

OTHERWISE THAN MEANING

On the Generosity of Ritual

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Abstract

The thought experiment ‘ritual in its own right’ implies a suspension of dominant interpretive paradigms in anthropological research. This essay begins by juxtaposing the foundational accounts of Weber and Geertz—both of whom associate ritual with the quest for meaning in suffering—with the phenomenological account of Emmanuel Levinas, who argues that suffering is inherently “useless” and therefore resistant to meaning’s claim. All three theorists are then juxtaposed with the Warsaw ghetto writings of a twentieth-century Jewish mystic, Kalonymos Shapira, whose work exemplifies the tension between meaningful and useless suffering in a real social setting. Shapira’s work bears comparison with Levinas’s, and lends support to the idea that our preoccupation with meaning may stem from a particular religious genealogy of social theory. Ritual can be analyzed as a ground of intersubjectivity or transcendence rather than meaning, which makes it more akin to medicine, in Levinas’s terms, than to theodicy.

Key words: Alterity, experience, Geertz, Hasidism, Judaism, Levinas, medical anthropology, ritual theory, Shapira, suffering, Weber

As a hermeneutic enterprise, cultural anthropology tends to assume that ordered and coherent meaning is *the* primary desideratum of social life. Ritual practice plays a primarily supportive role whenever meaning has been threatened or called into question by pain or by circumstance. In this view, ritual generates meaning. Yet without denying that ritual practice can sometimes be shown to aid in the shoring up of culture’s regime, we are entitled to ask if this is all that ritual ever does. Is not theodicy, which in its broadest sense means the production of ordered meaning in response to catastrophe, only one prism through which the relationship between ritual and suffering may be viewed?

Treating ritual 'in its own right' means recognizing the traces of theodicy in our very bias for *interpretation* at the expense of other kinds of engagement with ritual phenomena, which might include a greater attention to lived experience, the phenomenology of suffering, and ethics. What happens when the account of suffering upon which classical ritual theory depends unravels? Emmanuel Levinas has articulated a critique of theodicy to which ritual theorists should pay attention.

Theodicy and Ritual

"[T]he least one can say about suffering," writes Levinas, "is that in its own phenomenality, intrinsically, it is useless, 'for nothing.'" The *uselessness* of suffering that Levinas (1988, 157) articulates is an argument about the phenomenology of pain, especially extreme pain, which, just because it is both world and consciousness destroying (cf. Scarry 1985), must remain irreducibly present to human consciousness. "Suffering is surely a given in consciousness, a certain 'psychological content,' like the lived experience of colour, of sound, of contact, or like any sensation. But in this 'content' itself, it is in-spite-of-consciousness, unassumable" (Levinas 1988, 156). This means that pain is characterized by a paradoxically dual nature: it is both irreducibly present to the consciousness of the sufferer—transfixing attention, demanding notice—and yet implacably resistant to consciousness as such. Anthropologists who have attended to the cultural elaboration of chronic and acute pain in the lives of sufferers have only begun to chart the limits of culture's ability to domesticate and convey this register of human experience (Good et al. 1994; Kleinman 1988). Indeed, it is the way in which suffering *exceeds* culture that makes the anthropology of suffering (in a discipline devoted to cultural interpretation) so problematic. The uselessness (one might also say meaninglessness) of suffering lies precisely in its tendency to exceed culture's grasp (see Cohen 1999).

The relevance of this uselessness to the study of ritual is immediate, but not necessarily apparent. It is immediate because ritual and theodicy (the attempt to make sense of suffering) have long been linked by the social sciences. Yet it is easily overlooked because these relations are by now so deeply ingrained in the local knowledge that constitutes anthropological theory as to be rendered nearly invisible to analysis. It is no accident, for example, that Clifford Geertz devotes a good part of his essay "Religion as a Cultural System" to the problem of suffering, which leads him almost immediately into a discussion of ritual practice. The "problem of suffering from a religious point of view," asserts Geertz, is not how to *end* suffering but only "how to suffer," and ritual practice is intrinsic to this dilemma. Religion as a cultural system is inevitably identified with theodicy for Geertz, since it aims to make "physical pain, personal loss ... or the helpless contemplation of others' agony something bearable, supportable—something, as we say, sufferable" (Geertz 1973, 104), and to do so through ritual. Rituals "somehow generate" a degree of correspondence between the world as lived

and the world as imagined that is sufficient to sustain the “long lasting moods and motivations” that define religious life (112). If this model of religion can at all accommodate the occurrence of suffering that is in some sense useless, it is only when suffering is viewed as a foil to which religion allegedly responds.

