The Redemption of Hostages

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What we today call “terrorism” is certainly one of the most ancient elements of human warfare: hostage taking. The new Third World terrorism of the 1960s and 70s was literally so: hijacking airplanes and making demands, which can only work if you adhere to the deal which is finally struck and release the hostages. In a way, this form of asymmetrical warfare is not so different from the exchange of hostages that would guarantee, for example, that neither side’s leader would be killed when it came to negotiate the end of a tribal conflict. The new form of suicidal terrorism that emerged in the 80s and culminated in 2000 in Israel and then on 9/11 was an escalation that in essence declared the entire population to be a hostage—the population on both sides, even if we are only likely to see the civilized side as the hostage because we would never follow up on the suicide terrorist’s implicit assertion that all of his or her fellow countrymen and women or co-religionists would willingly step forward in self-sacrifice as he/she has done.

We can see how hostage taking might have dramatically humanized war at a particular stage in human history, by creating safe spaces for discussion through the replacement of a part for the whole. We can also see the similarity between hostage taking and other now proscribed practices such as human sacrifice and scapegoating—indeed, they are probably all the same thing, differentiated out from one another gradually. What the Jewish and Christian events make unthinkable, then, is taking a part for the whole in this way; but the only way of really banning what we might call social synecdoche is for someone to step forward and show willingness to take the place of the arbitrarily chosen party—all the legal and moral discourses exhorting us to love our neighbor would be meaningless without a “critical mass” of individuals willing to place their bodies between would be “synecdochists” and their victims.

Once the entire population is taken hostage (as was already the case in the Mutually Assured Destruction strategy shared by the USA and USSR during the Cold War), the part/whole relation has been not so much abolished as made probabilistic and democratic: rather than designating specific people to hold or exchange, under

determinate conditions, anyone, anywhere, or all of us, at any time, might be "taken"; at the same time, the odds are always heavily against it being anyone in particular. There is a major difference between nuclear deterrence and terrorism: with MAD, the responsibility for deferral remains where it had always been, with the duly recognized political leadership of the nation, upon whose rationality and access to sufficient information regarding the intentions of the other side we must rely. (The anti-nuclear movement in Western Europe and the USA, an attempt to change the equation by mobilizing the hostages themselves on their own behalf, was utterly impotent because the only equation that mattered was on the state-to-state level.) With regard to terrorism, especially the suicidal variety, responsibility is distributed: not only can the "average" man or woman strap on a loaded belt and self-deploy in a crowd of civilians, but the disruption of everyday life effected by such unpredictable acts of violence is intended to move the citizens of the affected country to influence their government in ways that are, compared to the stakes of nuclear strategy, fairly within our compass: to withdraw from certain countries, stop supporting certain governments, and so on.

I think that the Nazi genocide of the Jews can be understood as an instance of hostage taking that includes (or prefigures) both the MAD and the terrorist models, and that examining it in these terms can further clarify the "Auschwitz theology" or victimary thinking which has come to dominate the post-WWII world. For Hitler, the real war was in the East: all the major ideological, economic and territorial goals of Nazism lay in the struggle against the rival totalitarianism of the USSR—living space, a European empire, the destruction of Bolshevism., and the elimination of Jewish power (whatever that might have meant—I am working under the assumption that the physical extermination of the Jews was a decision arrived at in the course of the war, not an a priori ideological imperative). Hitler had no interest in war with either Great Britain or the US—indeed, he had every reason to assume that, as fellow "Aryan" and Western powers threatened by Bolshevism, they would at least tacitly support his war in the East. If they didn't—if they stubbornly and irrationally chose to treat the Nazis as their main enemy, even to the point of allying themselves with Stalin, there could only be one explanation: Jewish domination of those countries had overridden their natural racial affiliations with Germany. Once the threshold of all-out war had been passed, the Jews of Europe, captured and closed in by the Nazi enclosure of Europe, became hostages to their brethren in the West. These were no ordinary hostages—not only were they to be sacrificed as long as the Judeo-capitalists prolonged their hijacking of the Western democracies, but they were to be sacrificed as an offering even if the Aryan forces in the West were to come to their senses; in this latter case, the Jews would be a kind of peace offering, a sacrifice in the cause of ending a war between brothers.

