

CRONOS SWALLOWS A STONE: FROM CALCIFIED HISTORY TO *HINENI*, “ENLIVENING MEMORY” AND THE CALL TO JUSTICE (ON CREATING A LEVINASIAN HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL)¹

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Abstract

The Center for Judaic Studies (CJS) at the University of Denver (DU) is building a new Holocaust memorial that links Holocaust memory directly to ethical responsibility and social justice. Aimed at “enlivening memory,” DU’s new “Holocaust Memorial Social Action Site” engages the memory of those unjustly silenced by cultivating ethical responsibility through campus-wide and city-wide commitments to the public good. The new space is inscribed with the word *Hineni* (“Here I am”) and takes inspiration from Levinasian ethics by linking Holocaust memorialization directly to learning, intercultural dialogue, and social justice activities. In particular, the vision engages memory and justice as they are opened anew through Levinas’ rediscovery of time, subjectivity, and the sacred.

The paper explores the *Hineni* “life-stance” (which the new memorial aims to foster) by comparing three stones in Levinas: (1) the stone swallowed by the Greek God Cronos, (2) the Torah as “freedom on tablets of stone,” and (3) Mt. Sinai.

Keywords: Levinas, memory, Holocaust, memorial, memorialization, Cronos, Cronus, Kronos.

Introduction

There are perhaps few better ways to silence the voices of those whom we seek to remember than by creating fixed rituals or spaces of memory that calcify and absorb. It is no small irony that in “paving together” a memorial of bricks and mortar, we run the very real risk of “paving over” the very voices from the past that we seek to enliven: in creating fixed spaces (or activities or artworks or accounts) of remembrance, we must be vigilant not to “remember over” those whom we seek to engage. In this sense, we may speak of “calcified” structures (any fixed rituals or times or spaces) running the risk of “calcifying” those whom we seek to remember, and of “calcifying” ourselves: we run the risk of “calcifying” those whom we seek to remember in our triumphantly acting as if the infinite excesses of the past (and of the lives of those who have passed) are somehow recuperable by memory (i.e. acting as if the past were a finite, or in this sense, “concrete/calcified” entity, to be “had/contained” by us, “in” our memory). And, in “calcifying the other” in this way, we run the risk too (or rather: we at one and the same time and in one and the same sense run the risk) of “calcifying ourselves”—of calcifying our very living capacity for witness.

Amplifying in particular this last point—and reflecting on Pierre Nora’s warning that “The less memory is experienced from the inside, the more it exists through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs”²—James Young notes that “the extent that we encourage monuments to do our memory-work for us, we become that much more forgetful.”³ And, bridging these ideas about calcification and forgetting to the

¹ I am thankful to Leora Batnitzky and Claire Katz for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and to James Young for his engaging conversations about DU’s new memorial space during a March 2011 visit to campus. Thank you too to Karin Nisenbaum for the time and care she has put into the editing process. Any remaining unclarities are my own.

² Nora, Pierre. “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” trans. Marc Roudebush *Representations* 26 (1989): 13. Reprinted from Pierre Nora, “Entre mémoire et histoire,” *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 1: *La République* (Paris, 1984), xxvi.

³ James Young’s *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in and Meaning in Europe, Israel and America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 5. See too in this regard his discussion of the “invisibility” of memorials (and their

image of absorption, we may look further to Nora's own worry that in our careful institutionalizations, "memory has been wholly absorbed by its meticulous reconstruction."⁴

It is here that we might begin to feel the initial force of a Levinasian critique of Holocaust memorials: concerned broadly with totalizing perspectives that seek (knowingly or otherwise) to eradicate (or absorb) difference, Levinas critiques historical enterprises that aim to consume the infinite (and in this sense, unconsumable) expanse of "the past" (and of "those who have passed") into a tidy field of "things remembered." For Levinas, this is a form of violence which paves over the other while at once misconstruing the act of memory, misconstruing the nature of time, and misconstruing the true structure of the self's relation to (and dependence on) the other. Levinas describes this sort of totalizing comportment to the past ("I have the power to remember you") as one that makes of the past "nothing but past," failing—in its very attempt to remember—to pay due reverence to the unassimilable nature of the past (and of those who have passed), and in this way, failing to capture the realities of those who came before (and, in this sense, failing to remember). Concerned with just this sort of totalizing and absorptive approach, Levinas writes of "fate" as "the history of the historiographers, accounts of the survivors, who interpret, that is, utilize the works of the dead,"⁶ as he speaks on the contrary of "witness of the Infinite" as a "witness that does not thematize what it bears witness of."⁷ Any totalizing act of memory (in the very act of thematizing) forgets. Only a non-totalizing response to the infinity of the Other—for Levinas, found in the self-identifying response of *Hineni* ("Here I am")—can truly remember. Whatever it is about us that calls us to totality ensures the death of memory; whatever it is about us that calls us to infinity alone can remember.

