Elul 5775-Tishrei 5776

Three Gifts for Yom Kippur to our Hartman Rabbis

From the Tales of the Talmudic Rabbis

Noam Zion
SHALOM HARTMAN INSTITUTE
JERUSALEM, ISRAEL

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Last summer after my work with the Hartman rabbinic program in Jerusalem, I met in Berlin with Professor Admiel Kosman, the academic director of the Liberal Seminar for Rabbis, the Abraham Geiger College. For years I have been an avid reader of his literary and spiritual essays on rabbinic tales such as *Men's World, Reading Masculinity in Jewish Stories in a Spiritual Context.* Deeply inspired by Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy, he has brought out the subtle messages about inner piety and ethical relationships by reading between the lines of the quasi-biographic narratives in the Talmud. We hit on the idea of gathering three tales connected to Yom Kippur or other fasts of contrition and repentance and producing a *kuntres*, a compendium, of tales and their moral lessons for the edification of the rabbis in the field who seek to inspire the Jewish people every year for Yamim Noraim. With the help of my hevruta, Peretz Rodman, head of the Masorti Rabbinical Association in Israel, we edited and where necessary translated these tales and their interpretations. With the blessings and support of Lauren Berkun, director of the Hartman Rabbinic Leadership programs, we present you with these literary gifts with the hope that they will enrich your learning and spiritual lives as you go forth as the *shlikhei tzibur* to Am Yisrael for this Yom Kippur. As Rabbi Tanhuma prayed on his fast day: May we be filled with compassion one for another and may God in turn be filled with compassion on us and forgive our lacuna.

■ **Noam Zion, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem**

Yom Kippur: A Time for Rabbis to engage in and to facilitate *Heshbon HaNefesh*, Moral and Spiritual Self-Examination

Rabbi Tanhuma Facilitates a Dialogue of Compassion Between Heaven and Earth

Admiel Kosman[i]

On the fast of Yom Kippur the portion of the prophets that is read is Isaiah's severe condemnation of fasting as a ritual act when accompanied by quarrelling and false accusations rather than generosity of heart and of material aid to the needy. By reading this prophetic poetry carefully you can decipher the message written in rabbinic prose in the famous story about Rabbi Tanhuma, the drought, and the scandal that about the divorcés that upset the whole community.

Isaiah's Sermon

> *The people*: "**Why do we fast, but you do not see?** Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"
> *The prophet replies:* Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. **Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.**
> Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.
> Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself?
> Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
> Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?
> Is not this the fast that I choose:
> to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and **not to hide yourself from your own kin?**

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly;

your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, **the pointing of the finger**, the speaking of evil,

if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,

then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

The Lord will guide you continually, and **satisfy your needs in parched places,** and make your bones strong; and **you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.** (Isaiah 58)

The Tale of Rabbi Tanhuma

In the days of Rabbi Tanhuma [whose name means Rabbi Compassion] [the people] Israel needed a fast, so they went to him [Rabbi Tanhuma] and said: ' Master [Rabbi], proclaim a fast.' He proclaimed a fast, for one day, then a second day, and then a third,[ii] yet no rain fell.

Thereupon he [Rabbi Tanhuma] entered [the assembly] and preached to them, saying: 'My sons! Be filled with compassion for each other, and then the Holy One, blessed be God, will be filled with compassion for you.'

Now while they were distributing tzedakah [philanthropy] to their poor, they saw some man named so-and-so give coins to his divorced wife.[iii] Then they went to him [Rabbi Tanhuma] and exclaimed: 'Master, why are doing sitting here [distributing tzedakah], when such [mis]deeds are being perpetrated here!'

He [Rabbi Tanhuma] said: 'What did you see?'

They told him: We saw some man named so-and-so give his divorced wife coins!'

He summoned them [literally, sent after them and brought them] into the public assembly. He [Rabbi Tanhuma] interrogated him: 'Who is she for you?' He replied: 'She is my divorced wife.' He [Rabbi Tanhuma] asked: 'So why did you give her coins?'

He replied: 'Because I saw her in distress, and I was filled with compassion for her.'

At that moment Rabbi Tanhuma raised his face upward and exclaimed: 'Master [Rabban] of all the worlds! If this one who has no obligation to give that one alimony[iv] [food, nevertheless] saw her in distress and was filled with mercy [love] for her; then You, of whom it is written, *Adonai is compassionate and merciful [patient and filled with grace. Not forever will Adonai quarrel and not forever will Adonai bear a grudge. Not in accord with our sins does God act towards us and not in accord with our iniquities does God requite us. …. As a father shows mercy to his sons, Adonai shows mercy to those who fear God*] (Psalm 103:8-13) and for us, who are your children, the children of your beloved [your friend], the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, how much the more should You be filled with mercy!'

Immediately the rain descended and the world enjoyed relief. (Genesis Rabbah 33.3)

. ביומוי דר׳ תנחומ׳ צרכון ישׁ׳ לתעניתא,
אתון לגביה, אמ׳ ליה: ר׳ גזור תעניתא.
גזר תענית יום קדמי, יום תניין, יום תליתיי, ולא נחת מטרא.
על ודרש להון.
5. אמ׳ להן: בניי, איתמלון רחמים אילו על אילו, והקב״ה מתמלא עליכם רחמים.
כשהן מחלקין צדקה לענייהן ראו אדם אחד שנתן מעות לגרושתו,
אתו לגביה ואמרון ליה: ר׳ מה אנן יתיבין הכא ועבידתא הכא.
אמ׳ להם: מה ראיתם?
אמ׳ לו: ראינו אדם פלו׳ נותן מעות לגרושתו.
10. שלח בתריהון ואייתינון לגו ציבורא,
אמ׳ ליה: מה היא לך זו?
אמ׳ לו: גרושתי היא.
אמ׳ לו: מפני מה נתתה לה מעות?
אמר לו: ר׳ ראיתי אותה בצרה ונתמלאתי עליה רחמים.
15. באותה שעה הגביה ר׳ תנחומה פניו כלפי למעלן ואמ׳:
רבון כל העולמים!
מה אם זה שאין לזו עליו מזונות
ראה אותה בצרה נתמלא רחמים עליה,
ואתה שכתו׳ בך ״חנון ורחום יי״י״ (תהלים קג, ח),
20. ואנו בניך, בני ידידיך, בני אברהם יצחק ויעקב,
על אחת כמה וכמה שתתמלא עלינו רחמים!
מיד ירדו גשמים ונתרווח העולם.

ובתרגום לעברית:

1. בימיו של רבי תנחומה היו ישראל צריכים לתענית.[v]

באו אליו,[vi] אמרו לו: רבי, גזור תענית.

גזר תענית יום ראשון, יום שני, יום שלישי, ולא ירד גשם.

נכנס ודרש להם:

5. אמר להם: בני, התמלאו רחמים אלו על אלו, והקב״ה מתמלא עליכם רחמים.[vii]

כשהם מחלקים צדקה לענייהם ראו אדם אחד שנתן מעות לגרושתו.[viii]

באו לפניו[ix] אמרו לו: מה אנו יושבים כאן והעבירה כאן?!

אמר להם: מה ראיתם?

אמרו לו: ראינו אדם פלוני נותן מעות לגרושתו.

10. שלח אחריהם[x] והביאום אל תוך הציבור.

אמר לו: [xi] מה היא לך זו?

אמר לו: גרושתי היא.

אמר לו: מפני מה נתת לה מעות?

אמר לו: רבי, ראיתי אותה בצרה ונתמלֵאתי עליה רחמים.

15. באותה שעה הגביה רבי תנחומה פניו כלפי מעלה, ואמר:

רבון כל העולמים,

זה שאין לזו עליו מזונות

ראה אותה בצרה, נתמלא רחמים עליה[xii] -

ואתה שכתוב בך 'חנון ורחום ה'' (תהלים קג, ח) -

20. ואנו בניך, בני ידידיך, אברהם, יצחק ויעקב -

על אחת כמה וכמה שתימלא עלינו רחמים![xiii]

מיד ירדו גשמים ונתרווח[xiv] העולם.

The dialogic discourse at the center of the tale

The drought in our story is understood both by the rabbi and by the community as an intentional action by God, to a message to God's people that they are required to perform a *tikkun*, an act of reform and repair. The tale regards events in the world as a language in which God addresses the world. By means of the drought, God poses a question to the community; if they wish to be participants in the dialogue, they must reply with an answer, a *teshuva* (repentance!). Thus does Buber formulates this dialogic dimension of "life with God": "in the eyes of the Jewish faith, all of life, if we really live it, is a relationship with God…. What happens to me in this life is a message from God, and what I myself do is the answer."[xv] The story before us, then, presents two responses to God's question, that of the community and that of the divorced husband. What, then, is the difference between those two answers?

The community comes to Rabbi Tanhuma with the demand that he decree a public fast. The community is hard-pressed and presses hard on Rabbi Tanhuma, since they are an

agricultural society for whom a drought leaves them without any source of sustenance. For them the withholding of rain is life-threatening. While they sense that what is happening to them come from God, but they have no direct access to God. They turn, therefore, to Rabbi Tanhuma – the rabbi who is supposed to be, in their view, the intermediary between them and God. But one who looks carefully at their language immediately discovers that even with Rabbi Tanhuma, their own rabbi, they are not truly engaged in dialogue. They do pose a question to him, but they are not truly attentive to his words in reply to them. From the first moment, they **demand** that he decree a fast, and they do not **ask** about the significance of his having tarried so long in doing so. It seems that there is even a tone of complaint in the way they address their rabbi: Why—they are asking—are you not doing what you are obligated to do?

If the local community had asked, as God asks and Rabbi Tanhuma asks throughout our story, they would have understood that Rabbi Tanhuma does not decree a series of public fasts—even though, as local rabbi, that would be the explicit demand of him in the framework of halakhah—because he does not believe that in merely performance of the Mishnah's concrete halakhic demands one can find the true response to the dialogue that God opened up with them by bringing a drought as a question.

Rabbi Tanhuma's ear is not deaf to the community's cry of despair. He too knows that they are faced with a question of life and death. In his eyes, though, the external death, the aridity of the outside world, is a reflection of the "inner death" of the community, their own inner aridity regarding the religious dimension of existence, as seen from the narrator's worldview.

We have here a principle of symmetry. God responds only to one who himself/herself responds properly, one who knows who knows how to engage in true dialogue with God. First, the inner "rain" must be opened up. Only thereafter will it be joined by its actualization in the external world.

Since the community demands of Rabbi Tanhuma, though, they he accede to the requirements of the law, he eventually acquiesces to their demand—despite the fact that he does not see in the performance of legal requirements a true answer (*teshuva*) to God's "question." Indeed, the anticipated rain, God's response to their response, does not fall.

Decoding the Misunderstanding between Rabbi Tanhuma and the Community

What is the secret of the community's "inner aridity"? Rabbi Tanhuma gathers the community to himself and attempts to teach them the secret of these events. He addresses them gently, saying "My sons! Be filled with compassion for each other, and then the Holy One, blessed be God, will be filled with compassion for you."

The same symmetry is highlighted here: the key to the answer, Rabbi Tanhuma tells them, is not, as you think, in the external ritual, not in the performance of the law. There is no value to the fast in and of itself, but rather in changing from within: "be filled with compassion." The same inner process of opening that is hoped for is what will make possible dialogue with God, enabling God too to be filled with compassion for you.

There is no symmetry that makes possible a true dialogue between acting according to the law, which is the arid, juridical, external action, and divine revelation. Yet, there *is* a symmetry between *opening one's heart* and God's *self-revelation*. That does indeed make dialogue possible.

Rabbi Tanhuma reveals to the community the "correct answer" to God's question when he tells them, "be filled with compassion." But if we look closely at the community's response, we see that the community again interprets Rabbi Tanhuma's words in their

external meaning: they immediately organize a “campaign” of giving tzedakah to the poor!

However, is giving tzedakah to the poor necessarily the same as being filled with compassion on them? The difference between these two formulations is simple: one who is filled with compassion for another gives tzedakah because he senses the other’s profound distress. Thus we have before us a dialogical relationship, an “I-Thou” relationship. One who gives tzedakah to the poor as an external act while his heart is still closed to the other’s distress uses the poor as an object in order to achieve his own personal goal. (For Buber, every technical, mechanical formulation of the law misses the mark, failing to achieve a nuanced listening to the voice of God, which by its very nature is non-recurring and issues a commandment regarding that which is before each and every human being at that particular moment.)

In our instance, the community shows no interest in the poor in and of themselves, as the continuation of the story demonstrates. It makes use of the poor person only in order to do a “mitzvah,” the ritual of giving tzedakah. The poor are a means; the rain is the end, to the point that we might almost state ironically that if there were no poor people in their city, they would apparently have regretted that fact, since their city would be without the objects that enable them to fulfill that mitzvah, which can, as they understand it, solve the problem of the drought for them.

In the first case, in giving tzedakah from a sense of compassion, the act of *tzedakah* is unitary; one cannot distinguish between the compassion and the giving. They become one united act. This unity is present not only in the actions themselves, but rather is present in the relationship between donor and recipient. Being filled with compassion is clearing a space for gently attending to the world of the other. This opening up of space nullifies, in a sense, the gap between the donor and the recipient and creates a kind of unity between them.

In the second case, the instrumental giving, the action is fragmented: there is a donor, and there is a recipient, and the entire undertaking has a goal toward which the donor directs his actions, a goal beyond the giving itself. We may even say, to put it crudely, that there is a simple calculation at work: the donor gives the recipient some of his assets in order to receive something from God.

The concept of prayer versus the concept of law as a form of magic

The drought points to the inner hard-heartedness of the community, that same community that is truly incapable of being filled with compassion for the other and whose concern for itself leaves no room for the other. Now too, even after Rabbi Tanhuma has revealed to them the true meaning of what God wants of them, the community is unable to hearken to the call directed toward them, just as they has earlier failed to hear the appeal addressed to them through the drought itself.

According to the community's religious concept, a fast should be decreed in response to the plague of drought, because that act is understood by them as a ritual capable of bringing rain. The community believes in the existence of a Superior Power that *decrees* drought, but it thinks that if Rabbi Tanhuma *decrees* a fast, decree versus decree, he will thereby satisfy the will of God, who requires such a fast, and as a result, the rain will fall.

For the community, the fast and the giving of *tzedakah* exert, in a somewhat mysterious manner, an influence upon that Superior Power, fulfill its demands, and motivate it to bring those rains, which were held back on their way to the land. This conception is very close, then, to the definition of magic, as a particular form of knowledge that, according to belief, enables people who have acquired it to mobilize it in order to force the superior powers to act in their interest.

