumptions, and ordinary ways of perceiving things, also referred to as epoché, and phenomenological reduction. Levinas veers from Husserlian intentionality when he finds within the face-face encounter a transcendent orientation, and a pre-cognitive sensibility that exceeds intentionality (Davis 1996, 10-11, 17-20).

Levinas’ depiction of human subjectivity is also dialogical in character, although it differs from Martin Buber’s well-known description of the I-Thou relationship, which
demands genuine dialogue in order to produce a reciprocal encounter with the other (Buber 1970, 54). Levinas refutes the importance of reciprocity, positing that a truly ethical relationship consists of the radical separation of oneself (the same), and the other, the asymmetry of the relationship leading to obligation and responsibility. Levinas’ characterization of ethical subjectivity also owes much to Rosenzweig’s attempt to speak both philosophy and theology, what Rosensweig calls “new thinking.” Rosensweig’s exposition of human experience, through dialogical encounter, as exceeding totalization (Hollander 2008, 13, 24-25), is embraced by Levinas in his rejection of the totalizing relationships that mark Western imperialism, and more fundamentally, the state of war (Levinas 1969, 21-22, 24, 28).

Levinas begins his explication of ethical subjectivity with the separation of the human being from the overwhelming and amorphous elements. He refers to impersonal nature, in which human beings are steeped as the “il y a,” or “there is.” Separation from the hostile world, or “il y a,” occurs by way of the formation of an inner life, which he names “psychism.” One’s self, or the “I” is now able to live from all the things in the world that nourish it, feeling at home with itself, and understanding its life as having its own beginning and end, its own birth and death. By a complete break from participation in the formidable “il y a,” the “I,” separates itself even from God, finding itself atheist. For Levinas atheism is a necessary step between the paganism of the “il y a,” and the sensing of transcendence.

The “psychism” is reinforced by the domicile, or the home, where the “il y a” recedes further and further, as the “I” becomes more fully formed through inhabitation,
intimacy, labor, and possession. The home is a harbor of safety due to its hospitality and welcoming, characterized by intimacy and familiarity, as well as due to labor, which allows for the acquisition of durable goods. This safety or reprieve of the home for the “I” is identified, by Levinas, with the feminine face. His depiction of the feminine “face” as being, somehow, something other than the “I,” suggests to some of his readers the positing of the male as the phenomenological subject, although a few of his readers have suggested that Levinas is bringing to the fore the possibility that ethical relation may be shaped from the start by sexual difference. Ultimately, the value of the home, as welcome, is for Levinas one of security, providing the time at one’s disposal to ward off the threat of death. This, along with control of labor and economy, allows the “I” to achieve a sense of mastery over the hostile elements. Labor also brings with it a life surrounded by others who see themselves, too, as beneficiaries of all the world has to offer (Levinas 1969, 12, 55-60, 152-166).

How do I, Levinas asks, living in the safe harbor of intimacy, and welcome, react to the claims of others? I may try, with all of my resources, to place these other persons in a position that serves my own purposes and designs, but when I do I inevitably find, by the others’ asserting themselves through language, that they resist being swallowed up, until I at last begin to see myself for what I truly am: self-centered. Out of the feeling of shame this acknowledgement of self-centeredness brings, arises my desire to give of myself to the other. The appeal of the “face” of the other does not refer to a face composed of eyes, nose and mouth, but rather to the other’s address, and demand. The other’s “face” is both destitution (well understood through the biblical
trope of the widow, orphan, and stranger), and height, where the trace of the Infinite is revealed, most importantly promoting my freedom by arousing my goodness (Levinas 1969, 66, 75-77, 303-305). Levinas is here in dialogue with Jean-Paul Sartre, who famously proposes that the ground of meaning of being-for-the-other is conflict. Sartre describes a self that becomes an instrument of possibilities, not its own, its transcendence transcended by the other person’s possibilities. It is the ongoing challenge to contain the other within her or his objectivity and the self’s failure to do so that, for Sartre, is the ground of inter-subjective conflict (Sartre 1956, 235-250).