As it relates to our thinking about Holocaust memorials, we may say that in building a space to remember, we must foster opportunities for *Hineni*—opportunities, that is, for ethical witness: we must be sure that in our best efforts to remember we do not instead foster forgetting and in the process pave over those honored others—and with them, ourselves. Thinking of calcification in particular (and loosely switching out the image of salt for stone), we might speak of the need to avoid the fate of Lot's wife: in turning back to that which is behind us (seeking, that is, to recapture the past), we must be sure to avoid turning those of blessed memory (and with them, our own inner opening to true witness) to stone.

Mindful of engaging Holocaust memory in precisely this spirit of witness that avoids absorption or calcification,⁸ and mindful too of contributing to a vibrant and growing future for Jewish Studies,⁹ the

ability to foster *inaction*) in this respect (13–14), where he also directly engages our theme of calcification: "...a monument turns pliant memory to stone" (13), going so far to note that often memorials take on the "finished veneer of a death mask" (14). In his work, Young reminds us that memorials (for his own use of the terms "memorial" and "monument," see *Texture of Memory*, 4) must not foster forgetting, and that his work aims to "save our *icons* of remembrance from hardening into *idols* of remembrance" (Young, *Texture of Memory*, 14); these points can both be seen in his reminder that a memorial must always take into the account the participants who will engage memory through it in way of engaging the present (see for example Young, *Texture of Memory*, 11–15; speaking of memorials, Young speaks of the "public dimension of their performance" (11), and states that "we must go on to ask how memorial representations of history may finally weave themselves into the course of ongoing events" (12)), and in his reminder that memorials must never "redeem" and must instead represent the "the experience of the memory act itself" (see Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 9). For further reflection on how the DU memorial fits well with Young's own sense of the public role such spaces must play, see note 27.

⁴ Nora, "Between Memory and History," xxvi.

⁵ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 56.

⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 228.

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht and Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1978), 146

⁸ In the course of this paper, I will be exploring a Levinasian sense of this calcification or absorption; in this regard, one might consider various iterations of Levinas' concerns with totalizing historical approaches to the past and to those who have passed: see for example, Levinas' discussions of memory as a reversal of historical time (as for example in *Totality and Infinity*, section on "Separation and Discourse"; see too "The Ethical Relation and Time" (*Totality and Infinity*, 220–247), "The Glory of the Infinite" (*Otherwise Than Being*, 140–152), "From Saying to the Said, or the Wisdom of Desire" (*Otherwise Than Being*, 153–162); *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), and "Dying For..." in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (Columbia University Press, 1998). See too Edith Wyschogrod, *An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1998/2002); see too R. Clifton Spargo, *Vigilant Memory: Emmanuel Levinas, the Holocaust, and the Unjust Death* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Young, *The Texture of Memory*, and his *At Memory's Edge*; For a discussion of the general problem of over-representation of the Holocaust, see Andreas Huyssen, "Monuments and Holocaust Memory in a Media

Center for Judaic Studies (CJS) at the University of Denver (DU) is creating a new Holocaust memorial on the campus designed not only to wrestle with the complex question of how past fits with future, and of how tragic elements of Jewish history can be part of a socially conscious and forward-looking Jewish identity on campus and beyond, but designed too to “enliven memory,” allowing the voices of those unjustly silenced to be heard (if only in echoed silence) through campus-wide and city-wide commitments to the public good.¹⁰ Linked to an endowed Chair of Holocaust Studies, DU’s new Holocaust Memorial Social Action Site is inscribed with the word *Hineni* (“Here I am”—the enacting call of witness) and takes inspiration from Levinasian ethics by linking Holocaust memorialization directly to learning, intercultural dialogue, and social justice activities. In particular, the vision engages memory and justice as they are opened anew through Levinas’ rediscovery of time, subjectivity, and the sacred in the arresting call of *Hineni*.

