LEHRHAUS Over Shabbat

Vayikra

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Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing a variety of articles to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.

THE CHILD AT THIS MOMENT, THE CHILD THAT COULD BECOME: A TORAH MEDITATION IN WARTIME

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In the biblical story about Abraham's banishment of Hagar and Yishmael to the desert, Genesis 21:17 tells us:

> God heard the cry of the boy, and a messenger of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is."

We are immediately drawn to the anomalous wording, "where he is," "*ba-asher hu sham*" in the biblical Hebrew. These words seem to make no sense. If God has heard Yishmael's dying cry in the desert and the messenger reassures Hagar that God heeds that cry, any reference to Yishmael's whereabouts is superfluous. Hagar can rest assured that God will find and save her son where(ever) he is. Also, Genesis 21:15 has already told us:

> When the water was gone from the skin, [Hagar] left the child under one of the bushes.

We already know, even if with little specificity, where Yishmael is. Why would the Torah reference his whereabouts with even more ambiguity?

The early rabbis assume that Yishmael's literal location is not intended by these words. Taking the phrase *ba-asher hu sham* entirely out of

spatial context, the midrashic anthology Genesis Rabbah transforms it into a temporal and moral lesson:

> "Where he is" – Rabbi Simon said: The ministering angels leaped to condemn [Yishmael] before God. They said before God: "Master of the universe, will You produce a spring of water for a person who is destined to kill your children by thirst?"[1] God said to them: "What is he right now, righteous or wicked?" They said to God: "He is righteous." God said to them: "I judge a person only at his present time (i.e., where he is now, at this time)." Thus, God commanded Hagar, "Come, lift the boy…" (Genesis 21:18).[2]

What Yishmael and his descendants are to become later in history is irrelevant. At the time of his suffering, the boy is where he is, in a *moral* place of innocence. Here, God, as it were, establishes the ethical principle later mentioned in the Talmud (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 16b):

> Rabbi Yitzhak said: A person is judged only according to his deeds at the time of his judgment, and not according to his future deeds, as it is stated regarding Yishmael, "For God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is" (Genesis 21:17).

I have always been troubled by the seeming contradiction between this teaching and that of the Mishnah (*Sanhedrin* 8:5):

> A stubborn and rebellious son is sentenced to death on account of his ultimate end. He should die while still innocent and not die after he becomes guilty.

Based upon Deuteronomy 21:18-21, the case of the stubborn and rebellious son is treated extensively in *Sanhedrin* (chapter 8), both in the Mishnah and in the ensuing discussions of the Gemara. The Torah demands that we execute such a child because he refuses to listen to his parents and because he is a glutton and a drunkard. The Mishnah and Gemara read these biblical verses so hyperliterally that they could never actually be applied, even if they remain "on the books."[3] These stop gaps on such cruel, peremptory legal action notwithstanding, the Mishnah is still willing to entertain the theoretical possibility that this child would rightly be put to death. The Gemara explains the Mishnah's reasoning:

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[1] This is based upon a midrashic reading of Isaiah 21:13. The tradition associates the Dedanites and Arabians mentioned there with the Yishmaelites. When the Jews were on their way into Babylonian exile, the Yishmaelites deceived them into believing they were giving them water and bread, when in fact they were sending them to their deaths. See *Midrash Tanhuma*, Yitro 5.

[2] *Genesis Rabbah* 53:14.

[3] *Sanhedrin* 71a famously asserts that the case of the stubborn and rebellious son never happened and never will happen. The Torah states it solely for the purposes of exegetical exercise and the rewards ensuing from such Torah study.

> …The Torah penetrated the ultimate mindset of the stubborn and rebellious son and the inevitable results of his actions, and it is understood that he will continue on this path; in the end he will squander his father's property, and then, seeking the pleasures to which he had become accustomed but not finding them, he will go out to the crossroads and rob people.[4]

Genesis Rabbah judges a child's moral culpability based on *who he is now*, not who we presume he will become later in life. Tractate *Sanhedrin* seems to obliterate that distinction.

Anticipating my discomfort with this contradiction by eight hundred years, R. Hizkiyah ben Manoah (c.1220-c.1260, France) addresses it directly in his Torah commentary, *Hizkuni*:

> "Where he is" – Rashi explained that this refers to Yishmael's current moral and behavioral state (i.e., where he was at that moment in the desert). We could ask about the teaching in Tractate *Sanhedrin* that a stubborn and rebellious son is put to death based upon his future presumed behavior. (It implies that God should have let Yishmael die in the desert, because of his evil progeny who would later learn from him.) The response to this is that in the stubborn and rebellious son's case, his future behavior is inferred from what he already is doing in the present. In Yishmael's case, he was righteous (i.e., innocent of any evil) when he was younger, regardless of what his descendants would do to us in the future.[5]

R. Hizkiyah's resolution of the seeming contradiction is itself problematic. He is at liberty to assert that the rebellious child's current behavior is a legitimate basis for his preemptive execution because he knows that this talmudic case is purely theoretical. Yet, even as "mere theory," it posits some chilling assumptions about a person's future culpability due to his current actions as a teenager or young adult. *Teshuvah* as a part of maturation is erased entirely as a moral possibility from this model. Nonetheless, R. Hizkiyah's sense of justice is admirable. Like the ancient rabbis before him, he insists on evaluating every person – even the progenitor of a nation who maliciously harmed our people – based solely on that person's current moral state. Implicit in all these comments about God's argument with the angels is an overriding imperative of *kedushah*, holiness: we must emulate God. If this is how God treated the young Yishmael, would we not be duty bound to do the same?

Since October 7, two long-time ideas have gained new traction in some circles. The first asserts that the lives of Israeli Jewish children are forfeit since they are future enemy combatants for the Jewish

[4] *Sanhedrin* 72a.

[5] *Hizkuni* on Genesis 21:17. Translation and paraphrase is my own.

state who will all eventually be drafted into the IDF. The second, a mirror image of the first, asserts that the lives of children in Gaza are forfeit, since they are future terrorists who will all eventually be recruited by Hamas. One need not create false moral equivalences between the actions of Hamas and of Israel to recognize the dangerous immoral ground of both these assertions. Little children living in Israel and Gaza are not eventually anything in the future. They are only one thing in the present: little children, terrified and traumatized by terrorism and war. Little children under fire in Israel and Gaza may well not become anything in the future, because they risk being only one thing in the present: little children who are dead.

