

## Losing Self, Finding Self

“Strictly speaking, the other is the end; I am a hostage”

Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*<sup>1</sup>

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Often and with ease do we separate ourselves from the suffering of others. In crowded cities, homeless men become part of the cityscape; they become blurred into the urban background of pigeons, falafel vendors and subway grates. The schizophrenic woman walking aimlessly on the train, muttering to her invisible neighbor, becomes a nuisance to the flow of Malcolm Gladwell’s newest *New Yorker* article. “To approach the other is to put into question my freedom,” writes Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*.<sup>2</sup> Their presence, argues Levinas, interrogates our identities and our responsibilities, and ultimately, demands our engagement. But this involvement creates existential anxiety. We are scared of what novelist David Grossman calls “the chaos within the Other.”<sup>3</sup> We believe we must prop up invisible walls if we wish to keep our sense of self and our sense of freedom. Thus, we too blur ourselves into the background of the cities, erect fences, become part of the mass, faceless crowd and remit responsibility for its outliers. Little do we realize that in losing self we gain freedom.

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In protecting self, we look obliquely at the beggar in the subway and drop a nickel into his Styrofoam cup without making eye contact. We erect linguistic barriers to create and reinforce distance. Homeless becomes “hobo,” unemployed becomes “bum.” The city has “bag ladies” and “dead-beats” and “trash-pirates” and “bridge campers”—verbal justifications for our indifference. We say “God-Bless” because it simplifies the moral and emotional contradictions of the moment and because we can’t be moved enough to introduce ourselves. Our consciences remain free of guilt, free of burdens and free of responsibilities if the other remains to us fossilized in a nameless, faceless, “I-It” relationship.

These unspoken rules are sometimes broken, but rarely, if ever, are they shattered. These rules permit us to navigate through our daily commutes and our weekend walks by keeping our relationships with socio-economic others sparingly functional. Our self-build fortifications protect our sense of self, and we rarely peer across the walls. But by doing so, we neglect and perhaps deny one essential fact: that a hand holds up that Styrofoam cup. That beyond defensive justifications, fear and apathy there is a *human being*.

Breaking down—or better yet—shattering these walls takes an earthquake, or, in my case, a hurricane.

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Super Storm Sandy barreled down on New York City with unexpected force and fury at the beginning of midterms week. I watched from my rooftop as the storm blew out transformers throughout the city, bouncing purple, green and yellow light off the low-

lying clouds. I wondered if I should go back to studying the Spanish Inquisition or continue to monitor the storm online, until the Internet sputtered and died. I wanted to help with storm relief but was powerless to do so. I grew restless.

By Wednesday, professors returned to their lectures, and students return to the libraries. My neighborhood, Washington Heights, was spared, save for a few trees. The talk of the campus, however, was the devastation in Long Island, New Jersey and Manhattan: power loss, flooding and fire. My Facebook feed was awash with personal pictures of the storm: houses washed away in Far Rockaway, flooding downtown, the national guard patrolling the streets against looters in front of another friend's house. Pictures of flooded synagogues and waterlogged Torah scrolls filled the local Jewish newspaper. With no way to travel to heavily damaged places to help, existential cabin fever set in.

On Thursday, friends displaced from the storm came over for dinner. As is customary after storms, we trafficked hurricane stories. At the end of dinner, a text came through to our phones. "Volunteers needed at 192<sup>nd</sup> and Audubon. George Washington High School is now evac shelter. Need Help ASAP." We finished washing the dishes and then walked the ten blocks to the high school, uncertain of what we would find. From a distance, we could see buses in front of the school. As we walked closer, it became apparent that a massive intake effort was underway. Women and children streamed out of the buses as men hauled trash bags off the back seats and out the back door. A line formed of evacuees waiting to enter the shelter, some carrying nothing but two black plastic bags.

