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Virginia Burrus
Syracuse University

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A Saint of One's Own: Emmanuel Levinas, Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, and Eulalia of Mérida

Virginia Burrus

One day [...] he said to me: "You know, one often speaks of ethics to describe what I do, but what really interests me in the end is not ethics, not ethics alone, but the holy, the holiness of the holy [*le saint, la sainteté du saint*]."

Jacques Derrida, "Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas"¹

We need a Saint Teresa of our own! [...] Thankfully, we had Hassidism and the Kabbalah. Let us rest assured that one cannot be a Jew without having saints.

Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics and Spirit"²

The saintly desire for the Other is excessive and wild.

Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*³

HAGIOGRAPHY INSCRIBES HOLINESS; it makes saints. But how does it do this? And to what end? It is often observed that the literary lives of the exceptionally holy bear the stamp of a demand for conformity. Portraits of exemplary piety are prescribed as well as prescriptive, where the saint is always already interpellated into a mimetic chain of production. Narratively, the holy one is both disciple and mentor. Textually, the holy life is both repetitive and generative, not only performing but also inciting citation. The iterative momentum of hagiography may thus insinuate normativity by presenting authoritative models of piety. Yet the imitation of holiness both effected and exhorted by the hagiographical text is also curiously productive of deviance, due not least to the agonistic impulse—the sheer ambition—of the holy life.

Each saint's life strives not only to outdo all prior saints' lives but also to outdo itself—or perhaps better, to *undo* itself. There is a movement of intensification, a tendency toward excess: the saint's life queers custom, perverts nature, and transgresses limits, including the limits of selfhood. It finally thereby exceeds not only the presumptions of normativity but also the operations of agonism. This is nowhere more evident than in the holy one's paradoxical, and also paradigmatic, pursuit of humility. In the holy life, zealous striving for perfection coincides with extravagant submission to humiliation. Hagiography, in other words, participates not only in the praise of singular

virtue that shamelessly violates the saint's humility but also in the salutary shaming that chastens pride and cuts back across difference.

How strongly does it cut across Jewish-Christian difference? The eagerness of recent Christian philosophers and theologians to appropriate the insights of Jewish thinkers who may themselves pose—as does Emmanuel Levinas—as interpreting, mimicking or even parodying a quintessentially Christian love of saints both invites and complicates such a question. My own interest in the relation of shame to sanctity in ancient Christian hagiographies leads me to reexamine the relation of these texts to rabbinic biographies that also deal with shameful subjects.⁴ It must be acknowledged, however, that the two traditions are more frequently contrasted than compared. Robert Cohn draws the contrast starkly: concepts and cults of sanctity central to Christianity are merely peripheral to Judaism, first arising in association with the false messianisms, speculative mysticisms, and strong syncretisms of the medieval period; “classical” Judaism resists both individualistic and idealizing depictions of piety.⁵ To be sure, one can find dissenting opinions;⁶ nonetheless, most Talmudists seem, like Cohn, to resist attributing any significant enthusiasm for sanctity to the ancient rabbis. Alon Goshen-Gottstein, for example, insists that the Talmud differs from Christian writings precisely because it is *not* hagiography, adding that it is not hagiography because it is not gospel. The Christian gospels tell of a single and singular life while the Talmud assimilates individual rabbis into a larger collective. The Christian gospels tell of a perfect man while the Talmud shows the rabbi “in the midst of power struggles and human temptations and make[s] no attempt to uphold any image of saintliness.” The function of stories about rabbis “is not to present their protagonists as paragons of religious virtue” or to inspire imitation, he asserts, since it is the law that sets the terms of religious observance. Rather, stories about rabbis mediate debates “over the Torah, its place, and its application” that pertain specifically to the life of scholars.⁷

Gently questioning this widespread view that the Talmud is distinctly non-hagiographical, I want to explore the possibility that ancient literary portraits of Jewish rabbis and Christian ascetics have more affinity than is generally acknowledged. The affinity may become especially apparent when one shifts attention, on the Christian side, from the lives of individual saints (or the gospels with which they tend to be conflated)⁸ to the early fifth-century collections of miniature saints' lives that are generically more similar to Talmudic texts and also possibly roughly contemporaneous with those texts, for instance Palladius's *Lausiac History* or Prudentius's *Peristephanon*. As Patricia Cox Miller argues, collective hagiographies derive their power from the

principles of repetition and condensation also evidenced in late ancient practices of visual representation. “The discrete parts of these collections are not full biographies but ekphrastic sketches that picture a ‘way of life’ [...]. Representational integrity, in other words, is carried by the fragment.”⁹ In both the collective hagiographies of late ancient Christians and the aggadic or anecdotal passages of the Babylonian Talmud, there is play between the tug of differentiation and the assimilative energies of the textual machine. In both literatures, moreover, saints and sages frequently turn out to be far less stereotypically saintly and sagacious than one might have expected. The reasons for this may be similar.