In this way, the citizens of the Western democracies were implicated in the murder

of the Jews: either they allow the Jews to control their own destiny, in which case they leave the Nazis no choice; or they repudiate Jewish control, thereby acknowledging it, and affirm their fraternity and partnership with the Aryans. The victimary discourse that emerged from the Holocaust followed the same logic: each witness, during the Holocaust, who managed to either get news out of Nazi-occupied Europe or to keep records they thought might survive it, focused on simply documenting beyond any doubt a crime that they had good reason to believe (they had, indeed, been taunted to that effect) would never be heard of or, if heard of, believed. Hearing such testimony therefore implicated the listener in a war against obscurity, or, more precisely, surfaced an already existing complicity, because there were sufficient signs pointing to unspeakable atrocities to entail that, since you could have observed and pursued them, in not having done so, you have chosen to participate in the concealment required for the perpetration of the crime: therefore, you are obliged to become a witness in turn, and thereby bear responsibility for the crime. The memoirs of the Holocaust that slowly trickled out in the following decades to become, eventually, a flood, followed this very same model, with harsh proscriptions against “subjectivizing” one’s testimony in any way that might weaken the credibility of one’s status as witness. In other words, the victim held the Western victors hostage as well, implicitly demanding that they undo in some visible way the complicity in the crime that was, simultaneously, the cause of the crime itself. Moreover, this complicity via obscurity, through not knowing what one should have known, is an extension of the complicity of those Germans who were not directly involved in the genocide—the very “banality” of their everyday lives contributed to the machinery of extermination, indicting the entire division of labor in advanced Western societies, where one’s specialized work can contribute to monstrous actions beyond one’s control and knowledge, and yet with one’s tacit consent. This is the full victimary model, and we can see its extraordinary power: at stake is not a cognitive belief in the consequences of racial or other discrimination; rather, it is a compulsion to redeem oneself from captivity.

This redemption would, theoretically at least, be achieved, as Eric Gans suggested in *Chronicle* 430, “The End of Antisemitism?,” by the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. The redemptive cycle would be complete: the victims, driven to displace another people, and aided in that enterprise by their former victimizers and bystanders, so that they in turn become victimizers, would finally restore their own inadvertently created victims. If it’s so easy to see the theological stakes of the apparently secular issue of Israel/Palestine, it’s also easy to see how those stakes contribute to making the preferred solution extremely unlikely. The Palestinians, as a tiny nation with little of intrinsic value (strategic or economic) to offer their supporters and therefore likely to be forgotten quickly as soon as a reasonably satisfactory agreement were to be attained; and as a proxy (or synecdoche) for both the Islamic and the Third Worlds, hold their would-be liberators hostage.

Without their agreement, the redemptive cycle will never come to an end, and since all the burden of arriving at that agreement is therefore placed (again, for strictly theological reasons) upon the Israelis, freeing the sacralized Palestinians from responsibility—since, that is, the Palestinians have no reason not to pursue any avenue of struggle that will complete their own redemptive cycle, the complete re-conquest of their homeland and the destruction of Jewish political power on Islamic soil—it is very hard to see why they should agree. Which means that even if a particular Palestinian leadership agrees, it is very hard to see why the next one wouldn't abrogate that agreement, and, furthermore, why the next one wouldn't come along very quickly. In this case, Auschwitz theology is at an impasse, in a double bind it has itself created.

The Jews, and then Jesus, offered themselves as hostages to God, presenting themselves in his stead for the sake of the good, or at least decent, behavior of humankind. It is probably more accurate to say that a small minority of ancient Hebrew scribes interpreted the catastrophes of the Jewish people as a hostage-taking through which humankind might be redeemed through Jewish suffering, and that this interpretation prevailed through the construction of systems of pedagogy aimed at resisting Hellenism by favoring God over Mind (the *I Am* over the *It Is*) and was finally codified in Rabbinic law and theology with the devastating failure of the nationalist rebellions against Rome, the reconstitution of the Jews as a diasporic people, and mostly hidden hostile dialogue with emergent Christianity.

The failure and near destruction of this tiny people could then serve as a synecdoche for the inevitable fall of all empires (founded on the accumulation of entire peoples as hostages), of all the haughty, and the replacement of hostage taking by the reciprocal replacement of oneself for others before God. Those who accept this model of self-hostaging will learn how to defer violence sufficiently to make and adhere to explicit, voluntary, recorded agreements.

But the stakes would have been raised: nothing less than the redemption of all humankind, making all obstacles to the institution of universal self-hostaging, whether it be through salvation in Christ or equality in democracy, instances of kidnapping of the most egregious kind. To the extent that this mode of redemption must be accepted as a proposition, which is to say that agreement on the truth of a proposition is a precondition of redemption, then a levy of forgetfulness must be imposed on all those layers of agreement which make agreement on propositions, or even the equivalence of hostages, possible and which, further, are revealed even in the sharpest disagreements over propositions. The notion of "human nature" can gesture toward this world of shared ostensives and tacit knowledge, which goes on in everyday life regardless of politics and philosophy. This world of the shared and tacit might be allowed to issue in more specific and readily checked voluntary

associations, but as it is no longer provides a resource in crises where parties are organized around incommensurable propositions, each making some claim to the inheritance of Western culture.