In what follows, and in the spirit of these opening thoughts on stony calcifications (and the avoidance of such stony calcifications), I explore *Hineni* as a life-stance by considering three stones: I begin by contrasting the *Hineni* life-stance with the “stone-swallowing” life-stance of the Greek God Cronos (to whom Levinas refers in *Totality and Infinity*); I then identify the *Hineni* life-stance with the infinite responsibility of Levinasian ethics found both in (1) Levinas’ Rabbinic treatment of the Torah (as binding ethical law) in terms of “freedom on tablets of stone,” and in (2) Levinas’ own re-reading of the life-affirming weight of one special stone in particular: Mt. Sinai, here signifying the “weight of responsibility-to-other,” in contrast to the crushing lightness of living without responsibility-to-other.

In exploring these Levinasian insights and by providing an analysis of “stones vs. stones” and competing life-stances, we can more fully express the vision for the new Holocaust Memorial Social Action Site at DU as follows: re-envisioning what a Holocaust Memorial can be, we aim to ensure that the stones of our memorial function in the spirit of Levinas’ own “stones” of Torah and Mt. Sinai, viz. as entry points for the cultivation of ethical responsibility and response. Aiming to cultivate the *Hineni* life-stance, our memorial expressly avoids the risks of calcification addressed above, as it at once functions as a new model for linking Holocaust memory directly to ethical responsibility and social justice.

*Man's freedom is that of an emancipated man
remembering his servitude and
feeling solidarity for all
enslaved people...¹¹*

Cronos vs. *Hineni*: Two Opposing Life-Stances (or: from Totality to Infinity)

The real must not only be determined in its historical objectivity, but also from interior intentions, from the *secrecy* that interrupts the continuity of historical time...We have always known that it is impossible to form an idea of the human totality, for men have an inner life closed to him who does, however, grasp the comprehensive movements of human groups. The way of access to social reality starting with the separation of the I is not engulfed in “universal history,” in which only totalities

Age,” [reprint of 1995 essay from Huyssen’s *Twilight Memories*], in *A Holocaust Reader: Responses to the Nazi Extermination*, ed. Michael Morgan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 359–363

⁹ I’ve witnessed a trend in Jewish Studies – as well as among congregational Rabbis and Jewish community organizations – to avoid (or to be embarrassed about) Holocaust programming: I have heard time and again that Holocaust programming is “passé”; I have heard from Jewish Studies scholars that Holocaust programming (and Holocaust Studies) is not part of cutting-edge Jewish Studies; I have heard from Rabbis that Holocaust “won’t play” to their congregants; and I have heard, in the words of one 30-something community leader at my local Jewish Federation, that “I don’t do Holocaust.” This entire trend seems to reveal what we may call “an anxiety against exile” of a piece with what Soloveitchik diagnoses as the “childish naïveté” which values only the “...tranquil and neatly ordered, tender and delicate” in its “desire to escape from the turbulence of life to a magical, still, and quiet island.” Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, trans. Lawrence Kaplan (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1983), 140, note 4. Jewish Studies – and Jewish communal life – must include Holocaust programming, and must do so with a creativity and dedication that reveals an understanding of Holocaust memory as a (1) vital and (2) *future-directed* endeavor (one, moreover, which is (3) part of the responsibility [and privilege] of both Jews and Jewish Studies programs—as well as everyone else—to properly engage).

¹⁰ DU’s particular dedication to the public good makes the campus an especially hospitable environment for our project; DU’s mission statement (enacted in a growing number of campus initiatives) states that “The University of Denver will be a great private university dedicated to the public good.”

¹¹ Levinas, “The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights,” *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (London: Athlone, 1991), 152.

appear. The experience of the other starting from a separated I remains a source of meaning for the comprehension of totalities...Cronos, thinking he swallows a god, swallows but a stone.¹²

At the root of our Western thought-space lies the myth of the God Cronos¹³ who, in his desperate attempt to avoid being replaced by his progeny, swallows each of his newborn children. Saving their youngest son (Zeus) from this pedicidal fate, the Goddess Rhea presents her husband Cronos with a stone disguised as his newly born son; and so, “thinking he swallows a god, [Cronos] swallows but a stone.”

