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Parables in the Service of Emotional Translation

Ronit Nikolsky

1 Introduction

The modern journey into ancient texts takes us to unexpected places, and by this, teaches us about our reality and our expectations.

In previous works I have developed the claim, which I share with other scholars,¹ that the use of parables² in the Tanhuma-Yelammedenu (henceforth: TY) literature should not be approached from a strictly textual-hermeneutical perspective, since the incentive for creating or adding the parable is not to explicate the source text, but to change the attitude of the listener or reader toward that text. This approach to parables asserts that it is not necessary to match every part of the parable to the source text; on the contrary, it is enough for the blending to be minimal in order to achieve the change in attitude. I term this change in attitude *emotional translation*.

I want to continue with this line of work in the present article. To that end, I will give a short introduction to the study of the story-nature of parables, and demonstrate how this particular nature contributes to the emotional translation. I will also give some attention to the importance of emotionality, and thus of emotional translation, in establishing group coherence. Tools that have been developed in the field of narratology help conceptualize the poetic moves that bring about the emotional translation, such as distancing or changes in the storyline.

Case studies will be offered in the form of five parables from TY literature, which will trace out the way the emotional translation is achieved.

- 1 Lieve M. Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhiltot: An Annotated Edition of the Meshalim in Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* (Mohr Siebeck, 2019), sections 2.10.5–7; and see more in Ronit Nikolsky, “De functie van parabellen (*mesjalim*) in de Tanchuma,” *NTT: Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 71, no. 2 (2017): 155.
- 2 For the sake of fluency, I use the word “parable” to translate the Hebrew *meshal* (pl. *meshalim*), in spite of possible arguments concerning the partial compatibility of the terms.

2 Double Scope Blending in Parables

One of the characteristics of parables is that they are stories.³ As narratives that aim at changing attitudes, one might think that they are well constructed stories. But this is in fact not the case. In reality, parables often have “faults” as stories, be it in the form of inexplicable behaviors on the part of the protagonist, or in plots that do not develop according to the reader’s expectations.

Laura Suchostawska has studied this phenomenon in some New Testament parables within the framework of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory of Lakoff and Johnson and the Blending Theory of Fauconnier and Turner. She conceptualized the phenomenon of “faults” in the story plots of parables, and explained it as the phenomenon of *double blending*, which is when the source story of the blending (i.e., the parable) is influenced by the “target” (i.e., the story) which it sets out to explicate. One of the cases studied by Suchostawska is a parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1–15). Here the owner of the vineyard hires different workers at different times, which results in each of them performing a different amount of work, and yet they are all paid the same amount at the end of the day. This is not a typical behavior, says Suchostawska, since in normal circumstances an employer would pay each worker according to their work. This behavior is thus influenced by the way God acts, that is, equally rewarding all people who perform pious work. The plot of the parabolic story is, therefore, influenced by what it sets out to explicate.⁴

Double blending occurs in all parables studied in this article. The “irregularity” of the plot, the unexpected move of the protagonist in the parable story, is the signifier of the focal point of the story, and the place where the major “statement” of the story can be recognized. This point is, therefore, the place that will be studied, and I will show how the irregularity, the story’s unexpected move, is a poetic technique which affects the listener, whose emotionality brings about the change in attitude.

3 Emotionality and Narratives

Emotions are the major force in human life, and responsible for important social decisions such as identity, commitment, and social cohesion. The term *emotional communities* was coined to refer to group cohesion that is based on

3 Lieve M. Teugels, “Talking Animals in Parables: A *Contradictio in Terminis*?” (in this volume).

4 Laura Suchostawska, “Blending in New Testament parables,” in *Texts and Minds: Papers in Cognitive Poetics and Rhetoric*, ed. Alina Kwiatkowska (Bern: Peter Lang Verlag 2014), 161.

shared values and attitudes.⁵ Cultures have the tools to develop and direct the emotionality of their members and to establish attitudes toward objects and values. Stories are one such tool, and within them, parables.

I use the concept *emotions* here in a very wide aspect, following the work of Lisa Feldman Barrett. Feldman Barrett shows in her research on the neurology of emotions that emotions are not universal, but rather mostly culturally invented and categorized; she shows that no “basic emotions” can be recognized in the biology of the brain. So cultures are responsible for what people feel and how they conceptualize their feelings and share them.⁶ Since emotions bring people together, and create the feeling of belonging, we do well to examine the cultural artefacts, such as stories, that create the emotionality typical to the social group.

Stories are an excellent tool for constructing emotionality. They mould emotionality by a teller, verbally leading a listener to create an imagined reality in their mind, a reality in which people act and feel and exhibit all aspects of human behavior. Teller and listener (or, in the case of written stories, writer and reader) voluntarily engage in developing an attitude toward the events and people in the story. Accordingly, stories set an example for behavior, together with the proper attitude to it, as suggested by the teller or author, and accepted by the listener or reader.⁷

The study of emotions using stories means that we would be looking into the people (protagonists) and events (plots), and discerning the attitude the author evokes in us as readers, be it by bringing certain aspects of the story nearer to the reader through the addition of details,⁸ or by studying the incentive of the protagonists in the story to act.