Anti-semitism, then, might be nothing more than taking literally the taking hostage of the Jews. On the traditional understanding of Jews themselves, the breaking of covenantal commitments weighs heavier for Jews than for others. The Jewish entrance into and dispersal within Western society at least seems to have been facilitated by a long series of covenants, first of all (literally and explicitly) with medieval rulers and later, more tacitly, with various "host" populations. The *post factum* model for such agreements is the insistence by Napoleon that the Jews abandon their collective loyalty to the Jewish nation in exchange for equal rights as individuals. Since no definition of "Jew" or "Judaism" can completely eschew such loyalty, or at least the plausible appearance of such loyalty, though, this agreement is destined to be deemed violated, at least by those who wish to stick to its strict letter. Even the foundation of modern Israel with (admittedly highly uneven) Western support conforms to this model, on many levels: from the issuing of the Balfour Declaration as in tacit exchange for the support of world Jewry for the Allied war effort, through the attempts of the pre-state Yishuv to establish the Jews' usefulness to and incur obligations on the part of the Allied powers, to today's inevitably special relationship between the U.S. and Israel.

Jewish firstness, in this case, reveals itself in this agreement that "always already" structures the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. The agreement between Jews and God and amongst the Jews themselves (according to Jewish law, nothing is more subject to prohibition than betrayal of the Jewish community—we must all be ready to be hostages for one another, and we must never give up on redeeming our hostages), that is, serve as a model for the subsequent agreements between Jews and others. Agreements bound to end up in disappointment. One way out of the Jewish condition of hostage is to participate in taking the Jews hostage in more worldly ways—there is a long tradition, as alive now as ever, of Christianized and then secularized Jews employing their renounced Jewishness, or alienation from the Jewish community, along with their putative expertise in one, the other, or both, as credibility in attaining stable relations of dependency within the larger community. Attempts to simply abandon Judaism en masse in the name of revolutionary utopianism can't work, because revolutionary utopianism is bound to fail, leaving the Jews visible as a major force, as Jews, within that enterprise. Perhaps intermarriage will gradually attrite the Jewish population in Western countries, leaving only openly observant Jewish minorities and Israel.

How interesting it was that the two planks that needed to be clumsily, indeed, forcibly inserted into the Democratic Party's platform at their convention this year

were one describing human potentialities as “God-given” and another affirming Jerusalem as the capital of Israel! There is a remarkable symmetry in the crowd seeming to boo God and Israel simultaneously. (Of course many if not most were booing the crude bureaucratic imposition of these unpopular planks—but isn’t that close enough to booing the planks themselves?) I wondered why the two planks couldn’t have been separated and voted on separately—it might have minimized the embarrassment. Perhaps the majority of DNC delegates were only against God *or* Israel (which would have been seen as the greater liability?). I also wondered why no one else seemed to wonder—perhaps they did it this way because they expected both planks to pass easily. The resistance to recognizing Jerusalem as Israel’s capital is a way of holding Israel hostage to the utopianism of international law and institutional arrangements, which will transcend the pettiness of national stubbornness (like the antiquated idea that a sovereign nation decides on its own capital). Other countries simply joined the UN; Israel’s very existence is dependent on a UN vote, which is to say its existence is the result of its international redeemers, involving an implicitly covenantal relation. Israel’s defenders refer to the UN vote granting Israeli statehood in 1947 as the solid ground of Israel’s sovereignty and legitimacy, but couldn’t the UN take back what it has given? States that exist naturally can’t have their existence erased, but why not one that was created by international agreement, and, therefore, can be reasonably expected to adhere to the norms generated (however ever evolving those norms might be) by that same covenantally established international body?

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I recently came across an essay by Renate Stendhal, who has written an excellent photobiography of Gertrude Stein, in *Tikkun* Magazine, “Why the Witch-Hunt Against Gertrude Stein?” Stendhal examines the recent kerfuffle over the White House’s inclusion of Stein in its official statement on Jewish Heritage Month. Stendhal details the campaign by the New York State Assemblyman Dov Hilkind, celebrity attorney Alan Dershowitz and others to represent Stein’s experience in Vichy France during WWII as evidence of Nazi and fascist sympathies and collaborationism. Stendhal’s essay disposes of these accusations decisively, and I’m not interested in reiterating the argument here—to take just one example, an obviously ironic suggestion in an interview in the late 30s that Hitler be given the Nobel Peace Prize has been ludicrously inflated into the assertion that Stein “campaigned” for Hitler to be given the prize. The real question is, why engage in these bouts of what is nothing other than what traditional Judaism calls *lashon-hara*, the evil tongue, or malicious slandering, especially of one’s compatriots?

