

- Kobrin (Page 1)
- Sinensky (Page 4)

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**FORGING A JUDICIOUS SPECTATOR: THE  
LEGACY AND INFLUENCE OF HERMAN  
WOUK**

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**H**erman Wouk's existence as a literary figure and an Orthodox Jew defies the odds. That an unapologetic and unabashed *shomer mitzvot*<sup>1</sup> could repeatedly climb to the top of the best-seller lists in an era when Modern Orthodox Judaism was not really seen nor heard is in itself remarkable. But this is not the place for Wouk's biography or bibliography. What I will explore briefly is Wouk's influence on one emerging reader and future teacher of readers of English and *Tanakh*: me.

George Steiner writes, "A great poem, a classic novel, press in upon us; they assail and occupy the strong places of our consciousness. They exercise upon our imagination and desires, upon our ambitions and most covert dreams, a strange, bruising mastery."<sup>2</sup> Wouk's books have long been part of my experience of such mastery, and while they may not have bruised me, they have certainly left their birthmark upon me. I have been influenced, buoyed, and altered by the impressions that Wouk's books have made upon how I think, feel, and make decisions of a moral nature.

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<sup>1</sup> In his memoir and final book *Sailor and Fiddler: Reflections of a 100-Year-Old Author* (New York: Simon and Schuster 2016), Wouk notes that when the 1950's Jewish secular literati learned of his family's *kashrut*, it was clear that the Wouks "were weird mavericks, no question" (p. 54).

<sup>2</sup> *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman*. New Haven: Yale University Press 1970, p. 10.

Wouk's sharp eye for historic and situational detail, his wry sense of humor, and his understanding of the human psyche and the human condition made a deep and lasting impression on me. Literature in general has given me insights into moral issues of right and wrong, just and unjust, fair and unfair. Reading often made me identify with the characters in stories I read, a process which in turn often made me evaluate their decisions—and made me think about whether I would have made the same.

Educator Sheridan Blau notes that many readers and teachers today, despite all the turns and developments of the past century plus of educational theory, still follow the tradition of F. R. Leavis and Matthew Arnold: *i.e.*, that of seeing "literary education as a source of psychological and moral wisdom and a humanizing bulwark against the crass materialism, ethical obtuseness, and intellectual crudity of contemporary commercial and political discourse."<sup>3</sup> In my own experience as a reader, student, and teacher, I have found that the literature classroom has the potential to provide such wisdom and to serve as such a bulwark.

In the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold believed that "morals" and religious values were growing "tiresome" to his Victorian contemporaries. The Church no longer served its educative purpose; literature, however, could take up the baton. He writes (1865) that "poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life,—to the question: How to live."<sup>4</sup> Arnold's view of the morally educative function of literature held great sway over the nascent curriculum of English in the Victorian Age. English Education historian Arnold Applebee writes that Arnold thought that an education based on

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<sup>3</sup> *The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and Their Readers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann 2003, p. 201, note 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Essays in Criticism, First and Second Series*. New York: A. L. Burt Company 1865, p. 353.

literary texts "...could be the source of a new principle of authority to replace the eroding bonds of class and of religion."<sup>5</sup>

Martha C. Nussbaum (1995), perhaps the most influential of contemporary theorists in the Arnoldian tradition, defends "the literary imagination precisely because it seems... an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own."<sup>6</sup> She writes of the power of literature to create a "judicious spectator," *i.e.*, a reader whose vicarious experience of reading about those in need brings him or her to not only feel sympathy for the text's fictional characters, but to go "beyond empathy" to a place where he or she is able to evaluate a character's situation and decisions with healthy detachment. A "judicious" reader ought to assess "the meaning of those sufferings and their implications for the lives involved."<sup>7</sup> When Wouk tells of his efforts in working on what he calls "the Main Task"<sup>8</sup> – the writing of *The Winds of War* and *War and Remembrance* – his desire was to show "an honest effort to make the vanished horror live for all the world that was not there."<sup>9</sup>

Nussbaum describes a system of education wherein students learn a "relation to the world, mediated by correct facts and respectful curiosity."<sup>10</sup> In my own reading of and transactions with texts, I see myself in the character's shoes. When I read Wouk's *The City Boy* as a twelve-year old boy, I was Herbie Bookbinder. The novel is the coming-of-age tale of Herbie, an iceman's son growing up in the Bronx of 1919. Herbie's school and summer camp escapades are Wouk's paean to his own beloved Mark Twain, "the American Sholom Aleichem."<sup>11</sup> I connected with Herbie on a visceral level.