4 The TY Literature

The TY literature is relatively late in rabbinic literature, dating from the end of the amoraic period (fifth century CE) until the Middle Ages. Geographically, TY literature started in Byzantine Palestine, and moved into the diaspora, be it the Babylonian one (as was probably the case with *Tanhuma Warsaw*) or

5 Barbara Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 2.

6 Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* (London: Macmillan, 2017), 128–51; see also Joseph LeDoux, “Rethinking the Emotional Brain,” *Neuron* 73 (2012): 655.

7 Joanna Gavins, *Text World Theory: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 18–33.

8 See Gavins, *Text World Theory*, 73–90 (on layers).

that of South-East Europe (from which Tanhuma Buber probably originates, but also other compositions with a strong tanhumaic influence).⁹ In terms of social milieu, due to its homiletic nature, it is generally accepted that TY literature has a strong affiliation with the synagogue, rather than the *beit-midrash* (study house). Another characteristic of TY literature is that its parables are about a midrash, and do not directly comment on the biblical text.¹⁰ We can therefore see how TY literature forms a bridge between the *beit-midrash* and the synagogue having been composed by people who knew the *beit-midrash* culture and could reflect on it, but were not passing it on in a *beit-midrash* manner to a synagogue environment. As such, there is certainly a reason for TY literature to work toward the establishment of an emotionality suitable for its audience.

I will be looking in parables in TY literature for ideological directions based on incentive to act, and on the overall message of the passage, using narratological tools.

Dov Weiss has taken a similar approach in his book *Pious Irreverence*, although he does not formulate it the same way. Weiss shows that the latent rabbinic license to criticize God comes to its full and legitimate expression in TY literature. This criticism or even reproach is about injustice in the world and in the biblical stories. The license to reproach is certainly an emotional trend according to my approach to emotions, since it is about the legitimizing of an activity driven by emotion. This particular emotion, the drive to think critically about God, will be apparent in some of the parables analysed below.

5 The Parables of the Bad Slave

It is said: *Judgments are prepared for scorners, and stripes for the back of fools* (Prov 19:29). The Holy One, blessed be He, said: “Before I created man, I prepared for him all of these.”

A parable.

[This is similar] to a bad slave who was being sold. His master went to buy him, and he knew about him that he was a bad slave.

He took ropes and whips with him, so that if he misbehaved, he would punish him.

9 Bregman, *Tanhuma Yelammedenu Literature* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press; 2003), 173–88; Dov Weiss, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 11–14.

10 Nikolsky, “De functie van parables,” 167–68; Nikolsky, “Are Parables an Interpretation?” in *Sources and Interpretation in Ancient Judaism: Studies for Tal Ilan at Sixty*, ed. Geoffrey Herman, Meron Piotrkowski, and Saskia Donitz (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 310–14.

When he misbehaved, he took the ropes and tied him, and the whips and hit him.

The slave said to him, "Did you not know that I am a bad slave? Why did you buy me?"

He said, "Since I knew that you were a bad slave, I prepared ropes and whips for you, so that if you misbehave, I would punish you with them."

So is the Holy One, blessed be He. Before he created man, he prepared tortures for him, because he knew that "for the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen 8:21), therefore he prepared all of these for him.

As it is said: *Judgments are prepared for scorners, and stripes for the back of fools.*¹¹

This passage starts with a midrash on the verse from Proverbs (Prov 19:29: "Judgments are prepared for scorners, and stripes for the back of fools") announcing that punishment has been prepared ahead of time for the scorners and fools. The midrash is saying that God prepared all these punishments for people before He created them. The parable then tells about a master who went to buy a slave knowing that the slave was bad, and therefore prepared ropes and whips for him. After rebelling and being punished, the slave asked the master why he had bought him knowing that he was a bad slave. The master answers that it was because of this knowledge that he prepared the ropes and whips for punishment.

In the Tanhuma, this passage follows a text which offers a nice combination of verses and expositions relating to Leviticus 14:34 ("When you come into the land of Canaan, which I give to you for a possession, I will put the plague of leprosy in a house of the land of your possession"). The text asks why is the earth, which has not sinned, still inflicted with the plague of leprosy. It goes on to explain that this and other inflictions on people's clothes and skin, as well as the first exile, are meant as a warning to the people not to sin, and that, whenever they continue to sin, they will be struck with the next infliction. The text is not very systematic in its categorization of the inflictions (i.e., it does not transition smoothly from earth to walls to clothes to skin, for example), but all inflictions are warnings until the real punishment comes, namely the set of the five "whips" of a rising, a scab, a bright spot, a scall, and a plague.¹² The texts discussed here—i.e., the verse from Proverbs and the parable on it—follow directly the text listing the inflictions.