These mini-civil wars, destructive of ancient Israel and transcended by Rabbinic Judaism, seem to be endemic to secular Judaism—I would bet that some historian

will someday (if not, unknown to me, already) uncover something of the kind in the Trotskyist-Stalinist battles of 30s, and that is what we see in the formerly liberal and leftist neo-conservatives as they battle those Jewish leftists they left behind. Dov Hilkind is an orthodox Jew and Dershowitz is still a liberal democrat, but that's beside the point—I am referring to a polemical style, one especially in evidence when issues of Israel and anti-semitism are foregrounded, which is lingua franca across the spectrum. As someone politically sympathetic to the participants in this style, and even perhaps given to it at times myself, I am occasionally shocked by its ruthlessness and desire for excommunication. (Maybe it goes back to Spinoza's expulsion from the Amsterdam Jewish community. Or the polemics against idolatry in the Old Testament.) I would prefer to think that someone saw the opportunity for a cheap shot at the Obama Administration, but the animus toward the ambiguously Jewish like Stein seems to me the primary motivation. Look at how self-appointed representatives of the Jewish community write about Hannah Arendt, to this day—it's as if *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was published yesterday, the hatred is still white hot. It is the hatred you have for one who has broken a sacred covenant and, even more, exposed the tenuousness of those covenants tying one to the "others."

Pierre Manent, in "City, Church, Empire, Nation," in the latest issue of *City Journal* (a neo-connish publication) examines the origins of modernity in the search for the "authoritative word" which had been lost in the Christian world due to the growing gap between Christian saying and the actual doing in the world (a gap most vividly brought to the surface by Machiavelli), what he calls "an unmanageable gap between speech and action." This desire is not specific to pre-modern Europe, even if the otherworldly nature of medieval Christianity in tension with emergent economies made it especially pressing. So, if "[t]he regimes that we call "totalitarian" are those capable of bringing together the most unbridled and terrible action with the most pedantic ideological and linguistic orthodoxy," that testifies to the urgency of this need fpr authority as well as its historical character. Presumably, there can be a "manageable" gap between word and deed, because there is always some gap, insofar as the word emerges as a deferral of the deed. But the deferral is itself the first deed, and the desire to close that gap is nothing other than the originary and constitutive desire for a scene, the only reality we as humans can know. How is it possible to live without experiencing some regular connection between the explicit and the tacit, between the declaratives one issues throughout the day and the ostensives and imperatives grounding one in tangible realities?

We create those tangible realities through agreements, hundreds and thousands of them, tacit and explicit, every day, and pathologies like Jew hatred and *lashon-hara* amongst supposed brothers and sisters are signs that the agreements are breaking down. Perhaps it's the otherworldliness and increasingly ramshackle metaphysics and theologies of "democracy" and "rights" that now open the gap between word

and deed to increasingly intolerable levels. Accusing one another of breaking faith in the agreements is the least likely way to restore them—such accusations are further proof that, as Arendt argued, the thread tying us to tradition, that is, to publicly known (if mythological) agreements, has been cut. It might be best to start acknowledging that Western civilization, as a unique and especially productive cultural form, predicated upon a paradoxical imperial anti-imperialism, has simply reached its limits. There is no need for resentment here, no need to blame Western civilization for the ills of the world, or indict its enemies, or demand affirmations of faith in its superiority, just as there is no need to blame Newtonian physics for reaching the limits of the paradigm it initiated. Rather, we can start to look for the elements of a new paradigm, which is admittedly far more difficult in the case of civilizations than sciences, but we can have a general idea of where to look: our constitution as signifying beings, as bearers of signs rather than as represented and representing through the transparency of signs. The sanctity of the individual as the limit beyond which signs cannot penetrate was always bound to be qualified by hedges and dodges, and the notion of individual "sacrifice" to be vulgarized and ultimately parodied. The sanctity of linguistic innovation or, more minimally, linguistic slippage, may be more durable, insofar as it does nothing more than remind us of the vulnerability of joint attention to violent efforts at imposing a singular focus.

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The minimalism of the originary hypothesis can be evoked in these broader moral and political contexts. It may be better to set aside the "big" questions, like equality vs. liberty, faith vs. reason, liberty vs. authority, the beautiful vs. the sublime, etc. Better for some inquiries, at any rate. We can simply ask, where do we see instances of joint attention? All the time, no doubt, but what does it look like? We can deviate from jointness by either allowing ourselves to be distracted away from what others are looking at or through fixation, in which we attend to something to the point where we are unable to show others what we see. We can roll all of what we call "morality" into the simple obligation to sustain the jointness of attention, which also means, in an expression that I can't make sound less trivial, just keeping things interesting.