As I have already suggested, humility is a key virtue for Christian ascetics, for whom vainglory and pride are the most challenging of temptations; it is also crucial to hagiographical representation. While hagiographers regularly insist that it would be a sin *not* to sing the praises of the saint, writers of holy lives also often betray awareness that their praise may place not only the saint’s humility but also their own at risk. As Derek Krueger has shown, elaborate rhetorics of humility, including the deliberate adoption of a lowly style, are native to hagiographical composition (Krueger, 94-109). In addition, hagiographers not only showcase the submission to humiliation that is part of the holy one’s discipline but also augment this discipline in the very act of publicizing the saint’s shaming by the demons of temptation. Without suggesting that the dynamics of the Talmudic representation of rabbis are identical, I do want to propose that there are strong similarities to Christian hagiography at many points. As Elliot Wolfson notes, for the ancient rabbis humility was “the moral virtue that could lead one to attain the supreme religious experience of dwelling in the presence of the divine”; moreover, in later strains of Jewish mystical thought, “the trait of humility was acquired by the acceptance of an austere lifestyle that places demands upon the individual that *exceed the strict requirements of the ritual law*.”¹⁰

Does a “hypernomian” tendency, as Wolfson names the phenomenon of law-exceeding ascesis, also characterize some earlier rabbinic narratives and even partly account for the presence of such stories alongside the legal traditions that would otherwise seem sufficient for the purposes of inculcating piety?¹¹ Does this tendency not also bring these texts close to the thought worlds of the Christian hagiographers who seek to take virtue past the edge not only of precedent but even of imagination? To restate the argument: if the acquisition of humility requires going far beyond the law, whether embodied as Torah or as Christ, so as also to fall hopelessly short of it, narratives of shaming or humiliation may play a crucial role in the depiction of the humil-

ity of the rabbinic sage as well as the Christian ascetic. Such narratives trouble the distinction between the sublime and the abject, the saint and the sinner. They also complicate, without simply negating, the reading of the holy person as a model for imitation. For the shame of transgression exceeds mere mimesis. We need “saints of our own” not simply because they are imitable but also because they are not. Saints are saintly because infinitely *other* (in Levinas’s terms), and also because infinitely *seductive* in the imperious audacity of their willful abjection. Drawing desire beyond the law (as the law itself, paradoxically, demands), hagiography evokes “not ethics, not ethics alone,” but “*le saint, la sainteté du saint.*”

In a Talmudic reading entitled “Desacralization and Disenchantment,” Levinas develops what he understands to be a very significant but often overlooked distinction between the sacred (*le sacré*) and the holy (*le saint*).¹² The selected passage, *Sanhedrin* 67a-68a, does not in fact mention either of these terms, as he acknowledges. Rather, it centers on a discussion of sorcery that is initially aligned with seduction, though Levinas twice explicitly “bypasses” the reference to seduction (Levinas, *NTR*, 141-42), and is subsequently exemplified, oddly enough, in the picking of cucumbers. However unlikely the text might seem, Levinas assures us that he has not chosen lightly: he has been meditating on this topic for a very long time. “I have always asked myself if holiness, that is separation or purity, the essence without admixture that can be called Spirit and which animates the Jewish tradition—or to which the Jewish tradition aspires—can dwell in a world that has not been desacralized.” In his reading of the Talmudic passage, sorcery will stand in for the debased sacrality—manifest alternately as a crass materialism or a deluded mysticism—that, in his view, impedes both the reception and the perception of the holy: “The sacred is in fact the half light in which the sorcery the Jewish tradition abhors flourishes.” The Talmudic texts, “through their definitions of sorcery [...] may perhaps allow us to distinguish the holy from the sacred,” he avers (Levinas, *NTR*, 141).