Geertz must certainly be aware of the extent to which he has gerrymandered religious experience and practice by defining the problem of suffering, in purely hermeneutic terms, as the drive to interpret pain or anguish in light of accepted cultural or religious values that render them more bearable. Ritual healing, religio-political activity of many kinds, and ‘good works’ in their broadest sense would all be at least partially excluded by ‘religion as a cultural system,’ since their goal is not just to make sense of suffering or to render it sufferable but to take arms against a sea of troubles. The question of ritual efficacy has been insufficiently studied in medical anthropology, but it would clearly be reductive to imply that ritual healers and those who visit them seek *only* meaning from this practice and not—as they often and vociferously claim—the alleviation of some real pain or sickness (Kleinman and Seeman 1998). The fact that Geertz can even imply this is due in no small measure to his reliance on Max Weber (“I believe with Max Weber,” he writes [Geertz 1973, 5] “that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun”), and so it is to Weber that we must shortly turn. Certainly, the hard distinction between ritual practice and activity devoted to pragmatic concerns (such as ending suffering) goes back to the linear progression Weber posits between elementary, “magical” forms of ritual practice, oriented to the fulfillment of pragmatic human interests (Weber 1991, 1–2), and the more inner-oriented concerns of developed “salvation religions” with which he is primarily concerned.

Salvation is a central analytic rather than just a descriptive category in Weber’s *The Sociology of Religion*, because Weber identifies salvation with the quest for “systematic and coherent meaning” in the world and for forms of practice that promote such coherence. “To this meaning the conduct of mankind must be oriented if it is to bring salvation,” he writes, “for only in relation to this meaning does life obtain a unified and significant pattern” (Weber 1991, 59). Religious communities may witness the occasional reversion to magical concerns that are associated with saints’ cults and other pragmatically oriented attempts to commandeer blessing, but these are not strictly religious phenomena in Weber’s view, because they deal too directly with the fulfillment of quotidian human needs. Weber’s account differs in some significant ways from Geertz’s later appropriation, but both are agreed that properly religious problems are meaning-oriented, and that the problem of suffering is therefore crucial to religion’s constitution. For Geertz, as Segal (1999, 70) has perceptively argued, the problem of suffering “comes less from the failure of belief—the failure to explain, make bearable or justify experience—than from the failure of practice—the failure to prescribe behavior” or to “harmonise belief with practice.” For Weber, by contrast, “the prime threat to meaning comes not from any hiatus between belief and practice but from a failure wholly within belief: the failure to justify suffering” (ibid.).

This is the context in which Weber most forcefully articulates his own view of ritual practice as it relates to theodicy as an intellectual problem, distinct from the practical ambitions of ritual healing or manipulation of the inhabited cosmos. “The conflict between empirical reality and this conception of the world as a meaningful totality produces the strongest tensions in man’s inner life,” he writes, “as well as in his external relationship to the world” (Weber 1991, 59). Whereas Geertz goes on to argue that ritual helps to generate meaning through embodied symbol systems, Weber treats ritual as a *sign* (in the distinctive Christian sense) of a believer’s inner reality. Weber’s commentators have rarely noted, for example, that the ritual virtuosity of *The Sociology of Religion* is exactly parallel to the capitalist virtuosity of *The Protestant Ethic*. Ritual activity in the *Sociology* and economic activity in the *Ethic* are each portrayed as a religiously authenticated and generative mode of practice designed to answer the problem of suffering in an apparently disordered or amoral world. And they each succeed at this task precisely because they each function as a sign of inner reality to which no other access is given.

Remember that in Weber’s *Ethic*, Calvinist entrepreneurs maximized the production of wealth not primarily for its economic or exchange value (“this-worldly asceticism” would prevent their enjoyment of such wealth in merely hedonistic terms) but rather as a sign of divine election vouchsafed to the pre-ordained. Similarly, the ritual virtuoso in Weber’s sociology of religion seeks confirmation of the attainment of “grace” or “salvation,” according to some particular religious (we would probably say cultural) conception:

Out of the unlimited variety of subjective conditions which may be engendered by methodical [e.g., ritual] procedures of sanctification, certain of them may finally emerge as of central importance, not only because they represent psychophysical states of extraordinary quality, but also because they appear to provide a secure and continuous possession of the distinctive religious acquirement. That is the assurance of grace (*certitudo salutis, perseverantia gratia*). This certainly may be characterized by a more mystical or by a more actively ethical coloration ... But in either case it constitutes the conscious possession of a lasting, integrated foundation for the conduct of life. (Weber 1991, 161)

“Demonstration of the certainty of grace” can take a variety of different forms, according to Weber, “depending on the concept of salvation in the particular religion” (1991, 164). It can even take the form of ethical activity, but its focus in that case remains the certification of the ethical virtuoso and *not* the worldly effects of ethical activity, let alone the fate of the other person towards whom ethical activity may be directed. Ritual practice is efficacious for Weber to the extent that it contributes to an ordered worldview in which the “certified” can know (and, just as importantly, show) who they really are. This is ritual as handmaiden to theodicy or “religion as theodicy” in one helpful gloss (Morris 1987, emphasis added). And this is precisely where Levinas’s phenomenology of pain opens a crucial but difficult intervention.

