

We Know Only Men: Reading Emmanuel Levinas On The Rez

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What is to be done after catastrophe?

I did not, a careful reader will note, say *a* catastrophe or *some kind of* catastrophe or even *the* catastrophe. I offered the word no adornment, neither the qualification of an article nor the sheltering cloth of a modifying clause. Rather, I used its most naked form, “catastrophe,” by which I mean the kind of totalizing event that repels any casual attempt at diminution or even explanation, that renders obsolete whole mental models of the world, and that, in some other language, would insist upon a perpetual and portentous capitalization: “Catastrophe.”

What is to be done after such a thing? After Catastrophe?

My family hails from Stilwell, a small town at the heart of the Cherokee Reservation in Oklahoma. Obesity, diabetes, and addiction, alongside inadequate social services, have conspired to give Adair County, where Stilwell is located, the lowest life expectancy of any county in the nation (according to the *Washington Post*). When I was a child, my father worked for the tribe, overseeing its economic development programs; my grandfather was a career employee of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, working first in agriculture and then, later, housing, while my grandmother’s family, the Adairs, are numerous enough to give the county its very name. In the Ozark foothills of eastern Oklahoma, my roots run deep.

For eight generations, every member of my family has been buried at Stilwell’s cemetery, unironically known as New Hope. The cemetery is famous as the terminus of the Trail of Tears, the forced migration of the Cherokee people to Indian Territory. Just outside the main gate of New

Hope is a slight, rather weedy depression, where, in the 1830s, newly arrived Cherokees were given supplies and told to find some land on which to make a new home. Most of the newcomers found their way into the rugged hills surrounding Hungry Mountain where, to this day, just off Cherry Tree Road, native speakers of the Cherokee language can still be found. But a few Cherokees decided to create a small township — Stilwell — near the terminus, and, a few years later, a distant relative of mine, Red Watt Adair, born in 1791, was the first person interred at the local graveyard built over the Trail of Tears' end point. Red Watt was lucky, in a way: he made it to Indian Territory, no mean feat, as, of the 16,000 Cherokees who set out on the Trail of Tears, more than 6,000 did not survive the trek.

When I was seven years old, my grandfather, for whom I am named, took me to New Hope. I am told that this was not my first visit to the burial ground, but it is the one that, through the dark glass of memory, I first recall. And, on that day, I most remember my grandfather pointing out the small plot of land where I would someday be buried, near where he and my own parents would ultimately be placed in the ground and surrounded by the resting places of dozens of my relatives. To be clear, this was far from macabre or sinister, as some, maybe most, might think. Rather, when experience distilled to understanding, I realized my grandfather was trying to teach me a lesson about the importance of community, service, and legacy. Although we walked among weather-effaced tombstones and spoke of that which the poet Virgil calls “the mortal things that touch one’s heart,” what my grandfather really wanted me to know was the enduring power of human connection. By linking me, both metaphorically and physically, to past generations, he hoped to anchor me in a shared history that insists upon an equally shared responsibility toward other people; he impressed upon me that my life is but one small link in an invisible but very real chain that extends backward in time and also forward into the future.

There is a Cherokee word, *ga-du-gi*, that captures this sense of interconnectedness. It is unique to the Cherokee language but can be loosely, if imperfectly, translated as “the community working together for the betterment of all.” For the tribe, *ga-du-gi* represents more than just a cultural practice; it’s an informal but necessary philosophy, born from ordeal and displacement, that speaks to the fundamental human need for kinship and mutual support. On the Reservation, families collaborate to build homes for those in need, pooling labor and resources in a spirit of mutual aid; community gardens are cultivated collectively, with the harvest shared among elders and low-income families; volunteers organize to clean up local waterways; and in times of personal hardship, community members rally to provide emotional and financial support. If no grand theory or body of systematic philosophy underwrites *ga-du-gi* – the Cherokees have no Aristotle or Kant – it is no less appealing for lacking such axiomatic foundations. In fact, as I have grown older, I have come to believe that this absence might be its very strength, and, even when younger, I suspected that the ethical basis of Cherokee life – and maybe all life – rests on something more powerful than deductive logic: an innate sense of human solidarity.