Perhaps: as we shall see, the Talmud both does and does not make such a distinction easy. There are crucial points of slippage within the text and also between the text and Levinas’s reading of it. Let us start with the cucumbers, which will lead us to the holy man, who may or may not also be a sorcerer. The legal text (Mishna) initially cited reads as follows: “Rabbi Akiba, in the name of Rabbi Joshua, has said: Two people pick cucumbers: one of them is subject to penalties, the other exempt; the one who performs the act is subject to penalties, the one that gives the illusion of it is exempt.” The cucumber-

picking here in question is magical, and in one case the magic is effective (cucumbers are actually picked), in the other illusory (cucumbers merely appear to be picked). The stakes are high, for only the cucumber-picker practicing effective sorcery is subject to punishment—capital punishment, in fact. Interpreting this text, Levinas reframes the contrast in explicitly economic terms: “The Mishna [...] distinguishes between the sorcery that procures illusions and the one that procures profit.” Yet immediately he blurs this distinction, redefining sorcery as the harnessing of illusion for profit while implying that there is only one kind of magical cucumber (the illusory) and only one kind of magical picking (the profitable):

To stay at the level of illusion does not have great consequences, but if the sorcerer *picks* the cucumbers, if the illusion manages to fit itself within an economic process—and modern economic life is, after all, the place of preference for the harvesting of illusory cucumbers and for the heavy profits attached to such a harvest—sorcery becomes a criminal act (Levinas, *NTR*, 142).

Already Levinas has worked his own magic on the Mishna: a distinction between effective and illusory sorcery has been transformed into a distinction between voodoo economics and true justice, that is, between the sacred and the holy. Still, the problem remains: “How can holiness be confused with the sacred and turn into sorcery?” (Levinas, *NTR*, 146).

The rabbinic commentary does not provide any easy resolution to this question; arguably, it increases the confusion. According to the rabbinic commentary on the Mishna (Gemara), with respect to sorcery as with respect to the Sabbath, the law distinguishes between three kinds of acts—acts that are punishable, acts that are forbidden but not punishable, and acts that are neither punishable nor forbidden.

Abaye said: [...] He who performs an action is stoned—as in the one who picks cucumbers; he who creates an illusion is not punishable, yet he performs a forbidden action. Some actions are entirely permissible: like the one of Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Oshaia, who, every Shabbath eve, studied the doctrine of creation, by means of which they created a calf one-third grown and ate it.¹³

The third category is a curious one, for at least two related reasons; first, it designates acts neither forbidden nor required (thus, strictly speaking, beyond the scope of the law) and, second, it is exemplified by the weekly conjuring of a roast, an act extremely difficult to distinguish from sorcery, to say the least. The original Mishnaic text (which identifies only the first two kinds of sorcery, both forbidden) has thus produced an unexpected surplus—sorcery that is permitted. So zealous are the two rabbis in their study that they render the laws of creation performatively effective: through the magic of divine

speech, new life is generated, even as a meal is provided for the Sabbath.¹⁴ The rabbis thus observe the law by exceeding it, a transgression that is, paradoxically, “entirely permitted.”¹⁵ Levinas celebrates the permissiveness: “This daring text thus teaches us how ridiculous it would be to pose limits on human possibilities.” Indeed! He insists, however, that the miraculous creation of a calf “is not sorcery.” While the Sabbath invites “even more daring dreams than that,” it necessarily holds sorcery—which is, “in a certain sense, the profanation of the Shabbath”—at bay. Yet he must also acknowledge, at least indirectly, that magic and holiness do sometimes coincide: “Rav Hanina and Rav Oshaia did not bother with the prohibitions against sorcery when they made a calf one-third grown in order to have a roast on Shabbath,” he remarks. What is important, he emphasizes, is that they avoided the “sorcery of interiorization” or the “magic of spiritualization.” From Levinas’s perspective, then, it is permissible to produce and consume magic meat precisely because it is *not* merely illusory, or “spiritual.” The creation of a calf is a positive transgression of law rather than an “abolition of laws,” and thus it upholds rather than erodes the holiness of the Sabbath. Here the philosopher’s interpretation seems, ironically, to follow the hypernomian spirit of the Talmudic text while ignoring its letter. The rabbis, in distinction from Levinas, are not concerned with the threat of an interiorization of Jewish spirituality but rather with the ambivalent power of holy words (Levinas, *NTR*, 149-50).

We are brought back here to the question of cucumbers and finally to the holy man in this text. The Mishna relates that Rabbi Akiba received the teaching about cucumbers from Rabbi Joshua, but the Talmud knows another tradition as well, namely, that Akiba learned it from Rabbi Eliezer. Here are the words attributed to Rabbi Eliezer, speaking from his deathbed:

I teach three hundred teachings—some say three thousand teachings—about the planting of cucumbers, and never did anybody ask them of me, except Akiba, son of Joseph. One day, we were going somewhere, and he said to me: Master, teach me about the planting of cucumbers. I said a word and the field filled up with cucumbers. He said to me: Master, you taught me their planting, teach me their uprooting. I said a word, and they gathered in one spot.