Later in life, when teaching, I tried to have students transact similarly by bringing in real-world applications of values discussed in the texts we read and by applying those values. Students wrote, for example, of physical and emotional journeys they had taken after we read a number of works of travels such as *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Remains of the Day*. The texts to which I have most deeply connected and from which I have grown morally are those about which I both think and feel something. As a teacher, I have hoped to foster similar depth of thought and feeling in my students.

The reader who feels a degree of empathy—not merely sympathy—for the characters and situations that he or she encounters in books makes for a better citizen, explains Nussbaum. She further explains that an "empathetic perspectival experience" can teach a young

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<sup>5</sup> *Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English: A History*. Urbana: NCTE 1974, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. Boston: Beacon Press 1995, p. xvi.

<sup>7</sup> *Poetic Justice*, p. 90.

<sup>8</sup> See Fiddler, p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> *War and Remembrance* (New York: Little, Brown 1978), p. 1127; also cited in *The Will to Live On* (2000), p. 83.

<sup>10</sup> *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 81.

<sup>11</sup> See Fiddler, p. 9.

reader that aggression to another can be harmful. "Empathy is not morality," Nussbaum adds, "but it can supply crucial ingredients of morality."<sup>12</sup> I vividly recall a number of moments, first as a reader and then as a teacher, in which I experienced—or sought to help others experience—vicarious moments, moments that would lead to empathy.

As I grew older, I became more ambitious in the selection of novels that I selected on my own. At age twelve, I found a dog-eared copy of Herman Wouk's 1948 novel *The City Boy* among my father's many paperbacks. Its picaresque narrative made me laugh and connect with its protagonist Herbie Bookbinder in his quest to impress his beloved, Lucille Glass. Like Herbie, I was bookish, intellectual and unathletic. By this age I already had tasted unrequited love from my own fifth-grade crush, and could vicariously feel Herbie's pain of rejection by his beloved as I read.

Through reading of Herbie's exploits and thinking his thoughts, fearing his fears, and desiring his desires, I *became* him while I was reading. I wanted to impress Lucille as much as Herbie did and felt heartbroken when "my" love was unrequited. Nussbaum explains that a novel "gets its readers involved with the characters, caring about their projects, their hopes and fears." This leads readers to realize "that the story is in certain ways their own story, showing possibilities for human life and choice that are in certain respects their own to seize, though their concrete circumstances may differ greatly."<sup>13</sup> My twelve-year-old Orthodox Jewish self connected with Herbie's more assimilated self; I felt our differences outweighed by our commonalities.

Herbie and his family are far less Orthodox in practice than Wouk himself had been growing up as a Bronx boy in the 1920's. I wondered about this authorial decision in his 1948 novel when I was a twelve-year old reader. Wouk explained years later (in a book which I also read only years later) that he "treat[s] of Jewish matters in [his] books and plays like other authors, not to persuade, but to delineate."<sup>14</sup> Reading and loving *The City Boy* made me want to tackle—and enjoy—more works by this author (I had already realized that one book I enjoyed by a specific author would often lead to more enjoyable books by the same author. It was like finding an untapped diamond mine).

That my parents knew Wouk socially made him seem more fascinating and accessible. A real best-selling author was someone just like me! He kept kosher and kept *Shabbat*! He had *davened* in my *shul*! Lore even had it that my own childhood Rabbi, Leo Jung, had been instrumental in working with Wouk on his classic *This Is My God*.