Levinas never directly engaged the writings of social scientists such as Weber or Geertz, but he did critique the self-involved focus of traditional theodicy on what he dismissively labels “my own adventure in suffering” (Levinas 1988). It would be easy to mistake this for a merely ethical or hortatory pronouncement, but it is also crucial to recognize that this is a distillation of Levinas’s strong phenomenological claim about the uselessness of suffering, which resists theodicy (read ‘culture’) in precisely the same way that pain resists human consciousness, and which imposes hard limits on our ability to “make suffering sufferable” in Geertz’s terms. Although Levinas links this realization to the historical experience of the Holocaust and to “the destruction of all balance between the explicit and implicit theodicy of Western thought and the forms which suffering and its evil take in the very unfolding of this century” (1988, 161), he is also adamant that theodicy and its secular offshoots have *always* been problematic because of their fundamental commitment to the meaningfulness of suffering. “Suffering,” he insists, “is, in its own phenomenality, intrinsically ... useless.” For all his concern with localized meaning and significance, Weber never directs his sociological *Verstehen* to this “useless” dimension of human experience—we might even refer to it as ‘anti-experience,’ given its irreducibility to norms of interiority, richness, and immediacy that we normally associate with experience (cf. Desjarlais 1994)—except to the extent that he believes it is susceptible of being overcome.

Otherwise Than Meaning

Levinas had interlocutors other than Max Weber in mind when he attacked the regime of meaning in Western thought. He wrote most directly in resistance to his one-time teacher Martin Heidegger, who had, in Levinas’s view, privileged ontology over ethics (see Davies 1998), thereby subordinating concern for the other with concern for the self. Another way of saying this might be that Heidegger’s phenomenology privileged the anxiety that one feels over a potential loss of being above the anxiety that one feels over the potential denial of being to one’s fellows, a position that was manifest in Heidegger’s unrepentant complicity in the politics of the Third Reich (Steiner 1991). Without venturing too far into the contentious debate surrounding Heidegger, however, my argument is simply that Levinas’s essay on useless suffering works to establish an analogy between ontology (the question of being) and theodicy (the justification of being) that has implications for our study of ritual practice. If ritual is conceived as a handmaiden to theodicy, as it is in Weber and Geertz, then we are entitled to ask whether the fixation on theodicy in the social sciences has had the same masking effect as the fixation on ontology has had in the rest of Western thought. Or to put the question more succinctly, has our focus on ritual-as-theodicy (i.e., justification of culture) blinded us to aspects of ritual that are more closely associated with the upwelling of uselessness in the phenomenology of pain?

Metaphysical and frankly theological concerns have never been far from the surface in social scientific talk about ritual. "The ultimate question of all metaphysics," writes Weber (1991, 59), "has always been something like this: if the world as a whole and life in particular were to have a meaning, what might it be, and how would the world look in order to correspond to it?" Suffering provokes an investigation of how the world must look in order to be meaningful and a quest for the specific type of ritual virtuosity that can confirm the meaning that is inevitably discovered. One corollary of this approach is that Weber's theodicy of certified grace tends, like his Calvinist capitalism, to justify success more than it tends to comfort failure. The perspective adopted is invariably that of the observer, and this is true of Geertz as well, to the extent that he confronts "the problem of suffering from a religious point of view," which is only hermeneutic. Geertz's argument is that culture justifies itself through ritual, and this leads him, like Weber, to begin his analyses of ritual from the subject position of culture and its defenders, rather than the viewpoint of those who suffer or who embody the meaninglessness of pain (cf. Das 1994). This is not, of course, a critique of the personal empathy that may or may not be exhibited by individual social scientists, but of the costs that certain modes of theorizing exact when their premises go unexamined. The essential thing for the *interpreter* is not that this or that individual find suffering "sufferable," as Geertz says, but that the cultural system itself resist collapse under the weight of accumulated grief. This is one of the most crucial and largely unremarked distinctions between hermeneutic (meaning-oriented) and phenomenological (experience-oriented) approaches in anthropological research, and it bears directly on the way we should view the relationship between ritual and suffering as we proceed.

To the extent that ritual is perceived through the eyes of culture, it cannot help but be seen as a machine for the generation of meaning, but this begs the question of suffering's uselessness, which can never be domesticated in this way. The phenomenological view is incisive here, because the sheer bearability of pain or of loss as such is never presumed:

Taken as an 'experienced' content, the denial and refusal of meaning which is imposed as a sensible quality is the way in which the unbearable is precisely not borne by consciousness, the way this not-being-borne is, paradoxically, itself a sensation or a given. This is a quasi-contradictory structure, but a contradiction which is not formal like that of the dialectical tension between the affirmative and the negative which arises for the intellect; it is a contradiction by way of sensation: the plaintiveness of pain, hurt [*mal*]. (Levinas 1988, 156-157)

"There are for Levinas certain experiences," glosses Wyschogrod (2000, 56), "that contain more than consciousness can hold at any given moment." These include the "metaphysically rich experiences of the infinite, of transcendence," and, we should certainly add, of pain. This recognition is of both descriptive and ethical significance for anthropology: descriptive because this is one of the reasons that culture only *shapes* but never determines the quality of lived

experience; ethical because the limit of culturally imposed meaning calls attention to what is really and uniquely at stake in that which people in different social contexts undergo (Kleinman and Kleinman 1991).

