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Against Autoimmune Self-Sacrifice: Religiosity, Messianicity, and Violence in Derrida's "Faith and Knowledge" and in Classical Rabbinic Judaism

Abstract:
In this essay, I argue that a comparison of Derrida's "Faith and Knowledge" to the texts and thought of classical rabbinic Judaism can illuminate new conceptual connections among the different elements of Derrida's thought. Both Derrida and the rabbinic texts can be viewed as affirming a type of "holding back" and "allowing the other to be," stances which Derrida links to "religiosity" and to "messianicity beyond all messianism." Moreover, the rabbinic texts appear to avoid the "autoimmune" reaction that Derrida sees as stemming from many sacrificial and self-sacrificial logics in which the self is problematically sacrificed in order to preserve the "unscathed" other. In addition, the rabbinic texts' stance concerning divine authorization for war and capital punishment help to illuminate Derrida's claim that the ostensibly "secular" wars of modern states are in fact better understood as "wars of religion."

Keywords:
Derrida, sacrifice, rabbinic Judaism, messianism, altruism, war

While Derrida, in his essay "Faith and Knowledge," sometimes uses the term "religion" as something problematic in a negative sense, in other places in his essay he seeks out "the possibility of religion" as something

desirable. This possibility of religion is associated with a modesty and a "holding back," which he links to a commitment to "stopping short" of causing injury to the absolutely other, thereby "allowing the other to be." This form of what he calls "religiosity" is closely tied for Derrida to the notion of "messianicity beyond all messianism." Thus, there is a connection for Derrida between this messianicity and a "religious" refusal to engage in violence against others.

In this essay, I argue that a comparison of Derrida's philosophical claims to the texts and thought of classical rabbinic Judaism can illuminate new conceptual connections among the different elements of Derrida's thought. The more explicitly theological language of the rabbinic texts will highlight the ways in which "merely human" judgment, specifically contrasted to divine judgment, must "religiously" refrain from certain acts of violence. At the same time, these texts point to ways in which the living human other can be upheld *without* slipping into the logics of sacrifice and self-sacrifice that worry Derrida. Moreover, I seek to show that classical rabbinic Judaism may itself consciously present a stance that conceptually parallels Derrida's "messianicity beyond all messianism." This orientation – alongside the rabbinic insistence that, in this age/this world, human beings cannot properly access the divine judgment or sacred authorization that is necessary for legitimate violence – helps to further highlight the ways in which ostensibly "secular" wars in the present day are also "wars of religion" (here in a negative sense). In this manner, the rabbinic texts serve to provide concrete literary-historical and theological analogues to the conceptual intuitions that Derrida puts forth in more philosophical and elliptical form in "Faith and Knowledge."

In terms of the methodology of my argument, I do not claim that Derrida is consciously drawing upon rabbinic texts, or that there is a direct influence of rabbinic conceptuality on his thought. While there may indeed be various potential direct or indirect historical links between Derrida and classical rabbinic literature, my aim here is simply to highlight the ways in which the two display parallel forms of logic with regard to the topics under consideration here. Thus, in addition to showing ways in which Derrida's way of thinking may have earlier historical precedents, the juxtaposition with Derrida also serves to bring out the "philosophical" potentials of the rabbinic texts, even though the latter may not express themselves in a typical philosophical manner. In addition, when I claim that classical rabbinic texts display patterns of thinking and reasoning similar to the ones put forth by Derrida in "Faith and Knowledge," I am not seeking to claim that there are no exceptions to these similarities within the broad corpus of classical rabbinic literature. Thus, for example, while I focus on counter-sacrificial logics in the rabbinic texts, it could potentially be the case that some classical rabbinic passages display impulses that are closer to a logic of sacrifice. Nevertheless, the patterns that I highlight do, I maintain, represent dominant tendencies in classical rabbinic thought, and the particular passages that I discuss can be viewed as more widely representative of these broader trends.