The rabbinic treatment of Yishmael *ba-asher hu sham*, subject to God's compassion in the present, is a damning critique of these (and other) extreme ways of thinking. As the current war and its traumas grind on, Yishmael is an excellent model for thinking about how we relate to the innocent victims of all of this violence, even as we defend ourselves against our enemies. Yishmael is the mythic founder of the Arab peoples, and for Muslims he is the progenitor of Islam. Yet, he is also Abraham's older child, and thus, as close to Isaac and us Jews as our tradition can get. It behooves us to broaden our empathy for the humanity of all children – ours and theirs – *ba-asher hu sham*, where they are now in their fragile innocence.

BULBASAUR & BISHUL: AN ADAR-FUELED, UNNECESSARILY IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF A NONSENSICAL HALAKHIC QUESTION

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I. Introduction

Two years ago, in *The Lehrhaus* symposium on *Torah u-Madda*, Moshe Kurtz wrote of his personal blending of pop culture and Torah learning. Amidst a series of examples in which pop culture can serve as a catalyst for halakhic discussion, he asked: "Does ordering a Solar Beam attack in *Pokémon* constitute *bishul be-Shabbat* (cooking on Shabbat)?"

I imagine that most readers of Kurtz's article quickly forgot this line, it being but one example among many. For myself, however, never has a question resonated so strongly; never has a hypothetical halakhic scenario piqued my curiosity so much. While other rabbis may devote their Torah learning to the *kashrut* of lab-grown meat or the impact of artificial intelligence upon Jewish observance, I found myself drawn to *Pokémon*[1] and *bishul*.

And so, in the spirit of the month of Adar—a time when Torah questions that are never otherwise taken seriously are given their moment in the sun (which, as will become clear, is a fantastic pun for this article)—I present the following analysis.

(A reader who simply wants to understand the

[1] *Pokémon* (in italics) refers to the franchise and the games themselves; Pokémon (without italics) refers to the creatures (singular or plural) within the games.

interaction of solar energy with the laws of Shabbat and some thoughts on the value of nonsensical questions in the pursuit of *Torah U-Madda*, yet has no desire to understand *Pokémon,* should read Section III and the Conclusion.)

II. What is *Pokémon* and How Does It Work?

Though I doubt anyone uninterested in *Pokémon* is still reading, a basic explanation of the underlying game mechanics is necessary for understanding the question.

First, however, I must offer a defining caveat. *Pokémon*—a media franchise more valuable than any of Mickey Mouse, *Star Wars, Harry Potter,* or Barbie—is encountered in three different mainstream formats: as a television series with associated movies, as a trading card game, and as a series of video games. Though all three formats share the same *Pokémon* world, they are defined by their differences. This article only considers the question from the perspective of the video game, and thus any references to *Pokémon* refer solely to these games.

Since its inception, the core of *Pokémon* has involved two "trainers," the term used for the human beings who control the Pokémon, engaging in a turn-based "battle." If we imagine two trainers, Reuven and Shimon, battling one another, they will begin by each sending out one of their Pokémon (as with sheep, the singular and plural noun is the same) to fight the other.

At the beginning of each turn, Reuven and Shimon will each select one of four "moves" known by their Pokémon to use against their opponent's Pokémon. Behind the scenes, the game calculates a set of complex mathematical equations to determine which Pokémon moves first. The fundamental goal of the battle is for the Pokémon to inflict enough damage on the opposing Pokémon over successive turns so that it faints. As a trainer may only have a maximum of six Pokémon at any one time with which to battle, they lose the battle when they have no more Pokémon left.

The defining gimmick of *Pokémon* is that the impact of a given move upon an opponent is governed by "type." In *Pokémon,* not only does each of the 1,025 current Pokémon possess one or two types, but moves themselves have a type. Though there are a total of 18 types in *Pokémon,* we will only consider three for the sake of simplicity: Fire, Water, and Grass.

Along the same vein as the game "Rock, Paper, Scissors," Fire is strong against Grass, Grass is strong against Water, and Water is strong against Fire. If Reuven commands his Grass-type Pokémon to execute a Grass-type move against Shimon's Water-type Pokémon, Reuven will be far better positioned to succeed than if he were to do so if Shimon was using a Fire-type Pokémon.

(The brilliance and popularity of the *Pokémon* franchise is due, in large part, to the complex permutations possible when 1,025 different Pokémon—each with strengths and weaknesses that go beyond our simplified explanation—can be of one or two different types using four different moves, each of which has its own type

that may be different to the Pokémon's type.)

The question we will consider begins with the following scenario: Imagine Reuven and Shimon are battling on Shabbat. Reuven sends out his Grass-type Pokémon, Bulbasaur (which, technically speaking, is a Grass/Poison type), and commands it to execute the Grass-type move Solar Beam against Shimon's Pokémon.

It must be noted that Moshe Kurtz's choice of Solar Beam in the question is ingenious, for Solar Beam is a (somewhat) unique move. First, unlike most Pokémon moves, which are executed in the same turn in which they are commanded, Solar Beam is a two-turn attack. Second, and more relevant for the laws of *bishul be-Shabbat,* is the way in which Solar Beam works. In the first turn, the game simply states that the Pokémon "took in sunlight" or that it "absorbed light." It is only on the second turn that the Pokémon unleashes that solar energy upon its foe.

Given that when one instructs their beast to violate Shabbat it is considered their own violation (Exodus 20:10, 23:12; *Shabbat* 51b, 153b; *M.B.* 305, 1), the question is thus: Did Bulbasaur's unleashing of solar energy constitute a violation, on Reuven's part, of the prohibition to cook on Shabbat?

To appreciate the magnitude of this question, it is necessary to understand the halakhic discussion surrounding solar heat and *bishul.*

But, before going any further, I must stress that it is hard to imagine that, were we to live in a world in which *Pokémon* was real (something my eight-year-old son was determined to convince me of this morning), it would be permitted to engage in a Pokémon battle on Shabbat. But, putting that admittedly large obstacle aside, the question can now be considered.

III. Solar Energy and Shabbat

Before understanding the halakhic concepts impacting how solar energy relates to the prohibition of *bishul,* cooking on Shabbat, it is necessary to have a broad understanding of how Halakhah considers various heat sources in their relation to the prohibition.

Most obviously, it is biblically prohibited to cook food on Shabbat using fire. (Admittedly, the term "cook" in the previous sentence is one that requires greater definition for it to make complete legal sense, but such discussions go too far beyond the purposes of this article.)

