
Fiction

The Gift-Wrapper

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for Allan Ullman

I NEEDED A GIFT, SOMETHING FOR ONE OF MY MORE RELIGIOUS FRIENDS. ACTUALLY, IT WAS A WOMAN I HAD BEEN SEEING, AND I WANTED TO IMPRESS HER. SO I TOOK A TRIP TO THE CENTER. I HAD ALWAYS BEEN able to find what I wanted there.

Sure enough, I picked up exactly what I was looking for, and headed out. I was in a hurry, and always seemed to spend more time in the Center than I meant to.

As I reached the door, I saw a sign that I hadn't noticed on the way in. "Gift-Wrapping," it said. "Enter here."

I opened the door and stepped through. It was a bit darker in there, but as my eyes adjusted to it, I saw a man sitting in one of two chairs in the middle of an empty room. I mean, there was nothing, nothing at all in this room but a chair and the man sitting in it, and another chair facing him. The man had a book in his lap.

I approached him kind of warily. "Is this where the gift-wrapping is done?" I asked.

"Certainly, certainly," he said, "sit down." And he motioned to the empty chair.

I wasn't too sure about this, but he seemed friendly enough. I sat down.

"Here," he said, and he handed me the book. "Genesis 2, verses 21 through 25."

"But the gift-wrapping..." I said.

"Yes, yes," he said with a hint of impatience. He took my gift from me and repeated, "Genesis 2, verses 21 through 25."

I opened the book, but couldn't find Genesis. The man smiled and snorted at the same time, then flipped the book over. It was then that I saw the

title in English followed by some Hebrew letters: "Torah."

"Open it! Open it!" the man said.

I thumbed nervously through the introduction and Genesis; one page would be in English and the opposite in Hebrew. When I turned to Chapter 2, I found, folded between the pages, sheets of incredibly delicate tissue paper, dark blue with thin streaks of gold, like comet trails, running through it. The man took the paper from me and proceeded to wrap my gift.

"Now read, please," he said.

I was startled. "I'm sorry, Mister..."

"Abramovich, my name is Abramovich. I'm wrapping your gift now, see? No charge. So please, read the passage. Out loud."

I began to read:

"The Lord then put the man into a deep sleep, and while he slept, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the flesh over the place. The rib he had taken out of the man the Lord God built up into a woman, and he brought her to the man who said:..."

"Stop!" Mr. Abramovich said. "Now," and he leaned toward me, "what didn't happen?!"

What do you mean, what didn't happen?"

"I meant what I said. Hello, is anybody in there?" and he reached over and knocked lightly on my forehead. I jerked away from him, more angry than I liked to admit.

"Okay, okay," he said leaning back in his chair. "You're a smart boy. That's obvious. Look, look how well your gift is coming along. Now, please, answer the question. What didn't happen?"

I just wanted to get out of there, and figured that the quickest way was to humor the Gift-Wrapper. "Let's, er, let's see," and I glanced down at the text. "God puts the man, that would be Adam, to sleep..."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Abramovich.

"Then he takes one of Adam's ribs and makes Eve out of it..."

"Ye-e-e-esss!" he said, leaning forward again, his voice rising in pitch.

"Then God shows Eve to Adam, and Adam says..."

"Wait, wait." Mr. Abramovich was almost on top of me now, and his voice had become a whisper. "Look! See! What didn't happen?!"

I leaned away from him and shook my head.

"He never woke up!" said Mr. Abramovich, waving his hands in the

air. "HE NEVER WOKE UP! Look anywhere, search the Scriptures. Adam went to sleep, yes. But nowhere does it say that he ever woke up!"

I was really scared now. I started to push the chair away. The Gift-Wrapper reached out a big hand, dropped it firmly on the open Torah in my lap and said, "Ribbon?"

"Wha... what?" I stammered.

"Would you like ribbon? What a foolish question, of course you would. Genesis 2, verse 2."