Clearly, the questions raised by this startling account include not just *who* taught Akiba about cucumber magic, but also *what* and *how* he taught him. According to the Mishna, which for the Talmud is always authoritative, Joshua taught Akiba that *actual* magical cucumber picking is punishable with death, but *illusory* magical cucumber picking is not punishable. According to a supplementary tradition that the Talmud also authorizes, Eliezer showed Akiba how *actually* to plant and harvest cucumbers magically by speaking a

word. A resolution is offered: “Rabbi Eliezer taught it to him, but he did not make the teaching clear to him. Then he learned it again from Rabbi Joshua, who made it clear.” It is no surprise that Akiba found Eliezer’s lesson difficult to master, but doesn’t Joshua’s subsequent teaching condemn Eliezer’s own as punishable sorcery? Here too the Talmud offers a resolution: “It is different when it is in order to teach [...]. You should not learn to do them [i.e., abhorrent deeds] in order to practice; but you must learn to do everything in order to understand and to teach.”¹⁶

There is more to be said about Rabbi Eliezer, however. Levinas introduces him under the heading “The Scent of Holiness,” suggesting stark contrast to the reek of sacrality clinging to the prior accounts of sorcery. Yet the planting and harvesting of cucumbers by the utterance of a word is not the only aspect of Eliezer’s story that associates him with unusual powers and renders him vulnerable to judgment from Rabbi Joshua. As Levinas notes, the account of Eliezer’s death in the *Sanhedrin* passage at hand (to which we shall return) is “the epilogue of a Talmudic story whose prologue everyone knows” (Levinas, *NTR*, 153). *Baba Metsia* 59b, the famous “prologue,” narrates Eliezer’s shaming, in a tale commonly dubbed “The Oven of Akhnai” with reference to the particular item that provoked fateful dissension among the sages. The account is offered as a comment on a set of stern rabbinic rulings regarding the seriousness of the offense of verbal injury, which is deemed more grievous than monetary injury, in part because it is irreversible as well as deeply personal. “Whoever whitens the face of [i.e., embarrasses] another in public, it is as if he sheds his blood.” Indeed, the Talmud urges that it is better to commit adultery or throw oneself into a furnace than to shame another in public. As the discussion moves to the divine protection afforded to those who have been shamed, the focus shifts away from public and toward more private temptations to shame others, however: “A man should always be careful about wronging his wife. Because her tears are close at hand, [the punishment for] wronging her is near.” After the destruction of the Temple, “the gates of prayer have been locked.” Nonetheless, the gates still open for those who have been verbally shamed: “The gates of tears have not been locked.” The only prayers that *always* get through, then, are the prayers of those who shed tears of anguish—that is, wives and men who have been rendered as vulnerable as wives by being publicly shamed. “A man should always be careful about his wife’s honor,” cites the Talmud, and then immediately (indeed rather abruptly) cuts to the story of Rabbi Eliezer, whose honor was disregarded and whose eyes streamed with tears that opened the gates of heaven dangerously wide.

In fact, even before he is so decisively shamed, the gates of heaven already seem to be open to the unconventional sage. Frustrated when his fellow rabbis simply dismiss his positive opinion regarding the purity of a segmented, thus technically “broken,” oven, despite the fact that he has used “all the arguments in the world,” Eliezer performs several miracles to back up the authority of his legal position: at his command, a carob tree uproots itself; water runs backwards; the walls of the study house lean (though they don’t fall); and finally a heavenly voice pronounces that “the law is in accordance with Rabbi Eliezer everywhere.” This is the point at which Rabbi Joshua famously cites Dt. 30:12 against Rabbi Eliezer: “It is not in heaven” that is, the Torah is not in heaven but in the study house where the rabbis make decisions by majority rule. This already astonishing proposition is met by an even more astonishing response from the Holy One: “He smiled and said, ‘My sons have defeated me, my sons have defeated me.’” God, it seems, delights in his own injury, suffering humiliation with perverse pleasure, and thereby allows Eliezer’s injury as well.