Similarly, it is biblically prohibited to cook food on Shabbat using what is termed *toldat ha-or* (or *ha-esh*), "a derivative of fire" (*Shulhan Arukh, O.H.* 318:3). To use the Mishnah's example, one cannot place a raw egg next to a hot urn in order to cook the egg (*m. Shabbat* 3:3). Though the egg is not being cooked directly by the fire, the urn's heat is derived from the fire and is thus equated to the fire itself (*Mishneh Torah, Shabbat* 9:2).

The *mishnah* quoted above, however, sparks R. Nahman in the *gemara* to note two other heat sources that a person may find themselves using

to cook food on Shabbat (*Shabbat* 39a).

The first is the sun's heat itself, which is universally agreed to be a permitted medium in which to cook food. Thus, one may leave an egg in a place where the solar heat is hot enough to cook it.

The second heat source is termed *toldat ha-hammah,* "a derivative of solar heat." Imagine if, instead of placing the egg directly in the sun's rays, a person left a metal pan that was subsequently heated by the sun, into which the person then brought the pan inside and placed the egg to be cooked by the solar-heated metal pan. In this situation, R. Nahman presents a debate between the Rabbis and Rabbi Yosei: the Rabbis prohibit this by force of rabbinic decree "due to derivatives of fire" (a statement that will be explained below), while R. Yosei permits it. Interestingly, the *Yerushalmi* unambiguously permits it (*y. Shabbat* 3:3).

Practically speaking, Halakhah follows the opinion of the Rabbis, and it is rabbinically prohibited to cook using derivatives of solar heat (*Shulhan Arukh, O.H.* 318:3). That being said, at the heart of this decree is a recognition that, just as solar heat is universally permitted, derivatives of solar heat *should* be permitted. Nonetheless, due to some undefined relationship within the *gemara* between derivatives of both fire and solar heat, derivatives of solar heat must not be used to cook.

Thus, Rashi explains that, while solar heat is permitted because it is atypical and thus can never be confused with actual cooking (*Shabbat* 39a s.v. *de-shari*), derivatives of solar heat are too similar in appearance to derivatives of fire, and an observer will all too easily (yet mistakenly) conclude that a person is cooking with a derivative of fire (s.v. *atu toldot ha-or*), hence the Rabbis' decree.

Yet, it seems logical to deduce from Rashi's comments that were a person to cook using a derivative of solar heat that could never be confused with a derivative of fire, then such a person would not be violating the decree. Nonetheless, Rambam includes—among his examples of when one violates the decree—instances that could never be confused for derivatives of fire, such as cooking with hot sand from the road (*Mishneh Torah, Shabbat* 9:3).

Rashi and Rambam, then, can be seen as representing two different schools of thought on why derivatives of solar energy are prohibited on Shabbat. According to Rashi's school of thought, the problem lies in the possibility of an observer reaching a mistaken conclusion. There thus lies the theoretical possibility of a situation which would not fall afoul of the decree. Indeed, Rabbi Solomon Luria—the famed 16th-century Polish *rosh yeshiva* of Lublin—permits cooking an egg on a hot roof, as such a manner of cooking could never be confused with a derivative of fire (*Teshuvot Maharshal,* 61). For Rambam, however, the decree is a blanket ban: no such situation can exist as all derivatives of solar heat are prohibited, regardless of how the heat source came to be.

Even though Rambam's perspective is the dominant halakhic position (*M.B.* 318, 20), rendering positions like Rabbi Luria's as predominantly intellectual curiosities, there are

other situations in which the practical Halakhah is more complicated.

Of particular interest to this article is a situation in which a person uses a magnifying glass to direct the sun's rays to cook an item. Here, Rabbi Isaac Maltzan argues that a person is merely directing the sun itself toward an object and is thus using universally permitted solar heat to cook (*Shevitat ha-Shabbat, Bishul, Be'er Rehovot* 44). The magnifying glass is not a derivative of the sun's heat; it is merely a conduit.

Similarly, in the debate surrounding the permissibility of using a solar-heated water tank, Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg cites a crucial distinction in the name of Rabbi Joseph Kapah. For R. Kapah, there is a difference between a medium that will retain heat when moved away from the sun's rays—such as hot sand—and one that will cool immediately, such as water (*Responsa Tzitz Eliezer,* VII:19). The former is a derivative of solar heat and thus prohibited, while the latter is not. In contrast, Dayyan Isaac Jacob Weiss argues that when a medium absorbs sunlight in order to convert it into energy, it is considered a derivative of solar energy (*Responsa Minhat Yitzhak,* IV:44).

IV. Bulbasaur & *Bishul*

With the above analysis in mind, we can turn to answering the *Pokémon* question. It must be acknowledged, however, that no definitive answer can be offered. But a few different approaches can be suggested.

A. Solar Beam as a Prohibited Derivative of Solar Energy

It is reasonable to assume that Solar Beam is a derivative of solar energy and thus prohibited on Shabbat. This is clear from the language and imagery of the game: the Pokémon absorbs the sunlight—rendering itself a derivative of the solar energy—and then emits it. The opposing Pokémon seems to have been clearly struck by a derivative of the original sun's rays. Indeed, Dayyan Weiss's position—that one example of a derivative of solar energy is when solar energy is absorbed and converted into another form of energy—bears a striking similarity to Solar Beam.

Further proof for this position can be gleaned from a different Pokémon move, the Electric-type Thunder. When a Pokémon uses Thunder, the clouds above the opposing Pokémon darken and a lightning bolt descends, striking the Pokémon. It is clear that the Pokémon has directed the lightning itself. In contrast, Solar Beam does not involve the sun's rays themselves—which would be a permitted example of solar heat—but the converted energy from the sun.

B. Solar Beam as Solar Energy

Despite the above, a different conceptual framework may be suggested, one that does not regard Solar Beam as violating the laws of *bishul.* Though the first turn of Solar Beam displays text that declares that the Pokémon "took in sunlight," the second turn simply states that the Pokémon "used Solar Beam!" In other words, whereas I

have assumed above that the Pokémon is converting solar energy into Solar Beam, there is no indication that anything other than the sun's rays are being unleashed.

In other words, the Pokémon is a glorified magnifying glass, a conduit for solar energy. A further proof to buttress this position is found in the move's classification: it is a Grass-type move and not a Fire-type move. The world of *Pokémon* thus aligns with Rashi's view noted above, as Solar Beam could never be confused with actual fire.