I start a reflection on Jewish memorial spaces by focusing on a throwaway reference on Levinas’ part to a Greek God, not only because a consideration of the mythic figure of Cronos can intuitively help us clarify critical Levinasian points about history, memory, and human subjectivity, but (and this is why I specifically describe the Cronos myth as rooting Western thought-space) because in the figure of Cronos we find a salient (and again, intuitive) image of what, for Levinas, lies at the core of the failure of Western philosophical thinking. While not to be confused with Chronos, the God of time (from the Greek *xronos*),¹⁴ the figure of Cronos (from the Greek *kronos*) nonetheless signifies a certain powerful (and desperate) mastery over time: starting with the castration of his father (Ouranus), and ending with the ingestion of his progeny, Cronos is a figure who dramatically symbolizes a totalizing historical impulse—one that aims to overpower both the past and the future (and in so doing, aims too to maintain full control over the present). It is precisely this totalizing stance (here, with respect to time) that encapsulates what, for Levinas, is wrong with Western philosophical thinking in its variety of totalizing guises, be it Hegel’s sense of an Absolute Spirit unfolding in history, Kant’s (or, for that matter, Plato’s) epistemological emphasis on universalizing reason as the crowning activity of human being, or Plato’s (or, for that matter, Heidegger’s) privileging of Being. For Levinas, these are all cases in point of the Western totalizing stance, which seeks to consume all difference—a desire to reduce otherness to sameness (related too to a conception of the self as an all-powerful island of one), which we might now colorfully and intuitively symbolize in Cronos’ desperate desire to control (by consuming) the past, present, and future.

It is precisely this desire to consume all difference (everything that is other-than-me) that can be seen as marking the key point of departure for Levinas’ new intertwined visions of subjectivity, history, and memory. And so, in the violent image of Cronos castrating his father and consuming his children, we are helped to a poignant symbol for (and as such, an intuitively rich way of thinking about) the Western totalizing life-stance against which Levinas is so indisposed. Reflecting on the “Cronos life-stance,” we may note that it includes the following core insights about selfhood and memory: (1) a sense of self as a powerful island of one at once able to master history, and as such, comported in a controlling way towards the present and future, and (2) a sense of history as objective time, with the joint “totalizing” and “consuming” senses that history “can be known” and that memories of history can be “had.” To this totalizing “Cronos life-stance” we may contrast the Levinasian approach, now in terms of a competing “*Hineni* life-stance.” Seen first in the Bible in Abraham’s self-disclosing opening to the infinitely other call of the sacred in the binding of his son, the *Hineni* (“Here I am”) unfolds in Levinas as a defining testimony at the core of human subjectivity—a responsive ethical stance that, for Levinas, reveals nothing less than the very ground of human [otherwise-than-] being in which the self is re-envisioned as a one-for-the-other, and in which subjectivity, autonomy, and freedom are re-envisioned in terms of an infinitely binding responsibility-for-Other.

Reflecting on the figures of Cronos and Abraham, we may emphasize a contrast between swallowing (because being swallowed) and binding (because being bound): Cronos swallows his son because he is himself swallowed by self-directed desires; Abraham binds his son in response to the binding

¹² Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 57–8.

¹³ More commonly spelled “Cronus” (Greek “*kronos*”); he is associated with the God Saturn (and is different from Chronos, the God of Time (from Greek “*xronos*” / time) – though see next note.

¹⁴ While Cronos (more generally spelled Cronus) and Chronos (lit. Time) are not the same God, even Cronos is depicted in the history of ideas as a figure deeply related to time. While I elaborate (in what immediately follows in my current essay) on a way of seeing Cronos as a master of time, my own reconstruction aside, we find that: “Since antiquity, the titan and ruler Cronus was identified with the personification of time, chronos. According to some theories the similar spelling and pronunciation in Greek is the reason for the misidentification, because only the initial letters of the two words differ. For example in Cicero’s writings you can find the equation of Cronus (*Kpovoc*) and Chronos (*χρόνος*). Associating Cronus and the word time continues to have consequences. Plutarch refers to this extension of meaning with reference to Cronus as the father of truth...”; see “Cronus (Kronos)” s.v. *Encyclopedia of Time: Science, Philosophy, Theology, & Culture* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2009) Credo Reference. 4 Aug. 2010, accessed 24 Jan. 2011, http://0-www.credoreference.com.bianca.penlib.du.edu/entry/sagetime/cronus_kronos. Thanks to Peggy Keeran of DU’s Penrose Library for helping me locate this entry.