11 Tanh B Metzora 12; there is a parallel in Tanh W Metsora 4.

12 The first three are from Lev 13:2, the last two from Lev 13:30 and 13:22, respectively.

5.1 *Earlier Rabbinic Parallels*

In rabbinic literature, the verse from Leviticus 14:34 is interpreted only in Leviticus Rabbah¹³ and in TY literature.¹⁴ Tanhuma Buber is based on the tradition from Leviticus Rabbah, but also alters it: Leviticus Rabbah has two parables in the discussion of this verse, but they both differ from the one found in Tanhuma Buber.

God as master and humans as slaves is a common parabolic topos in rabbinic literature, and “bad slaves” are not uncommon in rabbinic parables: slaves are compared, assessed, punished, and rewarded according to their actions. Examples can be found in the parable of the three slaves in the New Testament,¹⁵ as well as in tannaitic parables.¹⁶ In these parables, bad slaves are always a problem, if not a tragedy, and something the master tries to correct. However, the designation of the slave as “bad” before he is bought is uncommon, and so is the slave’s own self-designation as “bad.”

5.2 *The Emotionality Promoted in the Parable*

Two points in the story leave the audience with a sense of uneasiness, and they both refer to one and the same issue. The first is the master who voluntarily bought a slave knowing that he was bad. The second is the slave asking why the master bought him, and receiving an answer that does not directly address the question, but is only a repetition of the grim information given to us in the story: the master bought ropes and whips to punish the bad slave.

The plot of the parable does not make sense as an independent story: the incentive of the protagonist is counterintuitive, and there is no resolution to the problem the story poses. This can be attributed to the double blend nature of the parable, while the counterintuitive nature of the action and the lack of explanation derive from the fact that the slave owner is representing God.

The sense of uneasiness the story gives is its emotional message: humans are categorized as bad, and there is no explanation for this. Still God wants humankind, and this too is without explanation. The only solution is punishment, but it is hard to avoid the unfairness of this situation. This is quite a grim

13 Lev Rab parasha 17:1, 2, 3, and 5 (on Metzora).

14 I.e., Tanhuma Buber, the “printed Tanhuma,” Numbers Rabbah, and later collections that quote extensively from the TY literature.

15 Matt 5:14–30; Mark 13:34–46; and Luke 19:11–27.

16 R. Steven Notley and Ze’ev Safrai, *Parables of the Sages. The Complete Collection* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Carta, 2011), 172, 247, 312, 335.

picture in as much as it shows the omnipresence of the possibility of punishment, and on the other hand acknowledges the diversity of human behavior, without directly demanding proper behavior from everyone.

6 The Parable about the Divorce Document Which Was Written in Advance

This parable tells a tragic story about a man who frames his wife so that he can divorce her; the *nimshal* is God who is framing Adam and blames him for bringing death to the world:

He is terrible in his doing toward the children of men (Ps 66:5).

Rabbi Joshua son of Karha said: The disasters which You bring upon us, even those blame upon us.

Come and see: When God created the world, he created death on the first day, as it is said: “and the darkness on the face of the abyss”—this is death.

And Adam was created on the sixth day, and he was blamed for being the one to bring death into the world, as it is said: “On the day that you eat of it, you will surely die” (Gen 2:17).

A parable. [This is similar] to one who wanted to divorce his wife.

When it was time to go home, he wrote a divorce document, and entered his home with the divorce document in his hand.

He started looking for blame to put on her in order to give it to her.

He told her, “Pour me a cup.”

She poured and gave him.

He said to her, “Here is the divorce paper which is given to you.”

He said to her, “Get out of the house, since you poured me a lukewarm drink.”

She said, “You knew that I would pour you a lukewarm drink, you had already brought the divorce document with you.”

Thus said Adam before God, “Lord of the World, before you created the world, the Torah was already with you, in which it is written: ‘When a man dies in the tent’ (Num 19:14), but you framed this blame on me.”

As it is said: *He is terrible in his doing toward the children of men* (Ps 66:5).¹⁷

¹⁷ Tanh Yel Vayeshev, ed. Mann, Bereshit, Yod, 5b (to Gen 2:17).

The midrash preceding the parable is a proem which starts with Genesis 2:17 (“for in the day that you eat thereof you will surely die”), connecting Adam’s death with eating from the tree. This verse is contrasted with Psalm 66:5 (“Come, and see the works of God; He is terrible in His doing toward the children of men”), where “doing” is understood as “putting a blame on someone” in the sense of making that person the cause of what happened. Both are proper Hebrew understandings of the word *alilah*.¹⁸ According to Rabbi Joshua son of Karha, says the text, Adam is blamed by God for bringing death to the world, while in fact death had already existed before Adam was created, as it is said: “and the darkness on the face of the abyss”—where darkness means death. In the *nimshal*, Adam approaches or rather reproaches God over this unfair situation, without there being a reaction from God.