Levinas summarizes this first part of the well-known story but makes little comment, beyond a somewhat humorous exclamation, miming the dismissive stance of Eliezer’s colleagues: “Stop the miracles!” (Levinas, *NTR*, 154).¹⁷ Significantly, he passes over the continuation of the *Baba Metsia*’s account of Eliezer’s excommunication and its disastrous aftermath. There we read that the opposing rabbis burn all of the objects that Eliezer has formerly declared pure, in symbolic—and hyperbolic—repudiation of his judgment. Yet Eliezer’s power is so great that they are afraid to inform him directly of his excommunication, lest this provoke no less than “the destruction of the entire world.” Preemptively humiliating himself in advance, his disciple Akiba thus approaches Eliezer dressed in black, barefoot and weeping, even as he marks out the distance of the ban. Observing that distance, Eliezer mimes and intensifies Akiba’s gestures of shamed grief, tearing his clothes and removing his shoes, sitting on the ground, and weeping. Rabbinics scholar Jeffrey Rubenstein sees this as “the proper posture” of compliance, “not defiance and contempt,” but surely Eliezer’s performance has something of *both* compliance *and* defiance. To abase himself is to participate in the enactment of his abasement, at once passively and actively: the extremity of his mournful submission shows up the extremity of what has been done to him. He grieves and rages such that the crops wither and there is great destruction, even death. Only his wife is able to restrain him, and only up to a point, by preventing him from taking the most abject posture of humiliation, namely, falling on his face. When he does finally elude her vigilance, his brother-in-law Gamaliel

dies. Perhaps it takes a wife to understand that his hurt and anger exceed all constraint: “All the gates are locked except for the gates of [verbal] wrongdoing.” He is even more powerful in his humiliation than he was before.¹⁸

The epilogue to this prologue (as Levinas names it) takes us back to the tractate *Sanhedrin* and deals with Eliezer’s final illness and death. On the eve of the Sabbath, Akiba and his companions come to visit the sage, initially remaining out of sight. Respect for the master and respect for the judgment of the rabbinic majority seem to hang indecisively in the balance. Where is the purity of truth to be found? Eliezer instructs by example, even from an unseen distance, refusing to be bothered with a matter that is relatively trivial—something forbidden but not punishable—when others are about to commit punishable transgressions. Perceiving the sharpness of his judgment, the visitors enter his quarters, declaring their desire to study Torah with him, while still keeping their distance, in accordance with the ban. In apparent response to their hypocrisy, he predicts their untimely deaths, lamenting that he has not had disciples to whom he could transmit the fullness of his learning, as he once taught Akiba about cucumbers. Nonetheless, he responds succinctly to questions posed to him regarding the purity of a set of ambiguous objects: five he pronounces susceptible to impurity, but with regard to the sixth and final one presented to him—a shoe on a last—he responds, “It stays pure,” and he dies as he utters the word “pure.” “And his soul departed in purity,” the Talmud concludes.

“He breathed his last in the purity of a shoe!” exults Levinas. Eliezer is pure, in the philosopher’s estimation, because he has lived his life to the end in accordance with the “objective rules of purity” rather than the “unfathomable purity of [...] intentions” (Levinas, *NTR*, 158). He has defined himself not by the interior state of his soul but by his abidance in the law. Levinas accepts wholeheartedly the resolution offered by the Talmud: Eliezer’s planting and picking of cucumbers was not sorcery because it was performed “not in order to practice [...] but in order to understand and to teach.” Eliezer has nothing to do with the realm of magic, miracle or mystery, nor could he have, from Levinas’s perspective. “The only relation the Jewish tradition grants to this sacred and its desacralization is knowledge of these abominations [...]. The holiness it wants comes to it from the living God” (Levinas, *NTR*, 159).

The difficulty, of course, is that the holy person is not easily distinguished from the magician without resort to attributed intentionality—to deceive or to exploit? to teach or to practice? Even intentionality may be of little discriminating use when we are dealing with rabbis who routinely give birth to new life by reading a divine text, or another who commands water to reverse its

course, kills a fellow sage by prostrating himself, plants and harvests cucumbers with a word, and proves the purity of his almost-finished life by pronouncing the purity of an almost-finished shoe. Nor is this a trivial ambiguity. What concerns Levinas is the coercion entailed in any invocation of “the Irrational, the Numinous, or the Sacramental,” as he phrases it in an earlier essay, “Ethics and Spirit”; such sacral authority submits neither to reason nor to language, which he deems (with post-Holocaust clarity) the only sure arbiters of human violence. In other words, the last thing that Jews (or for that matter Gentiles) need is “a Saint Teresa of our own.” True spirituality does not thrive in interior flights of ecstasy but unfolds in radical responsiveness to a fully exteriorized Other.¹⁹ Repeatedly, Levinas attempts to describe the holiness disclosed in the face of the Other, and *only* in the face of the Other, who

opposes to me not a greater force [...] but precisely the infinity of his transcendence. This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial *expression*, is the first word: ‘you shall not commit murder.’ [...] The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity—its hunger—without my being able to be deaf to that appeal. Thus in expression the being that imposes itself does not limit but promotes my freedom, by arousing my goodness.²⁰