Levinas's critique of Heidegger includes the charge that unbounded preoccupation with the problem of being leads to suppression of concern for the alterity of separate beings. Against Heidegger's anxiety towards death, for example, Levinas asserts the fear of insomnia, which is an icon for unlimited self-referentiality and self-concern, for the absence of the boundaries or limits that make space for an other presence (Levinas 1985, 48). Theodicy is therefore only a particular instantiation, for Levinas, of a much larger dilemma concerning the typical preference in Western thought for the general over the particular, for existence over existents. One of the problems with theodicy is that on some level it suppresses the radical *alterity* of pain in a way that is analogous to the suppression of alterity in other people. The thrust of Levinas's argument is not to affirm pain as something positive, the way certain religious traditions do, but, on the contrary, to allow the reality of pain to force analytic attention away from the general and towards the irreducible quality of the particular. This is, ironically, a task for which ethnographic research is infinitely better suited than Levinas's own philosophical paradigm, but it requires a willingness to break with purely interpretive anthropology, which cannot help but do away too easily with the radical *otherness* of pain.

It may appear an unnecessary burden to invoke Levinas on the uselessness of suffering when so many other important critiques of the interpretive model in anthropology have already been elaborated closer to home. Practice-oriented theorists such as Bourdieu (1977) have called social science to account for confusing the ostensible 'rules of the game' (i.e., culture) with the 'game' (i.e., social praxis) itself, and for denigrating the strategic, performative aspects of *habitus*. *Habitus* itself evokes Mauss's (1979) early attempt to emphasize the lived and nonrepresentational aspects of bodily experience and practice that ritual activities presuppose, and Talal Asad (1993) has deployed Mauss in his own sustained critique of interpretive approaches that adopt the Reformationist bias of ritual as a "symbolic" activity that requires exegesis. Levinas would likely agree with Asad and others that anthropological analysis of ritual has tended too much towards the cognitive and logocentric range of human experience. But my invocation of Levinas in this context is meant to call attention to another feature of this problem that has not yet been sufficiently appreciated within anthropology—the important and distinctive role of alterity in defining the horizon of human experience.

Wyschogrod (2000, 62) argues that part of Levinas's overall project is to show that "there is a relation to being such that it bypasses the cognitive scheme of reducing alterity to the same through representing alterity." I cite this bulky formulation here because "reducing alterity to the same through representing alterity" is an equally fine gloss for the work of culture described in "Religion as a Cultural System." For Geertz, ritual helps to domesticate suffering by deploying sets of symbols that encode the context of suffering as

“really real,” thus counteracting the explosive strangeness of suffering. And while Asad and others have critiqued the hermeneutic assumptions behind Geertz’s model—in particular, the assumption that ritual efficacy always depends upon the articulation of meaningful cognitive symbols—this critique contains pitfalls of its own. The direct appeal to an experiencing body or to the hegemony of powerful social and religious institutions is potentially just as reductive as the argument from culture, in that it too threatens to close off the experiencing self from the recognition of alterity that transcends self-reference. The experience of pain as other—irreducible and undeniable—is worth reflection, according to Levinas, because it relates by analogy to the confrontation with human others who are similarly irreducible and undeniable, and whose presence similarly constitutes a demand for response that cannot be interpreted away.

In fact, this is something more than an analogy for Levinas. His phenomenological claim—which is also an ethical claim—is that my first response to the encounter with pain in another person is not grounded, as Geertz assumes, in the production of meaning, but in the “medical gesture,” which answers pain with a promise of help (Levinas 1988). The medical gesture is primordial to human experience—and Levinas here explicitly rejects the reduction of all healing to the will for power—and stands in some sense at the root of culture and language. Yet it is ‘otherwise than meaning’ in the sense that it cannot be reduced to meaningfulness or the quest for meaningfulness with which anthropology remains preoccupied. Instead, it is goal oriented, pragmatic, and possibly even “magical” in Weber’s terms, in a way that renders it effectively invisible to the paradigm of cultural interpretation.

Note that for Geertz, culture and religion are essentially fungible terms that sometimes incorporate ritual as well. “The problem of suffering from a religious [but one may also read “cultural” or “ritual”] point of view,” Geertz tells us, “is not how to end suffering, but [only] how to make suffering ... sufferable.” And this means that ritual and medicine are essentially opposed. To the extent that theodicy declines, so too should ritual practice decline as theodicy’s handmaiden. Yet while rejecting theodicy in an uncompromising and perhaps overblown way, Levinas nevertheless defends the honor of ritual practice in his many confessional essays, including some, like “Useless Suffering,” that cross confessional and phenomenological lines. While I have shown that Levinas’s phenomenology of suffering can be leveraged into a critique of the cultural paradigm of ritual analysis, it remains to be seen whether a view of ritual that is otherwise than meaning can be grounded in the intractable uselessness of pain.