Indeed, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook's justification of why solar heat is permitted on Shabbat—because it is not the typical manner in which people cook (*Iggerot ha-Reiyah* I, p. 183)—fits well with this view: a person wishing to use a Fire-type move would never use Solar Beam; therefore, Solar Beam cannot ever be considered any form of prohibited cooking.

Another reason to assume Solar Beam is not a derivative of the sun but the sun's rays themselves comes, admittedly, from a more speculative conceptual point. Attacking moves in *Pokémon* are divided between "contact" moves and "non-contact" moves—that is, there are some moves in which the Pokémon makes physical contact with its opponent and other moves in which that does not happen.

It could be argued that a defining distinction between cooking via the sun's rays or via a derivative hinges on whether or not the item being cooked makes contact with another item. By definition, a derivative of solar heat makes contact with the item being cooked in order to transfer its heat while, when it comes to solar heat itself, the item simply basks in the sun's light. Not only does this distinction buttress the belief that a magnifying glass is not a derivative—as it simply channels the solar energy—but it also strengthens the view that Solar Beam is not a derivative of solar heat, as Solar Beam is listed as a non-contact move.

C. Solar Beam as Solar Energy—Yet a Problem Nonetheless

Rabbi Baruch Gigi, in his series on the laws of cooking on Shabbat, elaborates on a comment of Meiri which explains that the permissibility of cooking with the sun's rays is because "the sun is a natural force, and it cannot be said that the human being harnessed it for his needs and cooked with it, given that the sun works as an independent force."

While this is certainly true of our world, this is less clear in the world of *Pokémon.* Not only do Pokémon have the ability to channel the sun's rays into Solar Beam; Pokémon also possess the ability to alter the weather. Indeed, though Solar Beam is typically a two-turn move, if any Pokémon previously used the move Sunny Day, which increases the intensity of the sun, Solar Beam will activate on the same turn it is selected.

Put another way, Pokémon do possess the ability to harness the sun's heat, rendering an entire perspective on the permissibility of cooking using solar energy questionable in the world of *Pokémon.*

A different and far more substantial threat to the permissibility of Solar Beam on Shabbat lies in the

above comment of Rashi. The entire premise of Rashi's view—in contrast to Rambam—is that derivatives of solar energy can be too easily confused with fire.

While this view was mentioned to justify the permissibility of Solar Beam, it also casts doubt on it. This is because while Solar Beam is a Grass-type move, Pokémon of other types can also learn it, including 49 Fire-type Pokémon—a striking 50% of all Fire types. (This count excludes the sole Pokémon that is both a Grass- and Fire-type one, Scovillain.) This has two crucial ramifications.

The first is that it is entirely plausible that a person could witness a Fire-type Pokémon belonging to Reuven using Solar Beam and yet be unaware that it is, indeed, Solar Beam being used. Admittedly, there is a lot of context that would imply a Grass-type move is being used, but there is enough to suggest that Rashi's distinction might not hold in the world of *Pokémon.*

More importantly, however, is the fact that the entire premise of solar energy's permissibility rests on its fundamental difference to regular fire. The world of *Pokémon,* however, seems to call that into question.

A bedrock of *Pokémon* is a desire for verisimilitude. If a Pokémon possesses a move not of its own type, there must be a plausible reason—either within the lore or the Pokémon's design—as to why it can still use that move. To give but one example, while many different Pokémon can learn the Electric-type move Thunder Punch, all the Pokémon that learn it must possess hands with which to punch.[2]

With so many Fire-type Pokémon able to learn Solar Beam, there is an implicit recognition that there is a strong fire element to solar energy. It seems that the very reality of the world of *Pokémon* is different from our own—and even if one could compellingly argue that Solar Beam is only the sun's rays themselves, there is good cause to think that such a view would not apply in a world of *Pokémon.*

Conclusion

This conclusion is not about the permissibility of Solar Beam on Shabbat but about the article in which Moshe Kurtz first posed his question. After listing his examples, which included his question about Solar Beam, Kurtz stated, "Granted, these ideas may sound odd to the uninitiated ear; however, they have all managed to spark serious halakhic debates and prompted otherwise uninterested parties to engage in Torah discourse."

Despite having learned through the laws of cooking on Shabbat multiple times, I have always found myself skimming through the questions concerning solar energy. Given its seeming irrelevance to my own life—growing up in Manchester, England, the permissibility of cooking an egg in the *rain* would have been far more relevant—I never dwelled on the discussions surrounding solar energy.

[2] Fascinatingly, there is one Pokémon, Gastly, that possesses no hands yet still learns Thunder Punch—a fact that has perplexed the internet for decades.

Until now.

And so, there is at least one person who has learned more Torah than they otherwise would have thanks to a nonsensical question about a piece of pop culture they love—as my embrace of *Torah U-Madda* has been eclipsed these past few days by Torah U-Mankey.

PURIM AND THE JOKE OF JEWISH SOVEREIGNTY

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For most Jews, the story of Purim is best understood as a cautionary tale, one that reveals the dangers of a world without a Jewish State. Because the Jews of Persia live in exile, they are powerless and, therefore, vulnerable to both assimilation and genocidal anti-semitism. That they manage to survive Haman's murderous decree is nothing less than a miracle, one that is made possible only by their willingness to fight for their lives. If there is a lesson to be learned from the holiday today, it is that Jews will only be safe when they are not under anyone's boot. Some contemporary Zionists even go a step further and argue that the events of the Megillah take place after Jews were allowed to return to the Land of Israel, and therefore is to be read as a critique of those too comfortable and assimilated to make aliyah. Unsurprisingly, their fate nearly ends in doom.[1]

Zionism and the End of Exile

In large part, Zionism was invented to ensure that the events of the Megillah would never happen again, and few saw this more clearly than Theodor Herzl. With the existence of a Jewish State, he argued, the Jews of Eastern Europe would finally escape the Czar's whip and be lifted out of poverty by a thriving economy in the Land of Israel. At the same time, the Jews of Western Europe could finally achieve a sense of national pride, which had long been denied them by anti-semitism in the countries in which they lived. While Herzl didn't necessarily speak about an end to exile, his vision was unquestionably a call to end the problems that exile had imposed on the Jews, and that is why many Jews saw his call for a Jewish state in messianic terms. After hearing him at the first World Zionist Congress, Ahad Ha'am sensed that something in the Zionist project had changed. Before Herzl, Zionism had meant the slow, difficult work of encouraging Jews to move to the Land of Israel and strengthen Jewish settlement there, but now, Ahad Ha'am felt that this no longer satisfied them. Instead, they said: "What's the good of this sort of work? The days of the messiah are near at hand, and we busy ourselves with trifles!"[2]

[1] See Yonatan Grossman, *Esther: Megillat Setarim* (Jerusalem: Koren, 2013), 16-25. Also cited popularly by Ronen Shoval in "Ha-Tziyonut ha-Semuyah shel Megillat Esther," Midah.