By seeking holiness in Eliezer’s law-abiding *exemplarity*, has Levinas here overlooked the rabbi’s law-exceeding *alterity*, the face of the Other that “imposes itself [...] precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity—its hunger”? By presenting the depths of his abjection and vulnerability, the extremity of his thwarted desire, the formidable sage positively *demand*s a response. He is a holy man, I would suggest (arguing now both with and against Levinas), *precisely* because he rises to great heights by falling on his face, because he upholds the law by transgressing it, because he is, like the oven of Akhnai, pure in his brokenness, like the shoe on the last, holy in his incompleteness. He is a holy man finally because he seduces us with the extremity of his need and of his strangeness, because he enables us to glimpse (but only to glimpse) the sanctity of the Other, because he thereby arouses our “goodness.” Our *goodness* is aroused and also our *desire*, which, according to Levinas, “is like goodness—the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it” (Levinas, *TI*, 34). Through the deepening of desire for the one who desires so deeply, mimesis may accommodate itself to the asymmetrical loopings of difference.

At what point (if any) does the seductiveness of the holy Other begin to impinge on the freedom necessary to ethical response? Is it when that Other

becomes a lawless saint, evoking not Desire but Eros?²¹ Levinas indicates, with biting sarcasm, his distaste for the passionate excesses of Teresa of Avila. Here, in closing, let me invoke another notably ardent Spanish Christian girl, whose hagiography is more nearly contemporaneous with the Talmudic biography of Eliezer, namely, Eulalia of Mérida, commemorated in the early fifth-century *Peristephanon* of Prudentius. Perhaps this saint will help us locate the limits of the holy, if only by transgressing them.

The story follows a script familiar to readers of ancient hagiography, though it is not without its distinctive twists. As a maid of twelve, “near the age of dowries and weddings” (l. 110)²² yet already dedicated to virginity, Eulalia escapes the unwanted safety of her parental home in order to present herself before the Roman persecutors. “Come on, then, torturer, burn, slice, sever these mud-concocted limbs,” she taunts lustily. “To dissolve a fragile thing is easy; but the inner spirit will not be penetrated by the searing pain” (ll. 91-95). When the governor attempts to break her defiant spirit, reminding her of both the joy of marriage and the pain of punishment, she spits in his eyes and overturns the pagan idols and censer prepared for her pious offering. In response, executioners mutilate the flesh of her breast and backside with the torturer’s claw, cutting to the bone, but Eulalia merely counts the marks lovingly. “Look, you are written on me, Lord! How it pleases me to read these letters that mark your victories, Christ! The sacred name itself is spoken by the (imperial) purple of the blood drawn [*purpura sanguinis eliciti*]” (ll. 135-40). Subsequently burned alive, she drinks in the flames eagerly; a white dove, identified as the martyr’s spirit, leaves her mouth and heads for the stars—“milky, swift, innocent” (l. 165).

In the shamed and shameless figure of the virgin martyr we seem to discover an intensification and a condensation—even a purification—of both the challenge and the seductiveness of the Levinasian Other: “The infinite paralyzes power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenseless eyes, in the nudity of the absolute openness of the Transcendent” (Levinas, *TI*, 199). Why, then, is Levinas so reluctant to embrace such a model of sanctity? What differentiates Eulalie’s nudity from the Other’s? this one’s “erotic love” from that one’s “metaphysical desire”? the threat of the sacred from the promise of the holy? her body from his face? Here at the end, are we still back where we started?