Levinas counters Sartre’s argument, asking if the presence of the other, instead of questioning my egoic freedom, questions, instead, the naïve legitimacy of that freedom, as a shame for itself, and a usurpation. My freedom is not, Levinas claims, aroused by conflict, but by the non-allergic presence of the other (Levinas 1969, 303, 51). The face of the other proclaims, “Thou shall not kill,” imploring me not to usurp her or his life for my own intentions. The face of the other speaks a language not based on meaning, but one creating meaning by way of the revelation of the other to me. Discourse, Levinas proclaims, is the thoroughly ethical teaching of the very freedom of the other, as well as the questioning of the sovereignty of my will. By that questioning I sense a responsibility to the other, a going out of my egoic self, as I give to the other in goodness; my freedom is formed in the election of my self to this singular responsibility for my interlocutor. No one can replace me. To be “chosen” is to be a source for the creation of meaning in the world. Here, we begin to see the move from paganism through atheism to the sense of being a creature. No longer the sovereign cause of
myself, I am capable of learning that I am created. In Totality and Infinity Levinas discusses notions of creation in terms of fecundity, a way to establish a relationship with the future. He also discusses how the face-to-face encounter does not limit ethical responsibility to just the person in front of me, because the epiphany of the “face” opens humanity, by my seeing in the “face” of the other the “face” of all others. This concern for the human community involves me in the pursuit of social justice that, although requiring measures of equality, rests on the asymmetrical ethical relation (Davis 1996, 48, 50-53). In Diane Perpich’s words, the political is demanded by, but not derived from ethics (Perpich, 2011).

The significance of Levinas’ depiction of subjectivity, not as a sovereignty, but as an ethical responsibility for the other is that the primacy of ontology, or of being as being for oneself, is put into jeopardy. Levinas deepens the understanding of ethics as first philosophy in his subsequent text Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, in which he appears to respond to Derrida’s critique of the continuing use of ontological language in Totality and Infinity, despite Levinas’ declared attempt to undermine its primacy. In further examining the emergence of the ethical subject as recounted in Totality and Infinity, Levinas takes up, in Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, the ethical dimension of language as expression, address, and command in order to account for the ethical subject arising in subjection, or despite itself, specifying the immediacy of the other’s address as sensibility, affect, and vulnerability. This sensibility, or radically passive exposure to the other, he calls “saying,” in contrast to the “said,” which has to do with propositions, rights, laws and philosophy. The “said” makes a theme of
the “saying,” although Levinas asserts that “the saying is not exhausted in the said.”

The trace of the saying remains in the opening to communication between self and other. Finding the signification of “saying” in the “said” is, for Levinas, the phenomenological reduction that surpasses intentionality in its ethical interruption of essence. This interruption of the synchrony of the “said,” where nothing interrupts the flow of time and consciousness is instead a diachrony, where the passivity of the exposure to the other signals a lapse of time, with no return possible. This diachrony, or non-synthesis of my identity comes to me in the form of the “election,” or of the “chosenness” of someone uniquely assigned, unable to slip away (Levinas 1998, xxii, 9, 38, 43-44, 46-47, 116).

In enriching our understanding of sensibility Levinas expresses the feelings that accompany the self-questioning ego, by appropriating the language of physical pain. Sensibility, he writes, is now felt as a wounding, the proximity of the neighbor pressed up against me, and despite my possible disregard, disdain, or even despising of my neighbor, I feel bound to the point of obsession by the burden of the neighbor’s approach, which interrupts my egoic enjoyment of the world. I feel responsible for the other, precisely because I am the first one on the scene (Levinas 1998, 86-87). This responsibility, commonly referred to as “love” of my neighbor is nothing less than the condition for my own subjectivity. It is also, rather significantly, in the “face” of the neighbor that the trace of infinity passes. Phenomenologically, the Infinite is an absence, but Levinas alerts us to how the Infinite, or transcendence is felt as present in the

Levinas uses the term “illeity” to refer to this experience of absence, as trace.