In magic, both the one who orders a magical act for his own benefit and the one who carries it out for remuneration are interested parties acting to advance their own interests. In complete contrast, in the Rabbis' concept of prayer—represented here by Rabbi Tanhuma—the one offering prayer does not coerce God into doing his own will. The value of the act of prayer is greater and more meaningful the more the one offering the prayer is a disinterested party. In Buber's words:

> "The man who prays pours himself out in unrestrained dependence and knows that he has – in an incomprehensible way – an effect upon God, even though he obtains nothing from God. For when he no longer desires anything for himself, he sees the flame of his effect burning at its highest."[xvi]

Why is this matter so central to the question of prayer? There is a value to the act of prayer only when it does not serve as a means for human beings to attain power; only when it is not an act directed to a personal, egocentric purpose but rather flows from that "opening of the heart," from that dialogical stance that is open to a conversation with God. The fast, or the giving of tzedakah, or any other act has no value, negative or positive, in and of itself, but only the source within the soul from which it originates.

In the act of distributing tzedakah, members of the community saw a divorced man giving money to his ex-wife. Those two were immediately suspect in their eyes. The community was entirely certain that this money was payment for sexual favors, and it was very disturbed by this, not out of any concern for this impoverished divorcé's distress and not out of concern about issues of modesty as such, but because it suspected that the "transgression" of which the divorcé and his ex-wife were supposedly guilty would obstruct the arrival of the much-desired rain. They turn to Rabbi Tanhuma, then, in anger and despair, and in total powerless they object, "What's the point of making such an effort to distribute tzedakah when such a flagrant transgression is being committed in our city right now?!"

But now the public's true priorities are revealed. When, in the course of the distribution of tzedakah they came upon what appeared to them as an egregious sin in their own city, they were struck by a loss of impetus to continue the distribution of tzedakah. That is a very perplexing response. What does this incident, raising suspicion about improper relations between a divorced couple, have to with tossing the poor and their needs aside? Had that community been immersed in the giving of tzedakah out of true compassion for the poor, had their primary concern been for the profound pain of their recipients and full empathy with the suffering of the other, they would never even have considered abandoning the distribution of tzedakah.

Here, the community's lack of any true compassion for the poor is exposed, and this "tzedakah campaign" opens up no space for listening to needs of the other. We no realize that this giving of tzedakah is nothing but a self-centered concern clothed in a religious mantle. Otherwise, why do they stop giving tzedakah and return to their rabbi with the peculiar claim that there is no point in their act of tzedakah while "sin" is to be found in their community.

Further reflection on the worldview of the residents of this place reveals, beneath their claim, an anthropomorphic image of God as the angry father bent over His ledger of human actions and calculating precisely the relative weights of the mitzvot and transgressions of this community. According to this "bookkeeper's" calculus, He distributes or withholds rain on the earth. By this logic, since the serious transgression has already been committed by the divorcé and his ex-wife in their town, there is no purpose in continuing to distribute tzedakah in order to appease the angry father. The die has already been cast.

Now, they think, the weak spot has finally been discovered, and the cause of the drought has been revealed: the scandalous act between the divorced couple. We now

know, then, that the community has thrust the full weight of the responsibility for the distress that has befallen them on the shoulders of the divorced man. They never imagine that they themselves have become obtuse and have not attended properly to God's appeal. From their perspective, in the normal course of events, the "other," the "it,"—the divorcé who gave coins to his ex-wife—bears the responsibility for all that has transpired.

Here, now, is the point of the story: the divorced couple are brought before Rabbi Tanhuma, and it becomes clear that not only has no transgression occurred between them but rather this divorced man was the only person in the community who gave tzedakah out of the true motivation of a heart filled with compassion.

We see, then, once again how very precise is the formulation of this midrashic tale as it presents the divorcé's answer to Rabbi Tanhuma's question: "'Why did you give her coins?' 'Because I saw her in distress, and I was filled with compassion for her.'" This sentence highlights three central components of our story: the woman's distress and suffering, seeing her in her pain, and filling up with compassion towards her.

The meaning of the fast in our story: The position of the community versus the position of Rabbi Tanhuma

In light of this analysis, we perceive very clearly the meaning of the fast with which our story opens. The community thinks that the one who fasts "constricts" himself by denial of this body and distancing himself from the "expansion" of eating. As a reward for that, they will be saved by God, who will shower His bounty upon them. They do not understand, however, that the corporeal fast, the obedience to law in and of itself, is nothing but an external factor. *Is such the fast that I choose*? (Isaiah 58:5). A fast whose self-constriction includes an internal self-constriction, a constriction of the ego and simultaneously the opening of a space for listening to the other. And this is the heart of

the matter. Only that internal constriction makes it possible to be filled with compassion for the other, as was the divorcé. Now we can see the deep significance of the man's response to the rabbi in an ironic light: it was in the very person who violated society's law and order and did not behave as was expected of him, thereby arousing public suspicion, that the spontaneous outbreak of true religiosity took place.

Let us imagine for a moment: had the divorce behaved as was customary in his community, the ones who blame him for the drought, he would certainly have succeeded in raising many rationalizations that would permit him to turn a blind eye to his poor, unfortunate ex-wife. Why, after all, should risk false accusations for her sake? She is no longer his wife. However, he is filled spontaneously with that compassion— without any reason or rational calculation, but rather only because of his capacity for listening to her distress— and therefore he pays no attention to the community's suspicions. Perhaps he disrupted the external public order, but he in fact touched upon the source of the internal divine order. And we realize, in the end, that only by his merit did the rain descend upon the community, whose inner world was arid and devoid of even a drop of religiosity.

We have learned that this, then, is the correct answer to God's question: in order to answer properly one must ask properly, and to ask properly one has to learn to listen carefully to the question that is asked and to enter into a true dialogue with it. There are two in our story who knew how to ask and to listen to the answer that would come: the divorce, who listened to his ex-wife's distress, and Rabbi Tanhuma, who, from the outset, listened in a completely different way to the question God asked and who later listened properly to the words of the divorcé. It becomes clear, then, that when a person is opened to this true listening, the concrete expression of this dialogue with God is God's response to the human response - the blessed advent of rain.

Rabbi Tanhuma Resolves the Tension between the Individual, the Community and God

In this reading of the story the major axis of our tale swings between fruitless ritual represented by the community's world of I-it and the world of I-You represented by the divorced man. At first it seems as if the narrative structure is built on binary oppositions: on one side, the public, the ritualized distribution of *tzedakah*, the accusations against the divorcé, and the drought; and on the other side, the individual, the spontaneous human act of giving tzedakah from the heart, and the parallel divine giving of rain form heaven. The divorced man who disregards the arid public order of the society grants to our story spiritual vitality and rescues the community from death both in metaphoric and literal sense. Haim Milikovsky commented to me that the narratives focus on a divorcé who showers compassion on his ex-wife who may well have been divorced for her sins against him and to whom he owes no support by law represents symbolically God who has so-to-speak divorced himself from his people for their sin of their internal alienation from God's mitzvot. Thus the divorced man's filling with compassion triggers the divorcing God's reconciliation with his alienated people.

However, we must still explain the role of Rabbi Tanhuma and his long poetic final prayer at the end of the tale that brings the rain? Why wasn't the individual's opening of his heart enough to merit Divine rainfall?

The prayer of Rabbi Tanhuma represents the component that joins the public and the divorced individual, who represent separate and opposed forces in the narrative, into a unity. His prayer mediates not only between God and Israel but between the individual in his act of *hesed* that aroused suspicion and false accusation and the judgmental community.

The rabbi who was supposed to represent the religious establishment in being a "rabbi" aspired to bring his flock mercy and to lead them with a gentle and loving hand. He understood, however, that from the establishment itself with its proclaimed fasts and tzedakah campaign, no salvation could come. It was from the anarchic forces outside the legal establishment that redemption would come. Rabbi Tanhuma felt that despite all his efforts to convey the message about inner compassion to the public, the

community was so imbued with an obtuse heart that it could hard to change it. Using the kabbalist language of arousal from below, we might say that Rabbi Tanhuma looked for the process of salvation to begin in "the lower waters" that bubble up in advance of the arrival of the "upper waters." Divine blessing would be aroused only from the individual acts of giving outside and even threatening to the social order.

The greatness of Rabbi Tanhuma as the community's representative (*shaliakh tzibur*) before God was his capacity for mending the torn garments of social solidarity and to join the separate and opposed components symbolized by the divorced man and the divorced woman. That idea of reunification of individual and community is hinted at in the brief yet very exact phrase: "He summoned them [literally, sent (*shaliakh*) emissaries after them and brought them] into the public assembly." Bringing them "into the community" is the supreme act of unification. He brings the great merit – even if it be dangerous , the anarchic religious vitality which is by nature spontaneous embodied in the act of an individual motivated by his heart into the heart of the community who prefer to act according to custom and maintain their inflexible law and order.

The unification of various components at odds in the horizontal axis of the lower world makes possible the renewed unity of the vertical axis. Thus God too becomes the mediator that unites poles just as Rabbi Tanhuma, the *shaliakh tzibur,* served as a mediator. In appealing to God to mediate, Rabbi Tanhuma calls God by his own title, *rabbi / rabban* - "Master [*Rabban*] of all the worlds!" and he speaks to God in the intimate personal nomenclature – "You." The outcome of this mediation of tension is the flow from on high of *hesed*, Divine goodness, parallel to the flow of human goodness. For that reason the editor of this collection of midrashim introduces the narrative with the verse and adage:

> *Adonai is good to all, and God's mercy is upon all God's works* (Ps. 145:9). Rabbi Tanhuma bar Abin says in the name of Rabbi Aha: "If we see a year of drought coming and the [human] creatures have mercy on one another, then the Holy One will be filled with mercy for us." (Genesis Rabbah 33.3)

Yom Kippur in the Public Latrine:

Pelimo Learns his Lesson from Satan

Admiel Kosman

> *"If at the gate there stands a guest / Who has landed from overseas,*
> *What should we offer this guest / When he comes from there?*
> *A green basket of fruit, a white flower, / Red wine and some bread with salt.*
> *That's what we have. / Sit down with us here."* Naomi Shemer – *The Guest / Ha-Oréaḥ*

The eve of Yom Kippur is so busy with bathing, dressing nicely, and preparing a filling festive meal for all the guests in one's home that one may forget to devote time both to one's inner purification and to the renewal of one's moral responsibility to those outside the home and those needy on the periphery of society. The narrowing of one's vision threatens to undermine the true meaning of this day of "at-one-ment" with our inner selves and this day of granting and requesting forgiveness from our fellow human beings. This problematic situation on the eve of this sacred fast day appears to be the background to a two-thousand year old story told by the Rabbis about Yom Kippur in the household of Pelimo.

The narrative has a simple moral lesson to teach, but it grabs the readers' attention by its fantastic style. In Act One, Satan, dressed up as a particularly repulsive beggar, progressively invades the home and joins the inner sanctum around the table of a pious, wealthy man – Pelimo. His task is to test Pelimo's character by seeking hospitality from his reluctant household. Pelimo is found wanting and ends up in Act Two as far from his

own table, his own home, and the sanctity of Yom Kippur as one can flee. The new setting, the public latrine to which Pelimo has fled rather than to the synagogue, is now the site of a second encounter with Satan. Here the masks of Pelimo and of Satan will be removed. It is in the impurity of the latrine that Pelimo learns a profound lesson regarding his hypocritical spiritual purity, the supposed sanctity of his wealthy hearth, and the defective way in which his beautiful home shows sensitivity to the filthy homeless.

The narrative begins with a daily event in the inner life of Pelimo, in which he trumpets his achievement of religious perfection and dares Satan to test him as Satan once tested Job, whom God praised for his righteous perfection. Pelimo violates the cautionary adage, "Never open your mouth to Satan" (TB Ketubot 8b) and the reader intuits that pride goes before the fall. The story focuses on the day that Pelimo learned not to be so arrogant and self-confident, and that day was appropriately a day of contrition, the eve of Yom Kippur. Pelimo's household was putting on its sacred pre-fast banquet before going off to the synagogue to join other respectable Jewish families for the day of confession of sin, conciliation, and repentance. Considering the spiritual heights that Pelimo claims to have attained, Yom Kippur seems to be superfluous. But enveloped in a mantle of both religious and social self-importance, Pelimo is ironically very far from being ready for a Day of true Atonement until God's agent teaches him a lesson in humility. As we read this symbolic story before Yom Kippur we must ask what we too have to learn. Here is our tale:

Exposition*: *Daring Satan

Pelimo [a rabbinic pupil of Rabbi Judah the Prince, 3rd century in Eretz Yisrael] would say every day: "An arrow in Satan's eyes!"[xvii]

Act One: Sacred Hospitality and Access to the Holiday Table

One day, on the eve of Yom Kippur,[xviii] he [Satan] disguised himself as a pauper, and came and knocked on his door. Bread was brought out to him [so that he would eat outside].

He [Satan] asked them: "On such a day as today [one that is as special and important as Yom Kippur eve], the entire world is inside, but I [shall remain to eat alone] outside?"

They brought him in, and set bread before him [so that he could eat inside the house, but not at the table where all were dining].

He [Satan] said to them: "On such a day as today, the entire world is at the table, but I am alone?"

They brought him and sat him at the table. As he sat, he raised [on his body] sores which discharged pus, and he engaged in repulsive behavior [probably pinching these sores].

They said to him: "Sit properly [behave politely, and not in a manner that disgusts people]!"

He said to them: "Give me a glass," and they gave him a glass. He coughed and spat his phlegm into it. They berated him [for this behavior], and then he fell dead. They [Pelimo and the members of his household] heard[xix] people shouting: "Pelimo has killed a man! Pelimo has killed a man!"

Act Two: Shedding Disguises - The Revelation and the Lesson

He [Pelimo] fled and hid in the [public] latrine.[xx] And he [Satan who had only pretended to die] followed him. He [Pelimo] fell before him.[xxi] When he [Satan] saw how he [Pelimo] was suffering, he revealed himself.

He [Satan] said: "Why did you speak thus?" [daring me daily with the words, "An arrow in Satan's eyes!"]

[Pelimo replied]: "Then how should I have spoken?"

He [Satan] said to him: "My lord should have said: 'May the Merciful One [God] rebuke Satan.'" (BT Kiddushin 81a–b)

פלימו והשטן: שיעור אלוהי בבית-השימוש הציבורי

"פלימו[xxii] היה רגיל לומר כל יום: 'חץ בעיני השטן![xxiii]

יום אחד ערב יום כיפור היה.[xxiv]

נדמה לו כעני (='התחפש' השטן לעני),

בא ודפק על הדלת,

הוציאו לו פת לחם (=שיאכל בחוץ),

אמר להם (=השטן): 'יום כמו היום (=מיוחד וחשוב כערב יום הכיפורים) - כל העולם בפנים ואני (=אשאר לאכול לבד) בחוץ??'.

הכניסו אותו, והביאו לפניו פת לחם (=שיאכל בתוך הבית, אך לא על שולחן המסובים),

אמר להם: 'יום כמו היום - כל העולם אצל השולחן ואני לבד??'.