Hostage taking, even in its form of giving ourselves over as hostages, is unavoidably violent—the trick will be to allow such self-sacrifice to those who feel it as a vocation, to allow as much of hostage taking as we will still continue to need, to provide due attention to those who will feel compelled to synecdochize themselves for others—while keeping only the due attention, that limited to those vocations. The problem of sustaining jointness is an esthetic but ultimately pedagogical one—it is the problem of creating out of ourselves and the scenes in

which we participate little plays that “catch the conscience”: obstacles to completing activities that don’t annoy but redirect attention just enough so that it can dwell on our voluntary convergence upon those activities.

The best way of doing this is through the creation of idioms out of errors: mistakes, or those iterations of the sign that disrupt attention toward the center can be taken as occasions for excluding those who pollute the scene of joint attention or as testimony to the desire for jointness. The former leads to ridicule, denunciation and failing grades (all of which are, no doubt, within certain rigorously defined contexts, or local paradigms, necessary); the latter lead to the renewal of signs and the invention of means for affirming jointness. Stein’s own work is rich in examples of this kind of move, but I’ll give an especially pertinent example cited by Stendhal in her refutation of the vicious charges against Stein, in this case regarding her project of translating for an American audience Marshal Petain’s speeches:

When the Vichy Régime chose Pétain as prime minister, Stein hoped—naively, blindly—that he would guarantee France’s protection from Nazi Germany and recognition from America. This view was shared by the American Department of State. At the Time of Stein’s translation project, Vichy France was not (yet) at war with America; in Pétain’s Unoccupied Zone, the Zone Libre, where Gertrude and Alice’s country house was located, American Jews lived freely, especially if—like Gertrude and eventually Alice—they were over sixty-five years old. Charles Glass points out that no Americans were interned in the Unoccupied Zone. Stein’s hope for Pétain’s France was encouraged when, according to Rogers, “the Franco-American Committee . . . asked her to translate for her compatriots Marshal Pétain’s messages.” If Stein acted out of her concern for France, it is still a puzzle how she felt about the repressive content of these speeches, the fascist and anti-Semitic tendencies in some of Pétain’s “messages.”

Even Barbara Will is baffled. She doesn’t know what to make of the translation, because Stein didn’t really do it. She hand-wrote a draft of some thirty speeches dated from 1939 to 1940, in a language that renders them unreadable. As we know from computer gobbledygook, word-by-word translations don’t make sense; they are a joke. But that is exactly what Stein did. Here is one of many examples Will gives: “‘Ils se méprendront les uns et les autres’ — a speech denouncing Pétain’s critics – is translated “But they are mistaken the ones and the others.”

Will ponders that perhaps Stein had such an admiration for the old man that every word of his had to be honored in and of itself. Maybe Stein wasn’t fluent in French, some commentators have proposed. She had spent almost four decades in France and had written and published in French. Others have wondered about her English proficiency. Stein, the recent bestselling author of *The Autobiography of Alice B.*

Toklas, certainly was able to write straight-forward English. One is tempted to speculate in the same manner Will does, but in the opposite direction. What if Stein found the content absurd but was fascinated by the language, the archaic French tonality of the old soldier that could only be rendered as some hermetic prose-poetry?

Barbara Will ponders ungenerously, attributing the unintelligibility of Stein's translations to blind hero worship of an old fascist collaborator; Renate Stendhal's more generous reading sees Stein as mistaking Petain's writing and becoming more interested in the violations of the rules of translation and genre upon which she found herself embarked. Stendhal is herself a bit upset at this project of Stein's, so she includes in her hypothesis the assumption that Stein "found the content absurd," but this assumption is really unnecessary—what matters is that, regardless of her feelings for Petain's politics, the drift into a new mode of potentially joint attention is more engaging.

