

Neurology & Pain Management

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The Parable of the Banished Wife: Resistance and Protest

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Protest and complaint come camouflaged in various guises in rabbinic literature but in a time when the divine-human relationship has been fractured we need to recover such texts to sustain us through these times. In the following essay I hope to show that our faith and dis-belief can still be located well within tradition without the need to abandon it. We live on the knife-edge between faith and dis-belief and struggle with both. In the following parable I found much solace. Let me share it with you.

In The second introduction to Reb Nachman's *Sippurei Maasiyot* or collected stories¹ Reb Noson his major disciple writes that a need for such an introduction occurred because of the opposition to the first edition.

The first introduction had been written with the publication of the tales in 1815-16 some four years after the death of Reb Nachman. The tales had been recorded and transcribed by Reb Nathan Sternhartz (tales 1,11,12,13) whereas Reb Naphtali transcribed and heard others.

“For we heard that there was a voice of tumult² saying it was not proper to print stories like these”

In the first introduction Reb Noson had already quoted the Baal Shem Tov³ and his use of the tale:

“And the BESHT may his memory be for a blessing could “unite unities” by means of the tale. When he saw upper conduits were ruined and he could not repair them through prayer, he would repair and join them by means of a tale”⁴

¹ First edition published in 1815 Ostrog (possibly Moghilev)

² Isa 66:6

³ Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, known as the Baal Shem Tov, was born in 1698 in Okup in the Carpathian Mountains in Podolia. Orphaned at a young age, he was cared for by the community. At that time there were many groups of kabbalists in Eastern European Jewish society. According to Hassidic tradition Israel ben Eliezer became a member of a society of secret mystics. Their goal was to help others, while concealing their mystical knowledge. Thus Israel ben Eliezer became an assistant teacher, bringing the children of the town to school.

At the same time he had another life: as a profound scholar, with great knowledge of all aspects of Jewish teaching and particularly its mystical, kabalistic dimension. Eventually he revealed his knowledge and his power to heal and to help others. He became known as the Baal Shem Tov, the "master of the Divine Name". Living in Miedzyboz he was leader of a circle of mystics with a wide influence. He taught a new path in mysticism: not to remain aloof from the people, seeking only to climb higher oneself; rather one should use one's knowledge for the benefit of all.

Now however with the second edition in 1850, there was apparent opposition to the book prompting a second introduction.⁵

In this introduction he again calls upon the Baal Shem Tov as cited by the Toldos Yaakov Yosef⁶ in the strangest story. He uses the story to justify the new tradition of telling tales that have no basis as yet within the haggadic textual tradition. In my thesis⁷ I discussed the history of the parable in Midrashic literature and elsewhere David Stern has analyzed the use of the parable in other texts such as New Testament and even the Zohar.⁸ There is whole secondary literature from the academic world regarding the use of tales and myths in rabbinic texts so I will not need to rehearse all this. What interests me is the daring quality of this particular tale, which would otherwise have been called a *mashal* or parable since it meets all the criterion for a parable in that it is clearly meant to be a fictional narrative followed by an explication. In this case the tale is about a man and his wife and their relationship as it follows a harrowing experience and a trial. The *nimshal* or explication speaks of the relationship between God and Israel or the Shechina and the implications, as I hope you will agree are quite radical. In presenting this essay I hope to further stretch the idea of just how unique was contribution of the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples in furthering the spiritual trajectory Midrash had begun.

In the second introduction to *Sippurei Maasiyot* the text reads as follows:

“There has already been a printed story of the Baal Shem Tov of blessed memory at the end of Toldos Yaakov Yosef, about the merchant and his wife who were at sea etc., which is based on the notion that a God-fearing woman is the assembly of Israel”

Clearly the author has made his own interpretation and explication of one of the characters which we will examine below. The wife is apparently vindicated and represents the assembly of Israel.