Vulnerable to the otherness of the neighbor and to the “illeity” sensed in the neighbor’s “face,” I feel traumatized and persecuted, and because my own subjectivity is under accusation I become my own accuser and persecutor, gnawing away at myself in remorse. My ego, now stripped of its imperialist sense of pride, is driven to expiation, just for being, and it is through expiation that I reach the point of “substitution” for the other (Levinas 1998, 111-112). What does Levinas mean by “substitution?” He describes it using the trope of maternity, or of the maternal body, maternity understood, in this way, as gestation of the other-in-the-same. Levinas, also, renders “substitution” as the giving of the very bread from my mouth so that in giving it, I am giving myself (Levinas 1998, 67, 75). I give of myself, so fully, that I take on the persecution perpetrated by the other, expiating for a persecution that seems to be emanating, not from the other person, but from the shame I feel when confronted with my egoic self-interest and complacent irresponsibility. In expiating for the persecution of the other’s demands, I take responsibility for being implicated in their anguish, and in their suffering, and I suffer for them. Being a hostage to the other’s demands, prior to the activation of my will, is the extreme passivity of “creatureliness,” and it is just this radical passivity, or the ethical character of the creature that makes “substitution” possible. It is by virtue of my own and the other person’s “creatureliness” that I can substitute myself for another, liberating myself from the confinement of my ego, and on that basis, confirming the goodness of creation.
What is of profound importance in the phenomenology of “substitution” is the creation of the responsible self, as goodness, despite itself (Kosky 2001, 91). The idea of “the good,” first introduced by Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity*, harkens back to Plato’s statement, in *Republic* 509b, that although the object of knowledge’s existence and essence are derived from the good, the good itself is not essence, but transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power (Plato, Hamilton and Cairns 1989, 744). In Levinasian “substitution” the offering to the other of one’s own being, is an expression of this sense of goodness (Levinas 1969, 183). In reaching the point of “substitution” I find myself a hostage, infinitely responsible for and indebted to everyone, and according to Levinas’ surprising claim, it is precisely through “substitution” and through being hostage to the other, that my self escapes relations, liberating itself ethically from all others. This liberation is apparently accomplished when my self breaks through egoity and essence, or as Levinas describes it, this liberation is an interruption of ennui and enchainment to myself (Levinas 1998, 115, 124). The self is not lost, as one could suppose, when it substitutes for another, but is paradoxically liberated, by its release from being tied to an essence (Froman 2005, 55).

The self senses its having been taken hostage by the other, as it responds “here I am” to the other’s address. “Here I am” is a “saying” that both precedes and opens dialogue (Kosky 2001, 153), implying a sensitivity, an orientation, and a readiness to respond to the summons of the other, a summons heard only in the response. Levinas’ depiction of the ethical “here I am” response of singular election, or of “chosenness,” finds resonance in biblical narratives, most tellingly in the account of the binding of
In Levinas’ interpretation of the story of God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, he counters Søren Kierkegaard’s exegesis of the story as a privileging of absolute love and faith in God at the expense of the ethical, with a reading that disallows ethical suspension. He suggests that the essential teaching of the narrative is Abraham’s response to the messenger in putting down the knife and sparing Isaac’s life, because responding to the call of one’s fellow human is responding to God’s call (Levinas 1996b, 77).

One cannot avoid the summons of the other, for even in evading that summons one is responding to it. It is in this inability to slip away from one’s “chosenness” to singular responsibility, in relation to “the good,” that we begin to catch sight of the created character of the human, who as a passive creature is not master of her or his own origin. This refutation of the autonomous subject places Levinas at the heart of the 20th Century challenge to Enlightenment “humanist” rhetoric. Although he rejects the sovereign ego of Enlightenment “humanism,” Levinas also rejects anti-humanist discourse that praises the dissolution of the “subject,” and its responsibilities (Davis 1996, 78). It is beneficial to recall Levinas’ claim, which supports his notion of “substitution” as a “humanism of the other,” that “the meaning of humanity is not exhausted by the humanists” (Levinas 1990b, 281). Levinas’ characterization of “substitution” as election by “the good” is a point of departure for my further inquiry into the possibility of re-determining the value of “chosen people” discourse as measured in terms of goodness or of “the good.”
By now we have, hopefully, come to understand how Levinas’ phenomenological description of the “choseness” of the “I” is in close harmony with references to “choseness” at issue in the Hebrew Bible. His philosophical apprehension of the meaning of election, or “choseness,” is not inconsistent with what religion has to say on the matter. According to Levinas, the ethical is religious. “Chosenness,” he explains, is not an already religious category, but has an ethical origin, signifying a surplus of obligations. Although having an ethical origin in the good, the religious, he states, is not being relinquished. As a matter of fact Levinas says that the position of being responsible is a dignity and a choseness that one owes gratitude for. “And, even, this will be a reference to religion, one must be grateful for owing God gratitude” (Levinas and Robbins 2001, 66). As noted previously, Levinas credits Plato for finding in philosophical thought the notion of something outside of being, but Levinas rejects the Socratic teaching, found in Plato’s dialogues, that one receives or learns nothing of the other, but what one already, in some sense, knows. In rejecting the reduction of otherness to sameness found in Greek philosophy, Levinas states in his introduction to Totality and Infinity that the concept of totality dominates Western philosophy, and that his aim in the book is to present a defense of subjectivity founded in the idea of infinity, in the process distinguishing between the idea of totality and the idea of infinity, so as to affirm the philosophical primacy of the idea of infinity (Levinas 1996, 21, 26, 43).