הביאו אותו והושיבו אותו ליד השולחן.

היה יושב וממלא עצמו (=מעלה על גופו) שחין ומוגלה עליו,

והיה עושה בו מעשים מאוסים.

אמרו לו: שב יפה (=נְהַג בנימוס, ולא באופן מעורר גועל כזה)!

אמר להם: תנו לי כוס.

נתנו לו כוס.

השתעל והשליך את כיחו (=ירק ליחתו) לתוכה.

גערו בו (=על התנהגות זו, והוא מצדו העמיד פנים שבגלל גערה זו -) נפל ומת.[xxv]

שמעו (=פלימו ובני-ביתו) שהיו אומרים: 'פלימו הרג אדם! פלימו הרג אדם!'

ברח והחביא עצמו בבית הכסא.

הלך אחריו,[xxvi]

נפל לפניו,[xxvii]

כשראה שהוא מצטער גילה לו את עצמו,[xxviii]

אמר לו (=השטן): מדוע אמרת כך?[xxix]

(=אמר לו פלימו): ואלא איך אומַר?

אמר לו: יאמר אדונִי: הרחמן[xxx] יגער בו בשטן'"

[בבלי, קדושין פא ע"א-ע"ב]

Daring Satan

We meet Pelimo through his daily bragging and his "dare-devil" challenge to Satan. Traditional commentators argue that this narrative teaches that one should not provoke Satan (the Evil Inclination),[xxxi] and that the thought that human beings are capable of overcoming the Evil Inclination and its temptations on his own, without God's assistance, is a delusion. That may be good practical advice to keep one out of trouble, but there is more to learn about Pelimo's spiritual failings from a close reading of the details of the story. Time and space define the plot,– its timing on the eve of Yom Kippur and its spatial tensions between inside and outside, between the manners of those who are "in" in society and the world of the "outhouse," between the table where one engages in "intake" of sacred meals and the latrine where one engages in excrement and bodily discharges.

Pelimo begins with a startling declaration (to himself?) that he no longer fears Satan's trials. The "arrow" that he shoots to Satan's eye is a phallic symbol that appears elsewhere in the Talmud when Satan sets a sexual snare. In one story Rabbi Hisda says that he is superior to his fellow Rabbis, because he married at the age of sixteen. He adds that if he had married at the age of fourteen, then he would have been able to tell Satan: "An arrow in your eye!" (BT *Kiddushin* 29b–30a). In other words, he would no longer have feared illicit sexual temptations at all having satisfied his urges with this wife. In another place Rabbi Aha bar Jacob uses a *lulav* to figuratively stab Satan in the eyes. When he shook it, he exclaimed: "An arrow in Satan's eyes!" (BT *Sukkah* 38a). There as well, the Talmud notes the danger entailed in such provocations. Appropriately, Pelimo's tale is incorporated in the fourth chapter of tractate *Kiddushin* among a series of narratives concerned with the Evil Inclination's assaults upon the Rabbis who thought they were immune to its appeal. So too Pelimo's immense self-confidence in his spiritual power expresses his feeling that, as far as he is concerned, the

struggle with the temptations of this world and the Evil Inclination has come to an end, and that he is on the level of the angels.

Satan therefore prepares for Pelimo a short lesson in self-awareness. His task is to set before this man a mirror that will show him his true inner state, but that requires paradoxically not only honest introspection but first opening one's eyes to that which is outside, the Other who is beyond the periphery of our well-ordered world. Human beings are too often blind both to their own inner worlds and those of the poverty-stricken. Therefore Satan who stands outside Pelimo's house chooses to disguise himself as a poor man and to call upon the people of the household to open the door and include him in their meal. The narrator's choice of Satan, dressed as a derelict, is obviously not coincidental; this character is the diametric opposite of the bourgeois life enjoyed by the members of the household. Rabbi Levi says: "Wherever you find eating and drinking, Satan brings accusations" (*Genesis Rabbah* 38:7). Thereby the narrator puts to the test Pelimo's opening bravado.

Act One: Sacred Hospitality and Access to the Holiday Table

Act One is about the outsider and the insiders, about those in need and those in abundance and how the social space is traversed from the homeless to the bastion of the inner home – the table. Since it is Yom Kippur, we expect hearts to open up and the poor to be invited inside as they are supposed to be on Passover: Let all who are hungry come and eat. Maimonides reminds us that on holidays when we gather at home "and when one eats and drinks, one must also feed the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, and other poor and unfortunates."[xxxii] But in Pelimo's household which mirrors his own ethos or purity and self-satisfaction it is very difficult to open one's heart and home especially for a hard-core beggar.

The Talmudic narrator masterfully focuses, in a painstaking close-up, on the dual dynamic that is central to the story: on the one hand, he reveals to us the extent to

which this beggar “bothers” the members of the household because they see him as such a repulsive and threatening stranger, who is unfit to sit in their company; while, on the other, the narrator shows us, in slow motion, how the beggar “infiltrates” the very heart of the family center, penetrates into the inner circle of their ceremonies, and dismantles it, while applying calculated pressure to their “religious” sense of guilt. The poor man provides them with a true vision of their religious world that is so complacent and self-confident that it directs its arrogant arrows at Satan-God.

The drama unfolds as follows: the pauper outside first knocks perhaps hoping to be invited in for festive meal as Maimonides urges. But the householders throw him only bread and leave him outside to eat it, while they return to their meal, perhaps feeling satisfied with their generosity. It is clear to the reader that they are threatened by his repulsive appearance, and they are happy to go back to their orderly and respectable table. But the beggar does not desist. Now he claims that his hunger is not solely physical, he pines for family warmth, love, and friendship: “the entire world is inside, but I [shall remain to eat alone] outside?”

Their revulsion at his hideous appearance is overpowered by their guilt feelings, and they allow him to enter. This invitation, however, is not sincere, since they do not ask him to join them at the main table. This is actually a further rejection, in which they relegate him to a corner of the house. The pauper, however, continues to press them: “The entire world is at the table, but I am alone?” The members of the family finally acquiesce and allow him to sit with them at the table, the sacrosanct family symbol. Their pious hospitality is a façade which the beggar will now expose.

The beggar now initiates a series of revolting actions meant to completely shatter the sacred and polite image of the “table.” His body is covered by repulsive sores at which he begins to pick. Then the hosts berate the beggar, rebuking him for his lack of respectability. Their moral self-righteousness is more natural to them than their guilt-

ridden expressions of compassion and hospitality. The beggar had rebuked them and now they reply in kind. But the beggar does not desist. He asks for glass – presumably to drink as well as to eat – for drinking together, literally a symposium, is the essence of sociability. (One wonders why the hosts have not offered him wine beforehand. Perhaps they think he is a drunk? Certainly they do not wish to be too sociable with the likes of this beggar).

When he is given a cup perhaps with something to drink, he spits into it, in front of everyone. We can easily imagine how the terrible smell and the repulsive sights affected the appetite of those in Pelimo's house, which also explains the readers' identification (on one level) with the family's harsh response to their "guest." But one element in this drama has been forgotten: the pauper himself. He suffers from hunger—and from loneliness and seclusion, too. The stench that exudes from this unfortunate's body and his spitting into the glass could easily be consequences of his grave illness, and not born of any desire to offend his hosts.

The members of the family, however, cannot apprehend this, since they are not truly concerned with the spiritual and the religious; if this had been so, they would have opened their hearts to the suffering person out of true generosity. They would have seen his distress and would have been happy to aid him in any way possible. The reality, however, is different: they want to preserve the bourgeois framework of the meal, the comfortable and pleasing family "togetherness." Instead they rebuke him again for awful table manners rather than extending help to a sick man wholly dependent on their compassion. Then he falls dead before them from his illness or, as in many rabbinic tales, from his shame which literally mortifies him.

Now it is evident to them all that their blindness to the pauper's suffering resulted in his death.

If Pelimo's household had been capable of sincerely feeling the mendicant's pain and suffering and of easing his burden, then the table would truly have become an "altar" on

which man's bestial ego is sacrificed, and it would have been sanctified by the act of eating. We see, however, that the offering on this altar is the poor man, who "fell dead."

Here Maimonides can help us interpret the shame engendered by the beggar's death as well as the deeper meaning of the table as altar and the desecration opf that table when the beggar spits into the glass and exposes the pus in his sores. The table is meant to be an altar that replaces the Temples where Jews once sought purification of their sins. Inviting guests is an essential part of the process. But when one closes one's home to needy pilgrims, then one desecrates the altar morally as if it were covered with physical refuse, vomit. Let us reread Maimonides, now with the full text:

> "And when one eats and drinks, he must feed the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, and other poor and unfortunates. But if one locks the doors to his courtyard and eats and drinks with his wife and children, but does not give food and drink to the poor and the embittered, [his meal] is not the rejoicing in a divine command, but a celebration of his stomach […] and such rejoicing is a mark of shame to all who so indulge themselves, as it is says: *I will strew dung upon your faces, the dung of your festival sacrifices* [*and you will carried to its dung heap*] (Malachi 2:3)." (Laws of Holidays, *Mishneh Torah*, 6:18).

Now the host - Pelimo - will be carried out to the dung heap, to the public latrine, to Dung Gate, now that his classy table has been reduced to the level of phlegm and pus and the impurity that the death of the beggar at the table imparts.

The Message of Act One: Respectable Religion versus a Spirituality Open to the Other

What is the message of Act One about what is truly religious life and what is merely empty forms that lead us to the sin of self-righteousness and insensitivity to those who lack the symbolic behaviors of respectability by which class societies rate each member and determine who is an honoured insider and who a disreputable outsider and

interloper.

In the context of this narrative, true spirituality is about opening not only one's door but one's heart to the "stranger" and the other (in our case, the sick pauper with filthy clothing). The stranger bears the genuine Divine Presence. The profound understanding is that all such "filth" is always God's messenger, come to put us to the test, and to teach us to accept the whole and not the partial. When we insist on purity and hygiene, we create the family, the societal and ostensibly the sacred "order," but then true sanctity vanishes from our lives, and religion becomes a despotic authority, like any other "secular" rule.

Our narrative, which focuses on a sage by the name of Pelimo, is a metaphor for the way of life of such "religious" society. Pelimo imagines in his mind's eye that he adheres to the divine truth, and he cannot see that, in actuality, all this is merely a mask. Like Pelimo, the head of the family, the members of the household follow his lead in doing God's official bidding. But this institutionalized religious order is merely a cloak disguising their true bourgeois aim which is to maintain the propriety of the family monopoly on the pleasure awaiting them from the communal festive meal. This is confirmed by their attitude to the sick pauper who comes knocking on their door. With no compassion or empathy, they disgustedly reject this pitiful mendicant.
Satan's disguise, which is matched by the masks of the Pelimo household, is meant to strip Pelimo and the members of his family of their own disguise, the religious "cloak" that they wear, the order of the smug and self-satisfied religious society.

Pelimo and his company sit down to the festive *s'udah mafseket* meal (literally, "cessation [from eating] meal"), in preparation for the lengthy Yom Kippur fast. The entire household is certain that this meal is an act of profound religious significance, the fulfillment of a commandment.[xxxiii] For them, participation in this obligatory meal is part of their overall religious activity, whose symbolic repertoire includes the table as the

altar of the Lord in the Temple, the "altar" that they "ascend" during the meal to see God's countenance (as BT *B'rachot* 55a declares: "As long as the Temple stood, the Altar atones for Israel; and now, a person's table atones for him").[xxxiv] Then this tale teaches us that in order for this table to be a truly religious symbol, we must first sacrifice on it our class assumptions and the comfortable family ego in favor of the suffering stranger. However the family does the exact opposite: they offer the wretched beggar as a "sacrifice" to maintain their respectable family comfort and contentment.

Act Two: Shedding Disguises - The Revelation and the Lesson

Strangely Pelimo has not appeared in Act One at all. Has he watched this whole farce of hospitality without intervening? Has he tacitly agreed with the household whose self-righteous ethos reflects his own? Perhaps he has been elsewhere and he only hears about this catastrophe when the neighbors begin gossiping about his role, however indirect, in this poor man's embarrassing death on the eve of Yom Kippur. Pelimo may simply be fleeing the public shame of this notorious incident. Or he may actually feel guilt and remorse for his inaction, so that Pelimo runs to hide in the public latrine from the "police" of his conscience that he imagines are pursuing him, and there—in the latrine—he receives a telling religious lesson from God's messenger. It is not to the synagogue and its rituals of confession and atonement on Yom Kippur that he turns not to his high society who disassociate from him rather than showing solidarity and offering solace.

Here Pelimo bows before beggar who has pursued him to his place of hiding. Perhaps he thinks this beggar is a ghost returned from the dead to take revenge. The homeless beggar had fallen dead before Pelimo's table in his fine home, and now Pelimo, who stands in the beggar's territory, the dung heap, the only residence where the marginalized are permitted to live, falls down in abject supplication before the beggar whose appearance may signify Pelimo's imminent death. This is a Yom Kippur moment when one makes a honest reckoning with one's soul knowing this may be my last

moment of life. Traditionally Ashkenazi Jews dress in a *kittel,* a shroud-like nightgown on Yom Kippur as they face their possible demise. By kneeling before the beggar, Pelimo reneges on his self-righteous spiritual arrogance as well as his social standing. He asks for forgiveness from human beings whom he has shamed, just as the Rabbis require on the eve of Yom Kippur, before one dares to turn to God for Divine compassion and an extension of life for another year.

Seeing his remorse, Satan now shows compassion on him and reveals his true identity. On one hand, that might spook Pelimo even more to know he stands opposite the Satan whom he insulted and challenged. On the other, he may be relieved to know he has not caused the death of an innocent, homeless itinerant. Now both Satan and Pelimo have removed their masks and like two human beings seeking conciliation they revisit the insulting remark, "An arrow in Satan's eyes," that triggered this tragic feud. Satan instructs him how to express himself more circumspectly and to give deference to God, the Merciful One, whose compassion is needed by all.

Why was the latrine selected as the venue for Satan's revelation? Because this is where "culture" discards everything that belongs to the dirt and filth of the "wild," just as the grimy pauper had previously been cast forth from Pelimo's house. Here social distance between respectable and marginal people disappears along with the masks we wear dissolve. Here honesty about are true self is most available where we defecate.

What is the Lesson of Act Two?

Act Two reinforces the message of Act One that the standard religious rituals of Yom Kippur must be disrupted by external events. Often an unexpected death or an unforeseeable reversal in our social standing must shock us in order to enable *heshbon ha-nefesh*, honest spiritual stocktaking. The narrative bears a subversive message: if Pelimo had finished his meal as usual, he would have gone directly to the synagogue for the evening Yom Kippur service. The "pious" congregation would begin with the usual

petitionary prayers and requests for divine forgiveness, and all would think that their salvation was to be found in this familiar order of things that is routinely performed every year, and that the good God would pardon them and the members of their households by merit of these prayer ceremonies. If this routine were the order of the day this year, as well, then Pelimo would have continued in his spiritual blindness for an additional year, with the same complacency engendered by empty trust in his "religious" life cycle. But Satan "saved" him by removing his spiritual blinders.