We lined up behind other volunteers waiting to sign in, and watched as police officers x-rayed every bag that the evacuees brought into the shelter. After logging in, writing nametags and sticking them to orange volunteer vests, we received a quick orientation by a red-eyed middle-aged Gil, the shelter manager. “Welcome to chaos,” he said. “Don’t come close,” he warned. “I haven’t showered in a few days.” Since Washington Heights was spared, New York City’s Office of Emergency Management decided to send hundreds of evacuees to George Washington High School. Paper signs reading “MEDICAL” and “SOCIAL” covered the classroom doors. “Thank God you guys came here when you did,” Gil said with a smile, “otherwise, I don’t know what the heck we would do.”

I nervously asked a man where he came from, not wanting to remind him of any destruction. I received a look of indignation and exhaustion. “I’m coming from another shelter,” he told me. I would later learn that almost three-quarters of the evacuation center’s evacuees came from homeless shelters that were flooded, dark and dangerous. Others were evacuated from low-lying areas while a few were actually rescued from rising floodwaters.

The scene in the men’s gym that I was supervising was dreamlike and dreadful: an overwhelming mass of humanity, a horde of the homeless and despondent. Some men lay down. Others paced between the rows. Still others sat at the edge of their cots, rubbing the backs of their heads. One man opened his only suitcase, and I saw the totality of its contents: books. He pulled out *American Foreign Policy: Three Essays* by Henry Kissinger and began to read.

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“We human beings are uneasy about what truly occurs deep inside the Other,” David Grossman wrote in “The Desire to be Gisella” in *Writing in the Dark*.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as I watched a rabbinical student move from cot to cot, listening and comforting the evacuees, nodding in kind sincerity, I felt an internal sense of unease. Again, I recalled Grossman; “Perhaps it is more than unease; perhaps it is an actual fear of the mysterious, nonverbal, unprocessed core, that which cannot be subjected to any social tampering, to any refinement, politeness or tact.” What was it that prevented me from approaching the evacuees, from introducing myself—*from listening?*

I left that night promising myself that I would return to investigate why I could not be moved to talk with evacuees; why I had busied myself with logistical duties late into the night but shied way from any interpersonal encounter.

I returned to the shelter the next day right after class. The high school’s imposing gates, long, wide hallways and tall windows, its echoing gym and its small classrooms seemed familiar. I recognized the faces of the evacuees, city employees and school security guards. I took round after round of volunteers and assigned them to various responsibilities: donations, hallway patrol, social services. I had students from my university play with the kids, chaplains provide comfort to the mothers and one volunteer compete with a chess-playing refugee (the volunteer was easily beaten). Before I knew what was happening, I was promoted to a “yellow vest,” which meant that volunteers and

evacuees peppered me with questions, complications and requests. Five problem-solving, people-organizing hours later, Mike, the school's imposing engineer, looked at the clock and asked me if I had to leave. *Had to leave?* I looked at my watch and realized that the Sabbath was arriving in less than ten minutes. "Go dude! We got this. But you better come back," he told me.

As I sunk into the familiar tunes of *Kabbalat Shabbat* services my mind wandered. As I reflected on the events of the day, I realized I had fallen into the same trap. I had avoided the other by busying myself with important but nonetheless impersonal tasks. As I chastised myself for again failing my goal, I realized that the more I learned about the evacuees, the harder it would be for me to move from I-It interactions to I-Thou relationships. I was conscious of the invisible and visible barriers between the two hundred evacuees and myself. We were separated in language and dress, in economic and in educational opportunity. As a product of religious Jewish home and day school system, now a university student, I was as much an other to them as they were an others to me. Some evacuees had gang tattoos. Some spoke no English. I couldn't fault myself for building fortifications around my sense of self; I was scared of the distance between us.