Then comes the parable, which tells about a man who wanted to divorce his wife and prepared the documents for divorce. He came home and searched for an excuse to give her the document of divorce.¹⁹ The excuse came in the form of a drink that was not warm enough; and so, after getting the lukewarm drink, the man gave his wife the divorce document. The wife recognized his act for the scheme it was, and told her husband so, but there is no answer from him.²⁰

The fragment of the Yelammedenu that we have starts where the text quoted above starts, leaving us in mystery as to what preceded it, but at the end it adds a short remark specifying that whatever is told about Adam holds true also for Moses and for Joseph—and yet it fails to elaborate on these cases.²¹

6.1 *Early Rabbinic Parallels*

The proem combining the verse from Genesis with the verse from Psalms seems to be original in TY literature, but a similar theme can be found in *Pesiqta de Rab Kahana*,²² where Adam, Pharaoh, and Moses are mentioned together as those who did not complain about punishments inflicted on them by God. In

18 Jastrow, 1083.

19 Halakhically, the act of handing over the document establishes the divorce.

20 The text could be corrupt, since we do not hear of the resistance of the wife to being given the divorce document, while we do have what seems to be the husband’s reaction to such resistance. Tanh W Vayeshev (39:1) has a fuller version that includes a reaction from the wife (“She said: ‘What is my crime?’”).

21 The Tanh W parallel does elaborate on Moses and Joseph; it mourns all three biblical protagonists as being foreordained to a bad future before they even had a chance to sin.

22 *Pesiq Rab Kah 14* (Shim’u), ed. Mandelbaum 245.

all three cases the *pesiqta* tells a parable that clarifies not only that the three did not complain, but also that the infliction was rightfully inflicted; none of the parables in the *pesiqta* is the one found in the *Yelammedenu*.

As far as parabolic tropes are concerned, aspects of this parable are found in other rabbinic parables. A man's capricious desire to divorce his wife is the centre of the parable in *Sifre on Numbers*,²³ but there the crux of the story is that the man regrets his decision before the scribe arrives to write the divorce document.

Aggravating results of bad cooking skills also form a parabolic trope in rabbinic literature, although these are mostly assigned to a slave rather than a wife (*b* Sukkah 29a, about a slave pouring a drink over his master; *t* Ber 6:18, about a slave who spoils a dish). But in the halakic literature without a parabolic context, the deficient cooking skills of a woman are sufficient reason for divorce.²⁴

6.2 *The Emotionality Promoted in the Parable*

The tendency to justify God's acts even in cases where they seem unfair is the more common approach found in rabbinic literature. Specifically with regard to Adam's death, *Pesiqta de Rab Kahana* relates in the form of a poem how Adam was given a thousand years of life to procreate, and this is seen as a proof of God's mercy. The *Tanhuma*, in contrast, does not hide the unfairness. Therefore, this is yet another instance where criticism against God is legitimized, as suggested by Weiss, and as seen in the previous parable. In fact, the *Tanhuma* even goes so far as to place itself in conflict with a direct halakic decision according to which bad cooking was a sufficient reason for a divorce, as found in the *Mishnah* and the *Bavli*.²⁵

7 The Parable about the Two Wrestlers Who Were Entangled with Each Other

Rabbi Judan said: "When Judah's anger was rising, he had two hairs coming out of his heart and tearing his clothes.

When Joseph saw this, he said, 'Now Egypt will be destroyed.'"

²³ *Sifrei Num Balak* 131, ed. Horowitz 170.

²⁴ Out of a total of ca. ten sources, see *m* Git 9:10, where Beit Hillel allows for divorce when a woman spoils the dish she was cooking; so too in support the *Gemara* (*b* Git 90a).

²⁵ I thank Eric Ottenheijm for his suggestion regarding the halakic aspect.

Rabbi Shimeon son of Lakish told a parable: “[This is similar] to two wrestlers entangled with each other. When one of them realized that he was overcome, he said, ‘Now he wins over me, and I will be shamed in front of everyone.’ What did he do? He kissed the other’s hands, and the anger of the greater athlete was appeased.”

Thus when Joseph saw that the anger of Judah was rising, he became worried lest he be shamed in front of Egypt; he then said to his brothers, “I am Joseph your brother.”²⁶

Gen 45:4

The Yelammedenu passage here starts with the words of Rabbi Judan (a fourth century Amora) with regard to Judah son of Jacob approaching Joseph to try and save Benjamin from having to stay in Egypt. When Judah became angry (and apparently at this moment he was angry), says Rabbi Judan, two hairs would grow out from his chest and tear his clothes. When Joseph saw this, he became afraid that Egypt might be lost as a result of this anger so he began speaking softly to Judah.

It is at this point that the parable starts. It tells of two wrestlers who are in the middle of a fight, when one of them realizes that he is about to lose; he then kisses the hand of the winning athlete, resulting in the anger of the winning athlete subsiding. The *nimshal* tells that when Joseph saw Judah’s rage rising, he became afraid lest he be shamed in front of the Egyptians, and immediately he revealed his identity to his brothers. It is therefore Joseph who is portrayed as the weak wrestler.