Religiosity, Self-sacrifice, and Sacrifice Suspended

Derrida identifies two distinct but related dynamics within what he describes as "a universal structure of religiosity," which is prevalent even in human communities that are not linked to a formal "religion."[1] On the one hand, there is a dynamic of an "absolute respect for life," but on the other hand, this very attitude structurally gives rise to a dynamic of "sacrificial vocation," which involves a tendency of violence toward living individ-

1) Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," 42-101. This note is for page 86 (subsequent references to this essay are provided parenthetically in-text through AR and page numbers). Original French: Derrida, "Foi et Savoir. Les deux sources de la 'religion' aux limites de la simple raison,' in *La Religion,* ed. Jacuqes Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Paris: Seuil, 1996), 9–86.

uals (86). While the first dynamic might appear to be something admirable, linked to themes of "respect for the other," the co-presence of the second dynamic points to Derrida's concerns about the implicit violence that can be contained in the seemingly "ethical" orientation of the first.

Derrida characterizes the first dynamic as linked to an attitude of holding-back and of restraint, of "respectful and inhibited abstention before what remains sacred mystery, and what ought to remain intact and inaccessible" (AR 86, and see also 68). While such language of "sacred mystery" might have initial connotations of Rudolf Otto's notion of the numinous, of a suprahuman divine sphere, Derrida goes on to use language that points back also to intra-human ethical relations. He describes this universal pattern of "religiosity" as "stop[ping] short of what should remain safe and sound, intact, unscathed, before what must be allowed to be what it ought to be, sometimes even at the cost of sacrificing itself [or 'sacrifice of self': *sacrifice du soi*][2] and in prayer: the other" (AR, 86). In saying that it is specifically "the other" that one should preserve unscathed and before which one should show restraint and self-sacrificial respect, Derrida keeps open the notion of the other as God or as the numinous, but simultaneously brings in Levinasian connotations of the other as the other human being by whom I am confronted in a dynamic of ethical responsibility. Derrida explicitly connects the "respect" of religiosity to "the absolute respect of life, the 'Thou shalt not kill' (at least thy neighbor, if not the living in general)" (AR, 86). The holding-back of religiosity, of not trespassing into that which is holy and off-limits to human beings, is thus linked to upholding the physical, living intactness of the human other, of holding-back from violence toward the other. In this regard, the attitude of respect for the life of the other would appear to mark a sharp "ethical" opposition to human tendencies toward violence and disrespect for the other, toward harming the other in pursuit of one's own "selfish" goals or desires.

However, even in his seemingly positive formulations of upholding the other through respect and restraint, Derrida gestures toward the potential violence lurking in the desire to preserve the other unscathed. In the quote above, he notes that the duty to uphold the other can involve *sacrifice du soi* – sacrificing oneself, or sacrifice of self. Derrida goes on to re-emphasize this element of self-sacrifice, describing it as "the price to pay for not injuring or wronging the absolute other… Absolute respect enjoins first and foremost sacrifice of self, of one's own most precious interest" (AR, 88). This dynamic of sacrifice directly brings in an element of violence into what was supposedly a holding-back from violence. Even if the violent act of sacrifice is supposedly directed at the self rather than at the other, this still brings into play a legitimation of "sacrifice of the living" (AR, 86). If the other is indeed to remain unscathed and intact, then it may sometimes be necessary to engage in violence to uphold the unscathed status of the other – which may then involve the sacrificial death of "other others," including oneself. Derrida describes this as the "violence of sacrifice in the name of non-violence" (AR, 88). In this dynamic, while human life is on one hand treated as sacred and off-limits, the commitment to preserving this status may involve violence toward human life – in other words, toward the very thing which was supposed to remain unharmed. In this sense, Derrida argues that the stance of holding-back before what is to remain unscathed and sacred in fact contains within itself "an intuitive violence … to that which remains unscathed" (AR, 86).

Derrida repeatedly uses the metaphor of "autoimmunity" to describe this pattern, drawing upon the image of autoimmune disorders wherein a person's immune response, ostensibly in an effort to keep the bodily system protected from harmful agents, attacks that bodily system itself, and functionally ends up causing harm to that very thing it was supposed to protect from harm.[3] This formulation of autoimmunity appears to be a reference to Emmanuel Levinas's goal, as stated in *Totality and Infinity*, of "apperceiving in discourse a non-allergic

2) See also the same phrase in Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 88.