Later that evening, newly arrived AmeriCorps volunteers from Missouri patrolled the halls and a new night operator had reported for duty. By 10:30, I arranged for the janitors to turn off the rows of halogen lights hanging in the gym. I had blankets distributed to newly arrived evacuees and welcomed the graveyard shift volunteers. At midnight, a homeless evacuee from Lower Manhattan signed back into the shelter. He staggered into the gym. He began muttering profanities and hissing lewd comments to

female volunteers. He was clearly drunk or high. I gave him a stern warning and inconspicuously removed the two women from the room. After a ten-minute hiatus, he continued, louder and ruder than before. I called in the night operator and the school's police officer. Again: warning, hiatus and persistence. At one o'clock, a meeting was called in the makeshift volunteer center. *What should we do?* We knew we couldn't throw him out, as many homeless shelters do, but we couldn't let him stay.

We debated back and forth. This man was disturbing the entire gym. *Why not put him in a separate classroom?* We don't want him destroying some teacher's classroom. *Why don't we put him in the hall?* We don't have the volunteers to watch him. *Why don't we move him to the corner of the gym?* It won't help. Thankfully, we never had to make the difficult decision. While we were absorbed in debate, a volunteer flagged over the school police officer who made the ultimate call. A tactical police team geared-up and took the shouting, spitting man to the local precinct.

We shared nothing, this man and myself. He epitomized total otherness. He was a stranger and everything about him was strange to me. I had been exposed to the core, or what I thought was the core of an individual. I saw raw, animalistic, unrefined, and unrepentant behavior. I was shaken up. "Perhaps," writes Grossman, "the fear of the hell that exists in others is the reason that the paper-thin layer of skin that envelops us and separates us from others is sometimes as impervious as any fortified wall or barrier."<sup>5</sup>

I descended into oversimplifications, into difference and stereotypes, into "I" and "them." I became conscience of conflating the few with the many and of failing to see the same inside the other. Suddenly, I felt an intense desire to rebel against the "rules of

the city” that dictated detachment and presented protection; I wanted to bridge the void, rid myself of unnecessary protection. I wanted *to know the other*.

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“A calling into question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoistic spontaneity of the same—is brought about by the Other,” writes Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*.<sup>6</sup> Establishing a relationship the other opens up the possibility of going beyond the self. Unfortunately, Levinas forgot to include a point-by-point plan to guide me in confronting and dismantling layers of conditioned resistance. I was on my own.

New AmeriCorps volunteers, fresh off the plane from the Hoopa Native American Tribe in California, joined me for another day in another universe. I turned into the men’s gym and walked down the lanes of cots, looking for someone who looked receptive but not preoccupied, someone who would challenge my sense of self. Suddenly, from the back of the room I heard “*Hey Yid!*” I froze. Had this really happened? Here I was trying to breakdown stereotypes and generalizations after an incident of crudeness and *this* is what I hear? I turned around. “*Vhas z’nt ‘yr tan da oyf Shabbos?*” he continued. I was flabbergasted. Among the myriad of people who came to the shelter, in front of me stood a fellow Jew admonishing me—in *Yiddish*—for coming here on the holy day of Shabbat.

I admitted to him that I did, in fact, sleep through synagogue services after leaving the shelter at daybreak. He looked at me disappointed. Abu, as it turned out, was an unaffiliated Russian Jew. From what I could tell, he was homeless, and, from what I could

smell, he was an alcoholic. I sat with him. He asked me where I studied and if I studied with other Jews. It was a short conversation. He was not interested in a long heart-to-heart. He asked me for some water, but I knew deep down that he really just wanted to tell me that he was Jewish and that we shared a connection, however tenuous. Our shared past opened the door for a face-to-face encounter.

On Sunday morning, Abu was gone. He had gone to the local library to access books and never returned. Perhaps in the cosmic scheme of things he was sent to begin breaking me down. I'll never know. But there was no time to dwell on his absence; cars were pulling up with bags and bags of canned goods, winter coats, hundreds of water bottles (bought in the panic before the storm), and blankets. Volunteers were signing in faster than I could place them.