There is a kind of minimal Gnosticism in Stein's absolute valorization of the present, and her "lowering of the threshold of significance"(1) such that everything becomes equally meaningful might be less violent than the faith and hope of more mainstream Western discourses. We always know something—lots of things, in fact—even if what we know in a given case is that Petain's speeches can become "hermetic prose poems" when translated over-literally into English. Even false claims manifest some knowledge: if I claim "you are the devil," I at least know that certain appearances of and around you can be pieced together in such a way, and from a certain perspective, and within such a situation, as to project something demonic. Even if my fever passes and I realize you are, as you always were, my good friend (that is to say, I know *that* now), that other knowledge need not be rejected. And such knowledge, like any knowledge, can only be acquired through the determined closing off of all areas of reality that might interfere with that piecing together upon which I am engaged that constitutes joint attention; areas of reality that might be more productively opened as my ongoing learning process continues to lower further the threshold of significance lowered by the attention paid to my latest representation. Hope and faith try to make a ritualized version of some scene real; a minimal Gnosticism just names the event and invites others to make the name fit. (As an experiment, if you eliminate in a particular discourse all uses of terms like "hope" and "faith," along with related terms like "believe," perhaps even ones further afield like "assume"—you will be left with stark and limited assertions of knowledge, such as "there is only x as far as the eye can see with the sliver of some new thing we might call 'y' that suggests an already diminishing likelihood of some 'z'")

So, we always know and are always mistaken; this duality derives from the plurality

of the originary scene where each can only know the other's gesture by exaggerating it in some way, and can only recognize one's own gesture in the other's exaggeration. There is no exaggeration, as the term makes no sense outside of some normalized frame of reference, while it is precisely such a frame of reference that is created on the originary scene; and, yet, there is exaggeration or ostentation because part of one's knowledge of the scene is the possibility that it will dissolve momentarily—that possibility of imminent dissolution is the measure or frame of reference against which the exaggeration, stylization or ostentation occurs. We can, following Stein, assert that only the living and not destruction are interesting, and that might be a natural stance, but it also involves giving significance to, further lowering the level of signification to register, those living things threatened with or obscured by destruction. In fact, only the living and peace-giving can be meaningful, and if we grant meaning to destruction we end up granting to destruction and evil creative potentials they cannot possess. When we know something, then, what it is we know is the significance of which thing must have its profile raised so as to lower the general threshold of significance, which thing we must attend to so that we can attend from it in turn to our shared attention.

It is the mistake, or anomaly if you like, that discloses the endangered reality whose profile must be raised, because in the mistake the constitution of the rules governing any scene by the sheer desire for the shared ostensive is revealed. The thing to be attended to is the idiom constructed out of the mistake, the affirmation of the desire informing the scene. If we keep raising the profile of endangered realities, our lives would get more eventful and more idiosyncratic—meaning would get made out of less and less; while at the same time our culture would get less scenic, insofar as the closure required for the scenic imagination is more effectively deferred. To an outside observer (like most of us now towards this largely hypothetical cultural development), such beings seem unspeakably trivial, concerned, maybe, with forms of greeting and leave-taking, shows of appreciation and deprecation, esthetic arrangements drawing attention to the normally neglected, fascinated by strata of agreement and agreeability. But while there is no guarantee, there is also no reason why this sensibility cannot support a readiness to defend itself against those impatient for definitive closure, even if more through subversion, mockery, withdrawal of cooperation and instigation of deconstructive elements than outright opposition. (If we had such a culture right now we would simply withdraw our embassies from the Arab and Muslim world—more or less—and expel theirs from our country, along with anyone overtly sympathetic to Islamic-sponsored violence, post more blasphemous YouTube videos to drive them crazy and encourage self-doubt—and this, of course, would mean that we'd be willing to take the hit in higher oil—and other—prices, while getting to our own drilling.)

Jewish firstness, its self-understanding through founding agreements, is further bound up with the injunction to “inscribe these words on your heart”—this metaphor of interior writing, which we see in the natural law theories of early modernity, articulates the permanency of the written word with the disciplining of the soul to obedience. The more written-on the soul becomes, the more responsible one becomes to take that writing to “heart.” While the metaphor, as David Carr shows in his *Writing on the Tablets of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature*, precedes ancient Israel’s systems of writing and education, going back to the Egyptian and Mesopotamian systems, what is new in Judaism is the conclusion Brian Rotman points to in *Becoming Beside Ourselves: The Alphabet, Ghosts and Distributed Human Being*: “[i]f prosody is absent from a voice, then the bearer of such a voice is unknowable in an auditory sense as an individual, as a speaking being among others. . . . Thus it is with the alphabetic God who exists and ‘speaks” only as a voiceless writer. Short of invoking a plurality of indistinguishable and interchangeable speakers (like identical atoms or mathematical units), a toneless voice can only invoke a singularity, a one-and-only, self-identical entity comparable to nothing outside of itself; a monobeing who is not merely one of a kind but *is* its kind” (121-2). Perhaps Israel’s location on the margin of ancient empire, along with the transience of its own imperial and (especially) ritual institutions, enabled it to take this final step in constructing and worshiping that monobeing, and in construing morality as the construction of the inner self, or the conscience, as the inscription of not merely the words of tradition but of that one-and-only on one’s own inner constitution. This was a forward looking metaphor insofar as writing in ancient Israel, as in ancient Greece, Mesopotamia, and Egypt would have first of all involved a means of and therefore would have been secondary to the oral recitation and memorization of canonical texts. The injunction to inscribe the words of the one-and-only on the heart would seem to go beyond memorization to a kind of individual being capable of tonalizing without infringing upon the toneless voice of God, making it transportable, and hence of shaping individual action beyond traditional strictures. The prophetic polemics against legalisms and ritual obedience devoid of inner intention that were so central to defining the exemplarity of Israel suggest that preserving, revering, even ingesting the written word led to the decisive displacement of the ancient imperial cosmologies by attacking any Israelite practices reminiscent of them. Such an inscribed being would revel in its ability to make and adhere to agreements of all kinds, and would mark its distinctiveness, or holiness, as a people, in such terms.

