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THE PROMISE OF PROGRESSIVE JEWISH EDUCATION

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"This past year my faculty and I opened The Idea School in Tenafly, NJ, the first Jewish interdisciplinary, project-based learning (PBL) high school in America. The school is the realization of about a decade of study and practice in progressive education and what it means to bring it to a Jewish setting. While the educational model for The Idea School is the High Tech public charter schools in San Diego, CA--a network of K-12 PBL schools--our school is the first to fully integrate Jewish and General Studies, and to do so using project-based learning.

In PBL, the learning is driven by a question that's enticing to students, so that they want to explore further. Students then probe (often traditional) content through the lens of the question, using it to make meaning of the curricula. They have to create artworks, products, or events from their learning, often working collaboratively to do so; and they also get and give feedback, revise their work, and present it publicly to a wide audience. This kind of process-oriented learning becomes personally meaningful to the student, and should be connected to the real world in relevant and authentic ways.

PBL falls under the category of progressive, constructivist education, which psychologist Jerome Bruner describes as an often hands-on type of learning that compels and empowers students to construct meaning out of what they study. It's noteworthy that in progressive models of education *constructing* something out of one's learning does actually help in the process of *constructing* meaning, but the latter is what Bruner is more concerned with. He writes in one of his seminal works, *Toward a Theory of Instruction*:

> To instruct someone… is not a matter of getting him to commit results to mind. Rather, it is to teach him to participate in the process that makes possible the establishment of knowledge. We teach a subject not to produce little living libraries on that subject, but rather to get a student to think mathematically for himself, to consider matters as an historian does, to take part in the

process of knowledge-getting. Knowing is a process not a product. (1966: 72)

On the other hand, Ron Berger, one of the most well-known and admired practitioners of PBL today, places great emphasis on the actual construction of products in the course of a PBL unit, extolling the benefits to students of creating beautiful work: they learn the value of craftsmanship and feel a sense of accomplishment over what they have made. Berger emphasizes the deep, rigorous learning that takes place as a result of PBL, and in this way aligns with Bruner but without specifically noting that the effect of deep learning is a student's arriving at meaning through the learning process.

A study of PBL necessarily engenders familiarity with other constructivist pedagogies, one of the more famous being experiential learning, which many educators often tend to think of as camp-like, immersive experiences in which learning occurs. Another important constructivist pedagogy is inquiry-based learning (IBL), which possesses the same elements as PBL but is wholly driven by student interests. In their provocative work, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner ask why schools should even have curriculum? Teachers should simply build coursework around questions students generate. This approach has been adopted by Democratic Schools (of which there are quite a few in Israel) that don't require students to take any particular courses, and instead allow them to study any subjects and engage in any activities in which they're interested.[1]

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[1] Constructivist, progressive educators have been touting the benefits of meaning-making and hands-on learning for over a century (Maria Montessori, one of the movement's more well-known figures, lived 1870-1952), but the pedagogies have taken some time to take hold successfully. The High Tech schools, which have existed for the past two decades and which now have a Graduate School of Education, are one of the movement's current thought leaders, providing professional development and even a master's degree. The Stanford Graduate School of Education has also become a mecca for progressive education. In fact, one of the school's most prominent professors, Dr. Denise Pope, started the organization Challenge Success which, as its website says, pushes back on a society "that has become too focused on grades, test scores, and performance." (Pope weighed in on the recent college admissions scandal in an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, "The Right Way to Choose a College.")

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The specific constructivist pedagogies that underpin The Idea School are PBL and IBL, and I studied these closely when I visited and trained at the High Tech schools. The schools challenged me to rethink my approach to education, and particularly to consider how a constructivist model might be applied to Jewish education. One of the first things that caught my attention at the schools were the cross-disciplinary projects: the schools take two main disciplines and yoke them together in thought-provoking, often whimsical ways.

For example, a physics and art teacher collaborated to create the Staircase to Nowhere project, in which students explored the physics of building, and then built their own unique staircases that led nowhere. A collaboration between the same art teacher and a calculus teacher another year led to Calculicious, an artistic math book. Writing was a central piece of the latter project as well, as students had to record their progress on a class blog and explain their process, including decision-making and trouble-shooting, in writing pieces.

One project I became enamored of was a service learning one that inaugurated freshmen one year at High Tech High. Ninth graders studied ancient philosophers' views on philanthropy, interviewed local philanthropists--including a major donor to the school--and completed a service learning project which they photo-journaled and hung on the school walls. What better way to build a sense of community among new students in the school than with such an opening unit? And how easy it was to imagine building out the project to include Jewish texts on why we should engage in acts of *hesed* and what are the obligations in distributing charity.

The philanthropy project caught my interest because it spoke to the whole person in ways the Staircase to Nowhere and Calculicious might not. While those projects were fun and creative, and designed to get even the most reluctant math and physics students excited about what they were learning, the service learning project had even deeper aims: it was interested in the social and emotional well-being of the child, initiating her into the school culture, and enabling her to discover what it means to care about society. The learning was horizontal, laying out the landscape on which students were situated.