Act Two, however, also introduces a new message through a new character whose presence has been missed not only by Pelimo but by the readers in their own spiritual blindness. After all, who sent Satan to mock Pelimo? The Talmudic belief in Satan and angels is a complicated issue, but none of the varied Rabbinic conceptions claims that Satan is capable of acting against the will of God, in contrast to the dualistic notions of an evil principle parallel to the good one. The Bible, in the book of Job and elsewhere, clearly indicates that Satan is sent to fulfil missions given him by God, and the Rabbis stress that his authority to tempt and incite comes from God Himself. Satan is the legitimate agent of God, and his intentions are therefore always good and educational. Thus, for example, Rabbi Levi says that Satan's persecution of Job was "for the sake of Heaven."[xxxv] So it is God, not just Satan, who chooses to be revealed to Pelimo in a latrine, upon the entry of the holiest of the year in the form of a disgusting beggar! Pelimo receives the word of God here, while all the congregation is feverishly engaged in prayers for atonement and forgiveness in the public synagogue.

Remember that on Yom Kippur we go to God's inner sanctum, the only day human beings enters the holy of holies. But even on pilgrimage holidays all citizens expected to come to the outer Temple court to appear before God's face and to bring offering to the altar as its says, *and none shall appear before Me empty-handed*" (Exod. 23:15); "*Three times a year all your males shall appear before the face of Sovereign Lord, the God of Israel […] when you go up to appear before the Lord your God three times a year*" (Exod.

34:23). One meets the "face" of God. Both humans and God enter into a direct communication without masks in God's home at the altar. As we said before, without the Temple the table is the altar and one finds God's face in the face of the poor when they are truly welcomed. But Pelimo and his household failed to see God's face through Satan's disguise. Now they will meet God face to face through his messenger in the public latrine.

God's choice makes a powerful and daring religious statement: God is present in every place, wherever humans let God in; wherever the human heart is open to one's fellow, especially the most "other" and least socially valued. There God is to be found. Consequently, God is present in the latrine of life, where the Divine radiates its sanctity in the uncouth place, even more than at the well-heeled family's festival table or in the communal prayers in the synagogue on Yom Kippur. God's Presence dwells in the inner place that is free of falsehood and ego. When personal arrogance and class pretence reign, the Divine is inaccessible. External, empty ceremonies—at the family table or the synagogue - actually become "latrines." even if their outer garb is spotless – or even if they are garbed with a nice talit in the synagogue. By contrast, inner decisions are always personal and totally authentic.]

Significantly, it is in the latrine, of all places, that Satan finds Pelimo, alone, without his family or any of his synagogue coterie. Now we can see the ironic measure-for-measure reversal between Satan and Pelimo. Now Pelimo sits alone on erev Yom Kippur far from his holiday table in the latrine. That is the same isolation experienced earlier by the Satan disguised as a poor beggar who had complained: "On such a day as today, the entire world is at the table, but I am alone?" In placing Pelimo in the filth of the latrine, the dirtiest place in the city, on Yom Kippur, the story puns playfully on the ancient meaning of the word "*kippur*" which means to cleanse. It is precisely in that latrine that the process of the "*kippur*," the moral cleansing of Pelimo, takes place. There Yom Kippur purifies and atones and not in the bourgeois "religious" institutions where one

might have expected the cleansing to occur.

What did God's agent, Satan, teach Pelimo in the latrine? Something very simple—and with him, we, the readers, also learn a fundamental lesson: do not say "An arrow in Satan's eyes!" but "May the Merciful One rebuke Satan." Don't lie to yourselves and others by presenting your actions as those of a pious person who has already overcome the temptations of this world and who already adheres to God. If you cannot live a religiosity that opens the door to the stranger, to the Other (also in the psychological sense, of accepting the Other and not criticizing him, because he seems to you somehow "dirty"), and you hold fast to your social supremacy over uncouth outsiders, then don't pretend to be what you are not – pure and righteous. The truth has its own power, and all the spiritual worlds are open before you when you do not lie; but if you continue to harbor the illusion that you live are already "religious" and that a "religious" world is madeup of a hierarchy of performers of ritual actions, you will descend further and further into the false ceremonies of your life.[xxxvi] On Yom Kippur the high priest cleanses the altar of human sin and sins are exported to the outsider, the scapegoat, who is sent to die in the hellish wilderness of Azazel. But we must beware not to identify the otherness of sin with the otherness of the homeless sinner. We all have our place in the dung heap and we cannot so easily cleanse our conscience by expelling the stranger inside ourselves and at the edges of our society. The rabbinic message to Pelimo and to us is that God may be found outside rather than inside our social structures where we feel too much at home.

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Ill-Starred Lovers: Marital Estrangement on a Loveless, Tearful Yom Kippur

Noam Zion

Introduction:

Regarding Greek and Biblical tradition whose clashes and inter-cultural dialogue constitute Western civilization, the philosopher Allan Bloom says, "We are the heirs of two great teachings about the place of *Eros* or love in the life of man." Yet these cultures differ about the prime relationship in life: the Bible gives primacy to family, while Greeks see male friendship as the primary attachment. Male philosophic friends pursue together the love of knowledge which is the central erotic quest and hence the highest end of human life for the Greeks:

> "Membership in the family is what defines the biblical man and woman; the Greek was defined, on the one hand, by membership in a polis, or, on the other hand, by his philosophic individualism. The Jew's primary association and attachment is to mother, father, sister, brother, and, the only outsider, husband or wife. … For the Greek, the attachment of all attachments was to the friend. For the Jew, the only laudable and beautiful human erotic expression is found in the relation between husband and wife. For the Greek the erotic ties were [with Truth and] the quest for the beautiful, wherever it may be found." (Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 442)

Bloom's generalization cannot, however, be applied to rabbinic culture. In the rabbinic world Abraham is reconceived, not a family man, but as a philosopher who studies nature and seeks its ultimate ground in God. When he sees that his father's religion is false, he does not honor him loyally, but breaks his father's idols and rejects the pagan gods of nature in his native city. Then he follows God's calling and abandons his father's family to pursue the ultimate God. He

becomes a teacher of the religious truth he has discovered and creates a new people of God. For the rabbinic authors of this midrash, a Jew's quest for God is integrated with the philosophic pursuit of knowledge. While Talmudic culture did not seek knowledge of God as science, it did seek to know God through the passionate study of Torah, understood both as God's word and as God's plan by which the world was created. To pursue that total devotion to Torah as the way to the Divine, the rabbis urged their disciples to abandon their families – both their parents and their young wives - and their worldly occupations and to go off to study Torah for years and years, often in a distant Beit Midrash with a demanding master of rabbinic wisdom. There these students nurtured a relationship with God's word that led them to fall head over heels in love with Torah. They shared their intellectual love life with a male study partner, as did Hellenist disciples of Aristotle, Plato, and Epicurus. But what became of these rabbis' spouses and children, whom they presumably loved, while they pursued their *Eros* for Torah? Where does one's marital partner fit in with this aspiration for Torah as an all-consuming truth? In broader terms, we wonder how to balance one's passion for one's calling – business achievement, artistic or athletic excellence, intellectual fame, spiritual meditation, or *tikkun olam* – with one's family life? What happens when one's relentless quest for self-fulfillment makes one morally insensitive to others, especially those closest to us, whom we often take for granted?

The rabbis thought through these deep conflicts between love of family and love of truth, by telling dramatic tales about the tragic dilemmas of their own rabbinic heroes. Let us listen to one such story about a rabbi named, peculiarly, "Rabbi Love," who imagined Torah as a seductive woman, his other woman. The amorous rabbi, who lived far from his wife and his home, was so infatuated by Torah study that he once lost track of time and missed a fateful rendezvous he had set with his wife on Yom Kippur. As we approach our own Yom Kippur, a time to re-evaluate our commitments in life, confess our failures, and seek a new balance among our priorities, we may learn something from reading this ancient tale and comparing the lessons modern scholars, religious and secular, have drawn from it.

Rabbi Love? The Fall of Rav Rahumi (TB Ketubot 62b)

Prologue:

Rav Rahumi[xxxvii] was [always] to be found studying before Rava at [his academy in] Mehoza [a city near the capital in Babylonia].

He used to come home on the eve of each Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

Act One:

One day [i.e. the Day of Atonement[xxxviii]] the oral legal tradition drew him in.[xxxix]

Act Two:

His wife/homemaker was expecting him:

"Now he's coming?" … "Now he's coming?"….

He did not come.

She weakened.[xl]

Down came one tear from her eye.[xli]

Finale:

He was sitting and studying on the roof.[xlii]

Down fell the roof from under him.

He died.[xliii]

אמר רבא: סמכו רבנן אדרב אדא בר אהבה ועבדי עובדא בנפשייהו כי הא:

דרב רחומי הוה שכיח קמיה דרבא במחוזא. הוה רגיל דהוה אתי לביתיה כל מעלי יומא דכיפורי.

יומא חד משכתיה שמעתא. הוה מסכיא דביתהו: השתא אתי השתא אתי! לא אתא. חלש דעתה, אחית דמעתא מעינה.

הוה יתיב באיגרא. אפחית איגרא מתותיה ונח נפשיה.

The infamous story of Rav Rahumi starts off a series of rabbinic tales that showcase the emotional pain and family dislocations attendant on young husbands' abandoning their families to pursue their sacred study of Torah with far-removed teachers.

***Literary Analysis*: Protagonist, Place, Time, Scenes, and Moral of the Story**

Our story develops dramatically line by line. It creates expectations in its readers and then surprises us with a plot twist.[xliv] Finally, our tale enables us to see the world from a new angle. Its goal is enlightenment, expanded empathy and self-criticism.

Protagonist(s): The first word is the main character's name and title, but the second protagonist, his unnamed wife, is not accidentally hidden from view in the Prologue. She is also hidden from her husband's purview. Her forgotten status is crucial, especially since her husband, Rav Rahumi, bears the unusual name "*Rahumi*" whose root means "love" in Aramaic. As in the Bible narrative, the literal meaning of a name often shapes the character, predicts the plot, and juxtaposes the character and the destiny of the bearer of that name in ironic ways.

What then are the associations and expectations of that fascinating name "Rahumi"- Rabbi Love?

(a) lover of God.
(b) lover of Torah or *philo-sophy* (love of knowledge).
(c) beloved, but of whom? In the story of King David, God renames his son Solomon with the name *Yedidya* for God has loved him. In fact, David or Yedid-ya share the same root word "*dod*" which means the beloved one or the lover.
(d) lover of a woman.
(e) compassionate one, moved by mercy as in maternal love. The name contains the word *rehem* – womb.

So far, nothing prepares us to think this love is directed to Rahumi's wife, for Rahumi is characterized by his devotion to Torah study conducted far away from home. Could we at this stage imagine him to be the villain and imagine his wife, the nameless one, to be the main

protagonist, the true tragic hero? Will his name be a clue to his essence as a great lover or a joke at his expense, causing the reader to wince every time his name is mentioned? His problem may be that he fails to fulfill the destiny of his name as a devoted lover of his wife.

Place – Setting: Where does our story start and where is it going? Rav Rahumi is a rabbi, not just a novice student, and he has located himself "before" his senior teacher – Rava whose name means, appropriately, "rabbi, my great, master teacher." The place Rav Rahumi dwells is a "house" – a Beit Midrash, the house of study, but not his own house, the one he once shared with his wife. In that house of study, relationships are hierarchical. Even a senior student sits *before*, that is beneath, his master's supervision. This house of study is located in Mahoza, the great center of learning near the capital of the Sassanian Empire in Babylonia. Since he is already called "rav," Rav Rahumi has most probably secured a position in his yeshiva where he "works" as a teacher, though he has not brought his family to join him.

But Rav Rahumi has another "house" that he goes to "regularly" – but ironically "regularly" means only once a year! This other house, which some would call his home, is not in the same city. In rabbinic Aramaic, "his home" (*d'beitu*) usually refers to "his wife," but he hardly lives with or in "his home." The connection between these two geographically distant places is tenuous – only once a year, only on Erev Yom Kippur, does Rav Rahumi leave his Mehoza home to visit the house where his wife resides. Yet as we shall see, Rav Rahumi's wife cherishes even that tenuous connection, as revealed in her intense longing and expectation for his intermittent homecomings. When that slender tie is severed, life is lost as well as love. So the relationship of student to teacher has displaced the relationship of husband and wife.

How long ago, we wonder, did he leave his other home? Why call it his home/house at all? What defines home? Why does he return there at all, and why so infrequently?

Time: From the everyday to the special day: The prologue to our narrative told us what happens *every* day and *every* Yom Kippur, but *now* a one-time unique happening is reported:

"One day." This "one day" can be any day in the life of Rav Rahumi when something minor but fateful occurred. (Perhaps the narrative will make more sense, practically speaking, if the day is in fact the day *before* Yom Kippur, the day to set out for home on *erev* Yom Kippur). Finally we might explain this "one day" as the one day that Rav Rahumi will make a conjugal visit to his wife in "his" home, or at least his former home. Practically speaking, Rav Rahumi is probably home for several weeks, at least until after Sukkot, when his yeshiva studies resume. He could then come home after Yom Kippur if he missed his opportunity to travel on *erev* Yom Kippur. But the narrator is not looking for realism, but for a symbolic irony – a man comes home once year to be with one's wife and chooses to come on Yom Kippur. What an oxymoron!

Time: Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, raises crucial expectations against which the plot is measured. *What associations are being suggested by Yom Kippur?*

(a) a special day versus the everyday

(b) a day of reconciliation, at-one-ment after requesting forgiveness. Recall that forgiveness from God for sins against our fellow human beings requires first requesting forgiveness from our human victims.

(c) a day of suffering for our souls/bodies with no food or intercourse

(d) a day of judgment when our fates are sealed as punishment for sins not repented; a day to think about our mortality

(e) a day off from the Beit Midrash, which is closed. Otherwise it is hard to imagine how Rav Rahumi, the work/study-aholic, could never take off a day were his "office" not locked and shuttered.

(f) a day of confession and prayer when we become most intimate with God sharing our weaknesses

(g) a day when tears may break through the locked gates (*Neilah*) of Heaven

(h) a day of purgation by suffering

These connotations weave themselves into our developing understanding of the narrative and its tension.
Why would one go home for that holy day and leave Mahoza and the Beit Midrash, where spiritual life is intense and where one lives all the other days of the year? Perhaps the rabbi is feeling guilty and his visit home is a penance. We may wonder what will occur on that day and in that place.