Tucked between the Rhone River, slinking its way toward the Mediterranean Sea, and the Lignon River, a tributary of the Atlantic-bound Loire, the small French village of Le Chambon sur Lignon has the rare distinction of being an entire community recognized by Yad Vashem as *Righteous Among The Nations*. And the designation is doubtless merited. In the treacherous moral climate of Vichy France, the townspeople of Le Chambon saved 5,000 Jewish refugees from Nazi arrest. Today, the community’s name is, across the globe, a byword for moral courage, not to mention physical bravery.

Le Chambon villagers were, mostly, Huguenots, a group of Protestants who, in the first decades of the Reformation, adhered to the stark, demanding strictures of Calvinism. For their faith, heretical in the emerging France of Cardinal Richelieu and, later, Louis XIV, the Huguenots faced relentless persecution throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. After the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572, still one of the most notorious historical examples of sectarian violence, many Huguenots fled their homes in the cities into the remote Cevennes, a mountainous area in the foothills of the Alps that is known even today as *Le Desert*, a moniker belied by the verdant topography if justified by the region's inaccessibility. Several small towns were established by the religious exiles, and, alongside Saint-Jean-du-Gard, LaSalle, and Mialet, Le Chambon has stood for centuries as one outpost in the Cevennes's so-called "Huguenot Trail."

When the Nazi Occupation began in 1940, the villagers of Le Chambon were poised both by principle and precedent to be a center of resistance. The previous decade had already seen Le Chambon welcome dissidents from Franco's Spain and Mussolini's Italy. But the contingent nature of events suggests that Le Chambon's famed role in protecting Jewish refugees was anything but inexorable. Indeed, an entirely different arc might have been predicted when the town's two leading ministers were quickly arrested and deported to internment camps. For Pastor André Trocmé and Pastor Edouard Theis, Christian pacifism and even civil disobedience to unjust laws had long been part of their catechism. As war brewed in Europe, the two clerics began to organize a clandestine network of shelter and transport for the expected arrival of Jews fleeing the Final Solution. When Vichy authorities, finally alerted to the looming presence of Jewish refugees, confronted Trocmé, he demurred, responding simply, "We do not know what a Jew is. We only know men." A noble and profound sentiment, one as worthy today as when first uttered. But under Gestapo interrogation, it was a warrant for imprisonment.

With the arrests of Le Chambon's leaders, it was unclear who, if anyone, would continue the village's surreptitious logistical preparations. Fortunately, the wives of the two pastors felt compelled to continue their jailed spouses' still nascent work. They began approaching their neighbors, both farmers and villagers, to ask if they would be willing to help when the time came. Yet, despite the traditions of Le Chambon, the wives' entreaties were not enthusiastically answered – at least initially. Historians recount that people weighed their duty to protect their own families against the sympathy they genuinely felt for the refugees. To shelter and feed the fleeing Jews was to run a great risk. Villagers would furrow their brows, expressing concern for the plight of the refugees, but their voices would falter as they spoke of the dangers. “We have our own little ones to think of,” a mother might say, her eyes darting nervously to her children playing nearby or “If the Gestapo were to find out. . . .” As the women trudged from door to door, they found that, for many, the abstract notion of helping strangers paled in comparison to the visceral need to protect one's own flesh and blood.

But whether the community was prepared or not, Jewish refugees, desperation etched on their gaunt faces, began to trickle into Le Chambon. Faced with living, breathing people in need, the pastors' wives redoubled their efforts. For their part, the citizens of Le Chambon now found themselves locking eyes with real people - not debate hypotheticals - whose very lives hung in the balance of their decision. In these moments of raw human connection, something remarkable happened. Despite the unchanged risks, few in Le Chambon could bring themselves to turn away those standing before them. A burly farmer might hesitate, conflict evident in his eyes, before wordlessly ushering the refugees into his home. A village shopkeeper might glance furtively up and down the street before quickly passing a loaf of bread to a starving child. What's more, these initial acts of kindness often blossomed into sustained commitment. Having extended a helping hand once, villagers found themselves drawn into a web of compassion that lasted throughout the war.

