

THE SELF, THE OTHER, AND GOD IN 20TH CENTURY JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

Cohen, Buber, and Levinas

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BIBLICAL ORIGINS

“Love your fellow as yourself: I am the Lord.” (Leviticus 19: 18)

- **Your Fellow: the Other**
- **Yourself: the Self**
- **The Lord: God**



ORIENTING QUESTIONS

- **What are the relationships among the self, the other, and God?**
 - **Do we know ourselves first, and only then come to relate to other people and God?**
 - **Or do we relate to other people and God first, and only then to come to know ourselves?**
- **What are the connections between religion, our relationship to God, and ethics, our relationship to other people?**
 - **Does God command us to be ethical?**
 - **Or, rather, do other people provide the entryway to God?**



ROADMAP

- 1. Cohen: From Ethics to Religion (and Back Again)**
- 2. Buber: Dialogue among the I, the Thou, and the Eternal Thou**
- 3. Levinas: The Other, the other Other, and the Self**



COHEN

From Ethics to Religion (and Back Again)

HERMANN COHEN

- **Life & Times**
 - **1842, Coswig – 1918, Berlin**
- **Major Works**
 - **Commentaries on Kant's Critiques**
 - **System of Philosophy**
 - **Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism**



PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND: DESCARTES AND KANT

“I think, therefore I am” (Descartes, *Discourse on Method*)

“Since I have deprived the will of every impulse that could arise for it from obeying some law, nothing is left but the conformity of actions as such with universal law, which alone is to serve that will as its principle, that is, *I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.*” (Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*)

These postulates [of practical reason] are those of *immortality*, of *freedom*..., and of the *existence of God.*” (Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*)

“The Jewish faith, as originally established, was only a collection of merely statutory laws supporting a political state.” (Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*)



THE UNIQUENESS OF GOD

“Hear, O Israel: the
Eternal our God, the
Eternal is Unique.’ ...
From the unique God,
the view of Judaism is
directed to one
mankind, and in the
same way to each
individual man in his
own uniqueness.”
*(Religion of Reason
out of the Sources of
Judaism)*

God as an Ideal Correlation among Self, God, and Others

- **One Humanity: Ethics →
Universality → the State**
- **Each Individual Person:
Religion → Particularity →
the Congregation**

The Role of Suffering

ETHICS AND ITS LIMITS

“The unique God, therefore, also unifies the concept of man and every breach in this unity of man is a violation of morality.... The relations between man and man form the lower or rather the inner correlation of God and man.” (Ibid.)

“In ethics the I of man becomes the I of humanity.... Besides the I, and distinct from the It, there arises the He. Is the He only another example of the I, which is therefore already established by the I? Language alone protects us from this mistake; language sets up the Thou before He. Is the Thou also only another example of the I, or is a separate discovery of the Thou necessary, even if I have already become aware of my own I? Perhaps the opposite is the case, that only the Thou, the discovery of the Thou, is able to bring about the discovery of the I...” (Ibid.)

TRANSITION TO RELIGION

Via Suffering

“[It is] precisely through the observation of the other man’s suffering that the other is changed from the He to the Thou.... [S]uffering, the passion is for the sake of compassion.” (Ibid.)

“When a human being begins in pity to love another human being, this implies a transition from the notion of just the next man to the fellowman. Religion achieves what morality fails to achieve. Love for man is brought forth. As a miracle, as a riddle it emerges from the head, or rather from the heart, of man.” (Ibid.)