But it went even deeper: by having students study what ancient philosophers had to say about philanthropy, the school took students in a vertical direction as well, having them look back into the past from which our current Western culture has sprung (and marrying the project to state curriculum standards at the same time). The photo-journalism component of the project capped it well by literally having students place themselves in the picture, on the walls of their new school, and in the continuum of the historical timeline of their community and the world.

This project, so deliberately and intentionally designed to maximize impact on the student, school, community, and world, jumped off the

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Harvard's Graduate School of Education, particularly Project Zero, is also contributing to the plethora of resources now available to progressive educators, and the Buck Institute of Education provides on-site PBL professional development and year-round PBL conferences.

walls at me. Its goals seemed perfectly aligned with ours as Jewish educators.

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When The Idea School faculty and I began planning our PBL units, we decided that the aim of our first year-long curriculum, our ninth grade one, should not only be to acclimate students to high school, but to give them the independence, work habits, and ability to regulate their behavior that they need to succeed academically and in life. We also wanted students to develop civic responsibility and a refined ethical sense. In short, we were guided by a *mishnah* from *Pirkei Avot* (1:14) that found its way into our mission statement:

> אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וּכְשֶׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי. וְאִם לֹא עַכְשָׁיו, אֵימָתַי.

> If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?

To me, this *mishnah* embodies what project-based learning is all about: first, it acknowledges that living has to start with the self--taking care of one's own needs, and knowing and developing one's self to the best of his abilities, so he can become actualized. Only then can one turn to the world and offer what he has developed--his unique gifts and talents. And this demand that self-improvement begin *now* enforces the notion for PBL educators that, as educator and philosopher John Dewey noted, education isn't preparation for life; it is life itself.

That education should have immediate purpose for students is something I heard often at the High Tech schools. Their founder and CEO Larry Rosenstock tells visiting educators that if students ask their teachers why they're studying a specific topic or subject, he doesn't want the answer to be, "You'll know when you get to college" or "This will be helpful later in life." Learning should matter to the student *now*, should be relevant to the student's world *today*. When you walk through the halls and classrooms of the school, you constantly see artifacts of learning reflecting that philosophy: murals in the artistic style of an Hispanic artist, painted by two seniors who are Hispanic; digital artwork about identity completed by middle schoolers who reflected on their adolescence; math projects that had students using data to understand themselves and have empathy for others; a DNA bar-coding project that helped trackers in Africa catch poachers.

Of course, this focus on personal relevance and purpose in school must be balanced with an emphasis on preparing students for college. While the High Tech schools don't spend class time on test prep for the California state exams, the students score about 10% higher than the state average; and the schools do have a strong SAT and ACT prep program, a testament to the fact that Rosenstock believes "we prepare our kids for the tests that matter, and the SATs and ACTs matter. . . . Do I think it's a good idea for a student to do a math problem in 3 ½ seconds? No, but tough noogies on us. Unfortunately, a three-hour exam is equal to three years of work [in high school]."

Rosenstock also believes that schooling is not an "either-or" proposition; it's "both-and." Schools can be both places where learning matters to the student personally and in the real world *and* also places that prepare them for college. In fact, many of the students at the High Tech schools are the first in their families to be college-bound, and yet the schools have a 99% acceptance rate into college, with students attending anywhere from Ivy League schools to

the California state schools and universities to which many of them apply. Luna Rey, a student we befriended, recently graduated Columbia University with a degree in education and wrote about how her project-based learning education helped her thrive in college.

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What I hear often from Jewish educators about PBL is a concern that the pedagogy doesn't cover enough content, and a main purpose of Jewish schools is to provide students with broad literacy in religious texts. This is something we very much consider at The Idea School, and we're trying to strike a balance: after all, we want our students Jewishly literate as well as ready for a gap year in Israel should they decide on that path for themselves.

But if we're to benefit from a constructivist approach, and contemplate what each student needs to develop herself, then we arrive at a place where we're drawing deeply from Jewish knowledge to help students grapple with who they are, who they want to become, and what purpose they will serve in the world.

Thus, when we introduced freshmen not only to the school but to project-based learning, our driving question was, *How do we cultivate good habits?* Like High Tech High's service learning project, this PBL unit impacted students' emotional well-being by taking them through a journey of self-exploration and the world today. It also empowered them to explore the past, which of course included our own religious heritage. In Humanities, students studied ten habits of ancient civilizations, while in *Beit Midrash* [what we call our major Judaic Studies block of the day], they examined *Sefer Bamidbar* through the lens of those same habits.

Students, for example, discussed how the manna related to ancient ways to store surplus food, connecting the topic to ways we currently distribute surplus food to the needy; or contemplated gender inequity and the daughters of Zelophehad, conveying how gender today is still such a hotly contested topic. As one of the final *Beit Midrash* deliverables of the unit, each student drew an image that we transferred onto a laser-cut wooden panel. The image depicted a habit of ancient civilization that the Israelites experienced in the wilderness, and that we can still see functioning in the world today.