Levinas is also influenced by Rosenzweig’s depiction of the ethical behavior demanded by “choseness,” as being possible for groups as well as individuals and by Rosensweig’s underscoring the centrality of the revelation, to a people, in the sacred
history of Judaism (Hollander 2008, 3, 174). Levinas, himself, claims that being “chosen” inevitably takes on a national appearance for this is the form in which civilizations are formed, maintained, transmitted, and made to endure. “Chosenness,” furthermore, is an expression of the responsibility for all that a people or a nation cannot evade, as well as awareness by the people of the exceptional duties, and of the infinite demands, comprising its quest for peace (Levinas 1990b 137-138, 173-176, 224). He boldly refers to “the scandal of the Jews as the chosen people,” submitting that this “chosenness” is neither pride nor will to power, but moral consciousness itself, consisting of compelling, non-transferable responsibilities. The people respond as if they were both the first, and uniquely, called to respond. The “chosenness” of a people is, no more and no less than, human beings living in a pluralistic, human society, under obligation to each other (Levinas 2007, 122). The people of Israel can be understood to exist as a “chosen people” because their response to “do before understanding,” upon receiving the revelation of God’s commandments, mimics the same deeply ethical structure of subjectivity, of a being for- the- other preceding knowledge and will. “Doing before knowing” is a pact with an originary goodness, sensed prior to any choice between the dichotomy of good and evil (Levinas 1990, 43). The people, in their devotion to “the good” are partners in the ongoing creation of a meaningful world.

The “chosenness” of a people, or of a human society under obligation, suggests a re-thinking of Western philosophical, and Enlightenment, notions of universalism. Ancient philosophical thought posited universalism and particularism in opposition to each other, with no opportunity for mediation between the two, and Enlightenment
rationality posited an autonomous, universal subject that suspiciously reflected particular European cultural standards and values. Judith Butler, in her investigation of the contemporary crisis of Enlightenment notions of universalism, warns that a universalism denoting that which is self-identical to all humans, loses that identity, when it refuses to accommodate all humans under its scope (Butler, et al 2000, 23). Ernesto Laclau also troubles the Enlightenment notion of universalism, as well as the Christian notion, where, according to him, the claim is that universalism is only accessible to humans through divine incarnation. He suggests that there is no particular that does not appeal to universal principles, in its self-structuring, asserting at the same time its own particularity as well as its universal horizon. Laclau envisions an ever expanding universality that includes more and more particular actors who, though never identical to the universal, are necessary to actualize the universal at any moment (Laclau 1996, 27, 34).

This description of an ever-expanding idea of universality rings true for the “chosenness” of the Jewish people who, while committed to universal and thus to shared values of moral agency, also remain committed to their singular “chosen” identity, thereby simultaneously actualizing the universal, and putting it into question. Levinas valorizes the particularity of a “chosen people” when he suggests that rather than limiting universality, particularity protects universality from the horrors of totalitarianism (Levinas 2007, 192). Richard A. Cohen portrays Levinasian universality, which differs from abstract universalism in its location of truth and values in notions of the “same,” as a “concrete universality,” rooted in pluralistic humanity’s temporal and
historical world, making possible the bond between universal morality and justice, and
the unique experience of a particular people (Cohen 2010, 271). In this interlacing of
particularity and universality we catch sight of obligation as a human condition, founded
in the absolute singularity of the obligated self, recognized in the “here I am” response
to the summons of the other (Hollander 2008, 32).