I flipped back a couple of pages. There was the most beautiful ribbon I had ever seen, creased in the center of the Torah like a breviary marker. It was a shimmering smokey silver-grey. As I took it from the book, it seemed to rustle across my hand to his, like a field the wind had just passed over. A thought spoke in my mind, "It is the color of whispers."

I couldn't stop myself from reading the passage out loud: "On the sixth day God brought to an end all the work he had been doing; on the seventh day, having finished all his work, he rested."

"So," whispered the Gift-Wrapper, "what didn't happen?"

I looked at him with avid longing now. I really wanted to know.

Mr. Abramovich smiled. "You've been working six days straight! You've created worlds, an entire universe! Then the time comes to rest. What would you do?"

"I'd sleep," I said, barely breathing.

"Yes, good. Now, what didn't happen. What doesn't Torah say?"

"It doesn't say... it doesn't say that God—woke up."

"Good, good," said the Gift-Wrapper, his fingers deftly arranging ribbon-whispers. "And what do you do when you sleep?"

"I dream," I said, but I think that I only mouthed the words. No breath would come at that moment.

The Gift-Wrapper handed my present back to me.

"Yes, yes, you dream when you sleep. It's only natural. And Adam dreams in his sleep. And the Lord God, he dreams in His sleep as well. Side by side in Paradise, arms twined about each other like lovers, God and Adam sleep. They sleep to this day. Sleep and dream."

"Then, what are we?" It was the first question I had asked since sitting before him, maybe the first question I'd ever really asked.

"Ah, a good question. I knew you were a smart boy." The Gift-Wrapper

sat back upright in the chair, in the same still, motionless position in which I'd found him.

"Adam dreams," he spoke, almost intoning. "Adam sleeps and he dreams. All human history, all the struggle, victory, and madness is nothing more than Adam's dream. And the Lord God, he too dreams. But he knows nothing of Adam's dream, of the serpent, the apple, the expulsion from the garden. God fell asleep on the seventh day; he knows only Paradise, only the oneness of all things with Himself. Those he dreams do not understand the dream of Adam, the follies of men and women. They walk among the people of Adam's dream, but they are not one of them. They see Paradise; they are always in Paradise."

"So of course, the others love them, fear them, revere them, destroy them. But they are of God. When they die, those of the dream of God awaken in Paradise. There is Moshe—Moses—there is the Buddha, there Lao Tzu, there Jesus and Mary, Mohammed, the Baal Shem Tov, Radha, Gobin Singh, St. Francis. And many more whose names are hidden in humility."

"All day long they walk about the Garden of Eden, and each asks the other the same question: "Should we wake them?" and "Who will do it?" It is the single question of the universe. It is salvation. It is armageddon. It is nirvana. It is hell."

"But 'What are we?' you ask. A good question. Are we merely a part of the dream of Adam? Or are we of the dream of God? Which am I? Which are you? How can we know this?"

I waited; he said nothing more. Several more minutes I waited, then I took my gift, got up, and opened the door to leave.

"We are all wrapped in someone's dream," I heard him say. "To open the gift is to unwrap the dream. Who will do it? Who will awaken us? Be wise. It is the single question of the universe."

IT SEEMED I PUT OFF DELIVERING MY GIFT. TWO DAYS PASSED, AND BY THE TIME I reached my friend's house, gift in hand, it was already late. But it was Saturday, and most places would still be open if she wanted to go out. Maybe. You never quite knew with this one.

I reached the door of her apartment building and buzzed. Nothing. Then I remembered, and started fishing for my wallet and the little card she'd given me.

I hit the buzzer in sharp sequences: long buzz, pause—long buzz, short buzz, pause—long, short, long, stop. Morse code: T, N, K. Tav, Nun, Kaph: Tanak. The door buzzed back and clicked open for me.

"Who's crazier?" I thought, as I headed up the stairs. "I go along with her." Still...