What a strange day to select as the only day in the whole year to come home, to be with one's wife – a day when sexual intercourse is forbidden, when one spends all day in the synagogue!
What does the rabbi usually say to his wife when they meet? Does he ask for forgiveness? Does he proudly report his achievements at the Beit Midrash in order for her to feel pride in her self-sacrifice for Torah? Will this Yom Kippur be a day of repentance, literally a day of turning and returning, in which the rabbi's or the wife's life begins to change?

Ruth Calderon, the feminist scholar of rabbinics and a member of the Israeli Knesset (2013-2015), notes that there is a genre of rabbinic stories based on ***Erev*** (the day leading up to) **Yom Kippur** in which there is an attempt to resolve longstanding interpersonal conflicts. Yom Kippur is the driving force of these narratives, for the participants are aware of the ambivalent power of the day – a day of reconciliation, of purification, or if not, then a day of judgment, a day of death. Repentance as a change of behavior and a commitment not to repeat one's sin is a *sine qua non,* essential for Yom Kippur to effect atonement (Mishna Yoma 8:9). But even more is required.

The offended party, in this case Rav Rahumi's wife, must also be asked for forgiveness and she must grant it, before God will consider wiping out her husband's punishment. Yom Kippur atones for all sins between God and humans, but sins between people must first be forgiven by the victims:

> "For sins between fellow humans, Yom Kippur [alone] does not atone until one appeases the fellow [injured]" (Mishna Yoma 8:9).

Only the minority position of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi dispenses both with repentance and with the forgiveness granted by those offended and claims that Yom Kippur itself wipes away culpability:

> "Rabbi says: For all the transgressions in the Torah, whether or not one does *teshuvah*, Yom Kippur atones." (TB Yoma 87a-b)

Some weighty sins cannot even be redeemed by the combination of repentance, forgiveness by the offended, and Yom Kippur. For those only the purging of death can help, and this may be the case with Rav Rahumi.

According to the majority view of Yom Kippur, it is a time for the offending party to request forgiveness. Yet Rav Rahumi never considers asking forgiveness from his wife before Yom Kippur, and in fact he fails to return home at all. The readers know that it is Yom Kippur and this may be his last chance to make amends, but Rav Rahumi is oblivious both of his sin and of his wife's feelings. So his opportunity to make amends is turned into another act of insensitivity that cannot be borne on this holiest Day of Judgment. In fact when the narrator announces: "One day the oral legal tradition drew him in," one day sounds like any ordinary day and that is how Rav Rahmui treats it. We are only assured that that day was The Day (*Yoma*), Yom Kippur, because Rav Rahumi's wife expects him that day and she only would expect him home if Yom Kippur were approaching. So Rav Rahumi's sin is to treat this like any other day. Rav Rahumi does not realize that his year-long criminal negligence of his wife's feelings and her honor merit him a judgment of death every year. Only thanks to his once-a-year visit and her once-a-year forgiveness has God granted an annual dispensation – so far.

Plot: It happens. Plots are instigated by events that make the plot thicken. But surprisingly in our narrative the originating event is so slight, so usual, so unremarkable. Rav Rahumi is simply drawn – attracted /pulled /enticed – by an interesting bit of Torah. How unremarkable for rabbis to be infatuated by an interesting text of Torah! Yet it sounds a bit like a seduction scene. Maybe that is why he is called Rabbi Love. The term "drawn" or "pulled" echoes the same root in the Song of Songs verse: *Draw me after you and we will run* (Song of Songs 1:4). In the context of the daring and dangerous entrance of Rabbi Akiba into the Paradise of esoteric Torah, the verse applied to him is, *Draw me (moshkheini) after you and I shall run* [*and bring me into the inner chambers of the King*] (Song of Songs 1:4). Thus Rav Rahumi, like Rabbi Akiba, was drawn by a devil-may-care passion for Torah into a dangerous situation. Yet their fates diverged. "Rabbi Akiba went up in peace [into the heavenly paradise] and descended in peace" protected by God, whose name he invoked (TB Hagiga 15b). Rav Rahumi will ascend to the rooftop of the Beit Midrash drawn by Torah, but he will descend into death when it collapses under him as the result of an apparent Divine act of wrath for betraying his earthly wife. Rabbi Akiba, who also abandons his wife for years and years to study Torah, will not suffer God's wrath, perhaps because Akiba's wife will not shed a tear of regret for his absence, but encourages him to persevere in his absence.

Yet for Rav Rahumi this is the wrong day to be attracted to Torah; this is the one and only day to be attracted to home, to his wife (to his other love?), to the one for whom he is "Mr. Beloved." This is the day to be a husband, not a rabbi. The regularity that was established is now in danger of violation. The delicate one-sided asymmetry of a whole year at the house of study versus one day at home with his homemaker is about to be upset. Yom Kippur was to be a day of abstinence from intercourse with the delights of Torah, but Rav Rahumi violated the holiness of the day and betrayed his obligations to his spouse.

Change of scene, change of character, change of perspective: "Meanwhile back at the ranch" is the literary maneuver that switches the focus suddenly to the home of Rav Rahumi and to the other protagonist – his wife – and her perspective. While the event that affects Rav

Rahumi is Torah's attracting him, his wife is still attracted to him; she is expecting him at home. The Aramaic words for "attracted" / *m'shakh-tei* and "expected" / *m'sakh-ya* rhyme or at least alliterate. We switch from the internal world of the Rabbi to the inner world of his nameless wife. She expects him:

> "Now he's coming?" … "Now he's coming?" He did not come."

Three times the word "coming" is used, emphasizing the coming home and the coming together.[xlv] (Though the narrative context is not sexual, that term has sexual overtones in Hebrew as in English.) If narrative is about expectation, seeking cathartic climax, then the wife and the reader are driven mad with a highly focused expectation of reunion and perhaps anticipation of romance. If you will, a Day of At-one-ment and reconciliation approaches. How often have we waited for someone special, imagined the arrival, and then been bitterly disappointed? But to have waited for a whole year for the one-day reunion that is over almost before it begins; then he does not arrive for that – that is heart breaking! The total dependence of Rav Rahumi's wife on her husband's schedule was bearable as long as she could rely on his coming at the specified time. The more he delayed, the more desperate she became because now she was dependent on his arbitrary decision when and whether he would come home.

Calderon reinforces this interpretation by exploring the unique literary feature of doubling the wife's expectation within her internal monologue. "Now he's coming?... Now he's coming?" is also found elsewhere in the rabbinic corpus. In the laws of *peah*, the unharvested corners of the field are designated by the land owner for harvest by the poor. In principle the owner of the field may pick any time and any place to declare "This is *peah*" and all may come at will to harvest it. But for many reasons Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai requires the owner to stipulate in advance a particular time and place for the *peah*,:

> Rabbi Shimon says: "For five reasons one (a farmer) should not designate the *peah* just anywhere but only at the edge (end) of the field." …. to prevent **making the poor idle** [wasting their time] – so the poor should not have to sit and watch all day saying to themselves: 'Perhaps now he will give the *peah*, perhaps now he will give the *peah*' [since they cannot predict the moment when that farmer will declare a portion of the field *peah*]. But rather [when the designation of *peah* has a fixed time] they can go to another field to glean and come back at the hour of the finishing off [of the farmer's harvest when the *peah* is declared]." (JT Peah Chapter 4 folio 18 based on Tosefta Peah 1:7)

Calderon notes the unusual literary feature in the midst of this legal text repeated twice: "Now he will give the *peah*; now he will give the *peah*" that echoes the tale of Rav Rahumi:

> "The literary expression 'Now… Now...' embodies the feeling of torment in expectation. The poor are imprisoned in waiting for the owner of the field; powerless without any ability to influence the situation; lacking in knowledge of how long they must wait; experiencing extreme anxiety lest they miss the moment for which they are waiting lest they fail to keep up their guard so as not to fall asleep or lest they go home [briefly to rest] and be absent just at that moment [the *peah* is designated]."(Ruth Calderon, *A Talmudic Alpha Beta,* 94)

Rav Rahumi's wife, like the widows, the orphans, and the destitute, has no alternative resources with which to meet her needs. She has a right to conjugal visits just as the poor have a right to *peah*, but without regulation they are utterly dependent on the arbitrary will of the *ba'al* – the owner of the field and the husband or the wife. But the problem both for wives of absentee husbands and for the poor dependent on the generosity of the landowners is not merely about fulfilling physiological needs. The poor are subject to emotional *inui* - persecution, exploitation, and torment, as it says, *You shall not persecute/wrong the widow and orphan* (Exodus 22:21). Their rights are trampled arbitrarily by withholding wages, by

withholding their coats taken as collateral, or by robbing them of their property (Ex. 22: 21-26). So too the wives denied timely sex (*onah*) are subject to pain – a pain of failed love as much as deprivation of sexual satisfaction.

In *A Bride for a Night*, Ruth Calderon innovatively combines a scholarly literary analysis of the tale of Rav Rahumi with an imaginative rewriting of the biography of this ancient scholar from a contemporary feminist angle. Calderon delicately portrays Rav Rahumi's wife's longing for his return. Here is the nameless character, the wife, who really deserves the name "*Rahumi* /Lover" of her husband as much as her husband merits the name Lover of Torah:

> "A wrinkled morning after a night of hallucinatory visions, and my heart is pounding: 'Now he's coming.' I hear footsteps in a dream. For days already they beat within me even while I'm awake. Like false labor pains.
>
> Once again a year has passed. My skin is sensitive after removing all that hair with lime. The pain is familiar; the women call it 'suffering for love.' Your skin is wiped clear of hair for someone, for his eyes, for his hands. During the hair-removal treatment, as the woman is applying the lime to my body, I rehearse the dream that's already so deeply imprinted in me: mid-day, a light breeze, the wagons will come into the town square. I'm lying on carpets in the house. I'll hear a voice. His hand on the door lock. He'll call my name....
>
> Who am I waiting for? That same young lad, the one who quoted in my honor one hundred fifty *mishnayot* [Rabbinic laws] by heart, the one who told of a dream that contained a sign, the one who said 'your big, brown, beautiful eyes.' That same young lad had become a man. And perhaps, my heart is afraid to tell my lips, he has become a stranger to me?
>
> And maybe it's Rav Rahumi I'm waiting for, Rabbi Love, the pride of the village, the Wunderkind who had earned advanced ordination, making him 'teacher and judge,' when he was only sixteen. And I — the rabbi's wife — was the envy of my girlfriends....

I undo my braids; I've kept aside the scented oil. I don't care if he arrives while I'm still in the water. From nightfall, sex will be forbidden. I make the sun swear it will stay high in the sky. What does the Holy One care? Just a bit more light.

Outside, a commotion of wagons. The caravan is arriving. My pulse picks up. Drying my body with a cloth. A fragrance will be lingering in the bath when he washes up. My clothes have been set aside for a few days already. My white dress is laundered, and his holiday clothes are on the bench. My hair is wet; my hair is braided under the kerchief. I'll go out to greet him anyway. *Lekha dodi*, 'Come, my beloved.'" [xlvi]

The plot betrays this woman's hopes. The expected journey from one place to another, the horizontal trip from Mahoza to home in the village, never got started. Probably Rav Rahumi lost track of time – Torah is another world, another time zone – and so he missed his connections and never made it home for Yom Kippur.

***Juxtaposition*: Opposed Codes of Social Behavior.** In a good love story, contrasting worlds meet. For example, the movie *Pretty Woman* is about a low class prostitute, a kind of *Pygmalion* or *My Fair Lady* who can neither talk nor dress nor eat properly by upper class standards. Yet she enters the world of the wealthy and becomes acculturated and transformed externally. She discovers that this "civilized world" is internally corrupt. What makes this a comedy is then not only her success at passing in the new world but also her ability to transform and redeem that other world by bringing to it her unvarnished emotional honesty.

In the narrative of Rav Rahumi what worlds contrast? What codes of social behavior? What happens when they meet?

(a) the city of Mahoza versus the village of his wife

(b) a men's world of intellect versus a women's world of emotion (though in fact the man, Rabbi Love, is moved emotionally, erotically by Torah)

(c) the female attractions of a seductive Torah (the other woman) versus the domesticity of the ever-waiting woman at home
(d) the house of study versus the house of family
(e) the ethos of the everyday versus the experience of once a year, on Yom Kippur

Rav Rahumi lives in one world (the Beit Midrash) with his full attention, but tries lackadaisically to live up to the norms of the other world (his old home) – at least minimally visiting once a year. His wife tries to make room for her husband to live in his own world, where he has been totally transformed (or at least enraptured) by the *Eros* of Torah. Yet she seeks to derive some satisfaction from the one day of his undivided attention he has allotted her.

Plot: It Happens. A second event occurs – this time in the inner emotional world of his wife, rather than between Rav Rahumi and his beloved Torah.

She weakened [became ill or upset or lost rational control]
And then
Down came one tear from her eye.

Rav Rahumi's wife "weakened (*halash da'atah*)." That term is usually translated as an idiom meaning "grew ill," "upset" or even "lost her mind." However, the literal translation "weakened" may be most appropriate in the context of this tale, which suggests that she has with great effort been holding back her emotions and her tears. Now, however, she weakens momentarily from her disappointment just enough that one tear escapes her otherwise severe control over the expression of her emotions.

Here begins a new journey – not horizontal but vertical, from up to down. A tear – one tear at home – is released and falls. So too across the world in Mehoza, invisibly connected, the roof

falls and the rabbi who failed to make amends on Yom Kippur dies as his Torah heights come crashing down. The words rhyme again – the verbs describing the two connected falls – *akhit/afkhit.* In Lamentations 1:2, the widowed city of Jerusalem is pictured with a single tear on her cheek and no one to comfort her because they have all been taken captive to Babylonia. Here, the single tear is that of a woman whose husband is "captivated" by an attraction to the oral tradition [feminine in Hebrew], to the Torah of Babylonia, while she herself is about to be widowed.

The **bifurcated world** that seems so everyday, so regular – man studying in the big city and woman waiting at home – turns out to be very fragile because of the issue of **restraint and balance**. The tale begins with a precarious balance that is lopsided and yet somehow seems to work: one day a year the man stops studying, leaves the Beit Midrash and goes home to give his wife her one big day – Yoma, "the day," though we know she must somehow divide it with God since Yoma is also Yom Kippur. Only once a year did Rav Rahumi do what he was obligated to do weekly – to visit his earthly wife.

When he lost control of time and succumbed to the female lure of Torah, however, he lost track of his schedule, his "*onah*" of fixed conjugal intercourse. He stayed just a little longer, until it was too late. The medieval poetry of Yom Kippur highlights the imagery of closing and locking gates: The imagery of "Neilah," the "locking" of the gates," for the last service of Yom Kippur, telling us that there exists a deadline after which the judgment, perhaps of death, is sealed. Rav Rahumi's love caused him a loss of control that led to her loss of control. His was small and so was hers – not a flood of rage, but just one tear that she could not hold back. When her long delayed gratification was denied, when the hope, which allowed her to keep going all year long was dashed, she broke – at least for a moment.