Dana Hollander introduces us to the complexity of thinking the universal
through the particular, as addressed by Jacques Derrida in his “Philosophical
Nationality” seminars, which call attention to the promise of exemplary structures,
including that of the “choseness” of the Jewish people. While crediting all national
discourses with assertions of universal values in the name of their particular identities,
Derrida’s appeal to all national and cultural communities, and to philosophy itself, is to
open up to what they routinely exclude. This notion of opening up to what Derrida
describes as “yet to come,” is an essential characteristic of exemplary structures of
national affirmation, and of all “chosen people” narratives in that being infinitely
“chosen” is not only by virtue of a group’s past, but is also by virtue of the promise of
the future, enacted, hopefully, in the present. When the articulation of universality, in an
exemplary way through particularity occurs, then “nations” paradoxically realize their
true selves by becoming less like themselves, leading, Derrida contends, to a radical
instability of self-identity (Hollander 2008, 3, 5, 8-9, 113, 124, 133-134, 137). This
radical instability of self-identity resonates with Levinas’ account of the subject who
experiences rupture of her or his egoic self through “substitution” for the other.
Derrida, interested in the tension that arises in the Levinasian formation of ethical subjectivity when the response to a call (“chosenness”) upsets the structure of self-possession, declares “Election is inseparable from what always seems to contest it: substitution” (Derrida 1999, 70). Sarah Hammerschlag suggests that the ethical moment, for Derrida, seems to occur precisely in this tension, for if ignored, “chosenness” can turn into an attempt to obstruct all others from taking up that position. For Derrida, “chosenness” demands a humility, and hospitality to all others (Hammerschlag 2008, 74-75, 84, 90). His interest also lies in the exploration of whether or not this “uprooting” of the self, as a result of election, can be useful as a fertile source for a thought of politics whose justice lies squarely in this lack of self-assurance (Hammerschlag 2010, 248). A strong claim can be made, at this critical juncture, for the notion that the humility demanded of “chosenness” ultimately resides in the radical passivity, or creaturely character of the human. “Chosenness,” as the responsibility of one-for-the-other, is a sense of responsibility not authorized by the ego, for in substituting ourselves for others, prior to any initiative, we find ourselves chosen by “the good,” before the choice presents itself to us. The humility is in the passivity of substitution, making “ethical chosenness” inseparable from “substitution.”

In this most passive orientation of the one-for-the-other, or what Levinas designates as “the good,” the ongoing creation of the world is achieved through human dialogue, which introduces the voices of singularity and multiplicity into existence. Michael Fagenblat alleges that by responding to the singularity of the other, the self sustains the work of creation, and in so doing, I contend, gives rise to the creation of the
human. Levinas’ appeal to the ethical characterization of creation as an appeal to “the
good,” is a petition to prevent the world from reverting to elemental evil, which
according to Levinas, is a world devoid of an ethical notion of responsibility, humanity
thus reduced to meaninglessness (Fagenblat 2010, 47, 49, 93-94, 99). Levinas’ appeal to
an ethical sense of ongoing creation is one possible response to Tod Linafelt’s inquiry
into whether the Torah was murdered in the death camps, or whether we are able to read
the text differently from a post-Holocaust perspective (Linafelt 2003, 113). I offer
Levinas’ interpretation of the biblical Job narrative as a way to listen anew for an ethical
sense of creation in the text. In the Book of Job we find Job, an upright man, arguing
with God that his, Job’s, prodigious suffering is undeserved, for in a meaningful world
one should not be held accountable when one has not done anything. But, according to
Levinas the subjectivity of the subject comes late into a world which has not issued from
her or his own projects (Levinas 1998, 122). In answer to Job’s unsuccessful search to
find out just how he is responsible for his suffering, Levinas refers to the biblical
passage Job 38:4, writing:

“Where were you when I created the world?” the Holy One asks him. You are a
self, certainly. Beginning freedom, certainly. But even if you are free, you are
not the absolute beginning. You come after many things and many people. You
are not just free; you are also bound to others beyond your freedom. You are
responsible for all. Your liberty is also fraternity. Responsibility for the sins you
did not commit, responsibility for the others. (Levinas 1990, 85)

Levinas alludes, when speaking of “beginning freedom,” to his reworking of the
notion of “creation ex nihilo” as the positing of a free human being, whose life consists
of its own beginning, and who triumphs over death, in the responsibility of the one- for-
the- other, whose time is not synchronous with one’s own (Levinas 1969, 55-56). When one, then, comprehends one’s freedom as arising in the response to the summons of the other, one catches sight of a notion of freedom that abolishes any belief in the human person as a self-creating source of her or his own value (Davis 1996, 84). Responding to charges of political quietism, founded on this depiction of the radically passive subject, John Llewellyn suggests otherwise, declaring that the election of the creaturely human to responsibility for the other, opens up a language of peace, by-passing the active/passive power dichotomy, which is fundamentally a relation of conflict or war (Llewellyn 2002, 111, 136).