A social worker reported to me that 65 evacuees came from the same homeless shelter, in the Two Bridges area of Lower Manhattan. Department of Homeless services were notified, and soon, two yellow school buses pulled alongside the entrance of the school. I mobilized a team of twenty volunteers to move the evacuees' belongings and load them onto the bus. After checking and rechecking the lists, I gave the bus driver the nod. He turned on his engine, I waved, and they were gone.

On Sunday evening, fewer than fifty people were left in the shelter. The remaining women and men left early the next morning. The classroom turned playroom was broken down; hundreds of donated books were boxed, sorted and stored away. Cots were folded up, blankets were gathered, the medical office was disassembled, the family gym returned to its original state. With every boxed blanket and cot, I was mindful of dismantling the

chance of acting beyond my horizons, of confronting the strangeness that still murmured inside.

As I walked down the steps of the school, I realized again that I had fallen short of my aspiration. A few curt conversations, a few memorized names and some anecdotes were all the memories that remained of the families that came and left. The day manager of the shelter urged me to stay home and study for my now rescheduled midterms. I returned to reading the testimonies of the Spanish Inquisition, Edgar Allan Poe's short stories and the complex laws of Talmud tractate *Sukkoth*.

A phone call woke me up on Election Day. The Office of Emergency Management was shutting down three evacuation centers in the city and moving evacuees to George Washington high school. The shelter had reopened.

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In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes, "The presence of the Other, a privileged heteronomy, does not clash with freedom but invests it."<sup>7</sup> Far from limiting autonomy, the other "calls it to responsibility and founds it."<sup>8</sup> Levinas inverts the notion that society so often reinforces: that a being that is "absolutely other"<sup>9</sup> detracts from the self. Indeed, a being that is "absolutely Other," argues Levinas, frees a person to become a boundless, redeemed being as he or she is no longer weighted down by simplifications, prejudice and intolerance. Levinas argues that the first step in "inviting" this justice is deconditioning the "atheism of the I," the egotistical "know thyself," the modern cult of self. The self,

challenged by a “face to face” encounter, gains access to a transcendent world, or as Levinas says, *infinity*.

Evacuees had arrived late the night before from the recently shutdown Graphics High School shelter in Hell’s Kitchen. Mike the engineer informed us that more evacuees would be coming later that morning. I relieved the night shift manager who looked exhausted after a long night of reestablishing the shelter’s basic facilities. The Office of Emergency Management of New York informed us that by day’s end, we would host over one hundred people. More had to be done—this time with no volunteers, as many returned to work and school. Cots had to be set up, the medical office had to be organized, volunteers had to be recruited.

By the end of the day, the shelter was once again full. I ran across the street to vote as snow began to fall from the Nor’easter moving in. Standing in line, I realized that I would not be able to step out of my own skin. There was too much difference, too much standing in the way. Denying or ignoring difference would be meaningless and untrue. Indeed, Franz Rosenzweig in *The Star of Redemption* probes the command “do unto your neighbor as you would like done unto you.” “Your neighbor is *like* you,” Rosenzweig writes, like you, but “not you;” “He is like you” precisely because he (or she) is not you. “Man must not deny himself.”<sup>10</sup> Rosenzweig was right. If I wanted to recognize the other, the other would have to recognize me.

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Welcoming the other into the protected realm of self, Levinas argues, requires “simultaneity of activity and passivity which places the relation with the other outside of the dichotomies valid for things;”<sup>11</sup> In other words, a relationship. Martin Buber similarly contended that for interactions to move from “I-It” objectifications to “I-Thou” kinship, a process of “confirmation” must occur. Confirmation involves relation: events experienced collectively, shared substantive dialogue, nonverbal confirmation of a common feeling, even “shared silence.”<sup>12</sup> In its essence, confirmation involves assenting to the totality of the other through meeting, bonding and recognizing the other as a subject capable of freedom.