Like the High Tech students, ours not only learned texts of the past, but applied them to today's world, used them to create artwork, and wrote about their experience doing so. The students' wooden panels now adorn the walls of our *Beit Midrash*. Their learning is a living, enduring thing. (Click here to view a panel on *B'not* Zelophehad, which shows the women in individualized ways, a verse about their standing up for themselves, and a modern-day gavel to reflect the fact that each Jewish woman today should find her voice in order to advocate for herself).

While the first unit of the year was focused on building a sense of self--אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי-- the second was on taking the self and turning it outward--וּכְשֶׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי. The second unit asked students to consider what makes a good citizen, what levers they use to make ethical decisions, and how the Talmud informs their sense of Jewish citizenship. They debated personal morality versus civic responsibility, and discussed a wide range of ethical dilemmas in medicine, business, and general life. They were asked to share their learning with the staff of the Kaplen JCC on the Palisades, where our school is located; and they had to prepare *mishnayot* from *Pirkei Avot*, which we learned throughout the unit before prayer each morning. The final large deliverables were a Rube Goldberg machine

that reflected Talmudic and ethical thinking, and a mock trial in which students tried the Greek heroine Antigone for disobeying a law of Thebes.

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Using a constructivist approach to learning, where meaning-making is the foundation on which we build curricula, we empower students to find their own significance in Jewish texts and their heritage.

Another example: students explored heroes and villains in *Megillat Esther*, at the beginning of our third PBL unit of the year, on storytelling. After identifying who the heroes and villains were in the *Megillah's* story, students then had to research a hero or villain in the Torah and find a *midrash* that told that character's story in an entirely different way. The *Beit Midrash* was humming during that time, as students chose characters that enticed them to take another look, whether that character was the snake in the Eden story, Esau, or even Moses. The room was alive with excitement and discovery as students researched their characters and told their stories from another view. The students were interested in their learning because they had chosen what to explore, and by seeing that their tradition could understand characters from multiple angles, they learned that Judaism is flexible enough to accept a multitude of contrasting perspectives.

Our students have also become unafraid of the research process because of the type of learning they're engaged in. One of the first skills they developed in the *Beit Midrash* was the ability to use Sefaria as a research and source-sheet building tool. During the first trimester, students made their own source sheets on a habit of civilization they explored in *Sefer Bamidbar*. During the second trimester, they worked in pairs to create source sheets for the *shiur* they gave to JCC staff. Now, when a student is asked to come up with a text to deepen their Jewish learning, you can find them searching Sefaria for commentaries and ideas.

A second Judaic Studies block of time is devoted to our Inquiry *Beit Midrash*, developed as part of JEIC's HaKaveret Design program and employing inquiry-based learning in a Jewish context. The Inquiry *Beit Midrash* is a place where students learn to ask questions that interest them about their Judaism; follow a line of inquiry into Jewish texts that answer their questions; and create products of learning from what they've studied. Students are exploring *Mashiah*, natural morality, languages, holidays, conversion, and other topics they find important in Judaism. They work in small groups under a teacher-mentor's guidance and come up with artifacts of learning they want to create.

As you can tell, a big difference between a constructivist approach and more traditional schooling is that progressive educators transfer agency from themselves to the students, and this can feel scary to teachers because they might feel out of control in their classrooms. (There are plenty of norms and structures in progressive education; they just differ from traditional ones.) Jewish educators also might believe that they're somehow altering the *mesorah*, the chain of tradition that links us to our ancestors. But what I've seen in The Idea School *Beit Midrash* and Inquiry *Beit Midrash* is that our students--and teachers--are deeply involved in what anyone in any *Beit Midrash* is doing--engaging in learning *le-shem shamayim* and, by doing so, bringing themselves closer to God and bringing God more closely into the world.

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In order to advance our educational goals, The Idea School has made decisions about curriculum that not every school is prepared to make: we don't divide our Judaic Studies time into *Humash*/Torah, *Navi*/Prophets, and Talmud classes. Instead, a two-hour *Beit Midrash* block of time in the morning focuses on one major corpus of Jewish texts, either *Tanakh* or Talmud. We made those decisions based on research into deep learning and the practice at the High Tech schools of minimizing the number of classes students take each day so they can fully immerse themselves in their courses and not be mentally fatigued by constant code switching. A dual curriculum already makes a heavy cognitive demand on our students; we want to make sure they find their learning refreshing and inspiring, not draining and enervating. This is especially important for their Judaic Studies classes, where our goal is to ignite a love of Torah and Jewish living.

And that's why we added the Inquiry *Beit Midrash* twice a week in the afternoon, instead of another block of time wholly dedicated to one set of Jewish texts. We wanted to give students the chance to explore their religion in ways that were uniquely personal. As we grow the school, we'll also offer interested students the chance to learn Talmud or *Tanakh bikiyut*, at a fast pace that covers a lot of material. If we're focused on the needs of each learner, then that style and type of learning also becomes an integral part of our program.

