

Verse from Afar: Approaching Biblical Texts

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The Text

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the children of Israel that they take for me an offering: Whosoever is of a willing heart let them bring it. And this is the offering that you shall take of them: Gold, and silver, and brass...And fine linen...And let them make for me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.

EXODUS 25:1-8

The Problem and its Technical Solution

THE TORAH CONTAINS LENGTHY PASSAGES CONCERNING THE SLAUGHTER OF ANIMALS AND THE SPLASHING OF THEIR BLOOD ON AN ALTAR, AND OTHER DETAILS OF THE ISRAELITE PRIESTLY CULT. OTHER PASSAGES, TOO, record moral injunctions that not only date from the Bronze Age but, it must be admitted, preserve its moral spirit. Each Shabbat, after the weekly portion has been read from the Torah, someone has to get up in the synagogue and deliver a commentary which is of interest to a contemporary audience. But what can a modern interpreter make of such material as *Parshat Terumah* [EXODUS 25:1-27:19], I wondered as I prepared to speak on it at my minyan.

Terumah starts with the verses quoted above, and continues with a very detailed description of the way in which the ancient sanctuary was constructed, and the materials out of which it was made. *And thou shalt make a table of acacia-wood: two cubits shall be the length thereof, and a cubit the breadth thereof, etc., etc.*

How on earth could I squeeze some refreshing water, let alone some heady wine, out of this obdurate material?

Trying to derive insights applicable to the contemporary world from descriptions of the sanctuary or of splashing blood on an altar was probably about as difficult 1500 years ago as it is today. But the rabbis of the Midrash had their revenge on the Priestly Redactor, or whoever put all this unappetizing material into the Torah, by means of an ingenious literary technique which is also a wonderful and demanding game.¹

The recipe for this technique is as follows: first, quote a “verse from afar” that has no apparent relation to the content of the text under examination. Typically that verse comes from Prophets or Writings rather than the first five books of Torah. Second, spin a series of interpretations out of the verse from afar using proof-texts (other explanatory verses) from anywhere and everywhere. Finally, land on the original text (i.e., the opening few lines of the portion of the week) with a surprising interpretation derived from this series of interconnected verses. My aim is to illustrate how this ancient rabbinic literary technique can be used for contemporary interpretations.

The Model

THE BEST WAY TO LEARN A NEW LITERARY TECHNIQUE IS TO DISSECT AN EXAMPLE of its application to get structural principles that will allow you to imitate it. I glanced over the interpretations in *Midrash Rabbah*² that deal with *Terumah*, and selected the third interpretation as a model.

The key phrase of our text in *Terumah* is: *that they take for me an offering*. Any interpretation that culminates in this phrase, as the technique requires, will focus on what is meant by “an offering” and who is the recipient of the offering, represented by the words “for me” in the verse.

Some of the interpretations in *Midrash Rabbah* transform the text in a

¹ For those interested in reading about rabbinic Midrash, the best place to start is the chapter on Midrash in Barry Holtz, ed., *Back to the Sources* (Summit Books, 1984). The chapter, which is by the editor, also provides a detailed guide to further reading. For a more extended description of the type of sermon imitated in this article, see also David Stern, “Midrash and the Language of Exegesis” in Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (Yale University Press, 1986).

² *Midrash Rabbah*, Third edition (Soncino Press, 1983).

useful way by reading “take for me” as simply “take me.” Considering that in the plain meaning of the text, “me” connotes God, this conscious misreading is very bold. We might call it the Henny Youngman variant; “take Me for an offering,” says God.

The anonymous explicator (*darshan*) of Midrash Rabbah #3 opens his discourse with the traditional formula, “As it is said,” and then quotes, as his verse from afar, a line from the Song of Songs:

As it is said [SONG OF SONGS 5:2]: *I sleep but my heart waketh.*

This verse certainly doesn’t appear to have any obvious relation to the text of Exodus 25:1. Song of Songs 5:2 reads, in full, retaining the archaic language of the King James or JPS 1917 translation:

I sleep but my heart waketh.

It is the voice of my beloved that knocketh

saying, Open to me, my sister, my love,

my dove, my undefiled;

for my head is filled with dew,

my locks with the drops of the night.

The image is of a poor supplicant male standing outside in the cold and pleading with his hard-hearted lover to open up and let him in.