In the Yelammedenu, the passage is immediately preceded by a number of other traditions about the meeting between Joseph and his brothers, emphasizing fear: the brothers were afraid and could not answer Joseph; Joseph was afraid that they would destroy Egypt; and the brothers were afraid again when Joseph revealed his true identity to them.²⁷

7.1 *Early Rabbinic Parallels*

Surprisingly little is said about the meeting between Joseph and his brothers in the extant tannaitic literature compared with what we have in the amoraic corpora.

26 Tanh Yel Vayigash, ed. Mann Bereshit, kof ayin zayin, 113b, p. 177 (to Gen. 45:4). The parable is also found in Tanh B Emor 1.

27 This parable is found also in Tanh W Vayigash 3, but there it is embedded in a different context, where the discussion concerns Judah being as strong as a lion, and Joseph as strong as a bull.

The parable found in Yelammedenu is probably influenced by a description in Genesis Rabbah.²⁸ In the amoraic narrative Judah becomes angry as a result of Joseph's threat not to allow Benjamin to return home. The anger that came over Judah made him roar like a lion; Joseph saw Judah's anger (from the sign that "he was dressed with five layers of clothes, and had a hair on his chest, and when he was angry, it tore them all [i.e., the layers of clothes]"),²⁹ and was scared lest Judah kill him, so that he too began to act with violent aggression (by kicking a pillar and reducing it to a pile of pebbles); then Judah went for his sword, but God performed a miracle to save Joseph by causing Judah's sword to stay stuck in its sheath. Through his wisdom, Judah recognized that Joseph was a pious person, and made a submissive gesture toward him, asking him to spare Benjamin. In Genesis Rabbah, therefore, Judah would be the weaker party who submits to the strong one.

7.2 *The Emotionality Promoted in the Parable*

It is very appropriate that Resh Lakish would be the one to tell a parable about two athletes, since he himself was a gladiator before he started his life of learning. This background gives a sense of reality to the parable. But on a second look we recognize that the scene is not realistic: wrestlers do not fight out of anger, and there is no need to appease any of them. Again, it is the double blending nature that is behind this discrepancy: the discourse about anger makes us recognize that the parable is based on the midrash which relates of Judah's anger.

In order to understand the full import of the story, we need to look at what Joseph came to represent in the biblical text and beyond.

In the biblical narratives there is a tension between positive perspectives on Joseph and those that give preference to Judah. In the Joseph cycle of stories, Joseph has an important role within the larger biblical narrative including the exile to Egypt, which had been promised to Abraham by God and forms the background to God's redemption of his people, his revelation in the desert, and their acceptance of God and their god.

However, Joseph's sons inherited property within the kingdom of Israel, not Judea, and are thus part of the less favored part of the Israelite "nation" within the later strata of the biblical narrative represented in the book of Chronicles,

28 Judah Theodor and Chanoch Albeck, eds., *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah: Critical Edition with Notes and Commentary* (Hebrew), 2nd rev. ed., 3 vols. (1903–1936; repr., Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1965), 90, 1161–62.

29 Hebrew: ויש א' חמשה לבושים היה לבוש ונימה היה לו בליבו, וכיון שכעס היה קורע את כולו.

which is pro-Judaic and anti-Israelite. Here, for example, the only tribes returning from the Babylonian exile are the Judeans, Levites, and some Benjaminites, while all northern tribes, including Joseph's sons, are lost.

The Joseph-Judah distinction is also known in the later Second Temple literature: in a Qumran text (4Q372 1), Joseph has become a distinct marker of the exiled people, namely those who did not return to the land.³⁰ This representation was apparently familiar to the rabbis, as will become apparent in the discussion of the amoraic material below. But in order to understand the amoraic material, we first need to look at it in relation to the biblical narrative.

The Bible relates in Genesis 44: 18–34 that when Joseph's silver chalice was found in the sack of Benjamin, and Joseph demanded that the thief stay in Egypt as his slave, Judah approached Joseph to convince him to allow Benjamin to go free with the words: "Oh, my lord, please let your servant speak a word in my lord's ears, and let not your anger burn against your servant, for you are like Pharaoh himself." Judah thus uses highly submissive language, and is very careful not to threaten the ruler's position of power in any way.

The version in the amoraic composition *Genesis Rabbah* changes the biblical narrative: Judah is now a strong person too, as both he and Joseph act angrily and aggressively, and it is only God's intervention that kept the story from being a tragedy. Judah's submissiveness toward Joseph, in this rendering, is a result of his cunningness.

The way the Yelammedenu frames the parable turns Joseph into the weak party, not even equalling Judah in strength. First, the sign of Judah's anger is not matched by a similar display of power by Joseph (as in *Genesis Rabbah*); and, secondly, Joseph is said to be worried multiple times, first for Egypt to be destroyed, and then for himself to be put to shame in front of the Egyptians, that is, in front of the rulers of the diaspora where he is living. Clearly, in this rendering Joseph is the losing wrestler who kissed the winner's hand. The Yelammedenu also re-interprets the act of kissing the hand as referring not to Judah's words of submission, but to the confession of being a brother of Judah, an act devoid of the connotations of weakness in both the biblical and amoraic narratives.