Let us now examine the story itself translated initially by Martin Mantel in his PhD thesis⁹

Mashal

It seems that I've heard from my teacher a parable about a certain merchant who was at sea when it began to storm and grew worse in the extreme until their lives were imperiled. Then the merchant arose in prayer that he might be saved through the merit of his modest wife.

There was an idol-worshipping man present and he was struck by the merchant's praying through his wife's merit. He answered that it is fitting to go to great lengths in her praise.

⁴ For a discussion on the Luriani terminology of the unities and their application to storytelling see Band, Arnold: Nachman of Bratzlav: The Tales. Classics of Western Spirituality: Paulist Press 1978 p33.

⁵ No location is given for the second printing. Aryeh Kaplan suggests that Rabbi Nathan never got a chance to print this edition although he had intended it as an introduction. See Kaplan, Aryeh, Until the Mashiach: Breslov Research Institute 1985 p 288.

⁶ Toldos Yaakov Yosef: Devarim, Os 3: Koretz, 1780. Many times throughout his work he writes “and it appears to me that I heard from my master so and so”. Our *mashal* is also preceded by this introduction.

⁷ Imaging/Imagining the Divine in Rabbinic Literature, PhD Thesis, Brandeis University 2000.

⁸ David Stern: Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature, Harvard University Press 1991

⁹ Mantel, Martin Irving, Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav's Tales: A Critical translation from the Yiddish with annotations and commentary. Princeton University PhD, Thesis, 1977.

The man said, "I'll go ahead and seduce her! What signs do you require? He answered that she has a precious ring on her hand and if he should bring it, then he would know etc. ¹⁰ they agreed upon a certain penalty, that each would give his merchandise to his opponent if vanquished... So he went on to seduce her but could not get close at all. He came on to her several times saying he had a secret from her husband but she paid him no attention. Finally he hired her maidservant to steal her ring away using several plots, which he hatched. It succeeded and he came with this ring and sign to her husband and took his merchandise away.

The husband returned home with an empty ship and when the wife heard of her husband's approach she adorned herself and went out to greet him with expressions of endearment and love they shared from olden times. None of these entered his ears and she was amazed, not knowing why and wherefore he had left off his love and affection.

He accompanied her into the house but his heart was not with her and he brought it about that he drove her away upon an unmanned ship at sea. However the husband changed his dress and language as though he were a sailor in solitary charge of the ship. She went along on the boat for several days without food or drink and begged the sailor to give her some food to revive her spirit. He said "if you kiss me then I'll give you." She did so under duress and afterwards he demanded her to have intercourse etc.

The day came when the boat reached the coast whereupon she threw herself off the boat, jumping to shore and seeking food. She found two trees one of which, if the fruit be eaten, caused leprosy and the second cured leprosy. She took these in her knapsack until she reached the king's home in the guise of a man. He was in need of this remedy so she prepared the medication and they gave her a great fortune (in payment).

She returned home, found her husband, and protested against what he had done to her by sending her away from home on a ship with an ugly sailor; and that she had needed to kiss him and another foul thing because of the great pain to eat, etc. the husband was glad at heart over the greatness of her complaint and her modesty.

He investigated and it came to light that the man had slandered her and had stolen her ring. The affair was cleared up and he dealt with him severely.

Nimshal:

The lesson contained is understood through all the affairs of this world from the time of the destruction the Temple until the arrival of our messiah speedily in our days Amen.

(For my teacher made spiritual ascents and beheld how Michael the grand caretaker of Israel, intercedes on their behalf that each of their debts is a merit for whatever they do negatively along with other culpable matters are only done so as to be able to arrange a wedding match with a well-versed scholar or to give charity and the like, in the course of which they are all forced etc.)

¹⁰ The Hebrew reads "and they agreed upon a fine equaling the merchandise each possessed should they win"

The chaste wife is the shechina as in the secret sense of “a valorous woman is her husband’s crown”¹¹. The devil grew jealous and said “that is now, while they have their temple and sacrifices, but if You should desire to try them out, destroy their temple and I’ll seduce her, as it were etc.”