Useless Suffering and the Disenchantment of Ritual

‘Ritual in its own right’ has been presented by the editors of this volume as an experiment in thought, and that is the spirit in which I have pursued this critique

of meaning-oriented approaches to ritual analysis. Establishing the genealogical affinity between ritual theory and theodicy is an important first step, because it demonstrates that many of our assumptions about the meaning of ritual are, for all their performative secularism, deeply rooted in particular kinds of theological constructs. One of the reasons that Levinas's phenomenology of pain is so congenial to this project is that Levinas also hints at a different phenomenology of ritual practice, one that is better aligned with healing and the medical than it is with theodicy. I will argue that this view is not original to Levinas, but that he was probably the first to haltingly articulate it in theoretical terms, and that his view has its roots in a different set of intellectual and religious genealogies than do those of Weber and Geertz. This is an argument that necessarily exceeds the scope of this short essay, but I hope at least to begin a conversation here by juxtaposing Levinas (and thus also Weber and Geertz) with a twentieth-century ritual virtuoso named Kalonymos Shapira, whose Holocaust writings exemplify the relationship between ritual and uselessness in an extreme social setting. Although they are not ethnographic in nature, I believe that these texts may help to point us towards features of human experience that have not yet gained the ethnographic attention they deserve.

Kalonymos Shapira (1889–1943) and Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) were contemporaries who traveled in exceedingly different social and intellectual circles. Shapira was heir to a prominent rabbinical dynasty whose roots go back to the very beginning of the Hasidic movement in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe. He exercised authority as a teacher and communal leader throughout his adult life, and wrote extensive Hebrew-language commentaries and mystical tracts, including a volume of sermons composed each week in the Warsaw Ghetto before his deportation and murder in 1943. By contrast, Levinas derived from a decidedly nonmystical but observant Jewish family in Lithuania, the heart of Jewish rationalism. He attended university in Strasbourg, where he developed a lifelong friendship with Maurice Blanchot, and then went on to study with both Husserl and Heidegger. During World War II, he was imprisoned as a French officer, which paradoxically saved him from the fate suffered by the rest of his family, who were murdered as Jews in Lithuania. Yet despite these differences in background, training, and experience, Levinas's and Shapira's views of ritual resonate deeply with one another in the sense that both men sought to articulate an understanding of ritual that eschewed conventional theodicy and meaning-making.

Before the war, Rabbi Shapira had been head of the largest Talmudic academy for Hasidim in Warsaw. His prewar publications focused on spiritual pedagogy, especially on the discipline and training of the emotions as precursors to ecstatic prophecy (see Seeman n.d.). Hasidism had inherited a doctrine of divine emanation from earlier schools of Jewish mysticism, but focused this teaching with unique insistence on the anthropopathic correspondence of divine and human emotion, whose linkage was an important channel for the flow of divine vitality into the created world. Emotion was viewed as an intermediate category between thought and coarse matter, and so, too, between the

divine and human realms, and this made the ritual management and manipulation of emotional experience into a topic of central religious importance. One of the most important themes of Rabbi Shapira's prewar writings was, therefore, his attempt to pre-empt or to reverse the "drying" and damping of emotional experience among young students that he associated with processes of secularization and modernization among Polish Jewry. He sought to "arouse and enflame" the emotional lives of students, "to allow them to experience ... the sweetness of even a slight illumination of the supernal light" (Shapira 1990, 23), by which he glosses the programmatic induction of young students into Hasidic mysticism. The prophecy he sought for his students was not related to foretelling the future but to a state of anthropopathic intimacy with the divine. The prophet, as another Hasidic scholar, Abraham Joshua Heschel, explains, is a *homo sympathetikos*, "open to the presence and emotion of the transcendent Subject ... He carries within himself the awareness of what is happening to God" (Heschel 1962, 89).

This focus on emotionalism shifted radically for Rabbi Shapira with the invasion of Poland in 1939, followed by the sequestration, starvation, and eventual murder of hundreds of thousands of Jews in Warsaw. Instead of working to heighten and intensify emotional experience, he quickly found himself forced to work for the moderation of emotional extremity that could literally destroy the experiencing subject. During the first month of the German campaign in Warsaw, he lost almost his entire living family: his only son, his daughter-in-law, and his brother's wife, who had been visiting from Palestine, were all killed in the initial German raids. Already a widower, he now lost his mother as well, reportedly (according to contemporary newspaper accounts) "of a broken heart" (Polen 1989, 11–12). Not long after this, he begins to reflect on the collapse of subjectivity under increasingly unbearable Ghetto conditions:

Even now, when troubles multiply to such an extent that the beards of Jews have simply been shaved off [i.e., by edict of the authorities], leaving them unrecognizable on an external level, so too their interiority changes, leaving them unrecognizable from within. The person loses and cannot recognize himself—[Yiddish]: *ehr farlert sich*. He cannot feel the way he did a year ago on the Sabbath or on a weekday before the prayers, or during prayer itself. Now, he is trampled and crushed, until he cannot even feel whether he is a Jew or a human being, or whether he is an animal. He has no reality left to feel. He is lost. (Shapira 1960, 11)

Despite the traditional hopes for future redemption with which Shapira's sermon ultimately concludes, the tone is far from Geertz's "problem of suffering from a religious point of view," which is simply to make suffering, "as we say, sufferable." Described here and in essay after essay over the next two and a half years is an eruption of the literally insufferable, the failure of culture as well as of subjectivity to bear up under the onslaught of evil. This is portrayed not so much as a failure of meaning in our terms as it is a failure in the flow of divine vitality that was carried by emotional experience in the prewar writings.