We thus find that the Yelammedenu presents a weak Joseph who fears the Egyptians and is therefore ready to make submissive gestures to his brothers. In direct contrast to the amoraic perspective, which has the biblical story as its source, the Yelammedenu works to turn Judah into an even stronger person than he is in the biblical narrative.

30 Eileen Schuller, "4Q372 1: A Text about Joseph," *RevQ* 13 (1990): 355 and 368.

The stories reflect what their protagonists came to represent, namely the Palestinian Jews and the Jews of the Diaspora, and they direct the emotionality to fit their life circumstances: in *Genesis Rabbah* Judah is turned from the weak biblical protagonist in this scene into a strong protagonist, while the *Yelammedenu* highlights the complicated situation in which the Jews of the Diaspora find themselves, as well as their need to appease and not to be shamed.

As such, we see here three instances on the cultural continuum (i.e., the Bible, the amoraic parable, and the post-amoraic parable), each with its own ideology and its own way of creating the emotional community appropriate to the period.

8 The Parable of the Cook Who Is Forbidden from Seeing a Corpse

And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to the priests, the sons of Aaron, [and say to them]" (Lev 21:1).

The Scripture speaks as follows: *The sayings of the Lord are pure sayings* (Ps 12:7), whenever God warns Israel about their sanctity and purity, "the sayings of the Lord are pure sayings," [and] "say to the priests, say to them," it is twice "saying."

To what is this similar? To a cook who comes and goes before the king. The king told him, "I command you not to see a dead person all your life, because you enter and see my face, so that you do not defile my palace." Thus the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded the priests who enter the temple not to be defiled by a dead [body].

Therefore it says: [*The Lord said to Moses: "Speak to the priests the sons of Aaron, and say to them:"] 'One shall not defile himself for the dead among his people'" (Lev 21:1).*³¹

The passage starts with a proem connecting a verse from Leviticus (*Say to the priests the sons of Aharon and say to them; Lev 21:1*) and a verse from Psalms (*The sayings of the Lord are pure sayings; Ps 12:7*). In both verses the root "to say" (*amar*) appears twice and seems redundant. This is solved in the statement that everything that God tells Israel with the aim of keeping their holiness and their purity is pronounced twice. Then comes the parable, specifying that the situation is similar to a cook serving at the house of the king. The king told this cook to stay out of the vicinity of dead bodies all his life, since he

³¹ Tanh B Emor 1.

came into and went from his palace, and ought therefore not to defile himself. For this reason God commanded the priests not to defile themselves with the dead, and therefore the verse says: “One shall not defile himself for the dead (*lenefesh*) among his people” (Lev 21:1).

8.1 *Early Rabbinic Parallels*

The proemic combination of verses is not original in the *Tanhuma*, as it can already be found in *Leviticus Rabbah* and in *Pesiqta de Rab Kahana*, which both shared the same tradition. They address the apparent redundancy of the verb “to say” in the two biblical verses, and create a midrashic expansion which connects the multiple uses of the verb with the demand for holiness.

The amoraic sources also include a parable-like narrative comparing a king of flesh and blood to God, but it is not the parable found in *Tanhuma Buber*. The parable in the amoraic material explains God’s sayings as promises that he always fulfils, unlike the promises made by the king of flesh and blood.

The amoraic material indeed offers an explanation for what the rabbis saw as a redundancy in the aforementioned verses involving the repetition of the verb “to say.” It is solved in a midrash that uses the word “holy” from the verse in Psalms to explain the context in Leviticus, namely that God uses the verb “to say” twice when he speaks about being holy, that is, pure.

In *Tanhuma Buber*, in comparison, the parable has nothing to do with the problem of multiplicity, but only relates to the midrash, namely to the fact that God instructs the people of Israel to be pure. The parable relates of the king who instructs his slave to purity of a priestly type, so that proximity to human corpses is forbidden.

8.1.1 Parables of Priests

Rabbinic literature does include a literary tradition of priestly parables, but the tradition is quite limited. There are only some eleven distinct parables, of which one is tannaitic (Mek), three are amoraic (in *b Nid* and *Lev Rab*) and the rest are of the later period, where we also find quotations from the tannaitic and amoraic parables. The parables in the later strata are mostly found in TY literature.³²

32 *Tanh Yel* 6, ed. Eisenstein 225; *Tanh W Vaera* 5, *Vayetzei* 9; *Exod Rab Bo* parasha 15; *Agg Ber* 25:1, ed. Buber 51; *Midr Zuta Lam*, version 2, 1:3, ed. Buber 74, which is found also in *Pesiq Rab* 26. Interestingly, *Tanhuma Buber* does not have any priest parables.