I felt a kinship to Wouk—and that I enjoyed his prose immensely didn't hurt. I thus undertook to read Wouk's 1971 novel *The Winds of War* and 1978's *War and Remembrance*. I took on both of these books in succession in seventh grade. Wouk's love of story seemed to match my own, a connection that was later articulated for me by critic Wayne Booth, who notes that the connection exists not so much between reader and book as much as between readers and

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> *The Will to Live On*, p. 5

writers. Booth calls writers the reader's "friends," explaining that they "demonstrate their friendship not only in the range and depth and intensity of the relationship they offer, not only in the promise they fulfill of being useful... but finally in the irresistible invitation they extend to live during these moments [of reading] a richer and fuller life than I could manage on my own."<sup>15</sup>

Booth adds that the idealized author is a far superior moral being to the "disorganized, flawed creature"<sup>16</sup> who is the actual writer. It is this idealized version of the writer who can—and does—successfully influence the reader. I would eventually read everything and anything by Wouk that I could find. Wouk's works were among the first volumes of "adult" literature that I read, and they engaged me in ways that the teen and children's literature in which I was steeped could not. Years later, when I actually connected with Wouk himself, I only strengthened my feelings of connection and identification with the author as a person.

I felt a deep empathy for Natalie and Aaron Jastrow, two of Wouk's fictional characters from *The Winds of War* and *War and Remembrance* who travel from the safety of the United States to war-torn Eastern Europe in the midst of the Holocaust. Wouk's weaving of fictional characters into historical reality further engaged me on the emotional level. Nussbaum desires for readers to attain "the faculties of thought and imagination that make us human and make our relationships rich human relationships, rather than relationships of mere use and manipulation."<sup>17</sup> Since Wouk placed his characters in realistic historical settings, it was that much easier for me to see them as real people and feel their pain. My own Jewish heritage and identity added to my feelings of connection.

In a 1994 letter that I wrote to Wouk, I spoke of my admiration for his work. I praised his "combination of humor, eloquence, fear of Heaven and style." I asked Wouk, one of my literary idols, to provide "any advice or stories or jokes...or anything you deem relevant and appropriate" to someone planning to teach both Judaic Studies and English literature. I was concerned that I would be spreading myself too thin.

Wouk thrillingly replied to me, encouraging me to "[g]o for it," writing that my "worry about falling between two stools is groundless, providing you give the challenge in both fields your all." I found Wouk's advice extremely encouraging, and often thought of it during my years in the classroom. I reconnected with Wouk again in the summer of 2017, when I felt that I could not pass up the chance to reconnect with one of my literary role models, who was still alive and alert (at age 102, no less). I wrote to him, summarizing my graduate work, and said, in part that

One of the formative authors of my life is, well, Herman Wouk... Your characters and your books have become my friends. As part of my research, as part of my own development as a reader and teacher, and purely to express my [appreciation], I

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<sup>15</sup> *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1988, p. 223.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Not for Profit*, p. 6.

wonder if you would be willing to meet with me at your convenience to discuss any and all of these ideas.

Wouk, terse but prompt, answered the same day. (The response time itself, not to mention the Courier font that he used, gave me extreme pleasure.) He wrote, in part:

**Good letter. I'm not up to interviews, but within limits I can answer queries...**

That my literary "friend" was once again willing to dialogue with me brought back many of my feelings of admiration for his books, his characters, and their tone and style. Indeed, that Herman Wouk had even written me the two words, "Good letter," made me swell with pride. I immediately drafted a follow-up question, asking him if when writing he had "specific educational or moral intent for [his] readers in creating specific books."<sup>18</sup> I asked him:

Did or do you want your reader to come away from *War and Remembrance* [(1978)] or even *Inside, Outside* [(1985)] or *The Lawgiver* [(2012)] with specific moral insights or ethical sense? ... I'm talking about a moral or ethical authorial intent. I'd love to read whatever you are willing to share on the topic.

Wouk responded:

**My answer to your question is "Of course!" Mark Twain once said, to this effect, "All I ever do is preach." Discerning the teachings is a teacher's job, like yours, while I go on with current work.**

I had two reactions to this response, which, incidentally, I found delightful. First, I found Wouk's words to be a validation of my own critical approach to literature: every reader ought to be reading in order to grow in his or her moral sensitivity (a term which for me rides piggy-back on Nussbaum's "empathy"). And if every reader ought to be reading that way, was it not fitting that a writer (whether Twain, Wouk, or others) write in order to make a moral point ("to preach")?