[2] From Ahad Ha'am's 1897 essay "The Jewish State and the Jewish Problem" as cited in Arthur Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea* (Doubleday Books, 1959), 262.

Political fantasies, especially utopian ones, are powerful things which can motivate people to make profound sacrifices, but they also can never quite live up to what they promise. In Ahad Ha'am's eyes, Herzl's depiction of a Jewish State could never come to be, not because the Jews couldn't achieve a state, but because no state could live up to Herzl's grand vision. Even if millions of Jews were to make aliyah, a Jewish State would be tiny when compared to others in the region, and it would exist on the most contested land in human history. Even with a strong army and robust economy, its dependence on more powerful states would be unavoidable. It risked being "tossed about like a ball between its powerful neighbors," and to the extent it could survive, it would require "diplomatic shifts and continual truckling to the favored of fortune," a condition Jews knew all too well from their centuries of exile.[3]

Small countries like Switzerland might be able to preserve a measure of neutrality, but this would not be an option for a Jewish State, Ahad Ha'am explains, for "they [the great powers] will all still keep an eye on it, and each power will try to influence its policy in a direction favorable to itself."[4] If power is what Zionists are after, he cautioned, they will soon discover there is never quite enough of it, and they will inevitably find themselves "turning an envious and covetous eye on the armed force of our 'powerful neighbors'." For Ahad Ha'am, the trappings of sovereignty cannot guarantee much, and, in the end, they will always be lacking. A flag and an army may provide national pride and a measure of physical protection, but what the Jews would eventually discover is that life in a Jewish State can be tenuous, just as it was for their ancestors in Shushan.

The Illusions of Sovereignty

Fifty years later, as the nascent Jewish State was beginning to emerge, Ahad Ha'am's assertions were confirmed by a surprising source, Rabbi Isaac HaLevi Herzog, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel and a leading Religious Zionist. He too understood that life under Jewish sovereignty would be more similar to Persia than many Zionists had imagined. In an important work intended to ground the future Jewish State in a halachic framework, Rabbi Herzog sought to address the status of religious minorities. If Muslims or Christians were to be considered idol worshippers according to *halakhah*, neither they nor their places of worship could be allowed to remain in the Land of Israel under Jewish sovereignty. Though he marshals a number of halachic sources to argue that Muslims and Christians need not be considered idol worshippers, in a moment of rare honesty, he admits that, even if they were, Israel would still have no choice but to allow them freedom of worship and protect their places of worship:

> And now the time has come to look at the situation as it really is and examine the *halakhah* from the same realistic perspective. We have not conquered until now and could not conquer the land against the will of the United Nations

[3] Ibid., 268-269.

[4] Ibid.

> according to their agreement. There is no doubt that until the coming of our righteous messiah, we will need their protection against a sea of political enemies that surround us, whose hand will also reach into the state, and there is no doubt that they will not give us the Jewish State unless the right of minorities to tolerance is established in the constitution and in the law.[5]

Though national sovereignty is often defined as the ability of a state to have total control over what takes place within its borders, Rabbi Herzog recognized that, in the modern world, no country is absolutely sovereign, least of all Israel, a state established and recognized through mechanisms of international law. Like Ahad Ha'am before him, Rabbi Herzog saw that there was a danger in imagining Jewish sovereignty to be more than it is. Though it can offer many things, it cannot allow Jews to act however they wish, even if they believe that is what the Torah demands of them. Any assertion to the contrary was a messianic fantasy.

Exile Returns…

That said, few contemporary Zionists would rush to agree with Ahad Ha'am and Rabbi Herzog, and would instead point to the many astounding accomplishments Israel has achieved since its founding. Is it not true, they might claim, that modern-day Israel has achieved so much of Herzl's vision for a Jewish State? One regularly hears that Israel is a regional power with an economy that is the envy of the developed world. Despite being surrounded by vicious enemies, it has defeated nearly all its adversaries, showing the world that "Never Again" is not an empty slogan but an immutable fact made real by Jewish power. If anything, Israel's successes have led many Zionists to feel it would be wrong for Israel to give in to international pressure, especially when it is so obviously fueled by anti-semitism. As a sovereign nation, Israel must decide what is in its best interest and act accordingly, regardless of what other countries might think, for this is the very promise of Zionism itself: the Jews and Jews alone are to be masters of their own destiny. Unlike their ancestors, Jews who read the Megillah today can breathe a sigh of relief knowing that the dangers it describes are no longer a threat, precisely because the Jewish people finally have a Jewish State.

At least, that was until October 7th. Suddenly, the events of the Megillah look all too familiar, especially for Jews in Israel. Hamas wears the mask of Amalek and seeks to "destroy, massacre, and exterminate all the Jews, young and old, children and women."[6] If, in the past, Jews traditionally ate *oznei Haman*, also known as hamantaschen, to celebrate the defeat of their ancient enemy, today, bakeries around Israel are selling *oznei Sinwar*, expressing a similar sentiment. Even more striking has been the creeping awareness that even with a state of their own, Jews are not the masters of their own destiny, at least not in the way Zionists long imagined. Though most Israelis view eliminating

[5] Rabbi Isaac HaLevi Herzog, *Tehukah le-Yisrael al pi ha-Torah* (Mossad HaRav Kook, 1989), 18-19.

[6] Esther 3:13.