Through the agency of the maidservant he stole the ring which is the secret sense of the lots of the two goats (in the Day of Atonement ritual) one belonging to God and one destined for Azazel. Because of the sin the ‘other side’ prevailed etc. so the temple was destroyed as Nachmanides describes etc. and she was sent away on a ship and God as it were, transformed Himself into the Holy Name SAL etc. and this is the secret of the confession of the complaint of the shechina towards Him Blessed be He. How could He have proved her thus etc.

And later the matter was investigated and found to be falsely accused and then:

The sword of the Lord is filled with blood, it is made fat with fatness, with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams; for the Lord has a sacrifice in Bozrah, and a great slaughter in the land of Edom.

Isa. 34:6¹²

¹¹ Proverbs 31:30

¹² The chapter refers to God's vengeance : Isaiah Chapter 34 1-8

Come near, ye nations, to hear; and hearken, ye people: let the earth hear, and all that is therein; the world, and all things that come forth of it.

For the **indignation of the LORD [is] upon all nations**, and [his] fury upon all their armies: he hath utterly destroyed them, he hath delivered them to the slaughter.

Their slain also shall be cast out, and their stink shall come up out of their carcasses, and the mountains shall be melted with their blood.

And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fall down, as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling [fig] from the fig tree.

For my sword shall be bathed in heaven: behold, it shall come down upon Idumea, and upon the people of my curse, to judgment.

The sword of the LORD is filled with blood, it is made fat with fatness, [and] with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams: for the LORD hath a sacrifice in Bozrah, and a great slaughter in the land of Idumea.

And the unicorns shall come down with them and the bullocks with the bulls; and their land shall be soaked with blood, and their dust made fat with fatness.

¶ **For [it is] the day of the LORD'S vengeance, [and] the year of recompenses for the controversy of Zion.**

The Toldos then continues (below) with his own exposition and use of the Baal Shem Tov's *mashal*. It is interesting to note how he first quotes his master as to the explication of the parable but then launches into his own reading and weaving it carefully into his homily on the first verse in Deuteronomy

Let me first begin by raising a series of questions about the *mashal*.

1. The tale begins with a highly unusual prayer for the businessman on board a ship running afoul of the sea in a storm. We usually invoke the merits of the Patriarchs or even our holy ancestors and Zaddikim, but never have we seen a tale of invoking one's wife's modesty! Who is the businessman? Clearly the idol worshipper is a dark character like the Satan who usually comes to test the fidelity of the devotee like in Job. Could the business man be Adam who believed in the modesty of Eve only to be tempted by the serpent? Reb Hershey suggested that it is really God himself who believes in the people of Israel and makes a wager with the devil for her fidelity.¹³ By casting lots God now "begs" His people not to let Him down so to speak. Thus the ensuing drama plays out the complaint of Israel against God as to how He mistreated her.
2. In his reply to the idol worshipper that it "is fitting to go to such great lengths in her praise" was this response one of pride or true humility? Did he not know he was inviting misadventure whatever its shape by justifying his unusual prayer?
3. What kind of a Faustian bargain was struck here? We readers thought that this pious man was invoking his wife's modesty for divine intervention, and now he is wagering her virtue away for the idol-worshipper's fortune! Was he possibly under duress? What would he gain by this wager other than money?
4. It might be understood that he lost his love for her when she "surrendered" her ring but why not confront her, rather than hold inside the resentment to

¹³ Citing a Targum Pseudo Jonathan to Deut 32:8: *yatsar gevulot amim lemispar bnei eilim*

Whereas the masoretic tradition reads bnei Yisrael:

"When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he set apart the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the people of Israel."