Wouk writes as much in his magnificent *The Will to Live On*.<sup>19</sup> He says that "where my fiction deals with moral or religious questions, I leave the resolutions to the reader."<sup>20</sup> My second reaction was to mull over the challenge I felt as an educator: how could I bring a student to the emotional and intellectual point where contact with a favorite author would give them the feeling I had, of feeling like a star-struck teen seeing the Beatles at Shea Stadium, screaming (perhaps not literally) with disbelief and delight? My own experience as a reader is not unique; the mass numbers of books sold by Wouk prove that it is

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<sup>18</sup> I added that I was "thinking less about the overtly didactic works like *This is My God* (1959) or *The Will to Live On* (2000) and more about [his] historical fiction."

<sup>19</sup> *The Will to Live On*, New York: Harper Collins 2000.

<sup>20</sup> P. 4.

not—or at least his power to connect to readers, to become their “friends” in the Boothian sense, is not limited to me.

Blau writes of the “intentional fallacy,” explaining that “a writer’s intention—contrary to commonplace ideas about meaning—is not reliable as a source of authority in determining the meaning of a text.”<sup>21</sup> In essence, it does not matter what Wouk’s stated or unstated intention was in writing his works; what matters is what transaction I or any other reader makes when reading. This point notwithstanding, Wouk’s succinct distinction between the author and the teacher resonates for me. While he goes on with “current work,” my role is to “discern the teachings.” But how to get my students to the same level of “judicious spectatorship” at which I found myself has never been simple.

As a teacher, I felt that novels, as opposed to other forms of literature, were the ideal vehicle to inculcate empathy. Their lengthier narratives, which allow for a deepening of character and situation, gave me as a reader (and, I thought, gave my students) more opportunities to connect emotionally and intellectually with the stories.

Indeed, Nussbaum notes that the novel may well be one of the most succinct ways of conveying and inculcating empathy.<sup>22</sup> She writes that a novel’s storytelling “gets its readers involved with the characters, caring about their projects, their hopes and fears, participating in their attempts to unravel the mysteries and perplexities of their lives.”<sup>23</sup> Nussbaum adds that, for readers, “the story is in certain ways their own story, showing possibilities for human life and choice that are in certain respects their own to seize, though their concrete circumstances may differ greatly.”<sup>24</sup>

I sought constantly to show my students that the story was “in certain ways their own story” through discussion questions and writing prompts. I was sometimes successful, and saw students making connections between the text we studied and their own lives beyond the classroom. Sometimes, however, no connection seemed to be made. It may well be that connections occurred that I did not see or that seeds were planted for connections made weeks, months or years later.

It’s an ongoing challenge: Blau makes a critical distinction between students and teachers. The latter have “a fairly sophisticated capacity to recognize and talk about the condition of our understanding.” He explains that teachers who are sophisticated readers typically “know the difference between what [they] do and don’t understand and to what degree [they] do or don’t understand. [They] are, in other words, metacognitively aware.”<sup>25</sup> My students were not able to

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<sup>21</sup>*The Literature Workshop*, p. 107.

<sup>22</sup> In his *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and in Practice* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary 2003), Barry Holtz adds that “Nussbaum provides a particularly appropriate lens to look at the goals of teaching Bible” as well, as the Bible’s goals of “ethical criticism” are very clear (118).

<sup>23</sup> *Poetic Justice*, p. 31

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *The Literature Workshop*, p. 41.

articulate their transactions at whatever level they were occurring. Despite these developmental differences, I still wanted students to begin to articulate their own sets of values, to begin becoming metacognitive.

When writing to Herman Wouk, one of the texts I cited was by Sir Philip Sidney, who notes that although “the philosopher teacheth... he teacheth those who are already taught. But the poet is the food for the tenderest stomachs: the poet is indeed the right popular philosopher”<sup>26</sup>. My intellectual stomach is unquestionably tender today thanks to my voracious reader’s appetite: Sidney is talking to—and about—me.