The villagers of Le Chambon didn't start with a grand ethical principle and then act upon it. Rather, much like the Cherokee, their actions came first – a bowl of soup offered, a hiding place revealed – and from these tangible gestures, they derived their moral stance. As more villagers chose to help, a new, unarticulated social norm emerged, one that prioritized benevolence and solidarity over fear and self-preservation. It was, if you will, ga-du-gi, but with a different accent.

Why do some people risk everything to help one another? What lonely impulse drives the hero and spurs the saint?

I improbably discovered Emmanuel Levinas in a small bookstore in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The shop is located not far from the site of the notorious 1921 Race Massacre and is situated at the intersection of the Cherokee, Muscogee, and Osage Reservations. Levinas, born in Lithuania and educated there in a Jewish *gymnasium*, made his career in Paris, where he is now widely recognized as a lion of continental philosophy. He survived the Second World War, but not without anguish: save for his wife and daughter, his entire family was killed, alongside 95% of Lithuania's Jews. Over the last twenty years, Levinas's work has been increasingly translated into English, and, whether through random chance or providential act, I found his *Nine Talmudic Readings* while lazily scanning the high, dusty shelves of Magic City Books one smoldering July afternoon. A collection of lectures on various Talmudic passages that were delivered over twenty years to the Colloque des Intellectuels Juifs de Langue Française, the book proved revelatory to me, although, at least superficially, my own life and culture could not be more distant from that of Levinas or the long-dead rabbis whose biblical interpretations he methodically parsed.

In Levinas's close reading, the Talmud, as a cornerstone of Jewish literature and law, emerges as a profound testament to the resilience of culture in the face of a catastrophe that brought displacement and potential erasure. Compiled in the centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple, the Talmud serves as both a response to, and a bulwark against, the forces of cultural dissolution. Its pages inscribe the urgent task of preserving Jewish traditions, laws, and ways of life in a context divorced from their original geographic and institutional foundations. The Talmud's extensive discussions on how to maintain religious practices without the Temple, its reinterpretation of biblical laws for new socio-political realities, and its emphasis on study as a form of worship all speak to its function as a portable homeland for a people in diaspora. Moreover, the very process of its creation – the recording of oral traditions, the layering of commentaries, and the fostering of debate – reflects a communal effort to ensure cultural continuity in the absence of physical stability. For Levinas, the Talmud stands not merely as a religious text, but as a paradigm for how a civilization can maintain its core identity and values even when uprooted from its native soil. Living with the legacy of Indian removal, I found the lectures to chime an unsettling chord.

Levinas also distills in *Nine Talmudic Readings* a profound vision of *universal* ethics from the *particular* texts of his own faith. It, too, resonated with my own experience. At the center of his program lies a penetrating insight: in truly encountering another person we confront their vulnerability, their suffering, and their infinite worth. And this engagement with what Levinas calls “the face of the Other” imposes upon us an inescapable, primordial moral obligation – one that precedes conscious choice and that exists beyond our capacity to rationalize or fully comprehend it. Levinas believes that, due to the unpredictability and complexity of this direct engagement with the Other, ethical action must always precede full understanding; we are, he says, called to respond with our hands to what we cannot fully grasp with our minds. What makes Levinas unique is his conviction that the encounter with the Other is not merely a catalyst for ethical behavior, but, rather,

is the very foundation of ethics itself. Departing from traditional views, which place ontology (“what is?”) or epistemology (“how do we know?”) as the first step in philosophical inquiry, Levinas finds support for his radical stance in the Hebrew phrase *na’aseh v’nishma* (“We will do, and we will hear”) from Exodus. This biblical passage, frequently cited in his writings, suggests to Levinas that healing and renewal begin not with perfect comprehension of past injustices or present challenges but instead start with a readiness to act, engage, and shoulder responsibility for one’s community. The *saying* antedates the *said*, to use Levinas’s own gnomic phrase.