At the same time, though, once that thread connecting us to the monobeing’s self-revelation is cut, we might find ourselves with the alternative Rotman posits: with the written word as evoking a “plurality of indistinguishable and interchangeable speakers,” perhaps inscribed one on top of the other, palimpsest style, on our hearts. Such a model would certainly conform better to contemporary electronic

communications systems, and carry with it the equally powerful injunction to allow for as many voices as we can bear (and to strive to learn to bear more) without trying to reduce their toneless anonymity to familiar polemics. The question would then always be, which voice needs to be allowed to come through unfiltered so as to preserve this general anonymity, to prevent all the other voices from identifying themselves by drowning out this one? Maybe the name of this plurality of voices is "everyone be anyone," but there are certainly innumerable other possibilities. And maybe that flip side of the Jewish model of God, thought, and conscience will take us all out of the system of anti-Semitism as we simply act on the agreements we must already have made rather than demanding compliance with an ultimately dubitable interpretation of some explicit one.

David Gelernter, in *The Muse in the Machine: Computerizing the Poetry of Human Thought*, proposes that we think about human thought as lying on a spectrum from "low focus" to "high focus." Along the spectrum lie different modes of attention, and making use of Michael Polanyi's distinction between "attending from" and "attending to," we can say that low focus thinking lowers the boundary between the "from" and the "to," while high focus thinking raises and reinforces the barrier. When the barrier is high—when we work rigorously, abstractly, theoretically—we maintain our focus on one central object or question, and reduce all other objects and questions to a subsidiary role, interesting only insofar as they enhance our attention to that central object. We could say that we construct an impermeable scene, with nowhere to look but at that central object. When the barrier is low, then the thing I was just attending from might now turn into that which I attend to, in which cases relations between lines of thought become metaphorical and affective rather than logical. Here, we might say that we have created less a scene than a thoroughfare across scenes, with no a priori relation between those scenes, as an object, however marginal, on one scene can be the pretext for the evocation of another.

There must always be a spectrum of thought from low to high focus, but the advent of writing makes the high focus end much higher, and so we can safely associate cultures in which low focus thinking is valued with orality and those where it is denigrated or ignored with literacy. The declarative sentence scopes or blends two scenes (which neither speaker nor hearer need have personally witnessed) onto a single scene, the scene of utterance, and is therefore the place where the spectrum is created: the two scoped or blended scenes or inputs can shed their original features in as tight a focus as the most urgent ostensive; or the declarative whole can dissolve back into the multiplicity of scenes. With writing the declarative sentence is made the object of inquiry and elevated so as to present itself as exemplary of language as such, leading to an enormous effort in tightening the declarative scene and preventing its collapse back into its elements. Jewish culture,

meanwhile, has valued low focus in a way that Western rationalism has not (in large part through a textual mysticism), but insofar as monotheism has joined the mainstream of world culture through Greek-inflected Christianity, the “toneless” voice of the “one-and-only” has tended to participate in stifling the lower focus side of the spectrum. If a shift might be afoot from “I am that I am” to “everyone be someone,” that is, from that one toneless voice to an infinity of voices, then a tolerance, even desire, for the lower focus would result.

The reason I advance this argument by way of Gelernter’s book is that he provides us with an astonishing analysis of an extremely opaque (that is, low focus) and seemingly marginal story in the Bible that helps me to tie this concluding concern into my early discussion of Judaism, anti-semitism and anti-anti-semitism as a kind of cycle of hostage taking.