Wayne Booth notes that “all works *do* teach or at least try to.”<sup>27</sup> I don’t know if I saw literature as a vehicle for conveying ethics as an emergent reader; that really only developed for me when I began teaching. But the seeds were sown in the love that I felt for the power of story as a child. As an educator, I firmly believe that such an awareness is teachable at age-appropriate levels; a student’s experience of reading would be much more powerful with that awareness. I myself possessed it to a degree as an adult, but only because I had brought it to my own attention. I did not want to rely on the possibility of students discovering this for themselves. I wanted more of a sure thing.

When I finally and ecstatically began teaching both Judaic Studies and English literature, I thought that each of these curricula would inspire my students, albeit in diverse ways. But after starting to teach, I soon felt that the classroom give-and-take in my Judaic courses, which had overtly moralist agendas, had appreciably *fewer* meaningful discussions of issues of moral decision-making than did my English classes. In my Judaic Studies classes, I taught Bible, *halakha*, and classical Jewish philosophy. Students seemed to simply take notes, ask clarifying questions, take tests, and move on. There was little evidence of internalization of the overt values that we studied.

Indeed, the impact of what we studied seemed negligible: the regard in which they held the traditional texts that we studied—or in which, at least, they acted as if they held these texts—seemed to place these texts in virtual museum-like, alarmed glass cases. The texts were sacrosanct and therefore the transactions, the empathy-creation, were at a minimum.

English classes, however, had fewer issues of untouchability: students reacted strongly, whether verbally or in writing, to the choices made by Jane Eyre or Atticus Finch; indeed, they did so far more than they did to the choices made by Moses or Queen Esther. My teaching methodology and enthusiasm, to my mind, were constants, as they did not vary significantly from one course to the other. The curriculum, therefore, must have been the critical variable. If my goal was not merely to teach texts for skills and content, but rather to teach ideas and thoughtful, reflective decision-making, my English classes were the better places to foment such learning.

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<sup>26</sup> Alexander, G., ed. *Sidney’s ‘The Defence of Poesy’ and selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*. London: Penguin Books 2004, p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1988, p. 152.

T. S. Eliot cites Ben Jonson's description of literature as "the absolute mistress of manners, and nearest of kin to virtue."<sup>28</sup> This resonated: moments of literature serving as the catalyst to a discussion of manners or virtue occurred far more often in English class than in Bible class.

Booth and Nussbaum enable me to better understand the way I am as a reader and the way I want my students to become readers as well. But Wouk does the heavy lifting: the compassion that I felt for his characters was the empathy of the "judicious spectator" that I had developed as a reader (and, later, a teacher) of text. Wouk proudly proclaims himself as "a humanist to the bone," carefully noting that Webster's Dictionary still allows one who believes in the "dignity and worth of man and his capacity for self-realization through reason" to still drive "a Merkava tank of religious commitment" alongside his or her optimistic humanism.<sup>29</sup> For the past thirty-eight years, my own humanism, along with my moral sensibility and sensitivity, has been fostered by that of Wouk.

*Yehi zikhro barukh.*

## NARCISSUS AND THE NAZIR

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The legend of Narcissus is well known. As enshrined in the later Roman poet Ovid's [classic retelling](#), the young man selfishly spurns countless romantic suitors and friends. One such nymph, who had been cruelly rejected, turns heavenward and beseeches the Gods, "So may he himself love, and so may he fail to command what he loves." Narcissus, in other words, ought to be punished measure for measure: he will fall in love with himself, yet, like his suitors, never see that love reciprocated. The Goddess Nemesis overhears the nymph's just request and punishes Narcissus accordingly. The boy views his reflection in a fountain and is inexplicably drawn to his own image. Infatuated with his beauty, Narcissus is unable to tear himself away from his own reflection.

The narrator interjects, "Fool, why try to catch a fleeting image, in vain?" But it is of no avail. Narcissus cannot escape his fate. Tortured by unrequited self-love, he despairs and soon dies. By the tale's end, as the nymphs mourn his passing and prepare the funeral pyre, "there was no body. They came upon a flower, instead of his body, with white petals surrounding a yellow heart."