***Moral of the Story*: Six Lessons**

Rav Rahumi's wife's tale is literally **a tear-jerker**, yet only one tear is allowed to fall and only after a long period of restraint. Just that much suffering revealed is enough to justify her husband's summary execution. The victim, so utterly ignored by her blissfully studious husband, is emotionally very restrained, yet that is what invites the reader to respond with a feeling of poetic justice when he falls as did her tear. *What is the underlying message of the tale?* Six lessons are offered by contemporary Israeli scholars, secular and religious, each of whom integrates literary sensitivity and prophetic pathos.

#1 – "Justice, shall you pursue!" - Measure for Measure.

In this tale there is no explicit moral lesson summed by the narrator and no description of Divine wrath in a Biblical style. Yet there is an implicit suggestion of **Divine justice.** The verdict is embodied in the **timing,** the Day of Atonement, and in the **plot symmetry** between her *falling* tear from her eye that had looked to his coming and his final journey *falling down* from his roof from which he had not moved and on which he had been sitting and studying.

God in the story is revealed by reading between the lines and applying the Biblical plot tradition of "measure for measure" justice. We see God's footprints in the choice of Yom Kippur as the day on his last opportunity was lost. God appears as a great plot-maker engaged in Divine string-pulling. Just as Megillat Esther's reversals point at a hidden hand, so too do the twists in this rabbinic narrative.

What then is the moral of the story? Obligations to one's wife, contractual and moral, must be honored. But the point is not merely a legal one. Halakhically-speaking a wife may absolve her husband of his duty to regular conjugal visits. Presumably Rav Rahumi's wife agreed to his long years of study away from home, as did many rabbinical wives whose marital contracts made that an explicit condition of the betrothal. Her love for him, which is so palpable in her expectation of his yearly arrival, makes it unimaginable that she would deny him his pursuit of self-fulfillment.

Ruth Calderon paints this halakhic and emotional reality with fine strokes in representing his wife's perspective:

> "When he wanted to go off to a place of Torah learning, I gave my consent. I didn't know how difficult the distance would be. I didn't know how long the nights alone are, how much the longing hurts. But in any case, he would have gone, even though the Babylonians say, 'One who goes off from his wife without her permission has committed a grievous offense, a mortal sin.' Would I give my consent again? When he arrives, I overflow my banks with love, knowing his weakness. His arrival each year, his arrival renews that consent again and again. His visits, during the autumn days of Tishrei, when the yeshiva is on vacation, became my life's object." (Ruth Calderon, *Ha-shuk,* 42-46, see her English book, *Bride for a Night*)

Ari Elon imagines Rav Rahumi's wife as much less forgiving than does Ruth Calderon. Both acknowledge that Rav Rahumi had received from his wife a legal permit allowing him to stay away from home, but that passport needed to be renewed annually and that is why he came home each Yom Kippur. He did not need to come home to renew his love from her, for the husband had his need for love satisfied in the Beit Midrash. Yom Kippur was not about making amends for the past but rather about renewing the formula that allowed him to behave the same way the next year with no regret or repentance.

Ari Elon imagines an exploitive husband and a wife close to despair and clinical depression:

> "Rav Rahumi's appearance at his house every Erev Yom Kippur extended his visa for another year. He is accustomed to come to his other spouse once a year - every Erev Yom Kippur - to placate and appease her in order to be able to go through Yom Kippur successfully. … The woman keeps back her tears all the years in which Rav Rahumi accustoms himself to appear on Erev Yom Kippur. She teaches herself to bite her lips

and persevere. She teaches herself to live from the previous Erev Yom Kippur to this one and from this Erev Yom Kippur to the next one. However, she, unlike him, never gets used to this ritual. She suffers silently, keeping back her tears, and fights the deep depression that threatens to draw her down into the depths of despair." [xlvii]

Even though the husband has a legal mandate for his absence and even though he caused his wife pain inadvertently, he is still responsible for criminal negligence. Morally he deserves the punishment, but bringing him to justice brings no happy ending, no reconciliation, no deeper wisdom for the rabbi or his wife. This is a **cautionary tale** planted at the heart of a Talmudic sugya that preaches and permits students of Torah to go off to study for two or three years without even asking their wives' permission!

Ari Elon deduces from the Yom Kippur context with its themes of Judgment Day (*Yom HaDin*) that the narrator wishes to pronounce a fatal judgment on Rav Rahumi and to protest the rabbinic ideal he represents. The tale's harsh ending implicates the cultural reality of social injustice upon which scholarly excellence is built:

"Rav Rahumi's social context enables him to push to the utmost his devotion to his love goddess [Torah] and elevates him as an esteemed hero. This is the society that engraved on its flag the slogan: 'The study of Torah is above all.' This is the social reality that the narrator is protesting.

Rav Rahumi … is going to die on a roof during his tragic ascent skyward. He is going to die on Erev Yom Kippur - the most significant day between any person and another - a day that brings into seventy-fold relief his **inverted priorities** and his doom. He is not going to get a visa for another year.

Rav Rahumi is the rabbinic Icarus and in his prideful flight heavenward he brings down the whole Beit Midrash.

While our sense of poetic justice demands that God or the moral structure of the world punish Rav Rahumi, what happens in the plot may simply be a coincidence. The Rabbis often felt that, after the destruction of the Temple, God was no longer directly involved in this world in visiting punishment and reward on people. Yet there was still moral causation in the structure of the universe. The tears of a woman who has been slighted still communicate directly with God and provoke immediate and punitive Divine intervention: "Even if the gates of prayer [to God] are locked, the gates of tears are never locked." Rabbi Elazar says: "All sins are punished by Divine mediators [i.e. God works his justice through natural causation in the empirical world], except for the sin of inflicting emotional pain (*ona'ah*)" which still triggers direct Divine intervention.

#2 - **For Lack of Maternal Love: Mercy, *Rahmanut* or the Art of Oppression**

Lack of mercy may be even more evident than lack of justice in our narrative. Rav Rahumi's name means not only Eros but maternal compassion (mercy, *rahmanus*) epitomized by maternal physiology – the womb (*rekhem*). *Rahum* is also God's self-identification to Moses at Sinai – *Adonai is the God of mercy* [*rahum* = womb] *and compassion, the long-suffering God*, *abounding in love and faithfulness*" (Exodus 34:6).

The **God of womb-like compassion** saw the pain of Rav Rahumi's wife, to which Rav Rahumi was blind. Rav Rahumi had no mercy, not because he was cruel, but because he was clueless and self-absorbed. God punished him according to the rabbinic principle that men are forewarned that women are generally vulnerable to being hurt and then shedding a tear. Men know that God as the advocate of forsaken wives will demand that justice be done forthwith for all those who cause the shedding of tears of emotional pain. The term for hurt feelings (*ona'ah*) is derived from the Biblical commandment not to deceive and exploit one's fellow (Leviticus 25:17) and it implies a betrayal of trust and a taking advantage of someone with deception.

> Rav said: "A man should always be careful not to hurt his wife's feelings, for her tears are ever-present and (the punishment for) her hurt feelings is near." (TB Baba Metzia 59a)

God will avenge the exploited directly for "every sin is punished via a messenger of God, but the punishment for *ona'ah* – hurt feelings – is exacted by God directly" (TB Baba Metzia 59a). God will also bless those who care for their wives' honor as well as their physical needs

> Rabbi Helbo said: "A man should always be cautious about his wife's dignity/honor, for blessing is present in one's home only on account of one's wife." (TB Baba Metzia 59a)

Surprisingly, Ari Elon is not happy with the rabbinic principle of justice for causing *ona'ah*. For him this is not a mark of moral compassion, but a protective device for husbands and, more generally, for cultural oppressors who seek to suppress the political resistance that tears might incite:

> "'A man should always be cautious about insulting his wife, for the presence of her tear quickly brings calamitous retribution' (TB BM 59a). The essence of the art of oppression is embedded in this verse. How can we keep our oppressed so they do not let their tears fall against us and bury us under them? How can we avoid stretching oppression too far? How can we prevent the oppressed from getting too depressed? **The art of oppression** is an important skill to learn, whether the subject is personal oppression (husbands-wives, parents-children) or national and class oppression. Whoever humiliates another in public, and all other oppressors who inflict mental anguish, are worthy of death, according to the Gemara. At the moment of humiliation and oppression, death is decreed for the oppressor. On the other hand, enacting this death sentence depends on the oppressed. The execution of Rav Rahumi's death sentence depended all these years on his wife; will she let a tear fall, or not?

His wife …enables him to cut off contact from the world and give himself over to his Torah. She is the one who enables him to walk the high balance wire. One incautious step on his part, and the tear will fall; his balance will be lost; the wire will snap; calamity will come. All the gates will be opened with lightning speed by an instantaneous, hidden hydraulic mechanism, the mechanism of the tear that she can no longer hold back. The power and swiftness of this single tear are the product of an ever-increasing mass composed of the man's ongoing oppression and the woman's continuing self-restraint.

The *talmid hakham* creates this terrible balance, and the woman preserves it. He depends on her ability to withstand suffering. As long as she can suppress her reaction, he can continue to be devoted to his Torah. *... How can we know if our behavior has injured another with a mortal blow? We cannot know. Who can know how many long-suffering victims circulate among us, holding back their tears, choking off their cries, and postponing for us the day of reckoning?"* [xlviii]

#3 - Scholar as Adulterer

Ari Elon also sees Rav Love's crime as his abandonment of his wife for an affair with a younger and more exciting woman. Rav Rahumi is "drawn" to Torah as another woman with whom he is conducting an affair.

"Rav Rahumi's relation to the Torah of study was not one of obligation but of allure. **His relationship to his wife, on the other hand, was one of obligation.** Relationships with his wife are part of the pattern of normative behavior that the commanding God imposes on him. The tension between the Torah and the wife is a corollary aspect of the tension between the female goddess and the male God. The wife represents the command of the male God and prevents Rahumi from completely divorcing himself from earthly attractions and being drawn into an ecstasy from which there is no return."

Elon feels that the real life wife cannot compete in holding the attraction of her scholarly husband. Rav Rahumi cannot feel love for his wife even once a year. At best he might manage some compassion for her suffering or he might pay her attention because he must exercise judicious caution lest her tears endanger his life. Torah is the mistress, but as Ari Elon shows, Rav Rahumi will never tire of this mistress. His wife cannot outlast her and wait for her allure to pass away, for Torah has found the elixir of ever-fresh Eros.

Elon wants to condemn Rav Rahumi, yet his reading actually gets Rav Rahumi off the hook. Rahumi is addicted by such a powerful aphrodisiac that he cannot break his habit even for one day. He has been sold this drug by cunning cultural purveyors of Torah who corrupt the youth as did Socrates. In the end Rav Rahmui will have to drink the hemlock and die, for he will never willfully stop studying Torah which is his equivalent to philosophy. It is this other woman, Torah, which takes the initiative in the seduction of Rav Rahumi. He is victimized and seduced by Torah. It was not his conscious decision to ignore his wife and stay away. Things just developed that way by their own inertia until it was too late to make it home in time.

Against the propaganda of the Song of Songs 8:6 that *love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave*, the narrator teaches us that love is, in the end, not as strong as death. Death overtakes Rav Rahumi, a death generated by an alluring affair with a powerful mistress, a spouse who demands and receives a monogamous loyalty and who banishes earthly wives from their husbands' hearts and minds. Even the threat of judgment and death on Yom Kippur cannot engender repentance in Rav Rahumi. Only death itself, God's verdict, can release Rav Rahumi from Torah's attractions.

#4 - Scholar as Single-minded and Cruel in Pursuit of Excellence

In *Eight Love Stories* David Zimmerman notes how even in the Prologue of our tale we have an ominous clue to the tragedy to be expected. For Rav Rahumi is a student of Rava who preaches an inhuman discipline to his students:

Rava says: **"Those possess Torah who learn from the raven's relation to its young and make themselves cruel to their children and their household members."**

That accords with Rav Ada bar Matana who was going to the house of his Rabbi to study when his wife said: "What shall I do [to feed] your children?"
He replied: "Are all the stalks in the lake used up?" [i.e. if there is no bread, let them eat stalks from the lake.] (TB Eruvin 22a)

It is debatable whether it is good to devote one's whole life to one's calling at the expense of one's other needs, but it is immoral to demand one disregard one's emotional and moral obligations to one's family. God, according to the author of the Rav Rahumi tale, does not think both married life and devoted Torah study are compatible.

Such single-mindedness in pursuit of intellectual excellence engenders arrogance as well as egocentric self-preoccupation. Rav Rahumi was simply oblivious of his wife's emotional needs and so God punished him with death, even though and perhaps precisely because he was too devoted to Torah study.

#5 - The Tragedy of Eros: A Love Triangle

It now seems plausible, emotionally and morally, to reduce the whole story to a condemnation of Rav Rahumi. Look at his "rap sheet": neglect of justice, of his contractual obligations (*Onah*); insensitivity to his wife's needs and lack of compassion for his wife's pain; and adultery – conducting an affair with Torah, his ever-young virgin. Yet Rav Rahumi is not actively cruel to his wife and his wife never complains and certainly does not wish for his death. Her tear is begrudgingly released. Both of them are animated by loves worthy of fulfillment but not loves directed at one another. These lovers are unsynchronized; they are attracted to mutually exclusive, contending values - Torah and marriage. Their lives are

dominated by two misdirected loves – his requited love, solely for Torah, and her unrequited love, for him. His love is impatient and cannot be delayed. Hers is patient but it has its breaking point. Her inordinate patience adds to the literary tension, but in the end it cannot save him from his impatience to go on with his learning.

Rav Rahumi's wife's love and her loyalty were unrequited; she was a victim of the new love of Torah that entered her domestic world and stole away her husband's heart without her understanding it at all. She is well-advised to suspect her husband of being unfaithful. But his sin is not his adulterous dallying with a mistress, but his true love for Torah and his inability to leave her even for a day. Here is his **character flaw,** but, it is not a private sin, because the other woman is the Torah and her accomplices are the Establishment. In Rabbinic culture it is **a virtue**, not a flaw or sin to be uncontrollably drawn to embrace the Torah day and night. Rav Rahumi cannot requite his wife's longing for love, because his true love for Torah makes him forgetful of all else, as passionate love always does. His flaw derives from his virtue, his responsiveness to the total love of Torah study. Torah is a jealous mistress, while Rav Rahumi's wife does not wish Rav Rahumi to be less of a passionate love, but simply to redirect some of that love and some of his time towards her.