There's much to master and ponder about progressive education and how it might be applied to Jewish settings, and there are lots of Jewish educators today doing just that: melding STEAM with Jewish studies; using the arts in the *Beit Midrash*; adapting PBL online learning systems to Jewish project-based learning; integrating civics education with Jewish texts; and making visits (often with me!) to the High Tech schools. Not everyone need adopt constructivist education wholesale, but it's certainly worth a look at some of the exciting opportunities it offers to inspire students in new ways, and to help them realize they have the power to make meaning of our rich and unique religion.

SHLOCK: AN UNLIKELY JEW NAMED JACOB

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SHYLOCK "By Jacob's staff I swear."
The Merchant of Venice, II.v.36

Shylock, the name by which the Jew in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is called by the Venetians, is not of Hebrew origin, though scholars have occasionally tried to make it so in far-fetched ways, deriving it, for example, from *Shiloh*, a name that is used only once in the Bible for a messianic person. We also find *Shiloh* in the Bible as the name of the place where the Ark of the Covenant rested, a sanctified site that the monotheistic Hebrews would not want to associate with a man. Nor is it likely that Shakespeare wanted his audience to believe that Shylock is the actual name of this Jew, assuming for the moment that in the willing suspension of disbelief one can accept that a literary character possesses a name that is not the one assigned to him in the *dramatis*

personae. Further, it is unlikely that Shakespeare meant this "Jew" as an actual Jew or even a plausible person in the real world.

Because of the popularity of Shakespeare's play, Shylock has become an English word. A "Shylock" is a usurious person, particularly a Jew. But Shakespeare has much more in mind than Jewish usury. He moves us to wonder if this Jew might be a fabricated figure, made for a literary purpose, not an actual Jew at all, arranging matters so that the possibility arises that Shylock's Hebrew name is Jacob. Let us set forth the evidence that Shylock is not the name of the Jew, that the Jew is not a Jew in the usual sense but a composite figure who is part historical Jew, part demon who could never be a Jew at any time or place, part the warped outcome of focused Venetian cruelty, and part the projection of Venetian psychology, and, perhaps, as well, an alter ego for the tormented playwright himself.

Just before we meet Shylock, Shakespeare signals to his audience to attend to the possibility that Shylock's character has not the quality of an actual person. Rather, Shylock is presented as a bizarre composite of clashing features. Early on in the play we are introduced to the idea of composite characters. The seemingly inconsequent banter between Nerissa and Portia about Portia's current suitors features the "young German, a double man: 'Very vilely in the morning when he is sober and most vilely in the afternoon when he is drunk.'" "The young baron of England" is an odd conglomerate, too: "I think he bought his doublet in Italy, his round hose in France, his bonnet in Germany, his behavior everywhere." The "Neapolitan Prince" is a centaur, composite of man and horse, making Portia fear "my lady his mother played false with a smith." The "French lord" is "every man in no man." And as Shylock enters for the next scene, a new suitor is announced, one whom Portia suspects will have "the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil."

Previously unmentioned and unexpected, Shylock breaks into Portia's wealthy dreamland wearing his contemptuous Jewish gabardine, a startling apparition with his sidelocks, beard, and predatory manners, a stock villain going on about "three thousand ducats." But Shakespeare has already suggested that Shylock must be something more. Perhaps we are to think of him, too, as part saint and part devil, another composite. He is even now in the company of Portia's essential suitor, Bassanio, a man who proves composite as well, a gracious courtier and a schemer after wealth. Bassanio needs money to impress Portia, and since his friend Antonio wants to loan him the necessary funds but is short of cash, Shylock the usurer must be consulted.

Bassanio calls the despicable figure before us "Shylock," a derogatory appellation unrecognizable as a Hebrew name and probably understood by Elizabethans as a sneering reference to the Jew's sidelocks. Shylock soon mentions "Tubal, a wealthy Hebrew of my tribe," and the scene brings forth other Hebrew names, including Shylock's deceased wife Leah, his daughter Jessica (drawn from the biblical name Yiskah), as well as the biblical characters Jacob and Daniel Shylock later mentions (II.v.43). Elizabethans would easily recognize all these Hebrew names, but nobody would recognize "Shylock," be he Jew or gentile.

Did the Elizabethans know the word *sidelocks*? The word is not in the compendious and authoritative Oxford English Dictionary. It is not in Merriam-Webster nor the American Heritage Dictionary, nor the spellchecker in Microsoft Word. Yet Jews bore carefully-groomed sidelocks in Roman Jerusalem, and they continued to do so in Shakespeare's time, along with their "gabardine" (I.iii.112). Their sidelocks must have been called something in English. They certainly

weren't called by the Hebrew *payot*, nor were they necessarily called earlocks*,* a word that is also absent from the OED. Let us for the moment take Shylock's name as a slur taken from some slangy reference to sidelocks. It doesn't really matter, though, because this is not his true name.