Strikingly, Hazal have their own version of this fable. After noting the danger of accepting vows that might go unfulfilled, the Gemara (*Nedarim* 9b and *Nazir* 4b; see also *Tosefta Nazir* 4:7) records:

אמר (רבי) שמעון הצדיק מימי לא אכלתי אשם נזיר טמא אלא אחד פעם אחת בא אדם אחד נזיר מן הדרום וראיתיו שהוא יפה עינים וטוב רואי וקווצותיו סדורות לו תלתלים

<sup>28</sup> *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1964, p. 46.

<sup>29</sup> *The Will to Live On*, pp. 86-87.

אמרתי לו בני מה ראית להשחית את שערך זה הנאה

אמר לי רועה הייתי לאבא בעירי הלכתי למלאות מים מן המעיין ונסתכלתי בבבואה שלי ופחז עלי יצרי ובקש לטורדני מן העולם אמרתי לו רשע למה אתה מתגאה בעולם שאינו שלך במי שהוא עתיד להיות רימה ותולעה העבודה שאגלהך לשמים

מיד עמדתי ונשקתיו על ראשו. אמרתי לו בני כמוך ירבו גזרי נזירות בישראל עליך הכתוב אומר איש כי יפליא לנדור נדר נזיר להזיר לה'

(Rabbi) Shimon Ha-Tzaddik said: In all my days, I never ate the guilt-offering of a ritually impure nazirite except for one occasion. One time, a particular man who was a nazirite came from the south and I saw that he had beautiful eyes and was good looking, and the fringes of his hair were arranged in curls.

I said to him: My son, what did you see that made you decide to destroy this beautiful hair of yours?

He said to me: I was a shepherd for my father in my city, and I went to draw water from the spring. I looked at my reflection in the water and my evil inclination quickly overcame me and sought to expel me from the world. I said to myself: "Wicked one! Why do you pride yourself in a world that is not yours? Why are you proud of someone who will eventually be (food in the grave) for worms and maggots? (I swear by) the Temple service that I shall shave you for the sake of Heaven."

I immediately arose and kissed him on his head. I said to him: My son, may there be more who take vows of naziriteship like you among the Jewish people. About you the verse states: "when a man or a woman shall clearly utter a vow, the vow of a nazirite, to consecrate himself to the Lord" (*Bamidbar* 6:2).

The parallels between this poignant rabbinic narrative and the Narcissus legend are as numerous as they are obvious. Both are religious stories concerning a strikingly handsome young man. Overtaken by his own beauty, which he sees in the water's reflection - remember that mirrors were rare in both time periods - the protagonist becomes self absorbed at least to the brink of death. In each instance, the story's resolution conveys an important ethical lesson.

What is more, those morals are much the same. Both fables serve as cautionary tales for the dangers of what later becomes known as narcissism. Indeed, it seems evident that [the Talmudic author was familiar with some version of the Narcissus story](#), and refashioned it to fit rabbinic sensibilities. Beyond these overt resemblances, a close study of the Talmudic tale in light of the Narcissus story unearths less obvious similarities, sharp differences, and motifs that are absent in the Greco-Roman fable. In the end, the rabbis not only repackaged a myth of modesty, but also offered a meditation on the importance of dialogue to personal growth, and how even the most sapient sage can be transformed by an encounter with a seeking student.

### Similarities

Beyond the obvious, two significant similarities stand out. Both tales not only warn against selfishness, but also embrace self-awareness as essential to overcoming temptation. In Ovid's rendition, Narcissus is tragically unaware that he is the object of his own love:

Unknowingly he desires himself, and the one who praises is himself praised, and, while he courts, is courted, so that, equally, he inflames and burns. How often he gave his lips in vain to the deceptive pool, how often, trying to embrace the neck he could see, he plunged his arms into the water, but could not catch himself within them! What he has seen he does not understand, but what he sees he is on fire for, and the same error both seduces and deceives his eyes.

In contrast, the crux of the Gemara's tale is the boy's ability to honestly label the desire as external to himself. As former Knesset member Ruth Calderon put it,

Honesty is the first step in the journey of the *nazir* from the south. The brave act of pulling himself out of the water and out of temptation to fall in love with his image is what makes such an impression on the High Priest (*A Bridge for One Night: Talmudic Tales*, pg. 73).