Hamas as an act of obvious self-defense, one that shouldn't need permission from others, the world sees it differently, in a way that is all too reminiscent of the Megillah. Though Haman's genocidal plans were common knowledge throughout Persia, the Jews were unable to defend themselves without King Ahashveirosh's approval, and only after a royal edict had been decreed could "the Jews of every city be permitted to assemble and fight for their lives."[7] However, even though they had been given permission to fight, they could only do so for one day. If they needed more time they would be forced to go back to the king once more, without any guarantee that he would grant it.[8]

Jewish sovereignty promised Jews that they would finally have the power to defend themselves rather than be dependent on the whims of others, and yet, the current war has proven this to be far from the case. Despite the Israeli government's protestations to the contrary, Ahad Ha'am's concerns remain true. Recent months have made clear that in the face of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran, Israel cannot survive without the assistance of larger, more powerful states like America and the political cover, funds, and armaments they provide. The Jews may be willing to fight, but there remain other, more powerful nations, to whom they must curry favor to guarantee their safety. Before October 7th, most Jews in Israel and the diaspora saw Purim as the quintessential story of what happens when the Jews are in exile, but now it seems that even Jews in Israel cannot escape it.

The Inescapability of Human Vulnerability

For many, this realization has been heartbreaking, but it has always been staring us in the face. According to Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the Megillah is meant to teach us that all of human existence is vulnerable and no amount of power can solve this problem. To be alive in this world is to be exposed to threats far beyond our control that can strike at any time. This was the lesson learned by the Jews of Persia. By all measures, their life was good. They were welcome citizens of the empire, able to achieve high levels of status and success. Yet, without any warning, it was all proven to be transient when Haman's decree proclaimed their destruction.

In the past, Jews understood the vulnerability of human existence, as it was at the heart of the Jewish experience of Exile. For Rabbi Soloveitchik, it is a "universal human condition," something even sovereign states must confront, because "Danger always hovers over human beings as individuals and as political entities."[9] It would be wrong, he explains, to think that it was limited to exile and that therefore a Jewish State could bring it to an end. The existence of Israel does not condemn the Megillah to the dustbin of history, he explains, but rather "applies to the state of Israel, its ministers, and military leaders, especially when the state is surrounded on all

[7] Esther 8:11.

[8] See Esther 9:13.

[9] Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *Divrei Hashkafa* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1992), 179-180.

sides by cruel enemies."[10] Zionism's danger is that it causes Jews to think that their vulnerability can be eliminated. By doing so, it represses a religious truth we avoid at great risk. Pride goes before the fall, and the same is true with Jewish sovereignty. Writing in the wake of the Yom Kippur War, Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that:

> "After the Six Day War, the government of Israel, and the top echelon of the military leadership in particular, lived for seven years in a mood of arrogance and forgot the principle of the vulnerability of man. That is why they thereafter found themselves in a very unpleasant situation to say the least."[11]

Fifty years later, Israel finds itself once again in a similar position. Sovereignty can provide many things, but it cannot bring an end to the vulnerability Jews know so well from centuries of exile. Assuming otherwise leads only to disaster. Though Rabbi Soloveitchik's words may sound harsh, they shouldn't surprise us, for the Megillah itself makes this message clear. While Ahashveirosh, a king whose rule extends across the world, appears all-powerful, by the end of the story he is proven to be little better than a fool. He is defied by his wives and manipulated by those around him, and when his enemies plot to assassinate him, he is not saved by his military might or his intelligence services, but by a lone Jew, who happens to stumble upon the plot and chooses to save his life.

In achieving a measure of power and victory over one's enemies, there is always a temptation to think that one's situation has changed forever. Perhaps one was vulnerable in the past, and that will never be the case again. Yet, by the Megillah's end, it is clear that Mordekhai and Esther knew better. When the Jews of Persia initially celebrate their victory over Haman on the 14th and 15th of Adar, they hold days of "feasting and merrymaking,"[12] but when Mordekhai and Esther later institutionalize the new holiday, they add an additional practice: giving gifts to the poor.[13] According to the commentary *Melo Ha-Omer*, this was done out of concern that in their euphoric celebrations, the Jews would mistakenly believe that with their victory over Haman, redemption was now at hand. As a result, charity would have been of no concern to them, because they would soon see a fulfillment of the Torah's promise that "there shall be no needy among you."[14]

However, Mordekhai and Esther "understood that the world had not yet been repaired such that the evil inclination was removed from the earth." Therefore, they commanded that gifts to the poor should be given because "*tzedekah* is so great it brings redemption closer," and because

[10] Ibid.

[11] Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah* (New York: Ketav, 2007), 10.

[12] Esther 9:17.

[13] Esther 9:22.

[14] Devarim 15:4.

"[it] weakens the power of Satan, which draws its strength from the powers of impurity."[15] Until the messiah finally arrives, all Jews live in a state of exile, and even the existence of a Jewish State cannot change that. Despite its many achievements, the needy have not disappeared, and evil persists all around us.

Who Has the Last Laugh?

This year, we have the opportunity to experience Purim in a different light, one in which we recognize that Jewish sovereignty is not all it is cracked up to be. For many Jews, this is a bitter pill to swallow, but that's in part because Zionists aren't known for their sense of humor. Here perhaps the teachings of Rabbi Nahman of Breslov can be helpful, for he reminds us that Zionism has always been something of a "joke."

For Rabbi Nahman, life in the Land of Israel before the Jews went into exile was not that different from life in Persia, for even then God was not present in the way their ancestors had known. His tale, "The Humble King," is intended to capture this by describing a land, meant to be Israel, with a mighty king, meant to be God. When a wise man comes from faraway to acquire the king's picture, he discovers two strange facts about the land. None who live there have ever seen the king, and all the inhabitants constantly make fun of their kingdom, for even though the land aspires to justice and righteousness, corruption and lies are everywhere. The wise man is initially disturbed by this, but eventually makes his way to the palace. Though he is told that he cannot see the king, who hides behind a curtain, he is allowed to speak with him. At first, he reports to the king that his land is full of falsehood, immediately angering the king's advisors, but then he appears to offer a joke, one that pleases the king. He tells him that despite what he has seen, he remains convinced that the king is righteous. Why? The reason he hides must be to distance himself from the wickedness of his kingdom!

In truth, Rabbi Nahman's tale presents a world we know too well. A Jewish State may aspire to be a "light unto the nations," but that claim will inevitably come into contradiction with the harshness of reality. Until the Messiah comes, it, along with the rest of the world, is filled with falsehood, and God appears absent even when the Jewish people most need Him. Yet, Rabbi Nahman reminds us that this need not get us down, and we may even find humor in it. He concludes his story with the verse "See Zion, the city of our gatherings (*Hazeih Tziyon*, *kiryat mo'adeinu*)," [16] and notes that when rearranged and put together, the first letter of each word spells *metzaheik*, which means to laugh.