In fact, Shylock is most often called "the Jew," or the "cut-throat dog," as if he has no name. When he is in the company of Venetians he refers to himself by the name they have assigned him, as in his bidding farewell to his servant Launcelot ("Thy eyes shall be the judge, the difference of old Shylock and Bassanio"), but in the presence of the fellow-Jew Tubal (III.i), he is not called Shylock, nor anything else, despite his calling Tubal by name six times. Shakespeare must mean us to note Shylock's iteration of "Tubal" and the discordant failure of Tubal to name Shylock.

By using no name at all, Tubal suggests that Shylock is no single being. Rather, he is an exaggerated "everyman in no man," like Portia's description of the French Lord. Let us count the many characters woven into Shylock. This will lead to the Hebrew name he would bear if represent an actual, un-demonized Jew.

1. *Historical Jew*. Jews had been expelled from England in the late thirteenth century under the usual Jew-hating libel. When, late in the play, Tubal joins Shylock on stage to report the flight of Jessica, Salerio, the mocking party-boy who is also present, captures both the isolation of the few remnant Jews in Elizabethan England and the indignities they were forced to endure: "Here comes another of the tribe. A third cannot be matched, unless the devil himself turn Jew." The Elizabethan audience would recognize Salerio's customary hounding of these two marooned Jews, but Shakespeare gives little support for Salerio's mockery in this setting, as Shylock has just lost his daughter and, in his distress, has just uttered his famous protest of his humanity: "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?" This Shylock, both as a recognizable but rare Jew of Shakespeare's London and as an Everyman bewildered by inhumanity, easily becomes unhinged. He is a man deprived of time and place, a wandering and disoriented man as much as a wandering Jew.

Shakespeare has bothered to learn and present the nature of a Jew. Shylock observes the dietary laws, keeps a sober house, uses Hebrew words. In court before the Duke he swears by "our holy Sabaoth" to collect his bond. This word actually refers to the Heavenly Hosts (*Tzeva'ot*), and that is what Shylock might mean, or perhaps Shakespeare meant to write *Shabbatot*, the Hebrew plural for Sabbath. In any case, Hebrew is probably meant here, and the later emendation of "Sabaoth" to "Sabbath" has no reliable authority. The historical, Hebrew-using Jew had to survive amidst hostile neighbors, so he was usually scrupulous about his treatment of others. Thus his servant Launcelot, lured away by Bassanio, has much new money (courtesy of Shylock) to lavish on an entourage, but is ambivalent about leaving his old master. He must dig up good reasons that were not previously apparent. Inconsistent with the notion that Shylock is the devil, "honest Launcelot" thinks that it is the devil who tempts him to run away from Shylock, and that it is his own honesty that warns him to remain. If Shakespeare meant us to think of Shylock as simply a diabolic villain, he would not have introduced Launcelot's ambivalence. Shakespeare seems to understand that the historical Jew survived by doing everything to avoid being branded a devil.

2. *Jew as mythical demon*. Shakespeare, of course, had ample opportunity to note widespread belief in the myth of the diabolic Jew. Before his eyes was the irrational hatred of the larger-than-life,

mythical Jew. Shakespeare seems to understand the Jew was both a meek and undefended soul, and an imagined monster. Shylock, a conveniently undefended Jew, is this bogeyman. "Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation," asserts Launcelot of his master. When Shylock is the devil, he is no longer the historical Jew. As a demon, he is made to boast, moments after we meet him, and seconds after he sees the courtly Antonio, of his diabolic intentions: "I hate him for he is a Christian. . . If I can catch him once upon the hip, I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him." Even as he tells us movingly of his humanity, Shylock shifts modes into the maniacal instrument of mindless revenge. Why does he want Antonio's pound of flesh as payment of the bond Antonio has become unable to honor? At the time of asking for the bond, he notes in jest that enforcing this "merry bond," should Antonio default, would be of no value to him. But, as he shifts from historical Shylock to demoniac Shylock, he raves, "If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge." He is now Satan.

A sensible man could not remain in this Jew's house, not even the clown Launcelot. When Jessica justifies her flight by telling Launcelot that "our house is hell," she says, "I am a daughter to his blood, I am not to his manners." Of course she should run from that devil, denounce his manners, and become a Christian. Demons must be shunned. But Shylock as demon is of course only one aspect of this "Jew," only one part of Shakespeare's focus on the universal trials of being a complex human being, Jew or gentile. That Shylock is made to enact the terror of being complexly human takes his "character" outside the realm of small-minded antisemitism. Besides, Shakespeare makes it clear that in a crucial sense, Shylock is not a plausible Jew.

3. *Not a plausible Jew*. The Shylock who demands his pound of flesh cannot be a Jew, unless he is insane, which is not the case. Jews know well that the Noahide laws forbid a pound of flesh because they themselves formulated them as a standard of righteousness that non-Jews can and do formulate for themselves, for these laws were given primordially to Noah and to all mankind. Derived from Genesis 9, these laws forbid blasphemy, murder, robbery, idolatry, and sexual promiscuity, and they include one dietary law, a prohibition against eating flesh from a living animal (the law is called *ever min ha-hai*, "[Do not rip] the limb from the living"). Taken symbolically, this is a prohibition against cruelty and self-coarsening. To eat of a living animal is self-brutalizing. These six laws, on some interpretations, were to be enforced by a seventh, a commandment to form a judicial system to enforce the first six.