The story is in Exodus 4:24-26, and here it is, in Gelernter’s translation:

> It happened on the road, at an overnight stopping place, that the Lord met him [Moses] and tried to kill him. But Tzipporah took a flint, cut off her son’s foreskin and touched it to his feet; she said “You are my bloody bridegroom!” And he withdrew from him. That was when she said “bloody bridegroom” with respect to circumcision. (165)

Gelernter shows that we can only make sense of this story by allowing ourselves to follow a nightmare logic of moods and associations, organized around Moses’s return to Egypt, where he faces the unresolved issue of his being a wanted man. Gelernter also makes a very plausible case that we are to assume that Moses has never told his wife or Midianite in-laws that he is in fact a Hebrew and not an Egyptian (this would, for one thing, account for his son not yet having been circumcised). The crime he committed in Egypt is likely to be revealed, and so is his hitherto concealed identity, and so it makes sense that Moses would imagine that God is coming to kill him just as God would soon come to kill the Pharaoh’s first-born son. Indeed, Gelernter reminds us, in Exodus the Jews are referred to as God’s first-born son, and “[f]irst-borns are *forfeit* before the Lord” (170, italics Gelernter’s). Circumcision is the symbolic redemption of the first-born Jewish son, in place of his sacrifice. This is not Gelernter’s conclusion, but I would say that through circumcision Jews redeem themselves from the human sacrifice that would otherwise be demanded in a culture consumed with hostage taking, transferring the two roles of hostage taker and redeemer to God. (Maybe this helps to explain another, so far minor manifestation of contemporary anti-Semitism: the mania for outlawing circumcision.)

I posed the problem of knowledge: how to determine which voice among the

innumerable ones we access through texts, through any text, we should raise the profile of so as to keep all the voices interchangeable. A voice, I would say, onto which we can project a blend akin to the blend this one small part of the Exodus story, in Gelernter's reading, projects onto God: hostage taker, killer, redeemer. As we lower the threshold of significance (in which writing and now electronic media aid greatly), the blends will be of lower stakes and the event ever deferred, so perhaps we get annoyance, nuisance, and pleasure as the qualities borne by a particular voice asking that its profile be raised. We know that we have directed our attention to those features of the voice that might be taken as annoying, even a nuisance, and that we turn our attention yet another way so as to find it, nevertheless, somewhat pleasurable—thereby opening up a low focus channel for finding other things to be annoying, a nuisance, and pleasurable in new ways. Indeed, anything can partake of all of these qualities. And then things barely signify at different thresholds of attentiveness, articulated in ways that register only through carefully formed acts of attention.

And when the time comes to raise the level of significance again, maybe we will be able to treat those who would take us hostage through such blends as voices among innumerable ones that we single out as a point of attention so as to ensure that everyone can continue to be anyone. Maybe the language of escalation and crisis is all used up (maybe that's why 9/11 never really became representable in American culture) and it will never be "1938" again—and maybe a more horizontal rhetoric in dealing with, say, the Iranian nuclear program will work better. Maybe if we note that the program is an unpleasant nuisance, then a disturbance, one we find unsettling, and still can't quite turn away from, we would actually act in a manner proportionate to the words and do what one does with disturbing, unsettling nuisances that don't go away—but, then, get interesting, a chance to try something out. The world won't come to an end if the Iranians get the bomb, or even if they use it; but by the same token, it won't come to an end if we find the shortest and most decisive way to make sure they don't get it. If we have to focus on the Iranians because they constitute a threat, we would want to focus on them in such a way that the upsurge in attention we must direct their way gets dissipated as soon as possible. I certainly don't know how, exactly, but it might involve taking up positions within their language, inside their attentive space, as infidels, as unruly dhimmis, as rogue interpreters of the Koran. In other words, figure out ways of spreading their attention out, so that the entire situation becomes one of language learning all around.

We can never redeem ourselves from hostage taking altogether—the very attempt to do so generates new spates of hostage takers alert to the slightest sign of vulnerability; and the creation of spaces free of hostage taking, which is to say spaces where relationships can be formed and broken at any time and on any

pretext or even none whatsoever, requires a willingness to stand in place in cases where those spaces attract the resentment of others. Anyone can, though, rather than delivering oneself to the most available taker, discover what one has become hostage to simply by following, through its linguistic turns, the line of potentially joint attention to the minimally distinguishable anonymous voice, until one finds oneself with a set of commitments, a mode of inquiry, and a sense of rights and duties to some others. Maybe what Charles Sanders Peirce called “musement,” or idle curiosity, or a pataphysical study of the unique and exceptional, or devotional meditation and prayer, or simple tinkering, is the best guide. And anyone can be curious about the boundary between the normal and the anomalous, the taken-as and the mistaken.

Notes

1. I am referring to the concept Eric Gans uses in *The Origin of Language* to account for the dissemination of the ostensive sign to other objects in the earliest period of language use. See pp. 76-82 in particular. (back)

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