If I found Levinas’s book by serendipity, it has, over time, become for me an indispensable guide to understanding my life in Oklahoma and far beyond. It has illuminated not only my understanding of Cherokee traditions and the complexities of Reservation life but also my perspective on broader issues of social justice, community resilience, and the human capacity for compassion. In a world increasingly fractured by ideological divisions and cultural misunderstandings, Levinas’s emphasis on the ethical demand presented by the face of the Other has offered me a framework for reimagining my relationship with those around me and challenged me to respond to human vulnerability with immediate, practical action rather than detached philosophical contemplation. Perhaps most surprisingly, I’ve found that Levinas’s ideas, born from his own experiences of suffering and exile, also echo the Cherokee concept of *ga-du-gi*, suggesting, to me at least, that, across vast gulfs of culture and history, there exist universal truths about our ethical obligations to one another. This unexpected convergence of Jewish and Cherokee thought has led me to ponder whether the most profound ethical insights are not the product of abstract reasoning or even singular histories, but rather can emerge in many very different places as common responses to existential threats and catastrophic events.

In Hebrew, the word Shoah means “catastrophe.” That the Shoah was Catastrophe – an event unmooring all previous buoys of meaning, of understanding – can scarcely be gainsaid; it stands without comparison as the culminating disaster of civilization. For the Cherokee a century before, the Trail of Tears – where more than one-third of the tribe was to die from starvation, exhaustion, and exposure – was also a world-historical Catastrophe. The forced march of thousands of Cherokees from their ancestral lands in the southeastern United States to unfamiliar territory in present-day Oklahoma was a devastating upheaval that shattered families, ravaged the population, and severed deep-rooted connections to sacred lands and cultural sites. Removal to Oklahoma brought in its train the erosion of the Cherokee’s traditional knowledge systems and the fragmentation of social structures that had evolved over millennia. The government-sanctioned ethnic cleansing, justified through a veneer of paternalistic policy, fundamentally altered the demographic and cultural landscape of the Cherokee, setting the stage for struggles over sovereignty, identity, and justice that are unresolved even to this day.

As I read Levinas’s Holocaust-haunted lectures in my small Oklahoma home, the examples of my own Cherokee people as well as the distant village of Le Chambon, known to me only through books, came unprompted to mind: how, despite the differences in time and place, the two communities nevertheless confronted Catastrophe in a remarkably similar way and how both exemplified many of the themes Levinas identified in his readings of the Talmud. The Cherokees did not ask of their hungry neighbor whether his plight was brought on through negligence or misfeasance; they simply provided food. The villagers of Le Chambon did not question whether the strangers at their doors were good husbands or dutiful children; they simply offered shelter. The Cherokees did not leave their elders to fend for themselves; they cultivated community gardens and shared the harvest. The villagers of Le Chambon did not turn away children in danger; they created safe havens in homes and farms. The Cherokees did not break apart and abandon their tribal

traditions in the atomizing face of displacement; they embraced a network of mutual responsibility and joined hands to dance around ceremonial fires. The villagers of Le Chambon did not coldly weigh the costs and benefits of resistance; heedless of safety, they created through their actions an emergent culture of almost unbounded moral obligation.

The Cherokees and the villagers of Le Chambon were untutored in the canons of philosophy, but what they both did know, almost instinctively, is that ethical action required no justification other than the face of a person in need; the subordinating conjunction *because* was neither necessary nor sufficient. In his reading of the Talmud, Levinas was more emphatic: for him, *because* was the favorite word of tyrants – a linguistic trap door through which ethics could disappear entirely. It is a shocking, counterintuitive conclusion. For most people, *because* is the very grounding of ethics. Why should we, following Kant, treat people as ends and not as means? *Because* we are all rational beings. Or why, following Mill and Bentham, should we reduce suffering? *Because* of our common humanity that allows us to relate to one another. Or why, following Locke or Rawls, should we respect some form of social contract, real or notional? *Because* we are moral equals whose rights should be equally respected and whose ambitions should be equally esteemed. In the vast majority of ethical traditions, *because* serves as more than a mere conjunction – it is the load-bearing word that undergirds the entire moral theory.