The Talmud forbids Jews from living where these seven Noahide laws are not in effect, where men eat from a living animal. *A fortiori*, taking a pound of living *human* flesh is more heinous, and no sane Jew could contemplate it. Nor would any Jew expect a court to enforce the very thing a proper court is created to forbid. Further, this act, so wished for by Shylock-the-Impossible, would kill Antonio (as Portia gratuitously points out in turning tables on the Jew), and to ask a court to enforce murder, yet another violation of Noahide laws, could not be in the worldview of an actual Jew. With a little poetic license, one can say that in court Shylock violates *all* the Noahide laws. The lust for flesh is a sexual perversion, especially in this play with its homoerotic suggestions in the friendship between Bassanio and Antonio, and even in the crazed antipathies between Shylock and Antonio. If Shylock calls on the Heavenly Hosts to aid him, he is committing blasphemy, for he means to rob Antonio of dignity first, then of life itself. The worship of his bond is idolatry. Any educated Jew would know this.

4. *Jew with a psyche damaged by cruelty*. If Shakespeare did not mean Shylock as a plausible Jew, perhaps he did mean him as warped by his cruel and greedy society. Since Shylock is always coherent, however unapproachable by reason, he cannot be called insane. But there is something to the claim that he would not be what he is if he were not spat upon and called a dog. Perhaps he would be a more proper man and a more proper Jew if Antonio and his friends did not make life miserable for him. Antonio "hath disgrac'd me, and hind'red me half a million, laugh'd at my losses, mock'd at my gains, scorn'd my nation, thwarted my bargains, cool'd my friends, heated mine enemies; and what's his reason? I am a Jew." It is indeed likely that the Venetians damage Shylock both in his business and his psyche. Shakespeare's plays repeatedly feature characters who suffer psychologically, becoming brutes in their lusts and rages (see Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, Goneril in *King Lear*, and Angelo in *Measure for Measure*). So insofar as Shylock is a warped character because he is a persecuted Jew, he is also warped because he is a persecuted man, as any man might be, a point built into his assertion of his common humanity. We see a shared, human vulnerability as both Shylock and Antonio have their lives threatened in the same court of justice. Antonio as the merchant of Venice is curiously indistinguishable from Shylock, the usurer of Venice, to the point that Portia, surprisingly and mysteriously (for Antonio does not wear gabardine or bear sidelocks) has to ask as she enters the Duke's court, "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" Shylock and Antonio have in common their humanity and their vulnerability under adversity, and they share this with all men.

5. *Jew as a projection from the Christian unconscious*. Men who fail to find meaning often seek gold as a compensation for emptiness. As they exchange the search for love, meaning, and salvation for the pursuit of gold, they loathe themselves, for they know that "money is the root of all evil" (1 Timothy 6:10). A person in this situation might best blame other people for greed. Antonio seeks wealth successfully, but he opens the play with his mysterious plaint, "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad." Perhaps he would best foist his disappointment onto the money-grubbing Shylock. The intelligent Shylock, otherwise known as the "cutthroat dog," even understands the Christian's psychological plight: "O father Abram, what these Christian are,/ Whose own hard dealings teaches them suspect/ The thoughts of others" (I.iii.157-159).

Portia, too, is sad, though she be steeped in riches. "By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is a-weary of this great world" (I.ii.1-2). She too might seek, and does seek with alacrity, to make the scapegoat bear her problem, which persists even after she has bonded to her true love and has rescued Antonio from his maniacal bond. She is unable to extend to Shylock her own paean to mercy. And even the suitors fail to realize that the winning choice in the lottery for Portia's hand is not gold, not silver, but lead. Bassanio, too, would have made the wrong choice if Portia had not clandestinely steered him away from the pursuit of gold and silver. They all scorn Shylock for pursuing profit, hate him for his lack of Christian civility, which includes loaning money at no interest, by which Venetian merchants undermine Shylock as they profit from ventures forbidden to Jews. Thus Christians, who wish to rid themselves of their own conflicted greed, force the vulnerable Jew to bear the psychological faults of the strong.

6. *Jew as tormented poet*. Shakespeare has assigned Shylock a verbal tic. Though he is thought a literalist, clinging to the exact words of his bond, he understands metaphor. He speaks poetically, but since he is a poet in an a strange land, he isn't quite sure whether he is making himself clear. When lending Antonio three thousand ducats he muses

that "Antonio is a good man." Bassanio understands this in a moral sense. Of course Antonio is a decent man. Shylock has to correct him: "My meaning in saying he is a good man is to have you understand me that he is sufficient." By this he means fiscally sound. Critics often cite this line as evidence of Shylock's materialism versus Bassanio's moral sensibility. But Shylock knows the range of meaning of the word "good," initially and mistakenly assuming that Bassanio will take from context the right meaning. It is Bassanio who has the leaden ear. So Shylock has to translate his metaphoric speech. Of the risks to Antonio's wealth at sea, Shylock says, "Ships are but boards, sailors but men; there be land-rats and water-rats, water-thieves and land-thieves, I mean pirates." He can't be sure that Bassanio understands what water-rats are. He often pauses to explain himself, as he does again in commanding Jessica on the eve of her flight to keep the house closed up: "By stop my house's ears, I mean my casements" (II.v.34).