“Thankfully, we had Hasidism and the Kabbalah,” writes Levinas in “Ethics and Spirit,” now only partly sarcastic, adding: “Hasidism is established in the Jewish soul only where that soul is full of talmudic science”

(Levinas, *DF*, 6).²³ What the Christian soul lacks, then, is the science of the Talmud. Without it, a girl like Eulalia may burn too hot, too fast. The rabbinic sage dares give voice to the performative force of the written law; the virgin saint carves the name of Christ on her very flesh. He is both more and less than the law, she both more and less than Jesus. They are much the same, then, and also different. Eliezer's desire materializes in the multiplying detours of hermeneutical possibility: he has mastered three hundred, perhaps three thousand, teachings about the planting of cucumbers alone. Eulalia has no text but her body through which to interpret her own infinite longing,²⁴ and its meaning is as urgent and simple as the heavenward flight of a dove: "a man should always be careful about wronging a wife" and even more so a virgin. Eliezer dies disappointed in his hopes yet finally sure of his purity—perhaps, even, of the ultimate purity of all things, in a world that is never finished but ever becoming, never whole but always broken. Eulalia dies exulting in her sacrifice, as violence coincides perfectly with a passion that obliterates all distinctions: nothing remains in the end but some fragments of ash and bone. "Representational integrity [...] is carried by the fragment" (Miller, 135-36).

It is Edith Wyschogrod who has transformed Levinas's ambivalent engagement of sanctity into a robustly hagiographical ethics that celebrates "the excessive and wild desire of the saint." What makes a saint saintly, she argues, is his or her "compassion for the Other, irrespective of cost." I am suggesting, however, that what makes a saint saintly, in the medium of hagiography, is the extremity of his or her *passion*—an active passivity, a willfully embraced humiliation, that in turn demands a response, "irrespective of cost." "The saint is without defenses, unsheltered, exposed to insult and outrage," as Wyschogrod notes, asserting too that "nothing whatsoever precedes the destitution of the Other" (Wyschogrod, xxiii, 98, 255). Such prior and exceeding vulnerability importunes and seduces us as readers, I would argue, eliciting our own "excessive and wild desire." And thus we imitate after all, answering the holy one's painful exposure by baring our own need. Reading the Lives of Saints is risky business, with or without a Law, which can only be fully observed in the breach, it would seem.

At the sight of Rabbi Eliezer's coffin on the road between Caesarea and Lydda, Rabbi Akiba "beat his chest until the blood came," calling out, "My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen!" As Levinas notes, the departure—not the death—of Elijah is here invoked (Levinas, *NTR*, 159). Regardless of whether the master is dead or merely gone, the study of magical cucumber-planting will (and still does!) continue, as memory overflows

the present and time is retarded through the patient rehearsal of an already-ancient debate. Meanwhile, in faraway Mérida, children lay “purple violets and blood-tinged crocuses” on Eulalia’s grave as winter thaws, while the poet offers a garland woven of rhythm and song to adorn the bare bones of a fierce girl whose life burned itself out in a fleeting instant: to this day, we are told, she watches over her people tenderly (ll. 201-15).

Having drawn our love, the saints may be imagined to return it—infinately.

The saints are neither here nor there; yet we may see them in every face, read them in every body.

It is not easy to see faces, to read bodies. Perhaps that is why we need hagiography.

Drew University

Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, Pascale-Anne Braut and Michael Naas, trans. (Stanford: Stanford U P, 1999), 4.
2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, Seán Hand, trans. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1990), 6.
3. Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990), 255.
4. Shame as a Talmudic theme has been highlighted by Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1999), and *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 2003). With reference to Christian hagiography, see my *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2008).
5. Robert L. Cohn, “Sainthood on the Periphery: The Case of Judaism,” in *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions*, Richard Kieckhefer and George D. Bond, eds. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988), 43-68.
6. Louis Jacobs, *Holy Living: Saints and Saintliness in Judaism* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1990).
7. Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac: The Rabbinic Invention of Elisha Ben Abuya and Eleazar Ben Arach* (Stanford: Stanford U P, 2000), 12, 270. In a similar vein, Rubenstein notes the Talmud’s penchant for emphasizing not the rabbis’ “extraordinary virtue” but their numerous faults, offering moral chastisement to the elite of the Babylonian academy (*Talmudic Stories*, 281).
8. Goshen-Gottstein is scarcely unique in conflating gospels with saints’ lives. See Jacob Neusner, *Why no Gospels in Talmudic Judaism?* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988). Curiously, Neusner defines gospel “in the context of Christianity and of Judaism” as the biography of a holy person, yet he empties the category of meaning by asserting both that Christianity acknowledges only gospels “with a capital G,” in other words only gospels about Jesus, and that Judaism produces no gospels at all (31). Generic distinctions must be held lightly, yet there are good reasons to honor the particularity of hagiography as a fourth-century literary emergence, roughly contemporaneous with rabbinic literature, dealing not with Jesus or the apostles but with later ascetics. On its origins and antecedents, see Patricia Cox (Miller), *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983). Recent treatments of Christian hagiography that take fresh approaches to questions of genre