Her apartment door was unlocked; she had a lot of faith in her system. "But someone who knew you," I once said to her, "some really bright person, couldn't they figure it out eventually? Process of elimination? 'Torah?' 'Adonai?' 'Moshe?'"

"But most of my 'bright' friends are too bright for their own good," she laughed back. "They'd buzz from right to left."

I knocked and went in.

It was a bit darker in her apartment than in the corridor. Her little kitchen was on my left, and farther on in the living room she lay on the floor, shoulders propped, reading apparently. A tallit flowed over her hair and neck, skirting the contour of her arms. Her fingers curled through its long tassles, and drew a curtain from her eyes to her hands to the book she held.

There was a distinctive smell of wine warming; I could just see a small flame in a chaffing dish below an earthen bowl. Lain across the top of the stove was a *havdalah* candle. I knew why it was there, it was the same every Saturday night. After quenching the wick, she would turn on the oven, and leave the twisted candle on top of the stove to soften. Later she would carefully untwine the shimmering, pliant columns of wax; in her hands they would become smokey parallel currents, never intersecting but always touching one another up and down one side of their progression. The farther edges would stay open to the air.

Next to the mulling wine sat an open *besomim* box. I recognized the odor of spices releasing their sparks into the warm darkness they floated in.

I closed the door behind me. Something rattled. On the inside hung a framed white paper, early dot matrix from CompuHut. It read:

"receptive
as a valley,

clear
as a glass of water"

I looked across the apartment. Thin, giddy whispers of light told me a candle burned near her, but she totally ignored it and me. She hadn't moved, hadn't turned a page since I'd arrived.

"Hello?" I half-sang, very softly.

A nose twitched. I heard her breathe deeply.

"Marinade," she said smiling. "We're eating-in tonight. Later."

She motioned for me to take the space beside her.

I set the gift on the rug, and stretched out on the floor. She put the book down between us, turned toward me on one elbow. The tallit fell from her dark, calligraphed hair, its blue lines settling around her arm. She had very light skin, pixie features; little, elf-toe nose, eyes green and turned down at the corners like butternut leaves. I'd joke with her. "Michael Jackson stole your face," I'd say.

Now that face was an aside spoken only to me; the one line that had to be heard to understand the play, parenthesized here and now between dark swirls of hair.

I was glad, but pulled back a little.

"What were you reading?" I asked. "You didn't seem to get very far."

"I wasn't going anywhere," she said. That smile.

Then she turned the book over and leaned it open against the front of her shirt. Smiled again.

I thought I hid the intake of my breath. I looked down at the page.

"And I wasn't reading," she whispered. She moved a little. Surfaces floated, rustled.

"I was unwrapping." She breathed out. She reached a hand to me, the shawl's fringe still trellised through her fingers.

My turning toward her was a thunderclap inside my chest. I reached one arm around her, the other under the throw pillow beneath her shoulders. The thunder blinded me. I could feel the zen prayer bench under her pillow; I should have recognized the angle of it supporting her. I'd seen the bench before.

My right hand curled its fingers through her hair, my left felt for the letter carved through the bench's side.

Ah! It was yod. The other side, I knew, was aleph.

She passed her hand over my chest toward my back. It seemed that a breeze reached her landing window then. Although the candle didn't flicker, I felt it and knew it. I was a field the wind had returned to. I was a field, and her

touch was a ribbon feathered through it, marking her place like prayer. A thought opened in my mind: "It is the way home of whispers."

Her left hand was around me now. She was smiling. Then, without a pause, she took the wallet from my back pocket. I gave more of a start than I'd meant to.

"Shhhhh. Unwrapping," she whispered. She opened my wallet and took out everything, one piece at a time. My cards, my license. A picture of my father and mother, one of my sisters, and of an old girlfriend. Each of these, each item she took one by one, and laid them out neatly in rows behind me. My blood type, my old membership in Young Israel, my old ID from St. John's, money. With each she'd press herself against me, her cheek on my shoulder, hair rustling by my ear. Then back.