Following the LXX angelon theou as well as the Qumran MS. And Ben Sira 17:17 the paraphrased Aramaic translation of Deuteronomy 32:8-9 in Pseudo-Jonathan supports the *Septuagint* rendering of verse 8, but also hints at the origin of the later alternate reading ("**sons of Israel**"): DEUTERONOMY 32:8 When the Most High made allotment of the world unto the nations which proceeded from the sons of Noach, in the separation of the writings and languages of the children of men at the time of the division, He cast the lot among the seventy angels, the princes of the nations with whom is the revelation to oversee the city, even at that time He established the limits of the nations according to the sum of the number of the **seventy souls of Israel** who went down into Egypt. (*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, translated by J.W. Etheridge) I am indebted to Professor H. Basser from Queens University for this insight. He notes that a Midrash is cited by Ginzberg as to the fact that the nations have their lots cast under various angels but Israel has its portion under God "*ki chelek Hashem amo*" for God's portion is His people. In the Noah parsha Ginzberg notes "beside the chastisement of the sinners by the confounding of speech another notable circumstance was connected with the descent of God upon earth-one of only ten such descents to occur between creation and the Day of Judgment. It was on his occasion that God and the seventy angels that surround the Throne of Glory cast lots concerning the various nations. Each angel received a nation and Israel fell to the lot of God."(Ginzberg Legends of the Jews Noah Section 90-91) This Midrash is cited in Pirke deReb Eliezer with the variance "and the lot fell to Abraham and his seed". See also Menachem Kasher Torah Shleima to Genesis 11:8, and genesis Rabba Ch 38.

- the point of arranging her banishment to an unmanned ship. Why such cruelty? Did her sin justify it?
5. On board the ship the cruelty of withholding her food is compounded by his further test of her virtue under such extremis. With her starving, he demands a kiss, then intercourse. She submits but in doing so does he not realize he has forever compromised the very modesty he had previously invoked forever?
 6. She uses her ingenuity to jump ship still not recognizing the sailor as her husband, even calling him “ugly”! But then finds these two fantastic trees one poisonous and one remedying. This saves her and from the remedy fruits she gains fortune from a “king” who is cured from his mortal wound by her fruits. She has meanwhile disguised herself as a man. The reversal of husband dressed as sailor and wife dressed as man closes the circle disguise.
 7. On returning home she now lodges her complaint against her husband. But now she is the one who brought home all the wealth, not her husband, yet he still has control over her so that she needs to complain against his absolute authority as well as the cruelty of the trial. He however, is pleased! By what! Her honesty! We are told “the greatness of her complaint and her modesty” this double reason for his pleasure seems mutually exclusive.
 8. Is this then the trigger for him to investigate? Why not investigate earlier? Did he not smell something fishy? Only now after trying her himself and witnessing what her modesty...surely not for she in fact succumbed to the sailor’s demands for intimacy...what satisfied him now so that he felt compelled to disbelieve the idol worshipper...only her honesty about the facts of what took place.

We are forced to dissect this *mashal* for its rhetoric and plot before we attempt to read the explication given in the name of the Baal Shem Tov. Who are the characters in the plot? Who comes out the hero and the villain? Only after we read their characters fully and determine the archetypal figures they represent can we imagine the radical nature of this narrative over most others Hassidic tales we have inherited from that first generation of masters and understand why this exempla was used in the introduction to *sippurei maasiyot* of Reb Nachman.

It is a sad tale, one with an apparent happy ending. It begins with the husband praying to God in the merit of his wife’s modesty and ends with a happy husband whose wife has brought home a fortune whose modesty has been salvaged by her honesty. But what of her, the innocent victim of this trial, what became of her inner emotional life after this entire trauma. What had been gained, what has been lost, what happens after she complains to him about the way he treated her. Does he make amends? Or does he merely feel his acquisition, his wife, is safe because she passed the trial. What becomes of their relationship after the story we are not told. But like other fairy tales the mythical implications here are resonant. When we read other traditional stories from around the world, we find that the things we value most highly, fear most deeply, and hope for most ardently are valued, feared and hoped for are mirrored in the characters themselves who come to life in the tales.