Though the holiday of Purim is a perpetual reminder that Jewish power cannot guarantee the survival of the Jews or bring an end to exile, it also highlights the fact that exiled nations are supposed to disappear from history. Even though we can't explain it, we are still here, and for more than two thousand years, with or without a state, we have celebrated a holiday that testifies to the miracle and absurdity of our survival. This year is

[15] *Melo Ha-Omer* on Esther 9:19. *Melo Ha-Omer* was composed by Rabbi Aryeh Leib ben Moses Zuenz (1768–1833).

[16] Isaiah 33:20. The story appears in *Rabbi Nahman's Sippurei Ma'asiyot*.

no different. We just finally have an opportunity to be in on the joke.

POETS ARE PURIM JEWS: ON CONTEMPORARY POETRY'S INEXPLICABLE OBSESSION WITH THE ORDINARY

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Contemporary Poets

Has there ever been a group of agnostics so intent
upon meaning
in every car door shutting
in the cold, each turn
of a leaf as it descends.
Do they believe
more than us, dozing off
in the back of the synagogue?[1]

One might argue that contemporary poetry seldom mentions the Divine because its practitioners are largely secular. However, something more profound appears to be at play when one considers contemporary poetry's tendency to jettison the exalted or overtly religious moment and, instead, insist on profundity and wondrousness in ordinary experiences, sometimes even restoring dignity to our most debased moments. Marina Tsvetaeva famously said, "All poets are Jews."[2] I would like to suggest that many poets, Jewish and non, might be described as Purim Jews.

Despite the current global precarity, we find ourselves in the Hebrew month of Adar. Historically, Adar is a period of quintessential Jewish joy, marking the anniversary of the Jewish people's salvation from potential erasure at the hands of Haman, King Ahashverosh's highest-ranking advisor during the period of the Babylonian exile from Jerusalem—a short span in Jewish history wedged between the First and Second Temple eras. Salvation in the Purim story came, in large part, thanks to Esther, a young woman who concealed her Jewish identity to become Ahashverosh's unwilling wife, the Queen of Persia. As recorded in the Book of Esther and celebrated on the holiday of Purim each Adar, after a string of seeming coincidences propelled her into a position of royalty, Esther stepped forward, revealed her Jewish identity, and thwarted Haman's plan to annihilate the Jewish people.

"When Adar enters, we increase in joy" (*Ta'anit* 29a) is a Talmudic phrase one finds on bumper stickers in Jewish enclaves in Brooklyn throughout this month; it is what one hears in song lyrics blaring from the open windows of minivans in Williamsburg. The joy of Purim is limitless: Jewish tradition instructs celebrants to drink wine until they cannot tell the difference between

[1] Yehoshua November, "Contemporary Poets," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 91, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 151.

[2] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Poem of the End" (1924), available at https://allpoetry.com/poem/14072497-Poem-Of-The-End-by-Marina-Ivanova-Tsvetaeva.

Mordekhai, a Purim hero, and Haman, the villain (*Megillah* 7b). The exact reason for this memorable custom could serve as the subject of another essay.

But what makes Purim the most joyous Jewish holiday, and what can the holiday tell us about joy versus trauma in the Jewish literary tradition?

Interestingly, as the Lubavitcher Rebbe (R. Menahem Mendel Schneerson of blessed memory) points out, several anomalies surround the holiday and its central text, the Book of Esther (or in Hebrew, *Megillat Esther*).[3] The last work included in the sacred canon, *Megillat Esther* is the only text of the 24 Holy Writings that neglects to mention God's name—a strange dynamic considering that, traditionally, Jews sprinkle "God willing" and "Thank God" into every casual conversation. Furthermore, Purim is the only festival whose name does not derive from a Hebrew word. "Purim" is a word in Farsi, a diasporic language Jews spoke during the Babylonian exile. The word itself, Purim, means "lots," recalling the lottery Haman drew to determine the ideal day to wipe out the Jewish people (Esther 9:26).

Calling a holiday Purim is, thus, akin to calling a holiday "the Final Solution." The names of all other holidays, by contrast, recall Jewish salvation via open miracles. Similarly, the name of the Purim hero, Esther, is rooted in the word "concealment." As the Talmud states (*Hullin* 139b), centuries before her birth, Esther and the Purim story were hinted at in a biblical verse in Deuteronomy (31:18) which reads, "I will surely hide my face on that day" (in the original Hebrew: *anokhi haster astir panai ba-yom ha-hu*). This is a foretelling of Divine concealment in a period of exile. Put together, these details reflect a time when the Divine hand remained hidden, and it appeared the Jewish people would fade away, God forbid.

Ultimately, it was the resolve to hold fast to Jewish identity that turned the tide and led to salvation in the Purim saga. On a deeper level the mystics teach that, in the Purim story, the Jewish people called the world's bluff, insisting that the Divine resides beneath the skin of the ordinary or non-miraculous moment, even when appearances suggest otherwise.[4] Purim teaches that what seems random and disordered—a cosmic lottery—is really rigged with Divine intentionality or acute Divine Providence.[5] Unlike Passover's ten plagues and splitting of the sea, open miracles and Divine revelation do not characterize the Purim story, which theoretically could be chalked up to a series of coincidences. A Purim Jew knows otherwise.

Indeed, Purim tells us that hidden Divinity resides in all things, and it is a Jew's—or humanity's—job to unearth it. Hence, as Hasidic teachings point out, the Book of Esther is called the scroll or *megillah* of Esther. While "Esther" means hidden, the word *megillah* stems from the word *gilu'i*,

[3] See *Likutei Sihot* 6, at 189-191 (addressing the anomalies listed in this paragraph).

[4] See ibid., 189-195; *Likutei Sihot* 1, at 213-217.

[5] R. Menahem Mendel Schneerson, "Al Ken Kar'u La-Yamim Ha-Eleh Purim, Chapter 9," *Sefer Ha-Ma'amarim Melukat al Seder Hodshei Ha-Shanah*, Volume 3.

meaning revelation.[6] The ethos of Purim is, thus, to reveal what is concealed, to unearth the supernatural buried within the natural. Hence the custom to wear masks on Purim, reminding us that the world masks its underlying Divine unity.