3) See for example, Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 89.

relation with alterity."[4] However, in building on this orientation, Derrida also worries that in such an attempt to avoid allergic reaction to the other, an autoimmune (self-allergic) response can be provoked. Thus, Derrida indicates that the "absolute respect of life," characteristic of "religiosity," inherently brings with it a simultaneous tendency to sacrifice the lives of selves and of others. As such, while Derrida is in many ways drawn to philosophies of ethical respect for "the other" (as thematized in, prominently, Levinas's thought), and while Derrida himself champions the idea of upholding "every other" as "utterly other" (*tout autre est tout autre*) (AR, 70), he nevertheless worries – on precisely "ethical" grounds – that certain forms of such "respect for the other" can in fact generate violence in the name of ostensible opposition to violence.

With these double dynamics of "respect of life" and "sacrifice of the living" in mind, we can now turn to ways in which related patterns can be discerned within classical rabbinic literature. We will see that these texts contain a very strong, and even near-absolute, tendency of "Thou shalt not kill" – yet, I will argue, these texts simultaneously appear to neutralize the autoimmune response of "sacrificial violence" that concerns Derrida. In the classical rabbinic idea that each singular human being represents "the image of God," *tselem elohim*, we can discern elements that appear to conceptually parallel Derrida's notion of religiosity as holding-back. As Yair Lorberbaum has emphasized, in the rabbinic conception, the image of God corresponds not to the human soul or intellect, but to the physically embodied, living human being as a whole.[5] In this conceptual framework, preserving the intactness of the living individual is simultaneously an ethical and sacred-religious responsibility. Thus, in Tosefta Yevamot 8:7, we read, "Rabbi Akiva says: whoever sheds blood is regarded as one who annuls [*mevatel*] the [Divine] Image, as it is said, 'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in God's image did He make man' (Gen. 9:6)."[6] Here, causing the death of an individual human being is described as "annulling the image of God"; because of the direct connection between God and the human being as image of God, causing the death of an individual is not simply a "finite" offence, but is also an "absolute" injury insofar as it affects God as well. Thus, the requirement to hold back from causing harm to a living human individual is a matter of "absolute respect": the otherness that is to be respected and left intact in this framework is simultaneously God's absolute otherness, and the individual human being's otherness as the image of God.

Likewise, in Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5, we read,

> Therefore man was created alone … to declare the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, for when a human being stamps many coins from one stamp, they all resemble one other; but the king of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, stamps each human being with the stamp of the first human being, but no one of them is similar to his fellow. Therefore each and every one is obligated to say, "For my sake was the world created."

The "stamp of the first human being" corresponds to creation in God's image, and yet this seeming "common feature" in fact manifests as the uniqueness and non-sameness of each individual. Since God's absolute singularity is thus conceived of as directly bound to each individual human in his or her uniqueness, we can view the rabbinic texts as putting forth, in theological terms, a version of the Derridean notion that every other is

4) Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*: *An Essay on Exteriority*, 47, see also 51, 197, 199, 203, 305. Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas,* 18, 27, 91, also engages with Levinas's concept of "non-allergic" engagement with the other.

5) See Lorberbaum, *In God's Image: Myth, Theology, and Law in Classical Judaism*.

6) See Ibid., 165ff for further discussion of this passage.

absolutely other.[7] While there could be forms of religious thought that assign absolute otherness to God alone, and not to the individual living and embodied human, it is notable that both Derrida's notion of religiosity and classical rabbinic thought extend this otherness from the divine to the ethical sphere of human life.

Moreover, the obligation of respecting the image of God extends even to letting oneself be killed rather than injuring another person. Here, however, we can already discern an important difference from Derrida's notion of "sacrifice of self" for the sake of the other. The Talmud asserts,

> In the case of murder, one should let oneself be slain rather than transgress [*yehareg ve-'al ya'avor*]… A man came before Rava and said to him: "The governor of my town has ordered me: 'Go and kill so-and-so; if not, I will kill you!'" [Rava] answered him: "Let yourself be killed, but do not kill. For how do you know your blood is redder? Perhaps that man's blood is redder."[8]

Here, the other person has been designated as an enemy by the reigning governmental powers, which might, to some, seem like a legitimate justification for taking life, and, in addition, one's own life is at stake. Yet, the text indicates that one should let oneself be killed rather than take the life of the other person. In the rabbinic conception, there is no situation that would warrant taking the life of an innocent person, as the latter remains absolutely off-limits and must be absolutely respected. Accordingly, any of one's own individual or collective desires or projects that would necessitate such killing must be renounced in the name of refraining from harming the other.