The metaphor of flow and blockage would not have to have been made explicit frequently for it to be understood by the circle of the rabbi's immediate listeners, and a culturist account of the Ghetto sermons would no doubt seize upon this usage where it occurs to argue that the heart of the Ghetto writings is an attempt at cultural articulation or theodicy of the disaster. It would be foolish to assert that this kind of cultural articulation or theodicy plays no role at all in Rabbi Shapira's oeuvre. But I want to call attention to a different dimension of these writings that may too easily be missed because of the challenge they implicitly pose to our habitual hermeneutics of culture and pain. In the prewar writings, divine emanation and the emotional cosmology it encoded were part of an ordered and exceedingly complicated worldview, infusing everyday life and ritual with precisely the *ethos* of embodied symbolism that Geertz describes so well. In *that* world, one could even fashion a coherent theodicy, and although Rabbi Shapira is never as forceful as some of his contemporaries in this regard, it is clear from his prewar writings that reward, punishment, and the "certification of grace" are all legitimate elements of his coherent universe. Yet the Ghetto writings are striking because of the way they call attention again and again to the bankruptcy of traditional theodicy and to the collapse of articulate meaning, which paves the way for a different kind of ritual response.

An essay from 4 November 1939, early in the war, relates directly to the problem of meaninglessness occasioned by extreme social suffering and the nature of the religious response that it occasions:

The word *brit* (covenant) is juxtaposed in the Bible both with salt (Leviticus 2:13) and with suffering (Deuteronomy 28:69) ... Just as salt in proper measure preserves the meat, but in excess makes it impossible to enjoy, so suffering should come in proper measure, so that a person has the capacity to receive it. Suffering should be blended with mercy. (Shapira 1960, 10)

This metaphor of blending and mixture is compatible with Rabbi Shapira's ritual cosmology of vital flow. In the passage cited it bears the implicit technical sense of modulating the flow of vitality from the right- and left-hand sides of the sefirotic tree, which are associated with the emotional qualities of mercy and judgment respectively. Suffering itself is here conceived as one of the many registers of vital flow, which can be blended "in proper measure" lest it overwhelm the sufferer.

But Rabbi Shapira quickly goes on to describe exactly what can happen when the flow becomes a senseless flood. His homiletic context is the death of the biblical matriarch Sarah, but the subtext is clearly the death of his own mother from what appears to be an *excess* of suffering that goes beyond the ability of theodicy or of culture to compensate:

[That is why] Moses, our faithful shepherd, juxtaposed Sarah's death in the Torah [Genesis 23] with the binding of Isaac [her son, in Genesis 22]. It was in order to exonerate us; to show [to God!] what can happen, God forbid, when a

person is made to suffer beyond measure. It was through excessive suffering that Sarah's soul expired. And if this was true for Sarah, that great saint, who for all that was unable to withstand her harsh affliction, how much more will it be true for us! (Ibid.)

Suffering "beyond measure" simply devastates the subject with no hope for bearableness. Yet instead of signaling the absence of religious response as we would expect, this becomes paradoxically the ground for a different kind of relationship to agency in suffering, based not on the quest for meaning—or even the meaningfulness of ritual—but on the ethical gesture that Levinas calls "the medical":

It is also possible to suggest that Sarah herself, in taking Isaac's binding so much to heart that her soul expired, did so for the good of Israel. In order to show God that an Israelite cannot be made to suffer beyond measure, and that even a person who remains alive after his affliction, through God's mercy, must still lose portions of his vitality, his mind and spirit. What difference does it make to me if I suffer a full or a partial death? (Ibid.)

According to this exegesis, Sarah becomes complicit in her own death because she took the binding of Isaac "so much to heart," when she might instead have stifled emotion for the sake of continued well-being. By allowing pain to defeat her, Sarah models a kind of agency that is not sovereign, but rather grounded in the knowledge of human fragility. Sarah embraces collapse for the sake of others and thereby defends the impossibility of bearing what cannot reasonably be borne. She does not create meaning or certify grace in any straightforward reading of this text, but signals rather the impossibility of those concepts and transcends them.