This scarcity is perhaps a result of priests being associated with halakic rather than narrativial issues, where halakic issues do not call for parables. Nevertheless, priests as a literary topos seem to represent a specific social group just like kings and their court, or masters and their slaves. Their characteristic as protagonists in the parables is influenced by the halakic discourse on them. What typifies the priest in the parables we have is the prohibition on visiting graveyards, their taking people's temple tax (*teruma*) and their distinction from others, as in the parable where the daughter of the priest is compared to the soul, while the regular Israelite daughter is the body (Lev Rab Wilna ed. 4:5).

In most cases, the priest in the parable stands for God. In one case, the priest stands for the heavenly realm (i.e., the angels), while the layman stands for Israel and God is likened to a doctor.³³ But the later midrashim have the priest exemplify biblical characters such as Moses and Aaron (as in our case), Jeremiah (who was a priest),³⁴ Leah (the mother of Levi, the forefather of all priests),³⁵ or Joseph.³⁶

8.2 *Emotionality*

From the numbers quoted above, we recognize that the TY literature added as many distinct priestly parables as Leviticus Rabbah did, with the latter, unlike the TY literature, being a midrash on a distinctly priestly book. The prominence of priestly parables in TY parable imagery reveals the interest that this culture had in preserving this cultural function. One way of doing this was to keep the special status of the priests in the synagogue service (being the first to read the weekly Torah portion); another way was to keep them in the cultural narrative. In contrast to their actual visibility in the synagogue service, which is non-verbal and could give rise to different attitudes (including negative ones), the verbal visibility presents the priests as important (insofar as they represent God, as in this parable and the next) and makes their image more familiar by pointing to their ethnic origin (connecting them to Leah and Jeremiah). Adding details about a character is a poetic technique for increasing familiarity, and thus—reliability.³⁷

33 Lev Rab Emor 26:5 (the same reference applies to the Vilna edition).

34 Midr Zuta Lam, version 2, 1:3, ed. Buber 74.

35 Tanh W Vayetzei 9; Midr Agg Gen Vayetzei 29:35, ed. Buber 77.

36 Otsar Midrashim, Tanh Yel 6, ed. Eisenstein 225; this is not found in the Mann edition.

37 Gavins, *Text World Theory*, 73–90.

The parable below is another example of a priest parable from the TY; here the (absent) priest-protagonist accentuates the foolishness of his slave who went to look for his master in a graveyard.

9 The Parable about the Stupid Slave of the Priest

Then came Moses and Aaron (Ex 5:1).

Rabbi Hiyya son of Abba said: It was a day of festival [*presbeusia*] of Pharaoh, and all the kings came and crowned him *Kosmokrator* above all the kings.

And when they crowned him, Moses and Aaron were standing at the gate of the Palace of Pharaoh.

His servants came to him and said to him, "Two old people are standing at the gate."

He said to them, "Do they have crowns?"

They said to him, "No."

He said to them, "They will be the last ones to come in."

[In the end] they were found standing in front of Pharaoh. He asked them, "What do you want?"

They said to him, "The Lord of the Hebrews sent me to you saying, 'Let my people go and they will worship me' (Ex 7:16)."

He said to them, "Who is the Lord that I should listen to his voice, and he did not know [that he had] to send a crown to me, but you only come to me with words!? I do not know the Lord (Ex 5:2)."

Rabbi Levi said: At that time he took out the record book of gods and started reading: "The god of Edom, the god of Moab, the god of Sidon and thus all the rest."

He said to them, "I read all my books, and the name of your god is not in them."

Rabbi Levi said: A parable; to what is this similar?

To a priest who had a stupid slave.

The priest went out of the city.

The slave went to look for him in the graveyard.

He started shouting to the people standing there, "Did you not see my master here?"

They said to him, "Is not your master a priest?"

He said to them, "Yes."

They said to him, "You fool, who sees a priest in the graveyard!?"

So said Moses and Aaron to Pharaoh, “You fool, these gods that you are speaking [about], they are dead, but the Lord is a God of truth, a living God, and King of the World.”³⁸

The passage starts with a narrative expansion on Exodus 5:1 (*Then came Moses and Aaron*), which relates how Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh’s palace to ask him to let the Hebrew slaves go. The long narrative expansion recounts that it was the festive day of the Pharaoh,³⁹ on which all kings came to crown him as the “Ruler of the World” (*Kosmokrator*).⁴⁰ Moses and Aaron did not have a crown with which to crown Pharaoh, and therefore were the last to be allowed in. After they had delivered their message, Pharaoh countered with a verse from the biblical story (“Who is the Lord that I should listen to his voice? I do not know the Lord!”), and then went on to look in his record books for the God of Moses and Aaron. Pharaoh did not find God in his books, and reported so to Moses and Aaron. This is the place where the parable begins.

The parable is about the slave of a priest, whose master left the city. The slave went to look for his master in the graveyard. He shouted to the people standing there, asking about his master. They replied by asking whether his master was a priest. After the slave confirmed this to be the case, they told him that he was a fool; who, after all, would look for a priest in an impure graveyard?

Thus, says the text, Moses and Aaron answered Pharaoh saying that he is a fool, since the gods he was talking about were dead gods, but God (of whom they spoke) is the God of truth, the God of life, and the King of the World.