Ancient myths and stories evolving from cultures over centuries (fairy tales) can be found embedded in Haggadah as well as Midrash. When we read them closely they can be explored and broken open, inviting readers into the depth of richness the stories bring to religious culture, spirituality, and psychology.

In Jung's writing in *Man and His Symbols*, he notes that nature has lost its symbolic implications for people, thus we have lost an "emotional unconscious identity" with natural phenomena. He says the river no longer contains a spirit; no tree is the life principle of man, no snake the embodiment of wisdom. With this lack of contact with nature, a profound emotional energy has slipped away that was supplied by this symbolic connection. How do we reclaim this connection? One way is through delving into myths and fairy tales and discovering their meaning at levels below what first appears. Various fairy tales and myths, filled with masculine and feminine energies, rich in symbolism, have been explored this way and this tale needs just such an analysis to mine the true depth of its implications for religious life.

Concerning the role of the wife in this tale when we compare her role to such archetypes we see in other myths, the role of a woman maybe as a strong, resourceful hero (such as "Hansel and Gretel"), with a tale in which the male is the traditional strong hero who "saves the day" (such as the "Jack" tales).¹⁴ In contrast the roles of women in a traditional tale in which the heroine has a relatively passive role (such as "Cinderella"), are more common. Are the two characters really very different?¹⁵

Jung and his followers developed two basic theories on fairy tales. The first is that the characters in fairy tales and the motifs that occur can be seen as analogous to archetypes. The second is that the fairy tale itself is analogous to the psyche and is searching for wholeness. Jung analyzed several different archetypes and how they are represented in fairy tales. Jung believed that in fairy tales, the psyche is telling its own story. The fairy tale creates characters that are representations of archetypes, and these archetypes interact with one another in an attempt to reach a state of self-actualization, the goal for all psyches. This is equivalent to a dream, in which archetypes likewise interact in the story the psyche is telling to try and help the patient come to terms with the hidden and repressed memories in his own unconscious and the collective unconscious so that he may accept his Self and become a whole person.

Von Franz explains that since fairy tales, as archetypal stories, are similar to dreams, they can be analyzed following the same basic analysis that is used for dreams. She says there are four stages that the story can be divided into; the first stage is the exposition; the time and place of the tale. Von Franz says that this is always evident in fairy tales because they begin with a "once upon a time" type phrase, which she interprets as signifying timelessness and spacelessness, the same qualities the collective unconscious possesses.

The next step in analysis is to concentrate on the characters involved. Here, von Franz says it is important to pay close attention to the number of people present both at the beginning of the story and at the end. Noticing changes in the number and composition of the characters in the fairy tale

¹⁴ Pushkin's analysis of Russian fairy tales is helpful in such analysis

¹⁵ Jungian theories analyze the tales in terms of the Mother, the Shadow, or the Animus/Anima archetypes. In addition to Jung, analysts such as Marie-Louis von Franz and Sybille Birkhauser-Oerie have contributed to our depth understanding of the roles of these archetypes. In contrast the Freudian theorists posit a psycho-sexual basis for these tales especially seen in the work of Bettelheim's psychological interpretation of such folktales for children. For a Feminist perspective in which the representations of motherhood, mothers, and mother-daughter relationships have taken a central place in feminist studies, see, for example, the work of Nancy J. Chodorow, Marianne Hirsch, Shari L. Thurer, and Adrienne Rich.

is important for determining what the story is about. For example, a story in which at the beginning there are no women and in the end there are women may indicate that the story is about redeeming the female principle.¹⁶

After the characters are evaluated, the naming of the problem can be studied. Von Franz says the trouble of the tale, whether it is a sick king, a missing sister, or any number of troubles that occur in fairy tales must be defined psychologically. You can then continue on to the propetia, or the twists and turns of the story, which reach a climax and then end in a lysis or a catastrophe; either everyone lives happily ever after or everyone disappears and no one is ever heard from again.