What is more, it should be recognized that the writing and teaching of this sermon was itself a highly ritualized act that carried deep cosmological significance for Rabbi Shapira. Innovative study and teaching of the sacred texts in their traditional form is a ritual activity that literally draws divine vitality down from above to support the integrity and existence of the cosmos, including the community of believers. So Rabbi Shapira's task is twofold, and I believe that this can be demonstrated again and again in his Ghetto writings. On the one hand, he perseveres heroically in the maintenance of ritual duties that sustain vital flow and the possibility of meaning. Yet the *content* of his teaching constitutes a denial that the insufferable can be made sufferable, and seeks to rescue agency precisely in meaning's ruin. Sarah's sacrifice is efficacious precisely *because* it draws attention to the limits of Rabbi Shapira's own strategy of ritual maintenance, and the paradox for Rabbi Shapira is a painfully personal one. The same Yiddish newspaper that described his mother's death "of a broken heart" relates the rabbi's fortitude as noted by observers at the time, without, however, touching on the deep ambivalence that Rabbi Shapira's writing signaled:

The stricken Rebbe, however, is not broken in morale or spirit. He has remained in Warsaw, conducts *tish* [the ritual sharing of food] with his *hasidim*, learns Torah throughout the day, and is currently writing a book. The ... *hasidim* marvel at the remarkable self-control of their Rebbe. (Polen 1989, 11–12)

Unlike his mother (whose name, not incidentally, was Sarah), Rabbi Shapira risks (but does not summarily forfeit) his life in order to continue his teaching, the ritual sharing of food, and all of the other practices that make the Hasidic *zaddik* into a virtual *axis mundi* for his followers (Green 1977). Indeed, this means that there are two ritual models that appear side by side in the wartime writings, only one of which is the traditional model of ritual efficacy that shores up the cosmos. The other is based on the model of the matriarch Sarah, whose agency on behalf of others is grounded in the impossibility of coherence or meaning in the world of the Ghetto. This is similar to what Levinas sometimes refers to as “suffering for the other.” As the genocide of Jews in Europe progressed through late 1942, so Rabbi Shapira’s essays turned increasingly towards this model, even as his own perseverance suggested a different approach.

All of this requires far more elaboration than I can provide here (see Seeman n.d.), but this small sample of a rich corpus serves at least to illustrate that there is an indigenous understanding of ritual practice in which the regime of meaning is explicitly called into question by the extremity of suffering, and which reflects more or less self-consciously on the possibility of a different approach, which is ritualized yet otherwise than meaning. There is an analogy between vital flow and articulate meaning in Rabbi Shapira’s writings, which repeatedly return to themes of silence, or to the inability to experience—much less to express in articulate terms—the collapse of human meaning around him. In the shadow of that collapse, only ritual gestures—the *act* of sacred study rather than its content, the *act* of self-sacrifice rather than its potential for success, or the *act* of ritual observance without hope for efficacy—remain in place:

“The dead flesh of a living person does not feel the scalpel.” *All that we feel is a crushing sensation throughout our bones; the world is turned dark for us, neither day nor night, just disorientation and confusion, as if the whole world were pressing down upon us and crushing and compressing us, God forbid, until we burst ... But we do not feel each individual affliction ...* (Shapira 1960, 117, emphasis in original)

Devoted proponents of cultural interpretation can certainly find material to interpret in these texts, but they will have done violence to them if they fail to note the strong motif of useless suffering transformed into a different kind of agency within ritual. The Ghetto sermons urge ritual fidelity *in spite of* meaninglessness, and not always as its antidote. This is the collapse not only of articulate theodicy but also of the everyday meaningfulness that normally infuses ritual practice, the sense that it contributes to an ordered and coherent life-world.

The identity between generative meaning and ritual that we have inherited from our intellectual forebears is strong. Even those who self-consciously reject theodicy in its religious and secular forms tend to assume that the assertion of useless suffering must lead more or less quickly to the disintegration of ritual practice as well. Nancy Scheper-Hughes's ethnography of impoverished Brazilian women, *Death Without Weeping* (1992, 528–530), was probably the first ethnography to invoke Levinas in this context, since she identifies his argument about useless suffering with that of liberation theology, and against the traditional religious or political justifications of poor women's suffering. Despite her commitment to liberation theology, however, she permits herself to lament the demise of ritual practices that lend comfort to poor women's grief, such as the celebration of church ceremonies for dead infants, which are now discouraged because they allegedly blunt the revolutionary impulse. Yet it is clear that Levinas himself had something else in mind than the replacement of the religious by the political, which this seems to entail. His comments are somewhat opaque, so that even some of his best-known commentators have been baffled by his assertion that there is ritual commitment that does not require the insertion of meaning in suffering.

Edith Wyschogrod (2000, 182) has put this matter most succinctly: "What is the justification for Jewish ritual [according to Levinas] if ethical action is founded in the upsurge of the Other and if such action is the way in which Judaism appears in the world?" The same question can obviously be asked of other forms of ritual practice, but since Levinas wrote about Jewish ritual, this is the most direct form of the question that emerges. "If transcendence is experienced in the very upsurge of the one who is near," observes Wyschograd, "ritual seems superfluous." And then she adds a historical place marker that brings Talal Asad's whole discussion of ritual theory in the Reformation clearly to mind: "Indeed, this is the point of view adopted by nineteenth-century liberal theologians for whom moral law alone sufficed to maintain the integrity of Jewish religiosity" (ibid., 183). No such question could have been asked of Shapira, for whom the efficacy of ritual practice required vital flow rather than articulate meaning; as a traditional mystic, Shapira affirmed the whole traditional cosmology upon which so much of Jewish ritual is based. Yet Levinas seemingly rejects this possibility as well when he declares: "At no moment does the law acquire the value of a sacrament ... No intrinsic power is accorded to the ritual gesture" (Levinas 1990, 18). If neither theodicy nor cosmic vitality can be attributed to ritual practice for Levinas, Wyschograd's question takes on an added measure of force. Yet I will argue that Levinas's view of ritual is grounded in the same ritual cosmology as Rabbi Shapira's, albeit shorn of its more explicit metaphysical connotations.