sacred call of the Other (and then unbinds him in that same responsive-to-Other mode). Herein lies the chasm between the “Cronos life-stance” and the “*Hineni* life-stance.” In the image of Cronos we find self-directed desire, which reduces difference to sameness, a call to be-for-oneself in which Cronos is himself swallowed by a selfishness that results in swallowing the other, with the end result that the others (all of his children, less Zeus) are absorbed into Cronos: their difference is reduced to a sameness-with-self. In the image of Abraham, on the other hand, we find the responsibility to respond to the call of the Other. Abraham enacts the call to be-for-another—he is bound by the binding call of responsibility-to-respond-to-Other, which results in a binding [followed in the story of Abraham and Isaac by an unbinding] of the Other—here (both in the binding and unbinding of Isaac) emphasizing the radical alterity of the Other whom the “I” can only encounter, but whom the “I” can never consume. We might say that Cronos is swallowed in a swallowing of the Other while Abraham is bound in a binding of / to / with the Other. The former is engulfed within the totality of historical time while the latter alone is opened to a freedom (in responsibility) that exceeds the bounds of historical time.¹⁵

Speaking of *Hineni* in terms of a life-stance (in opposition to the “Cronos life-stance”), we may reflect on the following core insights about selfhood and memory: (1) Warned away from the suffocating inadequacies of totality, we are alerted to an infinitely uncontrollable excess that grounds our human subjectivity in the Other; this grounding trace of infinity-in-the-Other at once reveals itself to us and conceals itself from us in the face of the Other to whom I am bound in responsibility.¹⁶ In this sense, my human subjectivity is grounded not only in the Other, but in the Other qua other (i.e. in that about the Other which is radically unassimilable and which exceeds the bounds of my knowledge or memory). In Levinas’ conception of ethics I am transformed into a “self-for-another,” a move that in part reveals a thoroughgoing privileging of alterity and irretrievability (bringing with it, as we will see, new senses of time and memory). In the face-to-face encounter with the Other, the “totalizing” space of my ego-I is interrupted, and in this rupture my subjectivity (as one-for-another) is constituted as a being bound first in a responsibility-before-choice. (2) Through this encounter with the Other, we enter into a time freed from the egological confines (of “objective time”) in which the past—now tied up with innumerable pasts of innumerable others (or simply: now tied up even with one unknowable past of a single other)—is no longer “that which I can retrieve” but “that which is irretrievable.”¹⁷ In this sense, we may say that the past itself is encountered as an unassimilable alterity on par with (and in part precipitated by) my encounter with the Other to whom I am beholden (and who grounds me). And so, from the past as that which I can “have” (something assimilable into myself as memory, viz. something I can swallow whole), we move to a past that I witness in and through my *Hineni* cry of response to Other (a past which is, as such, encountered by me as a radically unassimilable [un-swallow-able] other). Those who have perished in the past are now no longer “past-as-knowable” or “past-as-have-able” by me (using the image of Cronos, here the past and past voices would be consumed by me, or assimilated [or: swallowed] into me, with their difference lost); rather, the past is now that which I engage in and through my *Hineni* comportment to (and constitution by) the Other. In my valuation of the alterity of the Other, the voices of those gone are now encountered by me as non-assimilable voices for whom (to whom) I testify. In this sense,

¹⁵ In his description of subjectivity in terms of the Other, Levinas indeed speaks of a binding: “What is positive in responsibility, outside of essence, conveys the infinite... Subjectivity, prior to or beyond the free and the non-free, obliged with regard to the neighbor, is the breaking point where essence is exceeded by the infinite. It is the breaking-point, but also the binding place...” Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 12.