What is Shakespeare's purpose in showing us a man who feels the need to interpret his own language? Just this. There is great poetry in the man, and this poetry is frustrated by circumstance, to the point that he knows he cannot be understood. As the climactic Act IV ends with the unmerciful ruination of Shylock, the play slips into Act V with poetry, music, and innocent humor. This light-hearted fare, drawn from Ovid, contrasts with the darkened spirit of Shylock, which lingers in the background. But the stories from Ovid are dark, too, despite their chiming notes. It is a lovely moonlit evening as the lovers Jessica and Lorenzo make their way back to Belmont, but all is not well. Lorenzo, insouciant of Shylock's sorrow, croons, "In such a night/ Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew,/ And with an unthrift love did run from Venice." In return, Jessica jests, "In such a night/ Did young Lorenzo swear he lov'd her well,/ Stealing her soul with many vows of faith,/ And ne'er a true one."

Suddenly, poetry and love are diminished, likened to lies, "ne'er a true one." The full range of human experience, as suggested by the multiple Shylocks, provides material for the poet but overwhelms the man, undermining all song. This, says Shakespeare, is the tragedy of being human, even in this supposed comedy. Human beings need the Noahide Laws as a minimal defense against their own nature, which both engenders and endangers poetry. Without care, Shylock and Venice suffer the same fate, as they sink into the same denial of their own cupidity and foolishly seek to project it elsewhere. They live a fatal lie, "And never a true one."

Did Elizabethans know the Noahide laws? John Selden did. An English jurist and Judaic scholar born in 1584, he summarized in Ebraeorum (1640) the past scholarship on these and other precepts of natural law, including Aquinas' famous treatise on the subject. Hugo Grotius (b. 1583), the Dutch scholar, provided a similar and contemporaneous discussion in *De Jure Belli ac Pacis,* describing the Noahide laws as "flowing from natural reason to all mankind."

In *The Merchant of Venice*, did Shakespeare really want to remind his Elizabethan audience of Noah and the Noahide laws? Likely he did, and this would explain why he included Old Gobbo's oddball gift of a "dish of doves," carried for emphasis onto the stage as a prop. Old Gobbo means to give these doves to Shylock, so that the old Jew will be gentle with his son. Launcelot, however, wants to flee Shylock and serve Bassanio, so he diverts his father's doves away from Shylock, to the good Christian. Doves, of course, carry a common association with Noah, especially in English, as in this fresco from the catacomb of an early, third century, English church:

But the Bible and the story of Noah and his dove went everywhere, for Noah was a type of Christ, a Savior of mankind, as in this mosaic from twelfth century Venice:

Noah and his dove are likely in *The Merchant of Venice* to invoke the Noahide Laws as they pertain to Shylock-The-Impossible, a man who tried to live without the benefit of having these laws in force. In the Duke's court Shylock loses the last remnant of his manhood and his fatherhood. He is no longer even a Jew, but a "likeness of a Jew," as Solanio calls him in III.i. He is a nothing, a "no man."

Now, if Shylock did live in a society that honored the Noahide Laws, what might be the imaginary man's Hebrew name? Does not Shakespeare make us wonder that it be "Jacob"? Shylock's servant Launcelot Gobbo reminds us of the Bible's role-playing Jacob, the man who fooled his blind father into giving him the elder son's blessing by disguising himself in his brother's hairy guise. Shylock likens himself to Jacob, mentioning his name six times in a speech (I.iii.73-87) that recounts the patriarch's hoodwinking of his father-in-law Laban. Laban is cheating Jacob, so Jacob seeks revenge, like Shylock. He gets Laban to let him keep as salary the rare striped and colored lambs, and then he uses craft to multiply these. Shylock himself explains: "Mark what Jacob did: . . . The skillful shepherd pill'd me certain wands,/ And in the doing of the deed of kind,/ He stuck them up before the fulsome ewes,/ Who then conceiving did in lambing time/ Fall parti-color'd lambs, and those were Jacob's." The idiomatic "pill'd me," is a way of saying peeled for *himself*, but Shylock hints that Jacob peeled for Shylock, as if Jacob were Shylock.

And indeed he probably is, in a literary way. In a series of vaudeville acts played before Shylock's house (II.ii), Shakespeare stages stunts that are inexplicable if he didn't want us to fuse Shylock with Jacob. Launcelot and his blind father, Old Gobbo, enact a version of Jacob fooling his blind father, Isaac, into believing Jacob is Esau. "Do you know me, father?" asks Launcelot, using the generic term of respect for an elderly man, masking the fact that the man is indeed his father. The father answers, "Alack sir, I am sand-blind, I know you not." "It is a wise father that knows his own child," teases Launcelot. "Well, old man, I will tell you news of your son. Give me your blessing."