When the wallet was empty, she did the same with each pocket. Then my clothes, one piece at a time, beginning with my shirt. Unhurriedly. With smiling reverence. Everything that I was, the life recorded in photos and engraved in numbers; the self as stated in taste and price, generations of conditioning and rebellion—these were uncreated there, placed in orderly dissemble all around me. Even the laces of my shoes. With my gift in the center.

She would stretch against and across me, from one part of my body to another, arranging the items, unwrapping. Ah.

Only when she had finished did she hold me close, stretched out, embracing all of me at once from head to toe. My face was over her shoulder; I could see the light of a candle stub on an end table, buzzing around in one of those small porcelain cups they use for tea in Chinese restaurants. The light glowed faintly before a clear glass of water. Jelly jar, two with a tank of premium. Next to it stood a color photo in a puffed, quilted oval. The Kidron Valley, I think.

Then her breath was in my mouth. I closed my eyes.

The floor opened. The ceiling vanished.

The walls of the apartment fell away first, all four of them at once, letting themselves go, leaning from the top outward like a child falling backwards into a pool. The walls of the building fell next, then the buildings around it, the stores, the parking garages untwirling like an observatory dome opening.

The fences that lined every inch of highway rolled themselves up and blew away like tumbleweed. The road and all the concrete seemed fluid as melting ice. The ground accepted them as long-lost rain.

Every parting, every retraction, each retreating, sincere apology rang through me, one after another, orderly and intimate. Now the suburbs were closing-up upon themselves like a caravan breaking camp; now the radio towers and fire watches in the mountains popped into the air with the sound of soap bubbles.

Each step back was a bow; each bow was to me. I felt them. They were each a separate signal opening one door, freeing it from its hinges. I counted twenty-two of them. Not a code, like bar codes or passwords. More basic, personal. Stronger than merely permitting. Clearing. A double-helix unwinding, sighing. Row upon row of life unclenching.

I counted twenty-two of them. I didn't want to stop myself from marking them out loud: "Tav, shin, resh, koph..."

When finally the sea walls floated over the horizon, the entire world was open. I mean, there was nothing, nothing of human striving, of Adam's dream, from the edges of sky and light to where she and I lay together. In the center.

"Aleph."

Oh, all the people were still there. Milling about. Commuting. Wondering. Losing, winning. Relaxing as fast as they were able.

For them, all the walls still stood. Lines and knots of lives responding, avoiding, resenting the nothing they always saw, waking and sleeping.

"Sad," I said aloud.

"Wisdom," she answered dreamily, almost intoning. "17, verse 20. 'The whole world was bathed in the bright light of day, and went about its task unimpeded; these people alone were overspread with darkness... But heavier than darkness was the burden each was to himself.'"

I glanced over at my gift. It, too, was curled open like a lotus; the walls and roof of its package were waves stilled at their crest and parted.

The thin gold of comet trails streaked from horizon to horizon.

"Aren't I alone?" I asked.

"Mmmmm?" she said sleepily. "Mmmmmmm. There may be some others. Van Morrison...?"

My heart held her smile just long enough to channel it in all of my directions. I twined my arms around her.

We slept.

'The whispering breeze, the sweet melody of birds in spreading branches, the racing of creatures as they bound along unseen, the roar of wild

beasts, or an echo reverberating from hollows in the hills,' all of these filled my dreaming. Hymns to the silence. Wisdom.

Around our sleeping figures walked men and women, sipping spiced wine from jelly glasses, and talking about us.

Fatima spoke, leaning over me. "Should we wake them?" she said.

"Who will do it?" asked Seraphim of Sarov.

"Hush you all," said Mr. Abramovich. Then he took the tallit in his big hands and spread it over us like sky.



Note: The words on the apartment door are drawn from a longer quote attributed to Lao Tzu.

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