THE SELF IN ETHICS AND RELIGION

Ethical Self as the Bearer of Universal Moral Obligations

- “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” (Tolstoy)
- “Ethical selves are alike; every unethical self is unethical in its own way.” (Brafman on Cohen)

Transition to Religion

- “If now, however, through suffering and compassion, the Thou in man is discovered... even one's own suffering need not now be accepted with plain indifference. To have compassion with one's own suffering does not have to be simply inert and fruitless sentimentality. Corporeality belongs...to the soul of the individual and the soul is neglected when the affliction of the body is neglected. Humanity requires consideration for one's own suffering. With the suffering of the I, other injuries besides those of the imperfection of the senses also come to light. Moral frailty now needs renewed examination.... If, then, religion has its deepest basis in man's self-knowledge, then Ezekiel stands immediately beside Socrates.” (*Religion of Reason*)

SIN AND REPENTANCE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF

“When the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he committed, and does that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive...*Cast away from you all your transgressions, wherein ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit.*” (Ezekiel, 18: 27-31)

The new man is born, in this way the individual becomes the I. Sin cannot prescribe one’s way of life. A turning away is possible. Man can become a new man.... *This possibility of self-transformation makes the individual an I.* Through his own sin, man becomes an individual. Through the possibility of turning way from sin, however, the sinful individual becomes the free I. And only with this newborn man can the correlation between God and man become true. God does not want the sinner and his death, but he has pleasure in man’s turning away from his ways, and therefore in his life, in his new life...*Now the individual comes to full fruition in the I. (Religion of Reason)*



GOD IN ETHICS AND RELIGION

“Hear, O Israel: the
Eternal our God, the
Eternal is Unique.’ ...
From the unique God,
the view of Judaism is
directed to one
mankind, and in the
same way to each
individual man in his
own uniqueness.”
(Religion of Reason)

- Correlation among Self, Other, and God
 - Transcendent God → Humankind
 - *Self and Other as Moral Equals*
 - Compassionate God → Individuality
 - *Other as Particular Thou*
 - *Self as Particular Sinning and Repenting I*

“The Self results from the eternal relationship between I and Thou; that is, it is the infinite ideal of this ever-continuing relationship. The ideal always remains ideal; the task always remains infinite. Yet, the ideal is defined by its demand for zealous emulation, hence it opens up the possibility of coming closer....” *(Ethics of Maimonides)*

CLARIFYING QUESTIONS

Cohen: From Ethics to Religion (and Back Again)

BUBER

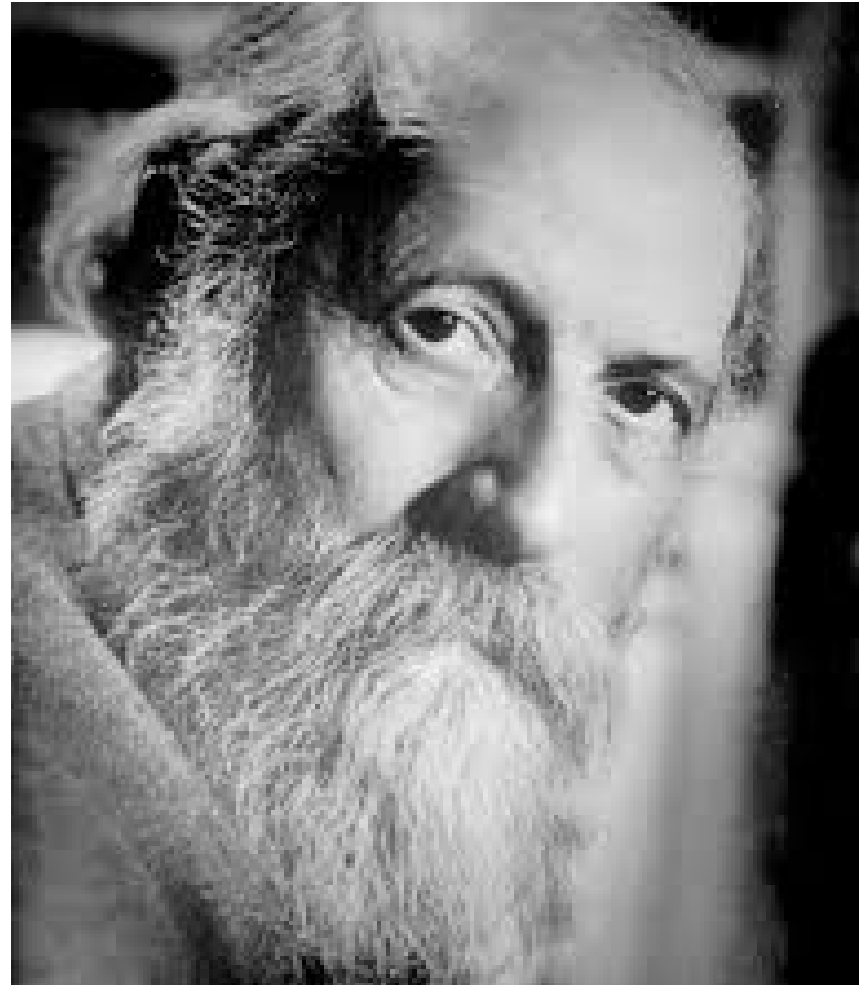
Dialogue among I, the Thou, and the Eternal Thou