This is Jacob stealing Esau's blessing in Genesis 27: "And Rebekah . . . put the skins of the kids of the goats upon his hands and upon the smooth of his neck . . . And Isaac said unto Jacob, Come near, I pray thee, that I may feel thee, my son, whether thou be my very son Esau or not . . . that my soul may bless thee." And in case we miss the allusion, Shakespeare gives it again: Says Launcelot to his blind father, "Pray you, lets have no more fooling about it, but give me your blessing." And then the father feels for the hair on the son, just as Isaac did as Jacob mimes the hairy Esau. And Old Gobbo-as-Isaac says, "Lord woshipp'd might he be, what a beard thou has got!"

Shylock's deceased wife was Leah, the very name of the wife whom Laban tricked Jacob into marrying. Shylock even swears by "Jacobs's staff" (II.v.36). What could all this mean? If Shylock were a well-integrated man and not a composite literary device, if he were not brutalized, if his energy and sobriety were valued, if his Christian neighbors allowed him other business besides usury, if he were shown a drop of Portia's "mercy," if his flair for poetry were given the free flight of a dove, he would be like the biblical Jacob, who began as a mere trickster but grew into the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. We are told that the biblical Jacob had two names, *Jacob* the ambitious, and later *Israel*, the "uplifted by God," to signify his maturation. Jacob became *tam*, "complete."

By alluding to the story of Jacob and Laban, Shakespeare suggests that Shylock had a second name, too. That name would be *Jacob*, the etymology of which stems from the Hebrew Yaacov, "the heel grabber," an appropriate moniker for the second twin who pulled himself forward in the birth canal by grabbing Esau's heel. But Shylock, reduced to usury, is never complete, never able to pull himself forward. Had he been unleashed, he might have earned Antony's eulogy of Brutus:

> His life was gentle, and the elements
> So mix'd in him that Nature might stand up
> And say to all the world, "This was a man."

But the unrealized Jacob remains as useless as Portia's poorly-amalgamated suitors.

In the world of literary criticism, looking for Shakespeare's biography in his work is usually considered gauche, but there's much to be said about why Shakespeare the poet chose to add Act V to *Merchant*. This coda is about the limits of poetry, while the play is about the powers and failures of Shylock, the usurious Jew, whose fate is already sealed at the end of Act IV. Shakespeare is the one who wants to associate problematic poetry with the problematic Jew.

And it is Shakespeare the poet who gave to Oberon in *Midsummer's Night Dream* and to Prospero in *The Tempest* the magical powers to impose imagination on reality and master it.

This is exactly what the best of poets hope to accomplish with their powers. So Shakespeare may have chosen the name Shylock, not because his audience would recognize it as an actual, if unusual, Elizabethan name, but because it mimics his own name, just as Robert Greene in the 1590's used the name "Shake-scene" to mock the upstart Shakespeare.

Shylock enters our culture as a malignant literalist, a miscreant clutching his knife, hoisting his ridiculous bond, as in this detail from J. M. W. Turner's *The Grand Canal Scene*. Malicious Shylock lurks in the lower right-hand corner of the painting, despised by the madding

crowd in magnificent Venice. And might not Turner in his portrait of Shylock have deliberately made Shylock resemble the famous portrait of Shakespeare, as seen in the Folio of 1623? Might Turner, too, have seen more in the multifaceted Shylock than meets the eye?
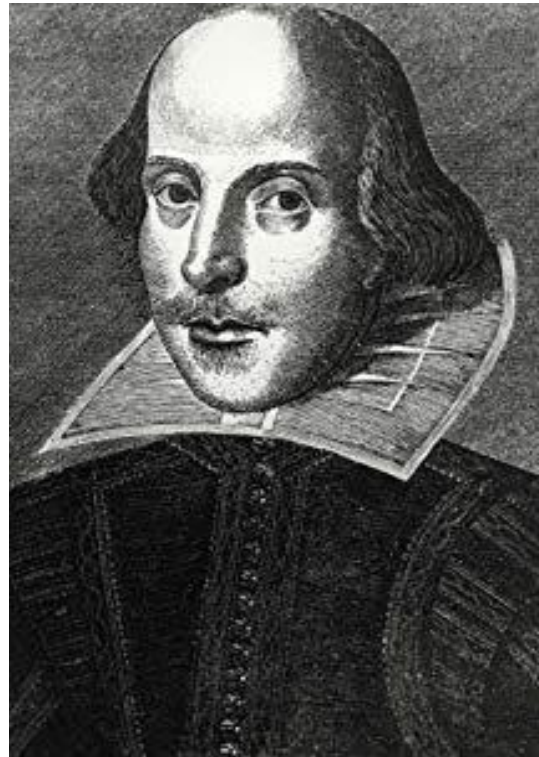
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