- include Derek Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2004), and my own *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2004).
9. Patricia Cox Miller, "'Differential Networks': Relics and Other Fragments in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 6:1 (1998): 135-36. See also her "Strategies of Representation in Collective Biography: Constructing the Subject as Holy," in *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, Tomas Hägg and Philip Rousseau, eds. (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000), 209-54. Miller draws particular support from Michael Roberts, *The Jeweled Style: Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1989).
 10. Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2006), 292. Emphasis added.
 11. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*; see 230, 237-40, for a discussion of the seeds of hypernomianism within the rabbinic corpus. Edith Wyschogrod is also explicit with regard to the insufficiency of the law, and thus (in her view) the necessity of hagiography, for ethics: "Even when saintly life is an expression of obedience to institutional norms or revealed laws, there can be no rules to guide that aspect of saintly work which admits of no conceivable realization, to fully re-present the divine life or to fully realize the divine will" (*Saints and Postmodernism*, 12). Wolfson discusses the *imitatio Dei* as well (196-98).
 12. Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, Annette Aronowicz, trans. (Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1990), 136-60; the 1971 lecture was first published in 1977 in a collection entitled *Du sacré au saint*. Translations of *Sanhedrin* here follow the translation of Levinas's lecture, as do spellings of Hebrew names; translations of *Baba Metsia* follow Israel Berman's English rendering of the Steinsaltz edition of the Talmud. As John Caruana has argued, Levinas's work broadly reflects a concern to disentangle holiness from the Durkheimian understanding of sacrality dominant in twentieth-century French scholarship and associated with appeals to religious experiences in which both rationality and self-awareness are suppressed or surpassed ("'Not Ethics, Not Ethics Alone, but the Holy': Levinas on Ethics and Holiness," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 34:4 [2006], 561-83).
 13. Daniel Boyarin points out to me that a more accurate translation would be "who, every afternoon before the Sabbath, studied the laws of creation"; an alternate version reads "book of creation" (*Sanhedrin* 65b) and is thought to refer to the mystical text *Sefer Yetzirah*.
 14. See Kimberly Stratton, "Imagining Power: Magic, Miracle, and the Social Context of Rabbinic Self-Representation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 73 (2005): 366-67. For my purposes, the distinction that Stratton makes between the more Hellenistic and ascetical Palestinian and more magical Babylonian perspectives is of less interest than the continuities of the Bavli with Greco-Roman works.
 15. See Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 270: "Release from the weight of obligation is not attained by discarding the laws, but rather by performing them with an intensity that pushes beyond their limit even as that very limit is established in the act of transgression." Wolfson's reading of Levinas at 261 discovers the glimmerings of such an insight.
 16. See Stratton, "Imagining Power," 370-71.
 17. Levinas misremembers Eliezer's position in the initial debate, asserting that he judged the oven susceptible to impurity. Yet the Talmud places Eliezer on the side of purity at the beginning and at the end, as we shall see.
 18. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 60-61, interprets this narrative as a salutary warning against humiliating others, whereas Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2004), 174, reads it as a more sinister caution against breaking with consensus. I will opt for an ambivalent reading.
 19. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 6; the essay "Ethics and Spirit" was first published in 1952.
 20. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Alphonso Lingis, trans. (Pittsburg: Duquesne U P, 1969; original French, 1961), 199-200.
 21. See *Totality and Infinity*, 258-59, for Levinas's depiction of the Beloved, also dubbed the "Eternal Feminine," whom Levinas distinguishes sharply from the Desired Other, a distinction that may need to be questioned, as others have also noted.
 22. Reference is to the Latin text of *Liber Peristephanon* 3 in the Loeb edition of Prudentius's works. Translations are my own.

23. Regarding Levinas's ambivalent relation to Kabbalah, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Secrecy, Modesty, and the Feminine: Kabbalistic Traces in the Thought of Levinas," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 14 (2006): 195-224.
24. That body is, however, a richly allusive text, in Prudentius's artful inscription; see Jill Ross, "Dynamic Writing and Martyrs' Bodies in Prudentius' *Peristephanon*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3:3 (1995): 325-55, Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Imperial Reimaginings of Christian Origins: Epic in Prudentius's Poem for the Martyr Eulalia," in *Reimagining Christian Origins*, Elizabeth A. Castelli and Hal Tausig, eds. (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 173-84, and Cox Miller, "Differential Networks," 133-34.