Von Franz says that often in fairy tales there is another ending, wherein the storyteller speaks and says that he or she was then hurt somehow. She refers to the way Russian tales sometimes end, with the teller saying that everyone drank at the end, but his beer slipped through his beard and he didn't swallow any. She says the purpose of this ending is to remove us from the realm of the unconscious, where we were for the duration of the tale, and smack us back into the reality of our conscious existence.

Returning to our Hassidic tale the Baal Shem Tov was the first to make use of tales and parable for the express purpose of giving strength to the simple person and to show how beloved the simple folk were in the eyes of God. The Toldos Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye was one of his closest disciples and was able to put to writing what the master had transmitted orally.¹⁷ He himself made good use of this *mashal* to stretch an already profound Midrash to Lamentations:

The Rabbi from Polnoye himself made use of the Baal Shem Tov's *mashal* for his own novella in explaining a profound Midrash relating to the first chapter of Deuteronomy which plays on the word *eichah* as Moses describes the burden placed on him by the Children of Israel's constant murmurings:

טַרְחָתְכֶם לְבַדִּי, אִשָּׂא, יב אֵיכָה אֶשָּׂא, וְיָרִיבְכֶם, וְיִמְשָׁאְכֶם, וְיִרְיַבְכֶם. 12 How can I myself alone bear your cumbrance, and your burden, and your strife?

אֵיכָה

Is a word used as the title for the very book of Lamentations bewailing the destruction of the temple(s) so the Midrash wastes no time in connecting the two. Citing the Midrash the Toldos begins "let us cite the Midrash where three prophesied with the word" *eichah*.

Moses used the word (as above)

Isaiah used the same word in "How doth she (Jerusalem) become a harlot" Isa. 1:21

Jeremiah used the same word "How doth she (Jerusalem) dwell all alone" Lam 1:1¹⁸

To what may this be compared (*mashal*) to a matron who had three consorts, one of whom saw her in her etc.¹⁹

¹⁶ Von Franz, Marie-Louise. 1996. *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*. Revised Edition. Boston: 1996.

¹⁷ There are but a few actual writings attributed to the Baal Shem Tov himself.

¹⁸ The Midrash assumes Jeremiah wrote Lamentations.

¹⁹ The full text of the Midrash Rabbah to lamentations 1:1 HOW DOTHTHE CITY SIT SOLITARY!

“So from the *mashal* (of my master the Baal Shem Tov) this Midrash can be understood. For the word *eichah* can be split to *ei* and *chah*, and as is known the shechina is called at times *chah* so the verse could be read (not as Moses complaining about carrying the people rather) the shechina alone wonders how she bears the burdens of Israel. Next Isaiah sees her in her infidelity as in the *mashal* above (where the wife becomes unfaithful on the ship), again wondering to herself “how is it possible that the shechina could be viewed as a harlot (by God!), nevertheless she remains a “faithful city”!²⁰ And finally Jeremiah sees her in her disgrace like the woman sent away on a ship, alone as in “the city dwells solitary” as she again wonders how the shechina could be alone and away from her consort (God). “She (Jerusalem) has become *like* a widow” but not a widow literally in the aspect (secret of)

“And I will hide My face on that day”

(Deut. 31:17)²¹

Like the sailor on the ship meaning *in truth he was with us all along* (like the sailor and his wife) and the remaining content all refers to the secret of the exile of the shechina.

In this brilliant exposition of the Midrash to the first verse of Lamentations which connects each of the words *eichah* to three separate prophets and one object of love that of Jerusalem and the people of Israel; the Toldos now stretches the Midrash even further. The Midrash had already employed a *mashal* of the stately courtly lady the *matrona*²² in order to congeal all three different views of the decline and fall of the nation of Israel as due to three separate periods of degradation. The word *eichah* thus unifies all three to one object. However the Toldos, by now employing the *mashal* of the Ball Shem Tov his master, has stretched the object even farther and substituted the shechina for the people of Israel! No longer is this a lamentation of the prophet for the people or the city of Jerusalem, rather it is a lament of the shechina for her separation from God Himself! The master's *mashal* becomes the exegetical tool by which the substitution becomes quite radical, for now it is all about the split within the divine, and the story is all about God's own biography! The exile of the shechina is a huge topic deserving a whole thesis however suffice it to say that the Toldos has stretched the rabbinic notion way beyond the normal confines of tolerable theological discourse. Here the *mashal* somehow gives him the license to place in the mouth of the shechina the kind of protest unheard of in prior texts!