At first glance, this could appear to be an example of the "sacrifice of self" that is "the price to pay for not injuring or wronging the other." Importantly, however, the text does *not* present a framework wherein the other is upheld as more valuable than the self. There is not a positive imperative to sacrifice the self for the sake of the other. Rather, what is presented remains in a "negative" framework, as an opposition to other-sacrifice: namely, that one should *not* sacrifice the other for the sake of the self. The text does not say that the other's blood is inherently "redder" than one's own, so that the latter should be sacrificed for the sake of the former, but simply that one's own blood is not redder than the other's, such that one lacks a positive basis for taking the other's life. In principle, one should uphold and preserve one's own life as image of God just as firmly as one upholds and preserves the life of the other as image of God; it is only when faced with a choice between letting oneself be killed (a passive act which involves no transgressive violation on one's own part) and killing the other (an active act which involves grave transgressive violation) that one must choose the former, even though both choices are highly undesirable. As such, the refraining-action of "let yourself be killed" in this extreme situation differs from a positive injunction of "sacrifice yourself for the sake of the other," in which the other is conceptually prioritized to the sacrificial detriment of self.

In this manner, the rabbinic texts may display a type of respect for finite life as the image of God that, while still representing a radical stance against killing, avoids the sacrificial logic present in Derrida's discussion of the unscathed. The "non-unscathed" quality of classical rabbinic understanding of respect for life can also be seen in the concept of *rodef* or pursuer. In the case of a person who is pursuing after another with intent to kill or rape, the rabbinic texts state that one should act to stop the pursuer, and prevent the act of killing/rape, even at the cost of the pursuer's life.[9] Sharp restrictions are put on this act of legitimate killing (it is legitimate

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7) Cf. Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 87: "Thus, respect of life in the discourses of religion concerns 'human life' only insofar as it bears witness in some manner, to the infinite transcendence of that which is worth more than it (divinity, the sacrosanctness of the law)."

8) Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 74a.

9) See Mishnah Sanhedrin 8:7.

only in the immediate moment in which the pursuer is about to kill/rape the other, and is forbidden if any non-lethal means of stopping the pursuer are available),[10] but, at least conceptually, the legitimacy of violently taking the pursuer's life to prevent him from fulfilling his intention to become a murderer/rapist is preserved. In this presentation, the life of the pursuer, while still highly protected, does not remain *completely or absolutely* off-limits or unscathed: if one is pursued by a *rodef*, one does not in this case sacrifice oneself for the sake of upholding the life of the pursuing other. Accordingly, this narrow or even infinitesimal exception to the prohibition on killing may enable the non-generation of the autoimmune response that conceptually results from an *absolute* respect for life. Moreover, in the formulation of the "law of the pursuer" in the Mishnah, it is stated that it is the pursuer who is to be "saved even at the cost of his life" – in this sense, the act of killing the pursuer is presented as carried out not for the sake of preserving the life of the pursued, but for the sake of preventing ("saving") the *pursuer* from committing an ultimate transgression.[11] This likewise enables a conceptual departure from the dynamic that worries Derrida, wherein life is sacrificed for the sake of keeping life unscathed.

In addition to the category of the *rodef*, another aspect of classical rabbinic approaches to "thou shalt not kill" can also be seen as contributing to neutralizing the problematic generation of "violence in the name of preserving the sacred." The biblical text presents a number of dynamics wherein, seemingly, human life is to be sacrificed for the sake of upholding the sacred. Thus, the death penalty is prescribed as the proper response to violation of certain divine commandments. Likewise, warfare in the biblical text is presented in "sacral" terms, so that the imperative to uphold God's sacred community gives rise to self-sacrifice of Israelite warriors as well as other-sacrifice of the Israelites' human opponents. Both of these forms of taking life – capital punishment and war – are also presented in classical rabbinic literature in sacral, and thus sacrificial, terms.[12] On the face of it, then, this might seem like the autoimmune flip-side to the rabbinic presentation of human life as the image of God.