The importance of frank self-confrontation also emerges from a careful parsing of the Gemara's literary structure, which follows an A-B-A<sub>1</sub>-B<sub>1</sub> organizational scheme. Shimon Ha-Tzadik's encounter with the boy's beauty (A) is followed by a series of utterances. First, the priest responds to that beauty (B) by asking the nazirite ("*amarti lo*") why he has chosen to cut his hair. Next, the nazirite responds ("*amar li*") by reframing the significance of his beauty (A<sub>1</sub>), citing his conversation with his evil inclination ("*amarti lo*"). Finally, the priest responds ("*amarti lo*") by accepting the reframing (B<sub>1</sub>) and lauding the young nazirite. The structure implies that it is the shepherd's difficult conversation with his *yetzer* that shifts the conversation's direction. That is the moment when the nazirite seizes control of his destiny.

A second parallel concerns the protagonists' contrasting trajectories. In Ovid's telling, Narcissus ends up as a flower, suggesting that by spurning others and refusing to engage in introspection, he retains his beauty but forfeits his humanity. The Gemara tells the opposite story. Throughout most of it, Shimon Ha-Tzadik refers to the nazirite by the term "*beni*," likely a designation of immaturity. By the end, the sage cites the verse, "when either a man [*ish*] or a woman shall clearly utter a vow, the vow of a nazirite, to consecrate himself to the Lord." The invocation of *ish* implies that the nazirite is not a child but an adult. Put differently, whereas Narcissus experiences a devolution, the shepherd, from his mentor's perspective, undergoes an evolution. Both stories make the same point from opposite perspectives. While one who falls prey to narcissism has forfeited his humanity, he who conquers desire grows by dint of that process. Here, as in regard to the importance of self-awareness, the stories are mirror images of one another.

### Differences

In two respects, however, the lesson taught by the nazirite differs meaningfully from that of his Greco-Roman predecessor. The first concerns the problem of free choice. Although Narcissus possessed free choice throughout much of the story - after all, his punishment is nothing more than the logical consequence of the Adonis' self-absorption - there is a point of no return. Once Nemesis casts his spell, Narcissus' fate has been sealed. For the Gemara, nothing could be further from the truth. The nazirite vow represents precisely the opposite of Nemesis' decree. For the rabbis, it is axiomatic that one can "acquire a share in the World to Come in a single instant" (*Avodah Zarah* 17a). That the Gemara's protagonist is unnamed implies that this principle holds true not just for our hero, but for any penitent.

The discrepancy between the narratives' respective portrayals of the evil inclination underscores this point. The Narcissus story does not distinguish between the individual and his source of temptation; they are one and the same. For Hazal, though, here and [elsewhere](#), as dramatized by the boy's strident rebuke of his *yetzer*, the evil inclination is seen as distinct from the person. The externalization of the evil inclination points to the Gemara's first conceptual departure from its Greek counterpart. Precisely because the *yetzer* is externalized, the Gemara suggests, one is always capable of emerging victorious.

The second point of differentiation between the Narcissus myth and Talmudic tale concerns not the message's substance, but its presentation. Whereas the Greek myth is conveyed in the negative, the Gemara's is presented in the positive. As we will see, this may reflect their desire to uphold the relationship between the priest and boy as a paradigmatic teacher-student relationship.

### The Place of Dialogue

So much for the points of agreement and disagreement between the Gemara and its mythical counterpart. But there remains one outstanding element, which is less a point of disagreement than a different set of concerns. The Narcissus tale is laser-focused on the boy. While at first glance we might similarly assume that the Gemara's primary interest is with the nazirite, a closer reading demonstrates that the rabbis' true concern is with the development of the priest.

To elucidate this point, it is worth further considering the Gemara's literary structure. We observed that the narrative is built around an A-B-A<sub>1</sub>-B<sub>1</sub> organizational scheme, in which a series of "*amirot*," conversations involving the priest and shepherd, plays a pivotal role.