CRITIQUE OF COHEN: AGAINST THE ETHICIZATION OF JUDAISM

“The meaning of the act of decision in Judaism is falsified if it is viewed as merely an ethical act. It is a religious act, or, rather, it is the religious act; for it is God’s realization through man.” (“Jewish Religiosity”)

MARTIN BUBER

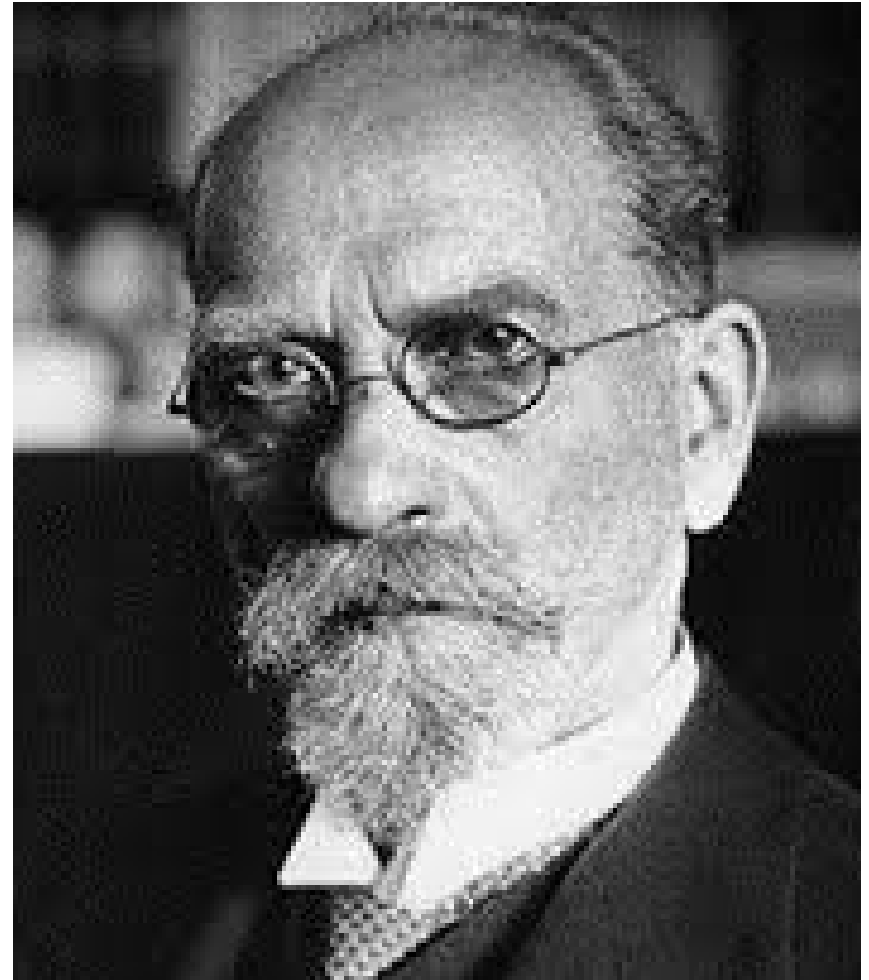
- **Life & Times**
 - 1878, Vienna – 1965, Jerusalem
- **Selected Works**
 - *I and Thou*
 - *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*
 - *On Judaism*



PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND: PHENOMENOLOGY AND EXISTENTIALISM

**“Return to the Thing Themselves”
(Husserl, *Logical Investigations*)**

**“Our first outlook upon life is that of natural human beings, imaging, judging, feeling, willing, ‘from the natural standpoint.’ ... In this way, when consciously awake, I find myself at all time, and without ever being able to change this, set in relation to a world which, through its constant changes, remains one and ever the same. It is continually ‘present’ for me, and I myself am a member of it. Therefore this is not there for me as a mere world of facts and affairs, but, with the same immediacy as a world of values, a world of goods, a practical world.”
(Husserl, *Ideas*)**



I AND THOU

“The word is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude. The attitude of man is twofold in accordance with the two basic words he can speak. The basic words are not single words but word pairs. One basic word is the word pair I-You. The other basic word is the word pair I-it; but this basic word is not changed when He or She takes the place of It. For the I of the basic word I-You is different from that in the basic word I-It.” (*I and Thou*)

“There is no I as such but only the I of the basic word I-You and the I of the basic word I-It.” (Ibid.)



I-YOU VS. I-IT

I-You	I-It
Whole-Being	Partial-Being
Participatory Encounter	Goal-Directed Experience
Spontaneous	Control
Presence	Information about Objects
Unmediated	Conceptual
Present	Past
Reciprocal Action	Unilateral Action
Basic	Derivative

“Feelings dwell in man, but man dwells in his love. This is no metaphor but actuality: love does not cling to an I; it is between I and You.... Love is the responsibility of an I for a You.... Hatred remains blind by its very nature; one can hate only part of a being.... Yet whoever hates directly is closer to a relation than those who are without love and hate.” (*I and Thou*)

THE ETERNAL THOU

“Extending the lines of relationships intersect in the eternal You. Every single You is a glimpse of that. Through every single You the basic word addresses the eternal You. The mediatorship of the You of all beings accounts for the fullness of our relationship to them—and for the lack of fulfillment.... It attains perfection solely in the immediate relation to the You that in accordance with its nature cannot become an It.” (*I and Thou*)

- Mediated
- Immediate

“For whoever pronounces the word God and really means You, addresses, no matter what his delusion, the true You of his life that cannot be restricted by any other and to whom he stands in a relations that includes all others. But whoever abhors the name and fancies that he is godless—when he addresses with his whole devoted being the You of his life that cannot be restricted by any other, he addresses God.” (Ibid.)

- God as Relational as Opposed to Substantial
- Redefinition of Idolatry

EXISTENTIAL JUDAISM

“In the religious life of Judaism, primary importance is not given to dogma but to the remembrance and the expectation of a concrete situation: the encounter of God and men.... Whatever is enunciated in abstract in the third person about the Divine...is only a projection onto the conceptual plane which, though indispensable, proves itself again and again to be inessential.... Israel’s experience of the Thou in the direct relationship, the purely singular experience, is so overwhelmingly strong that any notion of plurality simply cannot arise.... *Yihud* [unification] involves the continually renewed confirmation of the unity of the Divine in the manifold of God’s manifestation, understood in a quite practical way.... Therefore, the unification is contained... in translating the image in actuality, in the imitation Dei.” (“The Faith of Judaism”)

“The act that Judaism has always considered the essence and foundation of all religiosity is the act of decision of divine freedom and unconditionality on earth.... The meaning of the act of decision in Judaism is falsified if it is viewed as merely an ethical act. It is a religious act, or, rather, it is the religious act; for it is God’s realization through man.” (“Jewish Religiosity”)