The idea that people are “fundamentally the same” is also the first thing to collapse when the genocidaire arrives, for the initial task – and success - of the murderers is always to dehumanize their victims, to show precisely that they aren't “like us,” that they are somehow less than human, more like animals – or worse. Nazism’s characterization of Jews as “vermin” is well-documented by historians and well-illustrated by Art Spiegelman. So, too, in the parlance of their oppressors, the Tutsis were openly called “cockroaches”; the Rohingya, “dogs”; Yazidis in Iraq, “merchandise to be sold or used”; Armenians during the First World War, “dangerous microbes”; Native Americans,

commonly, “savages”; and, even today, Uyghurs are labeled a “tumor” and a “virus.” Relying on the idea that people are “fundamentally the same” – a beautiful sentiment, to be sure – opens the door for the massacre, for, once the victims are dehumanized, all of the *because*s are rendered void. The timeworn justifications of philosophers – that we should treat others ethically *because* we are all rational beings, or *because* we can all suffer – fray in the face of systemic dehumanization that denies the very premise that victim and executioner are of the same ilk. Empathy, it turns out, is a gossamer thread, and the carefully woven ethical theories that mistakenly rely upon it can come unstitched with terrifying speed. *Because* provides no armor against evil, and fine words may butter no parsnips, but they do litter graves.

I find myself returning to that initial, stark question: What is to be done after Catastrophe? And also to the later one: What makes the hero or the saint? The answer, it seems, lies not in grand philosophical treatises or sweeping political manifestos, but in the small, often unheralded actions of ordinary people who are moved by the face of the Other. Evil might be banal, as Arendt observed, but, so, too, is goodness.

The Cherokee concept of *ga-du-gi*, the brave choices made by the villagers of Le Chambon, and the ethical framework proposed by Emmanuel Levinas all point to a common truth: our primary moral obligation stems from our direct encounters with others in need. This obligation precedes rational calculation, sidesteps the traitorous *because*, and manifests in immediate, practical action. It is an ethics born not of abstract reasoning, but of lived experience and shared vulnerability. Yet, this conclusion is far from comforting. It offers no easy formulas, no clear-cut rules to follow. It requires us to act before we fully understand, to extend our hands even when our minds are clouded with doubt or fear.

As I reflect on my family's history, buried in the soil of New Hope, I realize that the lesson my grandfather tried to teach me goes beyond the importance of community and legacy. He was, perhaps unknowingly, initiating me into this more demanding ethical tradition. By connecting me to the long chain of Cherokee history, he was not just giving me roots, but also imposing upon me a responsibility – a responsibility to act, to engage, to respond to the needs of others without hesitation or equivocation. The convergence of Cherokee wisdom, Jewish thought, and the actions of French villagers suggests that this ethical imperative is not bound by culture or creed. It emerges, time and again, as a human response to the deepest challenges we face. It is a testament to our shared capacity for compassion and our ability to find meaning and purpose even in the aftermath of unspeakable horror.

But what does this mean for us today, in a world still scarred by historical traumas and faced with new catastrophes? It means that we must be ever vigilant, ever ready to recognize the face of the Other in those we encounter. It means that we must be prepared to act, even when the consequences of our actions are uncertain. It means embracing an ethics of risk, where the only certain thing is the moral demand placed upon us by the vulnerability of others. The examples of the Cherokee, the villagers of Le Chambon, and the insights of Levinas challenge me – challenge all of us – to live more courageously, to respond more immediately to human need, and to recognize that our truest humanity emerges not in our philosophical justifications, but in our readiness to act without them.

We shall do.

And then we shall hear.

For we do not know what a Jew is.

We do not know what a Rohingya is.

We do not know what a Uyghur is.

We do not know what a Tutsi is, and we do not know what a Yazidi is.

We only know men.

We must only know men.

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