¹⁶ The theme of concealment in revelation and revelation in concealment is key to understanding the delicate nature of encountering the infinite (God and / as / in the Other’s otherness) in the face of the Other. For a fluid and in-depth exploration of the thematic of revelation-as-concealment and concealment-as-disclosure, one might look to Elliot R. Wolfson’s treatment of this idea in Jewish mystical contexts (in which God is being revealed-as-concealed and concealed-as-revealed – a point itself directly related to the disclosure/enclosure of God’s own reality in the face of the Other for Levinas). For an overview of this idea (which Wolfson engages throughout his corpus), see, for example, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 17–19. On the Kabbalah’s “ontological esoterism” in this regard see Wolfson, *Abulafia-Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, Theurgy* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000), 52; see too Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁷ Levinas speaks of a time beyond “historical time” in which “inner life” (my own, as well as that of someone from the past) cannot be absorbed: “...each being has its own time, that is, its *interiority*, [which is] not absorbed into the universal time. By virtue of the dimension of interiority each being declines the concept and withstands totalization – a refusal necessary for the idea of Infinity...[This inner life] does not exhibit itself in history; the discontinuity of the inner life interrupts historical time...” Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 57.

Memory...reverses...what is already accomplished...in nature. By memory I ground myself after the event, retroactively: I assume today what in the absolute past of the origin had no subject to receive it and had therefore the weight of a fatality. By memory I assume and put back into question. Memory realizes impossibility.¹⁸

Moving from a Cronos life-stance, I do not aim to remember the voices of the past as an absorption/swallowing (even in my best intentioned desire to give them to voice in the present). Instead, enacting a *Hineni* life-stance, I am bound in response/responsibility to those in the past and to the Others before me. And in this way, we may say, the voices of the past are “given to voice” in the present, as if given “a triumph over death”:

Memory as an inversion of historical time is the essence of interiority...psychism extracts an existence resistant to a fate that would consist in becoming “nothing but past”; interiority is the refusal to be transformed into a pure loss figuring in an alien accounting system...Dying is agony because in dying a being does not come to an end while coming to an end; he has no more time, that is, can no longer wend his way anywhere, but thus he goes where one cannot go...mortal existence unfolds in a dimension that does not run parallel to the time of history and is not situated with respect to this time as to an absolute...[the life between birth and death] flows on in a dimension of its own where it has meaning, and where a triumph over death can have meaning.¹⁹

Through the *Hineni* life-stance, I testify to and as such enliven the voice of a she whose voice cannot be silenced by the mere passing of time (nor by the mere end of life in the historical sense):

Starting from the ethical relation with the other, I glimpse a temporality in which the dimensions of the past and the future have their own signification. In my responsibility for the other, the past of the other, which has never been my present, “concerns me”: it is not a re-presentation for me. The past of the other, and somehow, the history of humanity in which I have never participated, in which I have never been present, are my past.²⁰

And in this stance of *Hineni*—a standing first in testimony as a self-for-the-Other—the glory of God too is enacted. Of the *Hineni*, Levinas describes:

[A] witness of the Infinite, but a witness that does not thematize what it bears witness of, and whose truth is not the truth of representation, is not evidence...The Infinite does not appear to him that bears witness to it. On the contrary the witness belongs to the glory of the Infinite. It is by the voice of the witness that the glory of the Infinite is glorified.²¹

In my stance of *Hineni*, neither the person whom I remember nor God is revealed in a “total” disclosure: both the person whom I remember and God are revealed in a concealed revelation of the infinite that exceeds the bounds of objective time, and that exceeds the bounds of a self understood as a “totalizing” self-for-the-self. We may in this sense say that both the person whom we remember and God are revealed (in the hidden way that the infinite and unbounded must be revealed) only in my *Hineni* life-stance: a comportment to the Other as absolutely other, as the person to or for whom I (as self-for-the-other) am responsible.²²

As a sign given to the other...the “here I am” signifies me in the name of God, at the service of men that look at me.²³

¹⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 56.

¹⁹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 56–7; the quote goes on: “This triumph is not a new possibility offered after the end of every possibility – but a resurrection in the son in whom the rupture of death is embodied...” While in this context Levinas connects memory to fecundity (here as the “resurrection” of someone in their son), we can also speak of the ability of the perished to survive death more broadly in a memory that does not calcify (a memory enacted by one who stands in witness, open to the Other-as-other).

²⁰ From an interview with Levinas; see Levinas, “Philosophy, Justice and Love,” in *Is It Righteous to Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 176.

²¹ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 146.