COHEN VS. BUBER ON GOD'S UNITY

Cohen: God's Uniqueness

- **Ethical Humanity**
- **Particularity of Self and Other**

Buber: God's Unification

- **Existential Decision**
- **Total Commitment to Relationship**

CLARIFYING QUESTIONS

Buber: Dialogue among I, Thou, and Eternal Thou

LEVINAS

The Other, the other Other, and the Self

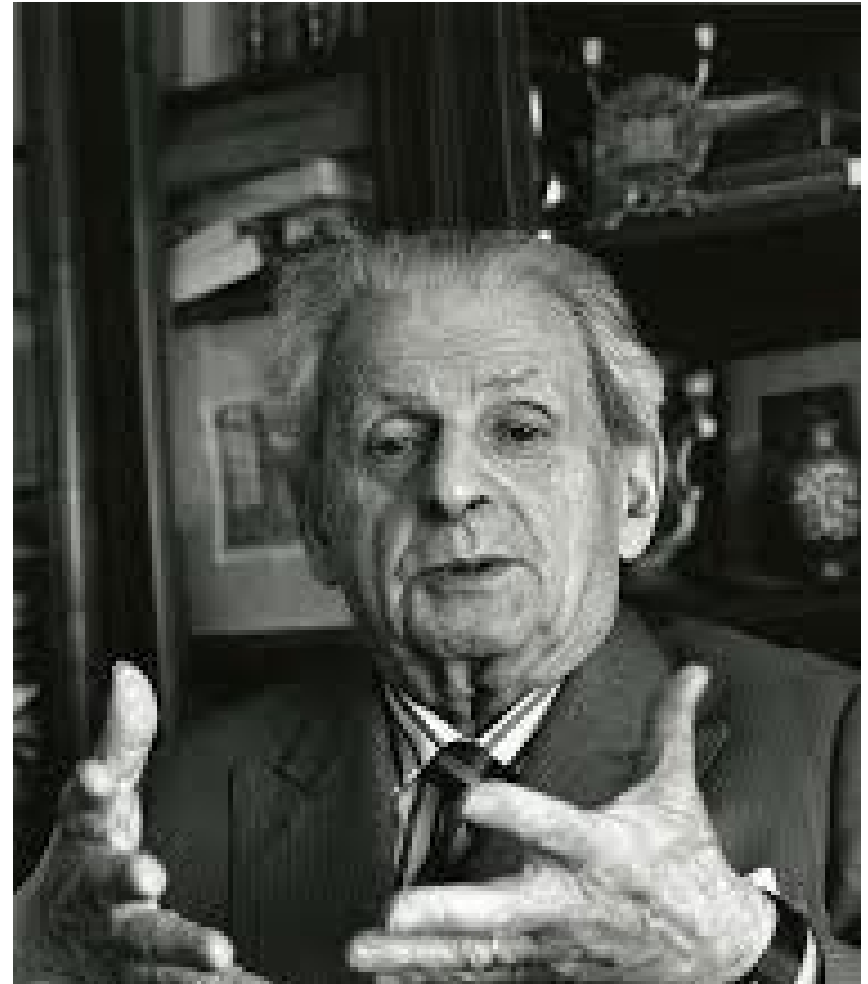
CRITIQUE OF BUBER: RECIPROcity VS. HEIGHT

“We shall direct our criticism mainly to the reciprocity of the I-Thou relation.... The originality of the relation lies in the fact that it is not known from the outside but only by the I which realizes the relation. The position of the I, therefore, is not interchangeable with that of the Thou.... The formal meeting is a symmetrical relation and may there be read indifferently from either side. But in the case of ethical relations, where the Other is at the same time higher than I yet poorer than I, the I is distinguishable from the Thou not by the presence of specific attributes, but by the dimension of height.... Although Buber has penetratingly described the Relation..., he has not taken separation seriously enough.” (“Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge”)



EMMANUEL LEVINAS

- **Life & Times**
 - 1905, Kovno – 1995, Paris
- **Representative Works**
 - *Totality and Infinity*
 - *Nine Talmudic Readings*
 - *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*



PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND: PHENOMENOLOGY AND NAZISM

“Being-in-the-World...amounts to a non-thematic circumspective absorption in references or assignments constitutive for the readiness-to-hand of a totality of equipment. Any concern is already as it is, because of some familiarity with the world.” (Heidegger, *Being and Time*)

“In clarifying Being-in-the-world we have shown that a bare subject without a world never 'is' proximally, nor is it ever given. And so in the end an isolated “I” without Others is just as far from being proximally given. If, however, “the Others” already are there with us in Being-in-the-world....: we meet them “at work,” that is, primarily in their Being-in-the-world....” (Ibid.)