Yehuda Kurtzer in his book *Shuva! Return* explicates how blindness and hence forgetfulness are constitutive facets of true love:

> "Rabbi Love lived apart from his family in order to pursue his true love: a life of Torah study in the schoolhouse of Rava.... Rahumi's ... **love of Torah is manifest in his total absorption**, **and the love of relationship is defined by his [in]ability to remember his commitments**... This story [is] a tragic love story rooted in the complexity of commitment and forgetfulness.... It seems that this rabbi's forgetfulness is what actually kills him, as his failure to consummate his love for his wife in favor of Torah."" (Yehuda Kurtzer, *Shuva*, 68)

Thus tragedy lies not in a dilemma in which the Rav Rahumi's heart is torn between two loves – love of Torah and love of his wife. Rather it is about a true love he finds in his career that makes him blind and deaf to her true love. His love was fulfilled and he did not need even a one-day visit to "his" so-called home. *His* love made him inhuman in his obtuse response to *her* love and in that sense his love killed him.

But *her* love also killed him. If she had not been in love, then his sin would have been tolerable to her and to the reader. Kurtzer explains how her love causes his death:

> "His wife lived for his annual return, and his failure to return literally kills him... The moment Rahumi's wife no longer believes that her husband will return, he becomes literally unable to return to her... The relationship between Rahumi and his wife, flawed as it is, is embodied in its **relationality** — in the seeking that exists between the two of them. In this way, **Rahumi's love for Torah—so all-consuming, so dominating of his mind that he cannot remember his humanity, that he becomes precisely unloving—is mocked in comparison to his wife's all-too-human, desperate, seeking love of him**. After all, it is *her* love that ultimately kills him, and no love of Torah can save him."

Ari Elon reads the tale in terms of moral failings of the adulterer and his culture and the addictive "carnal" Eros of Torah. But Kurtzer sees two seekers whose search for relational love makes them blind to one another's loves. In their loves, each of which is worthy, there is an almost unavoidable forgetfulness of the other and an inability to intuit the other's inner life. Their loves' mutual blindness is what kills their relationship, but it is not a matter of punishment for sin. It is an unavoidable and unintended consequence of their love that it directs them to be become "unloving" to the other and thus destroys either one's chance for fulfillment.

#6- Led Astray by Intellectual Passions

The sixth lesson is Rav Rahumi's congenital misperception that his Torah study is raising him up spiritually, when it is in fact pulling him down morally to his mortal end. David Zimmerman describes adroitly how Rav Rahumi's spiritual aspirations led to his moral downfall:

> "If the woman's tear becomes **heavier** for all the **length** of expectation invested in it, so too the **depth** of her husband's fall from the roof. Perhaps the roof symbolizes the high level to which Rav Rahumi imagined that he had reached when studying Torah. So the physical fall from the roof is symbolic of his moral fall that occurred within him even before her tear fell, when 'his learning drew him.' It had appeared that the learning *pulled him up*, but the truth is that it *pushed him down*. For what profit is there in Torah study that does not bring one to good deeds." (David Zimmerman, *Eight Love Stories,* 17)

By contrast, Ruth Calderon demeans Rav Rahumi's supposedly "higher" aspirations. She condemns his attraction to the Eros of the Torah precisely because it is characterized in the story not as a true and mature love, but as an infatuation that "draws him on." It is a mere "affair" for which he abandoned his trusting wife. Rabbi Love is drawn not by a great and noble love for which it is heroic to die if necessary. He never appreciates the true love, the earthly love, so much more real, which his wife demonstrates to him. Ironically he never deserved her love nor even noticed it. Calderon evokes literarily the basic expression of the kind of love for which his wife yearned. It is not sexual consummation, but a glance that will make all her preparations *for* him meaningful:

> "The path is raked, and the little vegetable garden is well-tended. All eyes are on the new mattresses. And all look forward to a glance—the delicate glass cup, the hair ornament— look forward to a generous glance that will confirm their existence. In mid-winter I sometimes suspect that maybe I've disappeared. (Does a woman exist when no one sees her?) Sometimes I come and go from a transparent house." (Calderon, *Ha-shuk*, 42-46)

But Rav Rahumi has neither a glance nor a thought for his wife who is for him “an absent absence,” while he is for her “a longed-for absence,” more real in expectation than in physical presence.

Setting the tale on the eve of Yom Kippur puts Rabbinic Judaism on notice that it is in constant need of criticism and that Yom Kippur is a day of judgment on the excesses of Torah study. The finale teaches that God cares more for ethical and emotional relationships between husband and wife than for intellectual achievement.

Ari Elon sees Yom Kippur in this tale as the arrival of the Judgment Day for Rabbinic Judaism itself. Even Rav Rahumi’s wife with her lone tear has begun to challenge the rabbinic hegemony that exacts sacrifice by the wives for the sake of their husbands’ passion for Torah. Our cultural achievements are often the result of exploitation of the little people for whom we have no respect. But, as Karl Marx teaches: the superstructure of the leisure classes will come crashing down when the abused classes can no longer take it and when they see through the arrogance and hypocrisy of the self-congratulatory elites.

Yehuda Kurtzer identifies the sin of Rav Rahumi in his virtue; his callousness, in his passionate love. Even if his sin is an unintentional misdemeanor, a missed opportunity to visit home, it is profound. Disregard of one who loves us cannot be excused as a minor infraction of inattention to the passage of time, for love demands precisely that – attention. Distraction is in this case attraction to a jealous Torah that banishes any thought of one’s timely obligations or of the feelings of one’s earthly spouse. The Eros of Torah is criminal precisely because it makes us forget everyone else.

Dissolving a Bigamous Marriage or Balancing a Relationship

In its conclusion, our tale offers us poetic justice for Rav Rahumi; he gets what he deserves. His behavior is deeply inattentive and therefore insensitive, criminal negligence derived from his spiritual preoccupation with his own pleasures with Torah as his true lover. Rav Rahumi, whose name means both "love" and "mercy," loves self-centeredly and lacks mercy for the other. Love of learning for oneself and compassion for others are deeply polarized in this tale. Here study did not lead to moral and caring action (*gemilut hasadim*). This is an institutional travesty for the life of Torah which is on trial, not merely a character flaw of one man. God's hidden hand emerges demonstratively, "speaking loudly" through the coincidence of the time (Yom Kippur) and the place (the falling roof of the Beit Midrash). Rav Rahumi's death is analogous to the falling of his wife's tear. But this collapse implicates the House of Study, the alternative house that drew Rav Rahumi away from his wife's house. Thus the punishment is not simply that Rav Rahumi falls, but that the corrupt institution of the Beit Midrash collapses.

That poetic justice is, sadly, no comfort for his wife, for his death is another tragedy for her, especially if she were to discover that her own tear triggered his demise indirectly by arousing Divine justice. As David Zimmerman writes: "In the end the woman in the story remains a **tragic figure** who unbeknownst to her brought down with her tear a harsh and speedy punishment on her husband. Woe is she in *her life* and woe is she in *his death*!" **The ending offers justice without satisfaction for the victim. She will probably suffer more from his punishment and her now absolute widowhood than she suffered from the crime of treating her as a straw widow. In either case she suffers from abandonment by her beloved husband.**

In my judgment, even if Rav Rahumi had been more conscientious in coming home on time - once a year, and if he had really cared about his wife's hurt feelings, the tragedy of their relationship would still be evident. A husband-wife relationship built only on mercy, on sensitivity to loneliness and on longing, but lacking love and lacking its own spiritual significance is very problematic. I admit that Rav Rahumi's problem is not merely a moral

flaw, but a spiritual predicament that is not at all unusual. He finds his emotional, intellectual and cosmic fulfillment in Torah, not sex and small talk with his wife and he cannot share that world with her. It is not unusual for spouses to find deeper meaning in professional worlds that are closed to their partners for lack of interest or ability. Perhaps marriage should take a back seat to these greater cultural projects that are furthered by individual passion.

When, however, the pursuit of public goods and professional achievement totally overshadow domestic intimacy, one must acknowledge the immorality of this bigamy. One must forthrightly choose monastic monogamy with Torah or career over an empty and exploitive maintenance of a human spouse on the side. Two alternatives are still possible in this bigamous tension. On one hand, in North America with later marriages among professionals, more couples share the same calling – two doctors, two rabbis, two lawyers. Thus, unlike Talmudic Rabbis and their unschooled wives, these modern couples can find a common passion for their common other spouse – medicine or Torah or law. Domestic intimacy can be enriched by professional passions.

On the other hand, the Kabbalists have bridged the gap between spiritual pursuits and mundane marital life by infusing human *eros* with the *eros* of the Shekhina. Jewish mysticism has gone a long way to infuse marital intercourse, especially on Shabbat, with something much more than the physical pleasures of *oneg Shabbat.* Intercourse and sexual play become a cosmic act of reconciliation and *tikkun* enacted in the microcosm of the home. Private life with one's spouse and public service or worship of God becomes one. Love then by definition is freed from self-preoccupation for it is the act of uniting with one's complementary other. Renewed once a week on Shabbat and not once year on Yom Kippur which is called Shabbat Shabbaton, a couple may realistically find ways to balance six days pursuing passionately their professional calling and one day devoted to the intimacy of interpersonal love.

A Modern Day Rav Rahumi Repents

Let me conclude with a historic anecdote about one of the most colorful figures in Jerusalem, a personal disciple of Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, whose class I attended once back in 1968. While Rav Rahumi shows no love for his wife and experiences no double bind torn between love of Torah and love of his spouse, Rav David HaCohen, the mystic scholar and philosopher, did experience that dilemma to its fullest and finally resolved it amicably. David HaCohen, the Nazir, devoted himself to a life of asceticism denying himself many worldly pleasures, such as wine and meat, and refraining from speaking for long periods, even with his wife. His devotion to his beloved wife-to-be did not stop him from abandoning her in Europe for ten years to study in Israel. Compare his dilemma to Rav Rahumi's based on the Nazir's description of his betrothed:

> "This precious and delicate poor one has waited for me for years, her soul longing from so much pain and anguish. She is a friend more precious than all. I became the cruel one embittering her life. Instead of traveling to her, as she and her whole family begged me, I went far away and abandoned her in desolation and anguish and I came to the holy land" (Kislev, 1922). "In my heart my longings for her have multiplied … my precious poor one, who has been my *aguna* for more than ten years… my soul is tied to her soul…I have decided to bring her to the holy land and build my house with this poor one." (Shvat, 1924)

Even when the Nazir's bride finally arrived in Jerusalem after 12 years of separation and a meeting was arranged at the home of Rav Abraham Kook, the matchmaker, the Nazir refused to break his vow of silence (*ta'anit dibur*). When the vow was cancelled, he was still reticent to speak with her.

> "Sitting one facing the other, staring at each other with eyes full of love and surprise .the bridegroom pointed at the food for his bride to eat, but she retorted in Yiddish, 'Didn't you promise to speak? If you won't speak, I won't eat.' So he said in Hebrew one word, 'eat.' Again silence prevailed and Rav Kook's wife brought tea. Again she would

not drink until he broke the silence and said in Hebrew, 'drink.' They sat in silence, their eyes filled with tears…. Later the bride went to consult with Rav Kook to ask about her suspicion that her bridegroom had become another man, that he was so ascetic, so righteous, and his ways of worshipping God so strange that they would constitute a stumbling block to their common life together. Rav Kook stood up, upset, and said, 'God forbid! I am a witness that your bridegroom feels very great love for you!'…. At the wedding, when Rav Kook noticed a cloud of sadness come over the bridegroom, he began tickling him [the Nazir] to make him laugh until that brought him joy and a smile appeared on his face." (Rav Sh'ar Yashuv's introduction, *Beit Imi*, to his father's book, *Mishnat HaNazir*, 27-28)

David HaCohen was a priest, like Rav Abraham Isaac HaCohen Kook, and his vows may well have been a way to prepare himself to become a new priest in the Temple he believed would soon be built, just as Rav Kook did. He also shared with Rav Kook the desire to become a new prophet and believed his spiritual practices would make him a worthy recipient of the Divine spirit that grants the highest form of joy. Eventually he found a way to combine this passion for his wife and his passion for the Divine spirit thanks to finding a strong and idealistic woman who supported his ascetic path while literally sitting at his side participating actively in his classes at the Rav Kook's Yeshiva in Jerusalem. The Nazir also developed a radical new conception of rabbinic marriage as the poetic relationship between loving friends along with a trenchant critique of many aspects of halakhic marriage.

Learning from our Rabbis' Failings and the Dark Side of Every Great Ideal

> "It may be that the ability to see paradox and tragedy in human nature rather than consistency and universality in moral rules is a far more powerful force in the expression of man's inherent humanity."[xlix]

Rav Rahumi is another flawed rabbi among many in the Talmud. He had an affair, as have many errant spiritual leaders in this generation, but his was with Torah. We understand the power of libido, the permissive society that corrupts clergy as well as congregants making them prefer the immediate satisfactions and betray their long term familial commitments. But the Talmud employs this sinning rabbi to highlight a flaw not only in his character but in rabbinic culture. Any culture where the passions of our professional callings lead us to neglect our moral duties and to become callous to the emotional pain of those who ought to be closest to us. Idealism has its victims; serving one's community and advancing great causes lead too many of us to be emotionally absentee from our homes. The greatness of Jewish tradition as moral quest is its self-awareness and its recognition of the unintended consequences of what appear to be higher passion and goal.

The Rabbis created their own new type of Jewish hero which existed nowhere in the Bible. That hero was an intellectual who loved the life of debate and created an institution, the Beit Midrash, which was not just a school but an all-consuming way of life. It not only transmitted ancient knowledge but generated new Torah – oral Torah. Knowledge was not abstract but life-giving – the Torah was the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge at once. Torah was not only a product of rabbinic creativity, but it was meant to recreate and reshape its learners' character. The rabbis and their disciples were meant to be a living embodiment of Torah and its values.

Yet this revolution, as most revolutions, conceals a dark side – the inevitable gap between ideal and reality, hypocrisy and arrogance at their own achievements, the colleagues, teachers and students who turn into rivals and enemies. The relations between the new revolutionary world and the old world of family were often very tense, as the stories we will examine reveal. Where do the conservative family values of marriage and honor of parents fit into a new world of intellectual discovery and personal transformation, a world of male bonding, an all-encompassing world of Torah study, night and day? The Tree of Knowledge

produced the forbidden fruit of death in rabbinic rivalries and it continues to expel couples from their homes as “loving friends in the Garden of Eden.”

Almost unique among militant visionaries, founders of a new society of "saints," is **the Rabbis' willingness to engage in self-criticism at the same time as they are promoting their ethos of Torah study and mitzvot as the hegemonic value system.** The Rabbis were a self-appointed leadership in the post Temple world to replace the priest of the Temple, the prophet of direct Divine revelation and the king of military and political might. They even reshaped the national memories of Moses, turning him from a prophet to a Rabbi – *Moshe Rabbenu*.