is as follows:

Three uttered prophecies using the word *eichah*, viz. Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Moses said, how can I myself alone bear your cumbrance! (Deut. I, 12). Isaiah said, how is the faithful city become a harlot! (Isa. I, 21). Jeremiah said, How DOTH THE CITY SIT SOLITARY!

R. Levi said: It may be likened to a matron who had had three grooms: one beheld her in her happiness, a second beheld her in her infidelity, and the third beheld her in her disgrace. Similarly, Moses beheld Israel in their glory and happiness and exclaimed, 'How can I myself alone bear your cumbrance!' Isaiah beheld them in their infidelity and exclaimed, 'How is the faithful city become a harlot!' Jeremiah beheld them in their disgrace and exclaimed, How DOTH THE CITY SIT SOLITARY!

²⁰ Lam 1:1. End of verse. To be read not as “a one time faithful city” but “an eternally faithful city” despite appearances to the contrary!

²¹ Dt 15-18: Then the LORD appeared at the Tent in a pillar of cloud, and the cloud stood over the entrance to the Tent. 16 And the LORD said to Moses: "You are going to rest with your fathers, and these people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake me and break the covenant I made with them. 17 On that day I will become angry with them and forsake them; **I will hide my face from them**, and they will be destroyed. Many disasters and difficulties will come upon them, and on that day they will ask, 'Have not these disasters come upon us because our God is not with us?' 18 And I will certainly hide my face on that day because of all their wickedness in turning to other gods.

²² Usually defined as; a lady of wealth or property and therefore able to vote in Roman society.

Whereas the suffering was at first that of *Am Yisrael* the people of Israel, it has now become the shechina Herself, or the Divine indwelling, that part of God Himself immanent in the world and I His people that is lost and exiled. It is to Her rescue that all of Torah and Mitzvot are now designed to address. Since the Ari, Rabbi Luria of Safed in the sixteenth century, articulated the mystical cosmology of the split between the Lord and the shechina, the Hassidic masters have picked up on this powerful myth and have woven it into the deepest readings of the Torah.

The introduction to *sippurei maasiyot* cites the Toldos and his own use of the banished sailor's wife parable in order to show that Reb Nachman is not the first and not unique in his use of parables about lost princesses as exempla for the shechina in exile.

We now have layer upon layer of exegesis beginning with the whole genre of the *mashal* in rabbinic literature especially Midrash, followed by the oral tales of the Baal Shem Tov cited then by his disciple the Toldos, then used as proof text and justification by the second introducing editor to Rabbi Nachman's Tales.

I would like to follow this trajectory in our own post-Holocaust age of genocide and man's inhumanity to man...

For me reading this narrative of betrayal and trials, torture and rescue, complaint and uneasy resolution, the ending leaves us uneasy. The husband seems satisfied with his wife's virtue, and is moved by her complaint and her modesty. If this is the paradigm for our relationship with God then we too must not betray the virtuous wife. Our charge seems to remain as those who would continue in our modesty (meaning in our virtue and making sure our own lives are filled with the pursuit of virtue and overcoming of our character defects) yet all the while we are licensed to protest as have our forefathers in the literature of our sacred books. This double command to remain virtuous and faithful as the beloved of God, as His chosen ones (however the lots fell upon us by some card game!) Yet also to remind Him of our suffering and humanities' call for rescue in such dark times.