However, in the classical rabbinic framework, these sacrificial-divine practices of taking life are understood as all having been explicitly *suspended* by the same God who issued them in the first place. The rabbinic texts the enactment of these practices requires direct authorization from God in the moment of enactment. Thus, in order for Israel to engage in capital punishment, the Temple, as the dwelling place of God's presence, must be standing and its priesthood operating. Likewise, in order for Israel to engage in war, direct divine authorization must be given via the priestly oracles of the Urim and Tumim. However, the rabbinic texts assert that, in the wake of the destruction of the First and Second Temples, Israel cannot engage in such activities in the present era, as the necessary vehicles of divine communication and authorization, as well as the holy spirit of authoritative prophecy, have been removed from Israel by God.[13] Thus, rather than seeking to reject or negate these practices and the sacrificial logic inherent to them, the rabbinic texts construct a conceptual framework that upholds the practices in theory and in principle, while definitively suspending them in practice, thereby leaving Israel in this age, in this world, without recourse to legitimate enactment of such violence. In this manner, rather than the "violence of sacrifice in the name of non-violence" that Derrida links to the problematic religiosity that he highlights, we instead have here an instance of practical non-violence in the name

10) See Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 74a. See also Tosefta Sanhedrin 11:10; and Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 49a.

11) For further discussion of these dimensions of the *rodef*, see Weiss, "Direct Divine Sanction, the Prohibition of Bloodshed, and the Individual as Image of God in Classical Rabbinic Literature," 25–29.

12) See Lorberbaum, *In God's Image*, 214 on parallels between capital punishment and sacrifice vis-à-vis atonement.

13) On the suspension of the necessary authorization for such forms of violence, see Weiss, "Direct Divine Sanction," 31–32, 36–38; see also Weiss, "Walter Benjamin and the Antinomianism of Classical Rabbinic Law" and Weiss, "'And God Said': Do Biblical Commands to Conquer Land Make People More Violent, or Less?".

of (specifically textual-theoretical) sacrificial violence! In this regard, rather than generating a violent autoimmune reaction, we might say that the rabbinic approach functions as a "vaccine": by preserving the discourse of sacrificial violence in a "weakened" (suspended) form, it has the effect of preventing actualized sacrificial violence in practice.

Thus, in each of these rabbinic examples – in the case of letting oneself be killed rather than annul the other as image of God, in the case of the *rodef*, and in the case of the suspension of capital punishment and warfare in the absence of the Temple and of prophecy – the practical duty of refraining from taking the human life of the other remains, but without the sacrificial and self-sacrificial *logic* that Derrida presents as a core danger of "religiosity." Derrida presents certain aspects of religiosity positively and seems to affirm the impulse to "let the other be," but worries that problematic forms of apparently letting the other be can result in violence to the self and then in turn to others. By contrast, it may be that the rabbinic conceptuality enables a socially-politically radical upholding of the other – the desirable aspect of "religiosity" – yet without simultaneously generating sacrificial violence. By upholding the conceptual-theoretical possibility of legitimate violence toward the other while suspending it in practice, the other that one should "let be" and that one "shall not kill" is precisely a "scathed," rather than "unscathed," other.