On the other hand, the Rabbis created and inserted into their vast legal and theological corpus, the encyclopedic Talmud, a new genre of biographical narrative with a high literary watermark that often presents values at odds with the legal norms they promulgated. Often these stories reveal their rabbinic heroes’ sinful, arrogant, lustful and foolish sides as well as the aggressive atmosphere of their beloved institution - the Beit Midrash. The first scholar to take such rabbinic quasi-biographical stories seriously as literature and as cultural creations is Yona Frankel, a professor of Talmud at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.[l] He argues that narratives are often embedded in the Talmudic sugya (the basic literary subunit of the Talmud, a purported discussion among scholars about a law) in a way designed to cast doubt and to form an ironic mirror by which to judge the normative statements critically. Our Talmudic sugya from TB Ketubot 62 is the parade case of such a complex interaction between legal norms and lived values of the Rabbis. This cycle of stories begins with the Babylonian Talmudist Rava's reflection on the permission given by the Rabbis to abandon one’s family for many years in order to pursue a life of total devotion to Torah study at their expense:

> Rav Adda bar Ahavah stated in the name of Rava:
> The rabbinic majority ruled: Students may go away to study Torah without the permission [of their wives even for] two or three years.

> Rava stated: The Rabbis relied on Rav Adda bar Ahavah's ruling and acted accordingly - **risking their lives** (*avda uvda bnafsheihu*)**.**[li]

The English translation of Rava's comment reflects the commentary of Rashi who says that *avda uvda bnafsheihu* means the rabbinic students acted according to the halakha of Rav Adda bar Ahavah at the risk of [losing] their lives. *What does it mean that one who follows a halakhic practice is "risking their lives?"* It might be seen as a compliment for the heroism of a way of life thatit is intrinsically dangerous because it is so arduous, such as the dedication required by a professional athlete to his training program. Rabbi Resh Lakish (3rd C. Eretz Yisrael) says that "words of Torah do not persevere except in those who kill themselves over it" (TB Shabbat 83b). That is how he explains the words of Rabbi Jonathan (2nd - 3rd C. Eretz Yisrael) that "one should never absent himself from the Beit Midrash even when one is actually dying, as it says "*This is the Torah of a man who dies in the tent [of Torah]*" (Numbers 19:14). In the tale of Rav Rahumi the scholar is so wrapped up in learning, that he forgets Yom Kippur is approaching, and for that very reason God strikes him down while he is studying diligently, too diligently, in the Beit Midrash (the House of Rabbinic Study). His teacher Rava who had perhaps not been sensitive to his student's one-sided preoccupation with Torah study and who had not inquired about Rav Rahumi's wife and her needs is the same Rava who concludes that "The Rabbis relied on Rav Adda bar Ahavah's ruling and acted accordingly - risking their lives." As he reexamined the tragic byproducts of his students' quest for Torah, so we must see how our vision of Judaism and perhaps of the rabbinate contributes to endemic moral failures.

[i] Translated, abbreviated and edited by Noam Zion, Hartman Institute, and Peretz Rodman, head of the Masorti Rabbinical Association in Israel. The full article with extensive footnotes is "Obedience to the Law versus Spontaneous Charismatic Action: Halakhah, Magic and Dialogue," *Bar-Ilan Law Studies* 18,1-2, pp. 219-47 [Hebrew]

[ii] For a scarcity of rainfall in the Land of Israel, the Rabbis of the Mishnaic era established a fixed sequence of public fasts, of progressively increasing severity, If the rainy season began and rain did not fall, a series of fasts was held (as many as 13) on Mondays and Thursdays of each week. Initially only exemplars of the community fast and later the whole community. During Temple times, there was also a special order of *shofar* blowing, an additional six blessings were inserted into the *Amidah* [central standing prayer], and there was even a *Ne'ilah* service [a closing service like the one at the end of Yom Kippur].

"If by the seventeenth of Marheshwan [approximately October-November] no rain has as yet fallen, then **some individuals** [particularly pious or scholarly] begin to fast three days. They eat and drink after sundown, they may work, wash themselves, anoint themselves, put on sandals, and they may have marital relations. If the first of Kislev [approximately late November] came and no rain has fallen, the court then orders the public to fast three days; they may eat and drink after sundown. They may work, wash themselves, anoint themselves, put on sandals, and they may have marital relations.

If these days passed and rain had not fallen, **the court orders the community to fast another three days**. They may eat and drink while it is still day, but they are not permitted to work, to wash themselves, to anoint themselves, to put on sandals, nor to have marital relations; and the bathhouses must be kept closed. If these days passed and rain had not come, the court orders a further fast of seven days, making it thirteen all together. …. [If rain had still not fallen] certain individuals fast till the end of Nisan [approximately March, the end of the rainy season]." (Mishna Ta'anit 1: 5-7)

[iii] They suspected this man of engaging in prostitution and the coins he gave her must be a fee for a whore's services. For they presumed that he could not have been performing an act of goodness for his ex-wife since he must have hated her which is why he divorced her." (Shmuel Yafe Ashkenazi, Yefe Toar on Bereshit Rabba, Prague 1689, Parasha 33: 3, p. 158b, s.v. "Noten")

[iv] In rabbinic law a husband is obligated to provide weekly alimony, literally, food, for his wife, but after a divorce he is exempt from supporting his ex-wife's needs, though he must pay a large lump sum as a divorce settlement as stipulated in the marriage contract (*ketubah*).

[v] כיון שהיתה בצורת, וההלכה קובעת סֵדֶר-תעניות ותפילה עבור הורדת-הגשם.

[vi] הציבור בא אל רבי תנחומה.

[vii] ובעקבות זאת החל הציבור לארגן מבצע חלוקת צדקה לעניים.

[viii] "וחששו לזנות, שהדבר קרוב מאד, דמסברא זה שנותן לה מעות הוא אתנן זונה, כי לא מסתבר שייטיב עמה כי ישנאנה ודאי (= שהרי גרשה)" (ש' י' אשכנזי **יפה תואר - ביאור המדרש רבה לספר בראשית** (תשמ"ט כרך ב) דף רה ע"ב, ד"ה נותן). על ההרחקה שהרחיקו חכמים את הגרוש מגרושתו ראו בבלי כתובות כח ע"א. ונדמה עוד שיש גם לראות זהירות זאת על רקע החשד הכללי של נתינת צדקה מיד גבר לאשה. ראו בבלי חגיגה ה ע"א: "מאי אם טוב ואם רע?...דבי רבי שילא אמרי: זה הנותן צדקה לאשה בסתר, דקא מייתי לה לידי חשדא".

[ix] לפני רבי תנחומה.

[x] אחרי הגרוש והגרושה.

[xi] רבי תנחומה לגרוש.

[xii] הגרוש אינו חייב במזונות גרושתו, ובכל-זאת ראה אותה בצרה ונתמלא עליה רחמים.

[xiii] ה"קל וחומר" שבתפילת רבי תנחומה בנוי על כך שהגרוש ריחם על גרושתו על-אף שהוא בן-אנוש, שאינו נוטה לרחם מטבעו, ועל-אף העובדה שאינו חייב לגרושתו מזונות מן הדין, לעומת-זה האל מטבעו נחן בתכונת הרחמנות וגם חייב לזון מן הדין את "בניו"!

[xiv] ויש שגורסים: "ונתרווה העולם",

[xv] Martin Buber, "*Darkhei Hadat V'Artzeinu*" (1941) reprinted in M. Buber, *Tikvah L'Sha-a- Sugyot MeiInyanei HaRuah v'HaM'tziut*, 97

[xvi] Martin Buber, I and Thou, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1958, pp. 81-82.

[xvii] Daily, Pelimo bragged that his righteousness cannot be challenged even by Satan's power to test

sinners. In short, he dared Satan to test his spiritual mettle.

[xviii] "One day" refers to a particular day on which Pelimo's daily bragging about his immunity from temptation will be examined, but it is also a rabbinic euphemism for "The Day," Yom Kippur. Towards the end of this day, before the onset of the fast, a "concluding meal" (*se'udah mafseket*) is conducted with great formality. Participants are often more anxious about eating well to ease their expected hunger during the penitential fast, than they are interested in fasting as form of purification.

[xix] According to Rashi the voices saying Pelimo had died were apparently a hallucination. Rashi interprets: "[Heaven, miraculously] caused them to [seemingly] hear this sound from outside."

[xx] At that time there were no private toilets inside people's houses. The extremely wealthy installed close their toilets near their houses. But most people had walk far outside the residential areas for public latrines.

[xxi] According to some manuscripts, Pelimo actually prostrated himself before the beggar. Thus the untouchable religious paragon of virtue high above the lowly beggar voluntarily reverses the relationship between them and places his fate in the hands of the beggar's compassion who is asked to forgive the uppity host.

[xxii] חכם שחי במאה השלישית, מתלמידיו של רבי יהודה הנשיא.

[xxiii] ביטוי של זלזול בכוחו של השטן.

[xxiv] היום שלפני כניסת ליל-כיפורים, שבסופו נערכת הסעודה-המפסקת בחגיגיות רבה לפני התחלת הצום.

[xxv] במקור הארמי: "שקא ומית". רש"י פירש כי "שקא" פירושו "החזיק עצמו כמת", אך תרגמתי "נפל" לפי הערוך השלם, ח, עמ' קמז.

[xxvi] כנראה מדובר בכך שהשטן הלך אחרי פלימו, לבית-הכסא.

[xxvii] פלימו נפל לפני השטן שהגיע לבית הכסא (ויש כתבי-יד שגרסו כי פלימו נפל על אפיו לפני השטן).

[xxviii] את זהותו. אפשר לפרש אם-כן כך: פלימו נפל לפני השטן כשראהו משום שהבין שהוא איש מופלא; ואז, כשראה השטן שפלימו מצטער - שהרי נפל לפניו לבקש מחילה - גילה לו את זהותו..

[xxix] "חן בעיני השטן".

[xxx] כינוי לאל.

[xxxii] Cf. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hil. Yom Tov* (Holiday Laws) 6:18

[xxxiii] As mandated later on in *Shulhan Arukh*, *Orah Hayyim* 604:1: "It is obligatory to eat a substantial meal on the eve of Yom Kippur."

[xxxiv] For seeing God's countenance during the Festivals in the Temple, the place of the altar, by bringing offers, see the Biblical mandate: "…and none shall appear before Me empty-handed" (Exod. 23:15); "Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Sovereign Lord, the God of Israel […] when you go up to appear before the Lord your God three times a year" (Exod. 34:23–24); "You shall rejoice in your festival […] three times a year all your males shall appear […] They shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed" (Deut. 16:14–17). In Exod. 34:23 ("all your males shall appear before the Sovereign Lord"), the Hebrew original speaks of meeting the "face" of God. And see Mishnah Haggigah ch. 1, and the notes of Hanoch Albeck in his edition (Tel Aviv 1954, seder Moed) p. 387.

[xxxvii] Rahumi, his name may be translated "Rabbi Com/passion," "Love," "My Beloved" or even "My Womb."

[xxxviii] Yom Kippur is known in Talmudic culture as *Yoma* – "the Day," but in the context of the story it appears to be the day before Yom Kippur when Rav Rahumi would have been traveling home.

[xxxix] Or alternatively: "*an* oral tradition he studied attracted or enticed him or allured him."

[xl] *Halsha da'atei* is strong emotional reaction on continuum from upset, lost control, even lost her mind, to grew depressed, despaired, even unto death, which is often triggered by deep damage to one's dignity or self-worth.

[xli] In Lamentations 1:2 the widowed city of Jerusalem is pictured with a single tear on her cheek and no one to comfort her because they have all been taken "captive" to Babylonia. Here, the single tear is that of a woman whose husband is "captivated/captured" by the oral tradition (feminine in Hebrew) in Babylonia. She herself is, unbeknownst to her, about to be widowed.

[xlii] The roof from which Rahumi fell may echo the story of Bathsheba where David walks on the roof and from there spies a woman who is the occasion for his "downfall" as a king (II Samuel 11:2).

[xliii] Literally, "his soul came to rest."

[xliv] The story contains a number of **puns and word plays** which serve to destabilize any obvious meaning. The name Rahumi can mean "lover" in Aramaic. Boyarin reads Rahumi as meaning lover in an ironic or poignant way or, possibly, "Rav Rahumi is indeed a lover, a lover of Torah. That is, we would have here actuated once again a version of the *topos* that we saw above with regard to Ben-Azzai of the life of a Torah student as erotic abandonment to Torah, such that the wife becomes a rival to the beloved Torah." (Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 147)
Fraenkel points out the irony in the first two lines of the story. The scene is set as if there was no problem. R. Rahumi learned at the academy of Rava. However, the second line pushes the normalcy of the scene to an ironic or sarcastic point. His normal schedule was to come home regularly every year. The regularity of annual visits strikes a deeply ironic chord, especially on a background in which we know little about where Rahumi lived. He might have lived in Mehoza. That is, there is no attempt on the part of the narrator to explain the annual visits as a result of distance.
The ironic reading is reinforced by the next line: "One day his studies absorbed him." This reinforces the claim to regularity which is anything but regular. This line might be read: "It just happened that on one of those days when he was supposed to go home...." Standing outside the story, the reader knows that those days occur only once a year.
....In the exact center of the Aggadah is the phrase: "He did not come." This phrase is a Janus element. It summarizes all that has come before, and generates what will come after. It provides, in a manner of speaking, the causal relationship between the two halves of the Aggadah. (Cohen, *Rereading Talmud*, 106)
[xlv] Ilana Kurshan observed that the repetition of *ta* ("coming") and the narrative tension of this story call to mind Tennyson's poem *Mariana*, a poem about a woman waiting for her lover to return. Each stanza marks the inexorable passing of more time in which he has not come, reflected in slight changes in the landscape:
"With blackest moss the flowerpots / Were thickly crusted, one and all…." The refrain of the poem is reminiscent of the only words spoken by Rav Rahumi's wife: "She only said 'My life is dreary, / **he cometh not**,' she said; / She said, 'I am aweary, aweary / I would that I were dead'!"
[xlvi] Ruth Calderon, *Ha-shuk, Ha-bayit. Ha-Lev – Aggadot Talmudiyot,* 42-46 translated into English but not published by Peretz Rodman and Noam Zion (2003).
[xlvii] Ari Elon, *Alma Dee: From Jerusalem to the Edge of Heaven* translated by Tikva Frymer-Kensky (JPS), 81-83
[xlviii] Ari Elon, *Alma Dee: From Jerusalem to the Edge of Heaven*), 81-84
[xlix] D. W. Oliver and M. J. Bane, "Moral Education: Is Reasoning Enough?" in *Moral Education: Interdisciplinary Approaches*
[l] Yona Fraenkel*, Iyunim B'Olamo HaRukhani shel Sipurei HaAgadah*
[li] But according to Michael Sokoloff, *The Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, 770b, the phrase simply means, "the scholars practiced this ruling themselves," not that they endangered themselves, their lives.