

Parable Drash Shabbat HaChodesh/Tazria - April 2, 2022

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My name is Abigail Gillman. For two months this year, I was a visiting scholar at Tel Aviv University in the Department of Cultural Studies. It had been 30 years since my last extended sojourn in Israel, and 20 years since I last spent an extended time away from home – that was in Vienna. What made it even more improbable was that my adventures took place during a pandemic, when most people were staying home, and even the borders of Israel were closed for a month, with people wondering how I had managed to get into the country. I lived on the Tel Aviv University campus in Ramat Aviv.

This drash takes the form of a letter I was writing to you all in my head during and after my trip. It starts: “Dear Minyan Ma’or, don’t worry, I found a wonderful place to daven in Tel Aviv.” We have had a long davening today, and I know you are starting to get hungry. So today I will just give you just a taste of my experience, and I will end by enlisting your help with my new research project on the Jewish parable, the “mashal.”

Though Steve Chatinover gave me names of minyanim in other parts of the city, I found, via the good old internet, “The New Kehilla of Ramat Aviv”, a traditional egal minyan right in my neighborhood. The new kehillah is 10 years old, and it meets in an old-fashioned, cozy chapel on the ground floor of a building for senior citizens. Why old-fashioned? The sifrei torah have silver crowns, there are large lions on the parochet, and on the wall facing the kahal, a big sign reads: “It is forbidden to speak during tefillah.” *Asur ledaber be-sheat ha-tefila.*

Rabbi Jeff Cymet, an American-born rabbi trained at JTS, leads this warm community. Jeff knew my father, Rabbi Neil Gillman. When I mentioned on my first visit that Neil was my father, he said something like, it’s an honor to have you here. I was shocked and moved. I became smitten with this small community and the humility which infused the service and its members. This very diverse group of people clearly love each other, and they were incredibly welcoming. On a few occasions, there was no minyan, and they read from the chumash and did not take out the torah or did only to read one aliyah. And the rabbi did most all of the Torah reading and led davening, which struck me as tough. In that minyan, when you get the honor to

open the ark, you also recite shema yisral. When they found out I was a bat kohen (I believe they had never been a male kohen), they invited me to do *birkat kohanim* every shabbat, as is the Israeli custom. Many people told me that it was the first time they had heard a woman in that role. Some other customs: a woman named Ayala gave a second, informal drash just about the haftarah each week. And the blessings for aliyot! Each person received an extended personal bracha from the gabbai, invoking their entire life story.

Because they had trouble getting a minyan as the numbers were rising, and because I felt so connected, I chose to avoid traveling elsewhere for Shabbat, as I looked forward to davening with the kehilla each week.

I enjoyed using a different siddur, *Va'ani tefilati / Siddur Yisraeli* published by the Masorti community. I realized that a few small differences with our liturgy really made me pay attention and enhanced my *kavannah*.

This siddur revised the last line of Ein Keloheinu. Instead of saying “Atah hu shehiktiru....et ketoret hasamin,” which was only placed there to introduce a short reading about the sacrificial incense that we (and many others) omit, they placed a line which Robbie always sings on Simchat Torah: “Atah Takum,...ki va mo’ed.”

This minyan recited a special prayer by Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav when the ark was opened. I loved this prayer, because it added intentionality to the dramatic high point of the service. The words are incredible, it asks God to stop war and bloodshed in the world and bring a great and wonderful peace into the world.

I was very moved that just as in America, when we say a prayer for our country and a prayer for Israel, this minyan also recited two prayers – both for their country. The first, an incredibly beautiful prayer for the State of Israel and the soldiers of the IDF, includes; the beautiful prophecy from Micha 4:

וְיַשְׁבּוּ אִישׁ תַּחַת גַּפְנָעָו וְתַחַת תְּאַנְתָּא וְאַיִן מְחַרֵּד פִּירְעֹי יְהֻנָּה צְבָאוֹת דָּבָר:

But every man shall sit

Under his grapevine or fig tree

With no one to disturb him.

For it was the LORD of Hosts who spoke.

And it concludes with the prayer to God to “cast the sukkah of peace on all the inhabitants of the earth.” And after, this minyan recited the prayer for medinat yisral composed by Chief Rabbi Yitzchak Herzog, which we say too--only we abbreviate it, and they say the complete prayer of 3-4 paragraphs. (By the way, this prayer book also gave the names of the authors of prayers in the margins, which is why I am able to share this information with you.)

And I wanted to tell you something I discovered about “Elohai Netzor,” the final paragraph in the Amidah. Did you know that this prayer is a kind of placeholder for inserting our own, individual, personal prayers? How many of you knew this—raise your hand! No one ever explained this to me. If you look in some editions of siddur Sim Shalom, it says, “you may add personal prayers.” The Israeli siddur included a blank space in the middle of “Elohai Netzor” and wrote the words: ‘kan hamakom l’hosafat tefillah ishit” (this is the place for adding personal prayer), followed by a blank space, before the end of the paragraph with “yihu l’ratzon...” I love this formatting, as it really invites us to fill that space. I had always thought of the Amidah as a series of formulaic prayers to Gods of Abraham and Sarah and all the patriarchs and matriarchs. I never realized that the Amidah could or should culminate with a “personal prayer,” tefillah ishit.