Rabbinic Messianicity Without Messianism

In comparing rabbinic conceptuality to Derrida's concerns about religiosity, we found that the rabbinic texts could uphold Derrida's positive regard for refraining from harming the other, but without the sacrificial violence that he sees as often accompanying the latter. We find similar parallels to Derrida's notion of openness to the other and letting the other come, which he characterizes "messianicity without messianism." Derrida describes this orientation as "the opening to the future or to the coming of the other as the advent of justice, but without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration" (AR, 56). Here, the basic notion of "messianism" involves an opening to the future and to the coming of the other as the advent of justice; however, Derrida holds that most forms of messianism involve an improper relation to that other. The messianicity for which he calls thus involves a taking-away of horizon of expectation and prophetic prefiguration. For Derrida, this negative move enables the messianic future and the coming of the other to be "left to be," without imposing the elements of one's own self and one's own concrete expectations upon them. He describes the stance of messianicity as "a decision that can consist of letting the other come and that can take the apparently passive form of the *other's decision:* even there where it appears in itself, in me, the decision is always that of the other, which does not exonerate me of responsibility" (AR, 56). Here, Derrida indicates that the decision to "let the other come" is an active one, even though this decision results in placing oneself in a position of apparent passivity. This orientation of letting-be with regard to the other-to-come resonates strongly with the restraint, holding-back, and respect for the other that characterizes Derrida's notion of religiosity. It is through a holding-back that the coming of the *other* is truly able to be the coming of the other. In this manner, the coming remains the other's decision, and thus remains intact. By contrast, the implication seems to be that a failure to hold back would transform the coming of the other into something else – a form of self, rather than other, which would in turn, through this transformation, preclude the actual coming of the other. Thus, the absolute respect and letting-be with which I must approach the ethical other before me in the present must likewise characterize my approach to the messianic other-to-come.

If, for Derrida, messianicity without messianism is that which lets the other come, this would imply that other forms of messianism do not let the other come. There is something in the "horizon of expectation" and "prophetic prefiguration" that introjects aspects of the self and of immanence, and it is only by removing

these that the other can actually be allowed to come. Derrida further indicates that which must be removed when he states that the type of "expectation" linked with messianicity "is not and ought not to be certain of anything, either through knowledge, consciousness, conscience, foreseeability, or any kind of program as such" (AR, 56). The importance of distancing messianicity from knowledge and from any kind of program can be seen as a means of avoiding "false messianisms." If a person is certain that the advent of true justice can be gained via a particular program of action, this would then justify the person in seeking to enact that program, even if this causes injury to some unfortunate other individuals. The program of bringing about "the advent of true justice" would take priority over other "mundane" concerns, and accordingly those who happen to be standing in its path may regrettably have to suffer. Likewise, those who fail to affirm the relevant program or knowledge thereby cast themselves as opponents of the advent of justice, and thus need to be compelled to comply or be forced aside. The effect of this will be that one seeks to bring about the future-to-come through one's own will, at the expense of the otherness of the coming of the other, as well as at the expense of the individual others who stand in the path of the specific program of messianism and who must be sacrificed for the higher purpose and the greater good.

By contrast, a form of messianicity that does hold back from claiming access to knowledge or to a specific program can remain open to the future, while allowing it to remain separate from one's own willful forcing of the desired end. Derrida describes this orientation as a form of "faith," precisely because it does not lay claim to any knowledge about precisely how this future will come about: the attitude of faith thus corresponds to respecting the otherness of the other. Such faith is in an important sense an active stance (even though it involves an apparently passive letting-be), in that it is an active commitment to refrain from trespassing on the otherness of the other.

Derrida notably claims that this messianicity "belongs properly to no Abrahamic religion" (AR, 56). By this statement, Derrida presumably means that he himself has not encountered this approach to messianicity in any historical tradition that he has studied.[14] However, it would in theory be possible for a previous religious tradition to have put forth a messianicity abstracted from all messianisms – this possibility would remain a historical and empirical question, rather than one that is ruled out a priori. I argue here that the texts of classical rabbinic Judaism can be plausibly construed as having done precisely this.[15] First of all, these texts put forth a notion in which the messianic redemption lies specifically in the future; it is not identified with any past or present person or program. Thus, because the messianic future is temporally transcendent and with no immanence that is yet present, there is no basis for a claim of knowledge of the other who is to come. There is no call to follow this or that specific messianic figure; rather, the attitude appears to be that Israel should leave the sending of the Messiah to God alone.[16] Indeed, one can view the classical rabbinic texts, redacted in the wake of

14) Robert Gibbs notes Derrida's claim to distinguish his concept of messianicity from any historical religious traditions, and goes on to connect Derrida's thought to messianic approaches of earlier Jewish thinkers and texts. However, he does not specifically address the question of whether or not classical Jewish texts might prefigure Derrida's notion of "messianicity without messianism." See Gibbs, "Messianic Epistemology," 121–22.