ETHICS AS FIRST PHILOSOPHY

Phenomenological Conditions for the Possibility of Ethics

“A calling into the question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same—is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics.... To affirm the priority of Being over existents is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with someone, who is existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the Being of existents, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom.” (*Totality and Infinity*)



EPIPHANY OF THE FACE OF THE OTHER

“The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed.... The Other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign; his face in which his epiphany is produced and which appeals to me breaks with the world that is common to us....” (*Totality and Infinity*)

“The presence of the face coming from beyond the world, but committing me to human fraternity, does not overwhelm me as numinous essence arousing fear and trembling.... To hear his destitution which cries out for justice is not to represent an image to oneself, but is to posit oneself as responsible, both as more and as less than the being that presents itself in the face. Less, for the face summons me to my obligations and judges me. The being that presents himself in the face comes from a dimension of height, a dimension of transcendence whereby he can present himself as a stranger without opposing me as obstacle or enemy. More, for my position as I consists in being able to respond to this essential destitution of the Other, finding resources for myself. The other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated.... Multiplicity in being, which refuses totalization but takes form as fraternity and discourse, is situated in a “space” essentially asymmetrical.” (*Totality and Infinity*)

“The Other becomes my neighbor precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question. Responsibility for the Other, for the naked face of the first individual to come along. A responsibility that goes beyond what I may or may not have done to the Other or whatever acts I may or may not have committed, as if I were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself.... A responsibility stemming from a time before my freedom - before my (moi) beginning, before any present. A fraternity existing in extreme separation.” (“Ethics as First Philosophy”)

THE OTHER OTHER, OR GOD

“To me, religion means transcendence.... Religion is the excellence proper to sociality with the Absolute, or if you will, in the positive sense of the expression, Peace with the other.... [T]he positive way of being concerned with God...comes precisely from the alterity of man, i.e., from his being outside of every genus, from his uniqueness, which I call face—.... proximity itself originally means responsibility for the neighbor.... The signifying of the face, defenseless nakedness, the very uprightness of an order, a commandment: ‘Thou shalt not kill!’ The obligation of responding to the unique and thus of loving.... The love of God is love of one’s neighbor.” (“On Jewish Philosophy”)

“The Sacred that envelops and transports me is a form of violence.... As regards the Divine which [other religions] incarnate, [Judaism] is merely atheism.... [H]ow does Judaism conceive of humanity? ... By experiencing the presence of God through one’s relation to man. The ethical relation will appear to Judaism as an exceptional relation: in it, contact with an external being, instead of compromising human sovereignty, institutes and invests it.... Ethics is not the corollary of the vision God, it is that very vision. Ethics is an optic such that everything I know of God and everything I can hear of His word and reasonably say to Him must find an ethical expression.” (“A Religion for Adults”)

BUBER VS. LEVINAS ON THE THOU OR OTHER

Buber

- **Reciprocity of the Thou**
- **Religiosity of the Eternal Thou**

Levinas

- **Height of the Other**
- **Ethics of the other Other**

CLARIFYING QUESTIONS

Levinas: The Other and the other Other



SUMMARY

- **Self, Other, and God**
 - **Self is Constructed out of its Relationship with Other People and God**
 - **Complex Relations between Religion and Ethics**
- **Cohen: From Ethics to Religion (and Back Again)**
 - **Universal Ethics: God, Self, Other**
 - **Particular Religion: Other, Self, God**
- **Buber: Dialogue among I, Thou, and Eternal Thou**
 - **I-It vs. I-Thou in Experience**
 - **Eternal Thou: Religious but not Ethical**
- **Levinas: The Other, the other Other, and the Self**
 - **The Height of the Other**
 - **The other Other through Ethics**
- **Universality of Judaism**

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

If we don't get to your question, please feel free to contact me at yobrafman@jtsa.edu