Having introduced the verse from afar, the *darshan* next interprets it in such a way as to link it to the text. Here the *darshan*’s first interpretive move is to ask, To what do the words “my heart” refer? (This is clearly the problematic part of the line since, as the Israeli poet Dan Pagis says in one of his poems, we humans are endowed with “four limbs, two ears and a hundred hearts.”) The *darshan* answers his question by introducing Psalm 73, verse 26, as a proof-text: *God is the rock of my heart.* And so “my heart” refers to God. Thus the verse from afar becomes “I sleep but God is awake.” And the rest of the verse from the Song of Songs then describes God standing outside in the cold knocking on a “door” and asking to be let in.

The *darshan* then asks, To what does “I sleep” refer? He answers, To the commandments; I sleep with respect to fulfillment of God’s mitzvot. God is giving the “I” of the Song of Songs a wake-up call, knocking on the door of perception, asking for attention. Continuing with the Song of Songs verse, the *darshan* interprets the remainder as God saying, “I’m out here in the cold, shut out of your thoughts, open up to me.” And with this move the *darshan* is ready to return to the opening line of the portion with a new interpretation of *that they*

take for me an offering. Offering gold, silver or, for that matter, sacrificial animals, wasn’t of value in itself, it just functioned as a start-up task, a wake-up call, a knock on the door of perception, which oriented the worshipper toward God.

A Modern Interpretation: Body and Self

THE INTERPRETATION IN MIDRASH RABBAH WAS THE MODEL. HOW TO COPY IT? ON the principle of learning only one thing at a time, and on the assumption that the Rabbis’ intuitions were better than mine in this area, I decided to start with the same verse from afar, and to make the same first interpretive move, as in the model. These were to be my wake-up calls, my orientation. So I open my discourse with:

As it is said [SONG OF SONGS 5:2]: *I sleep but my heart waketh.* To what do the words “my heart” refer?

So much for tradition. I’m now on my own.

To what do the words “my heart” refer? Why not try the plain, literal meaning of the text, always a good idea with poetry. I sleep but my heart keeps beating, it keeps functioning even when I’m asleep. Not only my heart but my entire autonomic nervous system “waketh.” In short, my body never sleeps, it’s awake even when I—this must now mean the Self, or the soul—sleep.

From here, all I need is an interpretive link to arrive at *Take for me an offering.* The “me” in this opening verse is, as in the model, whatever “my heart” stands for. In the model it was God; here it is the body. In other words the missing link is an offering of the Self to the body, saying, in effect, “make an offering to me.” Or, with the Rabbis’ alternative reading, the body saying to the Self, take me for an offering.

Variant one: Offerings to the body. The verse from afar has been interpreted to mean, “I sleep but my body waketh,” and this has set up a duality, an opposition between Self and body. The link section would be along the following lines: Even when I sleep my body takes care of me. And when I’m awake my Self is surrounded by my body and protected by it. Therefore I should take good care of the body, I should nourish it. Let me join a health club, sign up for some massage, get top-of-the-line sneakers for jogging. In other words, offer my body the best that gold, silver and negotiable instruments can buy. And also offer it sacrifices of the spirit. No more cheese-cake, and other delicious food with a lot of cholesterol or fat. Hence: that they take for me—the body is speaking—an offering.

This conception of free-will offerings of the Self to the body is by no means trivial. For the missing link between the interpreted verse from afar and the text we can read in any and all dialogues of body and Self (or soul), a voluminous literature from the Renaissance on, and part of an even larger literature of debates on the relative merits of the sacred and profane views of life.

Variant two: Kashrut. In this variant the Self's decision to transform nourishment of the body into an act of sanctification would be the link section's subject. *Take for me an offering* would then mean: Don't just shovel food into your mouth but sanctify the act of eating by saying prescribed blessings before and after eating, and by constraining yourself in the selection and preparation of food as proscribed by religious injunctions.

Variant three: The life of vocation. The sacred view, that life should be dedicated to a vocation to which all else is subordinate or even, if necessary, sacrificed, has a clear contemporary secular equivalent. To derive this interpretation we need the rabbinic license in Midrash Rabbah to change the text to *Take me for an offering*. Here the "me" is the body, conceived as that aspect of the human being subject to decay, that has a limited life-time. The Self then demands of it, Let me use you for the purpose of creating something that will live after me, art or poetry or the truths of science. The body responds, Take me—take my life-time—for an offering.

Another Interpretation: Dreams

LET'S TRY ANOTHER LITERAL INTERPRETATION OF "I SLEEP BUT MY HEART WAKETH." To what do the words "my heart" refer? When I sleep, I dream. In other words, my dreams are awake. So the verse from afar becomes: I sleep but my dreams are awake.