15) In a manner that parallels and complements my approach, Martin Kavka also argues, against Derrida's claim of novelty vis-à-vis previous religious tradition, that certain rabbinic texts can be viewed as meeting the criteria of Derrida's concept of the messianic. Kavka engages primarily with Derrida's *Spectres of Marx,* however, rather than with "Faith and Knowledge," and the rabbinic theme on which he focuses is that of mourning, rather than that of lack of messianic knowledge. See Kavka, *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy*, 195–97, and more broadly 193–221. See also Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania*, 159–61.

16) On the rabbinic stance of such messianic patience, see Neusner, *Vanquished Nation, Broken Spirit: The Virtues of the Heart in Formative Judaism*.

the Bar Kokhba revolt, as precisely abstracting messianicity away from any concrete messianism: the rejection of Bar Kokhba leads the rabbis not to affirm a different concrete messianic figure, but to distance Israel's faith from willful attachment to *any* present (or finitely-future) messianic claimant.[17] Thus, Israel is to put itself in a proper position precisely by a negative holding-back from attachment to any such claimant.[18] Instead, Israel is to occupy itself actively with the concrete religious and ethical tasks of Torah, *mitzvot*, and *teshuvah*, while simultaneously retaining faith – without any basis in certainty – that God will send the messiah and the reign of justice "in His own good time."[19] This is thus a stance of activity, on the one hand, while simultaneously an attitude of passivity that lets the coming be the "decision of the other," rather than one that involve the imposition of Israel's own will.

Thus, whereas the forms of messianisms put forth claims of certainty and knowledge, the classical rabbinic stance seems to say that it is only by recognizing and acknowledging the current *lack* of knowledge and certainty – as exemplified by the rabbinic conception of Israel's exilic status – that one can properly align oneself to the coming of the messianic future. Such a stance can be seen as manifested in the rabbinic admonition, "Blasted be the bones of those who calculate the End."[20] Instead of seeking to gain calculated knowledge as to when the messiah will come, refraining from such attempts at knowledge leaves one in an appropriate "open" orientation. And, it is precisely this non-grasping openness and non-predictiveness that in fact leads to the true coming of the messiah: as the Talmud states, "Three things come when the mind is diverted [*be-heyseach ha-daʿat*]: the messiah, a found article, and a scorpion."[21] With regard to the messiah, the goal is not to acquire *daʿat,* graspable knowledge, but rather actively to remove any pretense to such knowledge.

Moreover, this affirmed lack of knowledge goes along with an ethical holding-back from injuring the other: while a claim of true messianic knowledge could justify using force against opponents of the corresponding true messianic program, Israel's self-proclaimed lack of messianic knowledge means that it must refrain from any programs that would injure or kill the human other.[22] Thus, upholding the otherness of the messianic future corresponds to upholding the absolute otherness of each human other as the image of God: with regard to both, one must let the other be and let the other come.

Given this description of the messianic stance of classical rabbinic literature, it seems that Derrida may have been incorrect in his claim that messianicity abstracted from messianism is not found in any of the Abrahamic religions. Moreover, if the texts of classical rabbinic literature do indeed serve as a precedent for Derrida's conceptuality, then we can also view Derrida's thought as a quasi-secularized version of the classical rabbinic stance. Because Derrida's own comments are often elliptic and not fully spelled out, further examination of the more explicitly theological language of the classical rabbinic texts could enable thinkers today to develop a richer and expanded philosophical account of such messianicity than would be available via Derrida's texts alone.

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17) Note that in "Faith and Knowledge," Derrida does not equate his formulation of a "messianicity beyond all messianism" with a "messianism without messiah." The primary issue has to do with present identification or present knowledge of the messianic – knowledge of the present in contrast to faith in the not-yet – rather than with whether or not the future-to-come involves a personal figure. As such, the rabbinic notion of a messianically-future (rather than an already-present or finitely-future) messiah need not be seen as contradicting Derrida's notion.

18) Cf. Moltmann's reflections ("Israel's 'no'," 28ff) on the messianic significance of this "negative" stance.

19) This formulation, with regard to Jewish messianic hopes, is borrowed from Schwarzschild, "On the Theology of Jewish Survival," 97.

20) Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 97b.

21) Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 97a.

22) Israel's lack of messianic knowledge parallels the suspension, in the rabbinic framework, of war and capital punishment in relation to the removal of authoritative prophecy and the holy spirit, as discussed above.

These parallels between Derrida and the rabbinic texts also enable us to gain a better understanding of another of Derrida's provocative assertions: "Wars or military 'interventions' led by the Judeo-Christian West in the name of the best causes (of international law, democracy, the sovereignty of peoples of nations or of states, even of humanitarian imperatives) are they not also, from a certain side, wars of religion?" (AR, 63). He follows this question by referring to Carl Schmitt in order to assert that "our idea of democracy … with all its associated juridical, ethical and political concepts, including those of the sovereign state, of the citizen-subject, of public and private space" remains, in an important sense, "religious" (AR, 64). Here, the notion of the "sovereign state" in particular is linked to the notion of war. For Derrida, the various "causes" that lead modern states to war are ultimately "religious" causes, even if those states express themselves in the language of seemingly "secular" justifications. His logic here seems to be: for Derrida, the desirable aspects of both messianicity and religiosity involve a holding back, a letting-be of the other. By contrast, any "cause" that claims to have the right to sacrifice human others in the name of that cause inherently enacts the structure of a concrete messianism and is thus "religious" in a manner that goes beyond the holding-back dimensions of religiosity and messianicity. Only a claim to a transcendent or divine knowledge could justify causing sacrificing the human other for a "higher order," and thus any institutions that claim the right to take the lives of others in this manner are implicitly and functionally laying claim to such divine authorization and knowledge. By contrast, both Derrida and the rabbinic texts align themselves with an orientation that, possessing "merely human" capacities, does not lay claim to access to such knowledge or conferred authorization, and so must refrain from such actions and instead let the other be.

In this sense, whether a war is enacted on an explicitly messianic or religious basis in the name of God, or on an implicitly messianic and religious basis in the name of the modern sovereign state, such a war remains a structurally "religious" action, but one that undermines the sort of religiosity and messianicity that Derrida seeks to uphold. The attempt to distinguish "religious" motivations for war from "secular" motivations for war is thus ultimately a red herring and a false dichotomy: despite the supposed secularizations of modernity, we are surrounded today by what are mere variations on the same structural theme of messianic-religious war. From the perspective of classical rabbinic literature, "causes" for war of either type represents a human appropriation of divine status. In failing to respect the otherness of God's transcendent authority, such actions accordingly end up annulling the otherness of God's image in one's fellow human beings as well. This is the orientation that the rabbinic texts attribute to "the nations of the world," and which they see as Israel's task to resist. To be sure, refraining from such structural messianisms in the name of messianicity is a risky stance, entailing the possibility of "letting oneself be killed rather than kill" (although not in the sense of self-sacrifice for the unscathed). Nevertheless, both Derrida and the rabbis seems to prefer to align themselves with a form of mere "faith" that stands in contrast to false or idolatrous claims to war-justifying "knowledge."

Thus, reading Derrida in light of the rabbinic framework serves to point toward a radical removal of the typical division between "secular" and "religious" stances – a division that Derrida himself also seeks to trouble. Instead, what remains is choice between two forms of religious or messianic orientations: on the one hand, there is a religious-messianic orientation of concrete messianism that knowingly identifies one or another existing figures, programs, or institutions as the path for bringing about the advent of justice, and which justifies the sacrifice of human others in light of that knowing identification. On the other hand, there is a religious-messianic orientation of religiosity and messianicity which abstracts from all messianism and which thereby upholds and refrains from injuring the otherness of the human other and of the other to come – and thus, in Derrida's terms, "liberates a universal rationality" aligned not with knowledge but with faith (AR, 57). The difference between these two stances is not indicated by whether or not one uses typical

"religious" terminology, but rather by one's practical stance, by whether or not one affirms or refrains from actions that result in the sacrifice of the other and/or of the self. If, as I have argued, prominent conceptual patterns in classical rabbinic literature align with a specifically non-sacrificial logic, then further engagement with these texts may generate new tools and resources for constructing and liberating the type of "universal rationality" that Derrida awaits.

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