To this we may add that from the outset, the priest's judgment of the boy is rife with ambiguity. Given the context, we expect Shimon Ha-Tzadik to judge the shepherd unfavorably. After all, he has previously refused to partake of any nazirite's sin-offering. Presumably, following the Gemara's stated concern for unfulfilled commitments, this is because he generally disapproves of the nazirite vow. Moreover, two additional textual clues suggest that the high priest initially questions his visitor's righteousness. First, the nazirite ascends from the south, generally viewed in Talmudic literature as a place of boorishness and ignorance (see *Yerushalmi Pesakhim* 5:3, where Rabbi Yonatan refuses to teach Rabbi Simlai, explaining that he "has a tradition in [his] hands from his fathers not to teach *agadah* to Babylonians or southerners, for they are arrogant and deficient in Torah"). Second, shepherds were generally viewed with suspicion in the rabbinic period (*Bava Metzia* 5b).

The text heightens the tension by portraying the boy as a tantalizing amalgamation of biblical characters. He is first described as "*yefei einayim ve-tov ro'i*," which is taken directly from *Sefer Shmuel's* description of King David (I *Shmuel* 16:12), who was also a youthful shepherd. Indeed, the *Yerushalmi* (*Nedarim* 1:1) adds the word "*admoni*, reddish," which appears in the same verse regarding David. We then learn that the shepherd's locks are "arranged in curls," echoing the depiction of the beloved in the *Shir HaShirim* (5:11). These are both positive references.

On the other hand, the nazirite's preoccupation with his appearance recalls the rabbinic portrayal of Yosef as having played with the locks of his hair (see Rashi to *Bereishit* 37:2). Like Yosef, the boy tends to his father's sheep. The phrase "*pahaz alay yitzri*" evokes Reuven,

whose father Yaakov criticised him as “*pahaz ka-mayim*, hasty as water” (*Bereishit* 49:4). Finally, the boy closely resembles Avshalom, King David’s rebellious son. Avshalom, who was hanged by his hair (II *Shmuel* 18:9), was similarly led to his demise by way of self-affection (see *Mishnah Sotah* 1:8-9). Reinforcing this comparison, the rabbis depicted Avshalom as a nazirite (*Sotah* 4b). All these parallels, which are described through the priests’ lenses, suggests that a swirl of judgments clouded the priest’s mind as he first encountered the young man.

The priest’s first words to the young man encapsulate this tension. He invokes the word “*beni*, my son,” a term of endearment, while simultaneously questioning the boy’s decision to be shorn of his handsome hair. As the dialogue begins, a cloud of suspicion hovers over the boy. Instead of embracing the voluntary nazirite with open arms, as we might have expected, Shimon Hatzadik is a skeptic.

Through the *amirot*, though, the priest arrives at a new understanding. The apparently sinful nazirite turns out to be a hero. As a result of the conversation, moreover, it is not the boy who grows, but the priest. Indeed, the motif of appearance versus reality pervades both the Narcissus and Talmudic stories. Pools and their reflections demonstrate that not all is as it seems, and not everyone sees clearly. Narcissus entirely misjudges his situation, while the nazirite is closely attuned to his own. The priest, like Narcissus, initially misunderstands the nazirite’s intentions, but eventually becomes convinced of his righteousness and religious maturity. The boy, it turns out, is more David than Avshalom. He is an “*ish*,” a grown man.

In framing the story around a dialogue, and presenting the narrative through the high priest’s eyes, the Gemara recasts the Narcissus story, addressing not just the pitfalls of narcissism but especially the importance of dialogue, both internal and external. Narcissus, having rebuffed suitors and friends alike, finds himself isolated. Moreover, given the Gemara’s previous concerns regarding unfulfilled vows, Shimon Ha-Tzadik had every reason to be skeptical of the boy standing before him. Dialogue is key to both transformations.

Accordingly, while we initially assume that this is a rabbinic tale of how a seasoned mentor took a boy under his wings, the refrain “*amarti lo*” suggests an alternative interpretation. A willingness to engage in conversation is crucial to personal growth. It is only by confronting his *yetzer* that the shepherd defeats temptation, and it is only by speaking to the boy that the priest reevaluates his initial impressions. Through this encounter, roles are reversed. Instead of the older sage teaching the young mentee, it is the boy who demonstrates that by engaging in dialogue with an open mind, the sage will see clearly that a righteous nazirite can be found.

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