Variant one: Realizing dreams. The link is now between dreams and an offering. To arrive at the link, I'll copy the second interpretive move in the model from Midrash Rabbah, and introduce a proof-text. The rabbis could do this from memory, but I had to use a concordance. Under "dreams" we have a wide choice. Starting near the bottom of the list in the concordance, to get a proof-text not in the Torah, we have, for example, Joel 2:28, *Old men dream dreams*. No, not applicable! How about Ecclesiastes 5:3:

A dream is the result of much business.

That looks promising. The link section could be along the following lines: We should separate some savings from our earnings so that they can be used to help realize our dreams of (for example) artistic creation; that is, as an offering to our dreams. In other words, an offering of the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom.

Variant two: Psychoanalysis. When I sleep, my unconscious is awake. "I sleep but my dreams are awake" is to be understood in the light of the well-known remark in the Talmud [BERAKHOT 55b]:

A dream uninterpreted is a letter unread.

This agrees with the continuation of the verse from the Song of Songs:

(I sleep but my heart waketh)

It is the voice of my beloved that knocketh

This is the unconscious as postman delivering dreams and saying, "Do I have a letter for you?" In the verse from afar from the Song of Songs the unconscious continues to address the person sleeping, saying:

*Open to me, my sister, my love,
for my head is filled with dew,
with the distillations of the night.*

Interpreting dreams, the "distillations of the night," is one modern concept of an act that is, in potential at least, spiritually efficacious, and this is how an offering was regarded by a Bronze Age worshipper. Hence, using the rabbinic reading of the opening verse of *Terumah*:

Let them take me—the dream is speaking—for an offering...
to their psychoanalyst.

The continuation of our text supports this interpretation. It specifies the two main preconditions for converting the potential of dream interpretation into a truly efficacious act:

whosoever is of a willing heart let them bring it...

This agrees with the well-known requirements of analysis—there's no point in bringing a dream to your analyst unless you also bring a heart willing to accept the interpretation. Furthermore, the verse goes on:

let them bring gold, silver...

As we all know, these or their equivalent are also essential.

Another Interpretation: Sacrifice

Variant one: Yeats. As it is said—and here I go further afield in selecting verses from afar—by William Butler Yeats, in one of his last poems, “The Circus Animals Desertion:”

Players and the painted stage took all my love
and not those things that they were emblems of.

In other words, we are creatures who can be easily mistaken in the objects of our affection. We can even get distracted by baubles and trinkets, by jewelry and fine clothes, by trappings. Therefore, as our text says:

That they take for me an offering... Let them give up their baubles and trinkets, their trappings. And this is the offering that you shall take of them: gold, and silver, and brass... and fine linen.

Variant two: Confucius. As it is said, by Confucius in the Analects:

A square dish without corners, what sort of a square dish is that?

This subtle thought appeals to me because of my deep belief in the importance of tautologies. It is, of course, directly applicable to our text: An offering without sacrifice, what sort of an offering is that?

Hence (God is speaking):

Let them take for me an offering, a free-will offering of the spirit.

Let them bring me anything their little hearts are willing to give—provided that it's gold, silver, or other valuable materials.

In our text, even a free-will offering must have a certain materiality. No “gifts” of good-will and prayer here. This is in keeping with the spirit of rabbinic Judaism in which, for example, the commandment to visit the sick means getting up and doing it, not merely having them in your thoughts.

A Final Interpretation

And this is the offering that you shall take of them: gold, and silver, and brass... and fine linen.

To what may this be compared? To a story from the Buddhist tradition:

A monk is training a novice in meditation. He says: Go and sit comfortably somewhere and concentrate on your breath. Feel the

breath leave your nostril; then feel it enter. Feel it leave; feel it enter. Do this for half an hour and come back and tell me your experiences.

After ten minutes the novice rushes up to the monk in excitement and says, “I’ve just had a great spiritual experience, a communing with the Divine! I did what you said for five minutes and then, all of a sudden, I saw the Lord Buddha sitting on a golden lotus, and He leaned toward me and recited the whole first chapter of the Dhammapada!”

The monk said, with irritation, “If you had resumed concentrating on your breath it would have gone away.”

The novice was supposed to have had, for a few fleeting moments, the spiritual experience of a mind focused without distraction on one simple (and completely physical) awareness. He was also supposed to begin learning how to bring his untrained mind back to its focus when it got distracted—even when the distraction seemed to take the form of a religious vision.

In other words, the novice was supposed to learn to create in himself a still center, a quiescent and therefore receptive mind, within which meditation can be practiced and true revelations received.

Therefore, applying this to our text, with God speaking in His capacity of mentor to Israel in the novice phase of its religious life:

Let them take for me an offering, provided it is of gold, silver or other physical material they regard as precious. Let them build with these trinkets a place that will be a proper focus of their attention.

As it is said:

And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.

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