Finally: I have to tell you, my dear Minyan, that I have begun to research the Jewish parable, the mashal (in Ashkenazic Hebrew, the “moshol”). And I want to enlist your help with this project.

The mashal is a special kind of Jewish short story which was useful, in different ways, in many periods of Jewish literature, from the Tanach onwards. Parables read like children’s stories, but are written for adults. The most famous biblical parable is the parable of poor man’s sheep, which the prophet Nathan tells to King David to get him to recognize his sins. If you study Talmud, Midrash, or the New Testament, you see parables /m’shalim all over the place.

What defines the mashal? It has a special structure. It is a story invented by someone who wants to teach a lesson, a piece of wisdom, about the human experience—the trials of everyday life. But it teaches indirectly. Unlike a fable, where the moral is written out underneath, the parable cannot be rendered into one message or one moral. The teaching can

only be expressed through a story, and not in a single sentence; each person needs to engage with the story to acquire the wisdom.

Here is an example of how the midrash incorporates a mashal to illuminate the commandment against vengeance and bearing a grudge, which culminates in the famous words, “va’ahvta l’re’acha kamocha”.

לֹא־תַקְרִים וְלֹא־תָטֶל אֶת־בָּנֵי עָמָךְ וְאֶתְבָּתָה לְרַעַע בְּמַמָּוֹךְ אֲנִי יְהוָה

(It just occurs to me that this passage bears some relevance to a minor, barely noticed incident at the Oscars’ Ceremony last week.)

Talmud Yerushalmi, Nedarim 9: 4:

It is written, “You shall not take vengeance; you shall not bear any grudge against the children of your people.”

What is that like? One was cutting meat and the knife fell down on his hand, should he go and hit his hand?

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

R. Akiva says: This is the central principle of the Torah.:

Notice how the mashal is framed by the two parts of the verse, and forms a didactic bridge from the first part to the second part.

The content of the mashal is arbitrary. The story about cutting myself (accidentally!) with a knife has no logical connection to a commandment against revenge. But it contains a subtle, and critical, implication: that you and your countryman are like one body. If your hand causes harm to your other hand, you would not then go and hit yourself. But it is quite a large leap to the next step, which is to say that you should not bear a grudge or take revenge against another person who causes you harm, because that person is like a part of your body. There is a kind of sleight of hand: through the mashal, violence by one Jew against another Jew is framed as kind of self-injury. It seems to makes sense, but there is a leap of faith if you are to buy into this explanation.

Maybe you know the pair of terms in Hebrew “mashal” and “nimshal,” translated as Parable and its lesson, or Parable and parabolized. The truth is, the Nimshal is inaccessible. It may be added after the fact, but it does not belong to the mashal proper. For that reason, the simple parable will often leave the listener confused. Those who listen have to figure out what to take away, and what to do. (It’s a wholly other way of teaching than we saw today in parshat Tazria, which tell us, if the hair is yellow, do this, if it’s red, or green, do this. Do this do that – this is how the Torah often teaches.) But parables teach differently, through the story, and only through the story.

Why are parables told? My theory is that many parables are told to convince people to see things in a new way, to flip or reverse their understanding. “You only need to change your direction” says the cat in one of Kafka’s parables called “A Little Fable.” In the Tanach, a woman we know as the Wise Woman of Tekoa uses a similar phrase when asked by King David why she told him a parable: לְבָעֵב רֹאשׁ פָּנִים הַדָּבָר (II Samuel 14) – to change the face of the matter, to get him to change his mind about not allowing his son Absalom to return.

Another part of the project is to look at stories which have been read as parables—stories whose meaning is so deep and so relevant but defies any attempt to encapsulate a single moral. I think that the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac, and the Book of Job, are two of the most important Jewish parables: they are stories to which Jews return in every generation, which are inexhaustible, and which raise more questions than answers. We will never stop looking for meaning in these texts. There will never be the last word on the Akedah, on why it’s in the Torah, why God put Abraham through the trial, whether Abraham did the right thing, who, if anyone is the “hero” --Isaac or Abraham or the angel or the Ram. (I think of Barry’s drash on it this story last fall in parshat Vayera.)

Lastly: as a specialist in modern Jewish literature, I am writing about modern writers, such as Etgar Keret, Aharon Appelfeld, and in America, Philip Roth, and of course Shmuel Yosef Agnon, and Franz Kafka, who drew from this tradition of the mashal. They wrote in what I call “parabolic style.” I am studying different periods in Jewish history when this kind of style was especially useful: in Hasidism; after the Shoah; and today, in an age of pandemic. I propose that the Mashal is a through-line through Jewish literature from ancient to modern times. These

modern writers may not write parables, but they draw inspiration from this enigmatic religious form of teaching to teach wisdom in a secular context.

Like a character in a story by Agnon, I have been on a quest to collect Jewish parables from all time periods, to understand their magic. The larger questions motivating my research is: what are the most important Jewish tales, and what is their staying power? What are the stories which we come back to again and again? In the coming months and years, I invite you to send me your favorite meshalim, parables, fables, or Jewish short stories, and I look forward to discussing them with you.

Shabbat shalom, Lehitraot, and thank you for listening.