Levinas declares himself to be above the sacramentalism of both Christian and Jewish mystical religion and denies the "intrinsic power" accorded to ritual gesture, but like Rabbi Shapira, he is profoundly indebted to the myth of *zimzum* or contraction upon which the cosmology of ritual vitality in Jewish mysticism is built. That is because since at least the sixteenth century, the

heart of all mainstream Jewish mysticism has been the myth of a contraction or withdrawal that takes place within divinity to make room for creation: the divine as it were, needs to leave space for the existence of independent, created beings. This is, in fact, the whole basis of 'drawing down vitality' for a traditional mystic like Rabbi Shapira, who engages in acts of self-denial and obedience to the ritual law in imitation of (or in participation with) the primordial act of divine withdrawal of self and ego that precipitates creation. For Levinas, the literal implications of drawing down vitality are absent, yet withdrawal to make room for the other is taken up as the most fundamental metaphor of the ethical relation, which finds its way into both phenomenological and analytic writing.

Levinas disavows the metaphysical tradition running from Parmenides to Spinoza and Hegel that always endeavors, in his words, "to suppress separation, to unite," and which attributes all separation to "an illusion or a fault" in the absolute. He argues instead that "the same and the other [simultaneously] maintain themselves in relationship and absolve themselves from this relation, remain absolutely separated," and that this separation is the very possibility of ethical relation. And if there was any doubt of the influence of the kabbalistic metaphor in sustaining this line of thought, he writes: "Infinity is produced by withstanding the invasion of totality, in a contraction that leaves a space for the separated being ... Over and beyond the totality it inaugurates a society ... [T]he idea of creation *ex nihilo* expresses a multiplicity not united into a totality" (Levinas 1969, 104).

In his essay "'In the Image of God,' According to Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner," Levinas explicitly grapples with the need to disenchant the cosmological language in which kabbalistic writing like Rabbi Shapira's is grounded, without effacing what he calls the "inimitable resonances of this language" (Levinas 1994, 155). In the same essay, he suggests that the complicated kabbalistic cosmology through which ritual activity enervates the cosmos means that "[t]here is here an ethical significance to the religious commandments: they amount to letting those who are other than self live or, in the case of transgression, die. Does not the being of man amount to being-for-the-other?" (*ibid.*, 159). This is no indication that Levinas accepts the traditional cosmology of ritual in a literal sense, but it does constitute a clear acknowledgment that he draws upon the metaphoric resources of this cosmology in developing a view of ritual as a turning-toward-the-other that is outside the traditional self-absorption of theodicy. The fact that major interpreters of Levinas have failed to recognize this register in his writing helps to indicate the power that theodicy holds over all discussion of ritual and religion in our intellectual climate. Levinas has disenchanted Jewish themes and *topoi* in much the same way that Weber disenchanted Protestant ones, to make them available for an application that transcends their native contexts, and this is similar to the work that many ethnographers do in making local concepts available to a wider theoretical discourse through their writing.

A thought experiment is a risky enterprise under the best of circumstances, and this is especially true when one attempts to engage two or three intellectual

traditions that have never been brought into sustained conversation with one another in the past. My version of the ‘ritual in its own right’ question is grounded, to be sure, in a distinctive cultural genealogy and metaphysic that will seem foreign to some, but it has at least the virtue of being a *different*—and more self-consciously adopted—genealogy and metaphysic from the one already inscribed in ritual theory of the interpretive school. I am posing a challenge for us to engage with an aspect of ritual practice that has so far been subject only to the hermeneutic of grace’s certification, and to ask whether we can move towards a consideration of the intersubjective dimension that rises to the fore when pain is rendered useless. This is my understanding of the ‘medical gesture’ to which Levinas (1988, 158) points:

It is the original opening toward what is helpful, where the primordial, irreducible, and ethical, anthropological category of the medical comes to impose itself—across the demand for analgesia, more pressing, more urgent in the groan than a demand for consolation or a postponement of death. For pure suffering, which is intrinsically meaningless and condemned to itself without exit, a beyond takes shape in the inter-human.

Ethnography has only recently begun to pay purposeful attention to the intersubjective as a realm of ethnographic investigation (Kleinman and Kleinman 1991), but whether we can fashion ethnographic tools to locate and describe gestures of transcendence in ritual will depend in part on fashioning the analytic tools necessary to describe them. In Levinas’s usage, “the medical” constitutes a realm of practice—not discourse—in which concern for the other is embodied as a fundamental refusal to be subsumed under theodicy’s self-referential rhetoric. Levinas also argues—and this is where I think we can learn the most from him—that there are moments in which ritual practice constitutes a break, a reaching for the interhuman. This is what I mean by the generosity of ritual.

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