In Tanhuma Warsaw, the context is the verse that reads: “Exploitation turns a wise man into a fool; and a gift destroys the understanding” (Qoh 7:7). The paragraph immediately preceding it speaks of Solomon losing his wisdom as a result of his wealth. The text quoted above seems therefore to imply that it is the wealth Pharaoh acquired during the festival that caused him to “lose his wisdom,” to look for the God of the living in the list of the dead gods, and to be reproached by Moses and Aaron.

38 Tanh W Vaera 2.

39 The word *prosbetia* (פרובטיא) is probably corrupt, and one ought rather to read *presbetia* (פרוסביטיא), following Tanh W. The original Greek word is πρεσβευσία, “ambassador,” referring to the emissaries from all over the empire who came to crown Pharaoh. See on this Alexander Kohut, ed., *Aruch Completum*, vol. 6 (Vienna: Georg Brog, 1878), 417.

40 The word has negative connotations in the Christian tradition (Eph 6:12: “For we wrestle ... against the rulers of the darkness of this world”) and in rabbinic literature (y Avod Zar 42c [chapter 3 halakah 1]; Lev Rab Metsora 18:3).

9.1 *Early Rabbinic Parallels*

The midrash about Pharaoh and his festival day, as well as the discussion about the verse from Ecclesiastes as pertaining to king Solomon, seem to be original TY literature tradition. A parable about a slave and a priest can be found in Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael.⁴¹ The context here is Jonah fleeing from God and the mission forced on him. It tells of the slave of a priest who ran away from his master saying, “I will flee between the graves, a place where my master cannot come after me.” His master responded that he had other slaves (who could follow the runaway slave into the graveyard).

While we in both cases find a narrative connecting a slave, priest, and graveyard, the stories of the Mekilta and the Tanhuma Warsaw are very different. It seems that the latter is telling an original story, albeit with elements taken from the Mekilta.

9.2 *Emotionality*

The narrative situation in this passage is unusual: There is a very elaborate (and original) description in the midrash of Pharaoh and his festival, the receiving of gifts or coronation, the disrespectful attitude toward Moses and Aaron and the futile search for God in a “record book of correspondence.” The parable, in contrast, is more traditional, influenced by a tannaitic tradition, and belongs to a semiotic context that is more familiar in rabbinic literature. It might be that the parable’s aim is to “tone down,” as it were, the story of the midrash. While the story of Pharaoh’s course of action can be understood as being critical of the pompous empirical court customs, and the absence of God from the “record book of correspondence” might be seen as alluding to the (epistolary parts) of the New Testament, the parable brings the attention back into the Jewish semiosphere with its particularities: the living but unseen God is represented by the priest in the parable. Again the parable increases the verbal visibility of priests, but so too the disappearing God again evokes a difficult situation, thus conceptualizing the diaspora as difficult.

41 Mek R Ish on Ex 12:1 (Pischa), in Teugels, *Mekhiltot*, 73–76. The translation here is from this edition.

10 Conclusions

The Tanhuma's position as rabbinic literature of a late strata, as well as its tendency to offer parables on the midrash rather than the biblical text, help to typify the emotional community of the Tanhuma.

The "faulty" character of the parables is a result of them being a double blend. But the sense of uneasiness which this "faultiness" gives draws the reader's attention to this place, and makes her both dwell on the difficulty and ponder its meaning or consequence.

In the parable of the bad slave we learned about the state of unfairness and injustice inherent in the world, and humanity's categorization as "bad" even before sin was committed—and yet, God created the human race for no apparent reason (and, in this parable, without any elaboration on the grace of God). The same unexplained unfairness is found also in the parable about the divorce document that was written an advance, where the TY is more fatalistic than earlier material.

The hardship of the diaspora is apparent in the parable about the two wrestlers entangled with each other. The TY material reworks amoraic material (which, in turn, is a reworking of the biblical narrative).

The visibility of the priesthood comes up in the next two parables. In the parable of the cook who was not allowed to be defiled by the dead, the visibility of the priesthood seems to be the main issue. But it may also be a way to teach or explain halakic matters in an environment where this was not permitted or properly institutionalized. The absence of knowledge concerning the historical circumstances prevents one from arriving at a decisive conclusion here. The second priestly parable exhibits both an image of a disappearing God and political criticism against the rich ruler who adheres to the book of dead gods.

We have found that the TY literature is more open to presenting reality in a negative tone, pointing to hardship and injustice. I attribute this to the less official and more "intimate" nature of this literature. Official institutions, such as the *beit-midrash* appears to have been, cannot afford to acknowledge unexplained situations, such as injustice, lest their authority be challenged. Social institutions that are in touch with the "real people," in contrast, have to acknowledge hardships, which in their case strengthens their authority (for being "true to life" and empathetic). This, I think, is what we see in the data found in TY parables in contrast to the other rabbinic corpora. So too the findings of Weiss find confirmation within this framework.

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