I will end with a quote from the Holy Rebbe of Piacezna, Harav Kalonymous Kalman Shapiro, zt"l, who wrote the inspirational sefer, "Aish Kodesh" during his all too brief tenure as the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto.²³ Commenting on the verse regarding the death of the matriarch Sarah he notes:²⁴

"In the holy book Maor Vashemesh we find a quote from R. Menachem Mendel of Riminov on his commentary to Exodus chapter 6. It concerns a teaching from the Talmud (Berachot 5a) where Rabbi Simeon b. Lakish said "The Torah uses the word 'covenant' in its description of salt (Leviticus 2:13)²⁵. It also uses the word covenant in its description of suffering in Deuteronomy (28:69)²⁶. This teaches that just as salt purges meat so does suffering purify a person". Reb Menachem Mendel adds the following "and similarly just as meat is ruined when overly salted so can a person be damaged by unbearable suffering; for a person to be properly seasoned by suffering, the suffering must be administered with mercy and properly offset against the person's ability to cope"

²³ Shortly before he was murdered by the Nazis and the Ghetto was liquidated, the Rebbe buried his writings beneath the Ghetto's ruins with the hopeful plea that, after the war, the manuscript be taken to Israel. For a biography see Nehemia Polen's *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto* (Hardcover) for a translation of the citation below see J. Hershey Worch's *Sacred Fire: Torah from the Years of Fury 1939-1942* (Paperback) Jason Aronson, 2004.

²⁴ Pashas Chaye Sarah November 4th 1939

²⁵ 13. "And every sacrifice of your meal offering shall you season with salt; nor shall you allow the salt of the covenant of your God to be lacking from your meal offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt."

²⁶ "These are the words of the covenant, which the Lord commanded Moses to make with the people of Israel in the land of Moab, beside the covenant which he made with them in Horeb."

Rashi asks why the death of Sarah is written immediately after the episode of the binding of Isaac. Is the text suggesting some connection between these two events? Rashi answers “when Sarah was told of the binding of Isaac – how he was prepared for the slaughter, of how the knife was laid at his throat- her soul fled and she died”.

So Moses our teacher, the trusted shepherd, deliberately edited the Torah, placing two events-the death of Sarah and the binding of Isaac- side by side in the text, in order to advocate on our behalf. By doing this Moses suggested that if the anguish is, God forbid, unbearable, then death can result. If this could happen even to Sarah our matriarch, how much less can we bear this pain?

The Torah may also be telling us that our mother Sarah who took the binding of Isaac so much to heart that her soul flew out of her, died for the good of the Jewish people. She died in order to show God that a Jew should not be expected to suffer unlimited levels of anguish. Even though a person with the mercy of God, survives and escapes death, nevertheless elements of his capability, his mind and his spirit are forever broken and as a result of his ordeal, lost to him, in the final analysis what difference does it make whether all or part of me is killed.”

This moving piece was written after the death of his son in the Warsaw Ghetto. He speaks of the breaking of the spirit by too much suffering and suggests a radical interpretation of the “Death of Sarah” pericope. Whereas most commentators read her death as being caused by the anguish of the Akeda episode (the binding of Isaac) and her sensitivity and inability to hear out the happy ending of the story (in one Midrash) or the mere imaginative thought of what could have been (in another), here the Rebbe suggests her death was willed. It was as if she needed to confront the Almighty with the protest that such suffering was just too much, that if this was to be the paradigm for future generations of her children in exile, where the excess suffering has no purpose but to break the person’s spirit,²⁷ what would be the use factor. Surely it would not bring a person to penitence or closer to God! For this she had to leave this world so her soul flew away.

The motif of protest is seen in this moving Midrash working its way just as in the Banished wife story. Here however it is the future that is being fought for, since Sarah was the Matriarch forever worrying about the future.

In the final analysis I found the layering of texts dealing with the *masha* stretched theological ever more further until the final explosive reading of the Death of Sarah episode by the Rebbe who would die in Treblinka only 3 years later with a broken heart.

²⁷ Referring to the metaphor of too much salt spoiling the meat! (Berachot 5a)