This time I learned the names of evacuees: Julio, Juan, Jasen. Dana, Gabrielle, Sandra. I then moved to uncover their disaster stories. What I heard was heartbreaking. Tim was forcibly evacuated from his home and had only seconds to grab what he could before the National Guard forced him out. He came to the shelter with little more than the clothes on his back. Juan was so terrified to reveal his medical condition to staffers in another shelter (lest they kick him out) that he suffered crippling pain. Dana was still waiting to hear from her boyfriend, continuously checking and rechecking her phone for messages. I was uneasy at first in my “nonverbal, unprocessed core,” to borrow again from Grossman. But as I began to disentangle the distance, I felt the first of what Buber calls “confirmation.”

I spent time learning about Julio, who went to PS 124, liked basketball and wanted to move into a more permanent apartment with his mother (he proceeded to crushed me in multiple games of basketball). I learned that Devon barely went to school but wanted

her children to return as soon as they could, and she was therefore hoping to return to her shelter as soon as it opened. They asked me about the *kippa* on my head, about being Jewish and about studying in university. At 11 that night, the election was called for President Barack Obama. The gym erupted in cheering. We celebrated together.

With a little prodding and time together, evacuees opened up about their most personal dreams. Paula spoke of the difficulty of being homeless. “Survival” she said in a raspy voice, “all day, every day.” Reno just wanted to go back to school to do “better coloring.” Karah, Melcia and Grace, a troublesome trio of pre-teenage girls wanted “control” of their lives again. Not all conversations were confessional and one woman denounced my attempts. “What do you know of the life we lead?” she demanded. “You’re some Jewish white boy. You know nothing about living in the ghetto.” She closed that opportunity, but some doors I had to close myself. When a cocaine-addict prostitute asked to be admitted into the shelter, I couldn’t let her in.

By the end of the week, there were moments of mutual understanding. On Thursday, everyone wished me luck on my mid-term, my “big test.” On Friday, Joelle hugged me and showed me a letter she received from a judge ordering the city to provide her with an affordable two-bedroom apartment. “It’s all good from here,” she said.

On Friday night, my mind wandered again as I sang the songs of *Kabbalat Shabbat*. “Such is the definition of freedom,” Levinas writes, “to maintain oneself against the other, despite every relation with the other to ensure the autarchy of an I.”<sup>13</sup> The forces of autarchy were indeed present throughout the week. I was a volunteer, a college student, and a white man. But by relating to as many evacuees by name, by learning as many of

their stories as I could, by sharing my anxieties and my dreams to those I spent time with, I felt the “I-it” conventions dissolve into “I-Thou” relationships. A confirmation happened. I did not become, in the words of Levinas, “their hostage.” I did not lose sense of self. We recognized differences. We welcomed those differences.

The shelter closed the next day. I led the last family to a mini-bus bound for temporary housing in the Bronx in the afternoon. After hauling their belongings into the back of the bus, I high-fived Natalie and wished Juana good-luck. Their faces radiated joy. I confirmed the address to the bus driver and gave him the nod. He turned on the engine, I waved goodbye, and Natalie, Juana and little Mika were gone.

And then I walked back into another life.

*1Due to Office of Emergency Management Guidelines, the identities of individuals mentioned in this essay were masked, but nevertheless reflect, as accurately as possible, the life-story of those individuals.*

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise than Being: Or, Beyond Essence*. Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1981. P. 127-128.

2 Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity; an Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969. 303-4.

3 Grossman, David. *Writing in the Dark*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008. 31

4 Grossman, 35.

5 *Ibid*, 31.

6 Levinas (1969), 42.

7 *Ibid*, 81.

8 *Ibid*, 201.

9 *Ibid*, 101.

10 Rosenzweig, Franz. *The Star of Redemption*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971. 257.

11 Levinas (1969), 89.

12 Buber, Martin, and Ronald Gregor. Smith. *Between Man and Man*. New York: Macmillan, 1965. 96-98, 21.

13 Levinas (1969), 46.