²² In his study of “vigilant memory,” R. Clifton Spargo notes that “...Levinas helps us to see that the apparent individuality of the ethical relation is in reality an infinitely extensive structure of responsibility for others who are here now as well as for those who are remote in time or place...” Spargo, *Vigilant Memory*, 36. Spargo there speaks too of the person who is gone as “an interruption of historical teleology” Spargo, *Vigilant Memory*, 45.

²³ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 149.

Fostering the *Hineni* Life-Stance: the Holocaust Memorial Social Action Site, and the Call to Justice (or: From Cronos' Stone to Freedom on the Tablets of Stone)

*The Justice rendered to
the Other, my neighbour,
gives me an unsurpassable
proximity to God²⁴*

On the front page of *Difficult Freedom* we find Levinas engaging a Rabbinic play on the Exodus 32:16 notion that the writings of God are “*harût al ha-lûhot*.²⁵ Literally translated as “hewn on the tablets [of stone]” or “engraved on the tablets [of stone],” these words are read through the Rabbinic imagination (playing with the Hebrew word “*harût*” [engraved] and its similarity to the Hebrew word “*hérut*” [literally, “freedom”]) instead as “*hérut al ha-lûhot*”—viz. that God’s law is “freedom on tablets of stone.” Building closely on the Rabbinic sense that in the law one finds freedom, Levinas speaks of the responsibility-to-the-Other as a binding, which grounds my very freedom. Once again, it is the *Hineni* that marks my stance as the self-for-the-Other invested with my own subjectivity and freedom through my responsive comportment to the difference-as-difference of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger (or, for that matter, my neighbor).²⁶

Contrasting the Cronos life-stance with the *Hineni* life-stance, we may speak now of a replacing of stone with stone: from the stone swallowed by Cronos that symbolizes our totalizing desire to engulf the other (be it the perished other whom I seek to represent in memory, or the other before me whom I seek to reduce to sameness in some other way), we move now to the “freedom on tablets of stone” as the space of ethical response in which we ground ourselves in service to (and never absorbing) the Other. In the move between two symbolic stones, we have moved from Totality to Infinity.

In creating a Holocaust Memorial mindful of these issues, then, we must ensure that we move, in the actual, physical space of stone markers, to the space of “freedom on tablets of stone,” a space in which the calcification of past, present, or future is avoided precisely through the cultivation of the *Hineni* comportment of selves as selves-for-the-Other.

The Holocaust Memorial Social Action Site at DU aims to cultivate the *Hineni* life-stance, and as a reminder of this aim, it is inscribed with the word *Hineni*. It is not a memorial to look at. It is, rather, a space of gathering designed to foster learning, intercultural dialogue, and social justice initiatives on campus and across the community. Through the enactment of selves as selves-for-the-Other, we engage memory through the living space of ethical witness, and in this way we re-engage past, present, and future. The spirit of this stone memorial avoids the representational, totalizing approach to history of a self-for-the-self (i.e. the stone-swallowing stance of Cronos), and it recalls instead the “freedom on tablets of stone” that is only encountered through a responsible encounter with the Other on the part of a self-for-the-Other.²⁷

²⁴ Levinas, “A Religion for Adults,” in *Difficult Freedom*, 18.

²⁵ Levinas cites *Tractate of Principles*, 6.2; see Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Aboth*, 6.2. For Rosenzweig’s treatment of the Rabbinic “freedom on tablets” idea, see *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 266–7.

²⁶ In my comportment to my neighbor as Other-qua-other there is a responsive comportment borne of the same “distance [now as proximity] of difference” that applies in the case of the absolute stranger. My neighbor is a stranger (in the sense that I encounter her as radically other); and yet, the stranger is a neighbor (in the sense that we must feel the pull of the far as if she were near; see Levinas quote at note 31, as well as this paper’s closing quote from Isaiah with which Levinas engages).