As noted, Esther and the Purim story are alluded to in the verse in Deuteronomy where God proclaims, "I will hide my face on that day." A Hasidic reading of this verse emphasizes the use of the pronoun "I." Here, according to Hasidic teachings, "I" hints that the most profound Divinity—the Divine "I" or Essence, Divinity beyond names, Ineffable Divinity captured only by a pronoun—is accessible precisely where God is hidden.[7] Surprisingly and perhaps fittingly, the word "I," which connotes God's Essence in this verse, is *Anokhi*. As *Hasidut* underscores, though the *Humash* is written in the holy tongue of Hebrew, the word *Anokhi* is ancient Egyptian and not Hebrew—another indication that, in a sense, the Divine Essence, the Divine *I,* is accessed "outside" the parameters of overt holiness.[8]

Ultimately, the Purim story serves as a microcosm of creation overall. Not by coincidence, the Hebrew word for world, *olam,* derives from the word *he'elem,* meaning Divine concealment. As Lurianic Kabbalah suggests, to make space for the finite world, God hid pre-creation's Divine light (*Or Ein Sof*) via a contraction (a *Tzimtzum*).[9] This is so that humanity might then locate and draw the Divine into the empty space where the flawed and mundane human drama plays out. As the Midrash states—and *Hasidut* elaborates—this cosmic plan is called a *dirah ba-tahtonim*—the project of making a home for the Divine in the lower realm (*Tanya* 36). The metaphor of home—the place where one is free to be one's true self—specifically in the lowest realm, again suggests the deepest Divinity is found not in the spiritual Heavens, or in transcendent religious moments, or even in open miracles—but in the seemingly quotidian experience.[10]

To infuse light into a lackluster moment—moreover, to restore dignity to a debased moment—is to fulfill the world's purpose, which, naturally, provides profound joy: "There is no happiness like the resolution of doubts."[11] And surely, the greatest doubt concerns whether our small daily lives hold significance.

I would argue that perhaps poets—Jewish and non–intuit at least a secular iteration of this Hasidic/Midrashic teaching. As noted, poets are Purim Jews. Their tendency not to mention the Divine or the exalted moment, but to insist on underlying meaning and wonder in the mundane, appears to go beyond agnosticism. I think, often, poetry moves us so deeply—it provides incomparable joy—because, like the weekday holiday of Purim, it reminds us that ordinary

[6] See *Likutei Sihot* 6 at 191, 195.

[7] See *Likutei Sihot* 6 at 194; *Likutei Sihot* 9 at 193-95.

[8] See *Likutei Sihot* 3 at 892-895.

[9] See, e.g., R. Israel Sarug, *Emek Ha-Melekh*, *Sha'ar Sha'ashu'ei Ha-Melekh* 1; R. Hayyim Vital, *Etz Hayyim* 1:2.

[10] See R. Sholom DovBer Schneersohn, *Yom Tov Shel Rosh Hashanah - 5666* at 3-4.

[11] Rema, *Torat Ha-Olah* 1:6.

moments are suffused with wondrousness and purpose.

Indeed, two of my favorite poems reflect the Purim and "home in the lower realm" theology. And although the authors of both poems, Marie Howe and Sharon Olds, are not Jewish, they often write out of biblically infused upbringings. Of course, like many former religious practitioners, sadly, they experienced their share of youthful trauma in their faith-based childhood homes. Because the poems are so well known, I will just point to a few specific moments.

In Marie Howe's "What the Living Do,"[12] initially, the speaker finds herself exasperated by life's mundane tasks and items including Drano, a clogged sink with "crusty dishes [that] have piled up," dropped grocery bags, a hair brush…

Ultimately, however, the poem pivots and insists on profundity precisely within this mundane framework—not via transcendence or rising beyond the body but from within the ordinary. As Howe notes, in some of contemporary poetry's more famous lines: "But there are moments, walking, when I catch a glimpse of myself in the window glass, / say, the window of the corner video store, and I'm gripped by a cherishing so deep // for my own blowing hair, chapped face, and unbuttoned coat that I'm speechless..."

Like most contemporary poems, Howe's does not unfold in a place of worship, does not express a longing for the beyond, and, like the Purim story, does not mention God. Its setting: home, the video store, the parking lot. Yet, a sense of the sacred located precisely in the mundane pervades the poem. In fact, though it does not announce itself or stand out in the way a miracle or open Divine revelation might, this sacredness proves all the more striking because its address is a human one, this world, the lived-in environment. A person of faith might call this the presence of God; one with a secular background might call it humanistic; and both might refer to the same thing. To be reminded that our small passing moments hold acute meaning—and to feel gratitude for this—brings great joy.

In describing the home in the "lowest realm" theology, the Alter Rebbe, founder of Chabad Hasidism, notes that God wanted a home in the absolute lowest realm—in a realm relative to which there is nothing lower (*Tanya* 36). That is to say, the Divine desires to dwell not merely in our mundane lives but in our lowest moments. In spiritual life, this means holding onto faith through excruciating circumstances, bringing light into darkness. Sharon Olds's poem "I Go Back to May 1937"[13] offers at least a secular iteration of this theology. The poem's speaker heartbreakingly chronicles her young parents' pre-marriage innocence and then describes how her parents' marriage turns sour and abusive in ways the naïve couple never could have envisioned. At the end of the poem, the speaker imagines going back in time to relay a warning to her mother and father before they wed. Despite the pain that will ensue from her parents' union,

[12] Marie Howe, "What the Living Do" (1997), available at https://poets.org/poem/what-living-do.

[13] Sharon Olds, "I Go Back to May 1937" (1987), available at https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47057/i-go-back-to-may-1937.

she ultimately tells her father and mother, "Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it."

These last lines appear to serve as a kind of Ars Poetica, suggesting that to "tell about it," as Olds puts it, to render the story unflinchingly in all its lower-realm details, is often poetry's point. And further, perhaps the poem redeems or transforms the experience in some kind of way. Perhaps it asserts there is meaning and light—even here. *Hasidut* often posits that to transform—especially to transform one extreme to its opposite, such as unholy to holy, darkness to light, debased to ennobling—means to reach into and draw upon a Divine space beyond creation where all categories remain fluid and equal.[14] That is to say, to transform means to touch—and pull down into the world, to make a home for, as it were—the Divine Essence that transcends all definitions.[15] Surely, there can be no greater or more difficult form of joy.

[14] See *Likutei Sihot* 11, at 74-79. And see *Hasidut Mevo'eret Moadim*, Volume 2, at 41-42, on all categories as equal relative to the Divine Essence.

[15] See *Likutei Sihot* 6, at 22-25. And see *Hasidut Mevo'eret Moadim*, Volume 2, at 87.