The legitimacy of the Jewish people’s claim to “chosenness” rests on their ethical response to God’s commandments to “do before understanding,” an openness allowing for what Levinas describes as the coinciding of activity and passivity. The “chosenness” of a people holds out the promise, then, of peace among nations. Levinas recounts how each person at the foot of Mt. Sinai hears the call as singular, though they respond as a multitude, making them obligated not just to each other, but to everyone. Hearing the call as singular precludes any participation in a totality (Levinas 2007, 192). The multitude of people is not, Levinas states, a universality defined by numerical multiplicity, but a plurality of creatures in which the radical alterity of the other allows for the production of goodness and transcendence (Levinas 1969, 121, 305). The multitude of people is not a totalizing universality resisting, as Derrida compellingly warns, the claims of others. Levinas offers us a recontextualization, and revalorization of “chosen people” discourse, understood, by way of its textual heritage, as the
commonality, or shared moral awareness of a community of “creatures,” responding “hineni” ("here I am") to the other’s command. If we are able to recognize how our own as well as our community’s obligation toward others obtains in light of a sense of creation that in escaping the meaninglessness and absence of values characterizing elemental existence, makes human life intelligible, and if we are able to sense a trace of transcendence in our originary responsibility for the profoundly other person, then perhaps we can in some way begin to see how religion and philosophy, despite their different discourses, meaningfully intersect in our lives.

The challenging work that an ethical revitalization of “chosen people” discourse can possibly aspire to requires further inquiry, both in the investigation of what notions of “chosenness” mean, or could mean, for followers of Christianity, and for followers of Islam, and in the exploration of what this idea conveys, or could come to signify within the Jewish community. The controversy over what it signifies to be a “chosen people,” and who can legitimately claim such a title is not going away, despite attempts by some philosophers, and religious figures, throughout the ages, up to and including the present time. What is at stake in trying to create an idea of a group, or collectivity of free, responsible human beings, individuated through the radical alterity of the other, acceptable for and accessible to further dialogue, is perhaps nothing less than the future of humanity, or the capability of human beings to find ways to communicate with one another, and to find ways to live with one another, without violence. Our actions, in pursuit of social justice, are based on our values, which do not occur in a vacuum, but are firmly based on ideas, that sometimes become so much of a background to our lives,
that we don’t even recognize, or acknowledge them. Levinas makes us slow down, and take a good look at the meaning of some taken-for-granted words that we think we live by, such as “love your neighbor as yourself,” and in the process he gives us another chance at finding meaning and value in our finite lives, and in our finite struggles to continue to create for ourselves and all others a more welcoming and hospitable world.

It may be helpful to think back to the words of R. Clifton Spargo, in his book, *Vigilant Memory*, commented on at the conclusion of Chapter Two. Spargo challenges us to concede that when we turn away from the face-face, or the ethical roots of communal justice, relinquishing our vigilance on behalf of others, our complacency makes us complicit in institutional structures that orchestrate, or allow human suffering. We must understand, he asserts, that our survival due to social structures in place, is always potentially in the place of the survival of neighbors, near or far (Spargo 2006, 117). Given, in the preceding pages, my exposition of Levinas’ rich ethical description of how the human emerges as responsible for the vulnerable other, I, also, invite future consideration of how chosenness, as the sense of responsibility as substitution, or the offering to the vulnerable other of one’s own being, can serve as a possible grounds for human rights claims, in light of the frustrating contemporary sense of an apparent groundlessness to human rights discourse. Warrant can be found in Levinas’ writings for just such an investigation, based on the statement in his essay “The Rights of Man and Good Will” that the discovery of the rights of “man” and the elevation of these rights to fundamental legislation and social order marks an essential ethical moment in Western consciousness (Levinas 1998b, 155).
Levinas says that to do good one must be concerned with the other in her or his material misery. To be “chosen” by “the good” to do good is a matter of responsibility preceding any notion of guilty initiative. He recalls the words of the Lithuanian rabbi, Israel Salanter\(^\text{10}\): “The material needs of my neighbor are my spiritual needs” (Levinas, 1990, 99). I construe this to mean that the other person’s material needs are my spiritual practice. Finally, in conclusion, it is worthwhile to reiterate Levinas’ courage, in glimpsing, and in allowing us to catch sight of, a sense of transcendence in the radical passivity of creaturely “logic,” thereby creating an opening, granting us the opportunity to rethink the more familiar notion that transcendence is in no way discernible through philosophical thought, as well as furnishing us with the chance to embrace, imaginatively, a more satisfyingly meaningful sense of ourselves as “chosen,” each and every one of us responsible for the creation of humanity, as such.

\(^{10}\) Rabbi Israel Salanter is the name of Israel Ben Ze’ev Wolf (1810-1883), founder of the Musar movement, a moral movement based on the study of traditional ethical literature. (Levinas, 1990, 118n3)
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