²⁷ In this respect, the DU memorial also accommodates James Young’s sense that a memorial engage a community in the present: “The question is not How are people moved by these memorials? but rather, To what end have they been moved, to what historical conclusions, to what understanding and actions in their own lives? This is to suggest that we cannot separate the monument from its public life, that the social function of such art is its aesthetic performance” Young, *Texture of Memory*, 13. I would go further to note that we describe the DU Holocaust Memorial as a “gathering space for social consciousness-raising” and not even as art per se (though clearly art [qua art] can, as Young here points out, function precisely in this spirit). (Young also emphasizes the idea that a memorial should in part represent its own historical process of coming-to-be in a given time and place (i.e. that the memorial should reveal in its form the circumstances that lead up to the building of it, etc.); the DU memorial can be seen as responsive to this aspect of Young’s thinking not in any particular aspect of its form per se (i.e. no particular aspect of the memorial’s own form reveals the circumstances of its coming into being), but in the fact of its placement at the center of a university whose

The first word of the face is the “Thou shalt not kill.” It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. And me, whoever I may be, but as a “first person,” I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call...It is the presupposed in all human relationships. If it were not that, we would not even say, before an open door, “After you, sir! It is an original “After you, sir!” that I have tried to describe.²⁸

While within the phenomenological context of Levinas’ inquiry “ethics” is not the kind of prescriptive call to action that one can find in a range of thinkers from Aristotle to Kant to Bentham, it is nonetheless true for Levinas that the “tablets of stone” must call us to action and justice. The ethics-of-responsibility invoked by the face of the stranger-as-neighbor (or by the neighbor-as-stranger) not only grounds our own subjectivity and freedom; it also grounds the possibility for just action and for just society as it invites us to live in and through the *Hineni* stance.

In the singular awesome/mundane space of the “*Hineni/After you, sir!*” we do not find a code of human conduct or a charter for a fair community, but we do find the anchoring pull of responsibility-for-other in which action and society will be rooted when we remain true to our roots.²⁹ Emphasizing the manner in which a just society is rooted in the ethical, Levinas speaks of the “vigilance of persons who would not be satisfied with the simple subsumption of cases under a general rule, of which a computer is capable”.³⁰ Levinas’ “After you, sir!” is neither a call to open the door for your neighbor (i.e. a call to ethics or to just actions in the non-Levinasian morally prescriptive sense) nor is it a call to open the door for your neighbor’s neighbor (i.e. a call to just society); it is a call to identify your root in the other. But it is in that call that we will find both the ground for just action and just community; it is in that call that we will find our path to opening more doors and our path to fighting for others to open more doors still. It is in that call that we will find the *Hineni* life-stance and “freedom on tablets of stone.” It is in that call and in that call alone that we move to justice:

[Justice] remains justice only in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest.³¹

In his poignant excavation of the midrashic space of another large stone, Mount Sinai, Levinas (as part of his exploration of the truth found in the “*Na’aseh Ve-Nishma*,” the “We will do and [then] we will hear” of Exodus 24:7) illuminates the Rabbinic mythos of God’s having threatened the lives of the people of Israel by dangling the mountain over their heads. Levinas moves us away from a reading of the midrashic teaching (as it is often read) in terms of God’s having threatened to crush the people with the mountain if they did not accept responsibility / law / Torah. Levinas instead hears in the midrash a very different teaching: the temptation to turn away from responsibility is what threatens to crush us. To borrow a turn of phrase from Milan Kundera, it is “the unbearable lightness of being” [the so-called “neutral call of being” we might say]—and not the [weighty] call of responsibility—that has the power to crush us, to swallow us whole. It is in the “neutral call of being” that we find the crushing root of all violence. On the contrary, the demanding call of responsibility that is acknowledged in the *Hineni* and in the “After you, sir!” is that which can alone ground the very possibility for non-violence and which can, as such, open the door to peace.

“Peace, Peace, to the far and to the near” (*Isaiah 57:19*)

mission statement speaks of the public good, and whose Center for Judaic Studies houses a Holocaust Awareness Institute; in other words, it is not our memorial’s form but its placement (viz. at a university with a long-standing commitment to the public good and to Holocaust awareness-raising) that reveals important aspects of its own development).

²⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 89.

²⁹ In addressing the ‘After you, sir’ and other examples of ethical language in Levinas, Robbins highlights that they “seem to be located at the intersection between the transcendental and the empirical” and that in this, “Levinas indeed locates a certain transcendence in the factual.” See Robbins’ introduction in *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 5.

³⁰ Levinas, “Peace and Proximity,” 169. Commenting on this essay, the editors note that “Levinas’ thinking does not result in apoliticism or ethical quietism,” and that for Levinas “ethics leads back to politics – to the demand for a just polity” (161). They even add that “one might go further and claim that the ethical is ethical for the sake of politics, that is, for the sake of a transformed conception of politics and society” (161).

³¹ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 158.

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