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Digital Discourse and the Democratization of Jewish Learning

Zev Eleff

In the early 1800s, Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin was asked about forgetfulness and Torah study. To some, the question was a nonstarter. After all, the Talmud's position on this matter was clear: it's forbidden. Students of Torah must be diligent. Constant review is necessary to keep learning fresh, to improve recall of each chapter and verse of the Torah, the Talmud, and its codes. But Rabbi Hayyim disagreed. The strident warnings were pertinent for "earlier generations," he explained, "because they studied orally." In the age of printing, however, "this does not refer to us."[1]

No doubt, Rabbi Hayyim did not excuse complacency or willful disremembering of Torah learning. He nonetheless recognized that newly available resources had irrevocably changed the character of Torah study. To many, his response was surely sensible. It revealed an awareness of stereotype technology that had improved and lowered the cost of printing in the eighteenth century. The result was a proliferation of print culture in that period and a shift from rote memorization to intellectual chance-taking along new creative pathways.[2]

Yet, Rabbi Hayyim was not alone in taking up this matter. Others addressed it in the decades surrounding the turn of the nineteenth century. Despite the changed Torah terrain, some rabbinic scholars held tightly to the Talmud's admonition. Others agreed with the sage of Volozhin, but for different reasons.

The whole issue throws light on the purpose of Jewish learning.[3] What is more, the implications of this debate are particularly pertinent for the present moment. In this Digital Age, so much is accessible, and in a variety of translations. Like our forebears two centuries ago, we ought to acknowledge and assess the opportunities and challenges of our own time. With sincerity and sensitivity, we must start thinking more probingly about the way we engage Torah texts and our goals for traditional study.

An Unchanged Torah Experience

Not everyone was ready for a reevaluation. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi disagreed with the founder of the famed Volozhin yeshiva. The former cited a well-known statement in *Avot* attributed to the second century scholar, Rabbi Meir, who declared that someone "who forgets even a single word of his learning, the Torah considers it as if he has forfeited his life" (*Avot* 3:8).

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[1] Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner, *Nefesh Ha-Hayyim*, ed. Yissachar Dov Rubin (Bnei Brak, 1989), 422.

[2] See Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 141-44.

[3] On this see, Zev Eleff and Yitzhak Ehrenberg, "Be-Inyan Shekhehah shel Torah bi-Zman ha-Zeh," *Beit Yitzhak* 45 (2014): 478-81.

The founder of Chabad might also have listed other harsh rebukes offered by the sages of the Talmud. For instance, Rabbi Eliezer cautioned that forgetfulness will prolong the exile (*Yoma* 38b). Reish Lakish suggested that "anyone who forgets one iota of learning commits a sin" (*Menahot* 99b). Other sources in the Talmud—for example, *Kiddushin* 33b, *Sanhedrin* 26b, and *Temurah* 16a—reveal a kind of horror-stricken fearfulness of Torah forgetfulness.

Owing to this, Rabbi Shneur Zalman described such forgetfulness as an immutable biblical prohibition.[4] To him, "it is of no help that at present the Oral Torah is written down and that everything forgotten can be verified." The sin is tallied once a student slips, forgets "just for an instant." The only remedy is to halt all other activities and return to that forgotten lesson. Rabbi Shneur Zalman did not see a difference between someone who could in his time consult a library full of books and a pupil in Rabbi Meir's era who upon forgetting "could return and ask a teacher to figure out what was forgotten."

Rabbi Shneur Zalman argued that Torah study was an experience, an exercise in assiduousness. Mnemonics and other tricks to commit the details of Jewish jurisprudence were the Torah scholar's tricks of the trade. Printed texts, on the other hand, was the stuff of bush league, the yeshiva equivalent of creatine shakes and PEDs. It compromised the integrity of the individual learning experience.

A Paradigm Shift for Individual Torah Study

Rabbi Shlomo Kluger of Galicia sided with Rabbi Hayyim. Much like many (but not all) fifteenth and sixteenth century rabbis who believed that Johannes Gutenberg was Heaven-sent, Rabbi Kluger interpreted more recent print-related innovations like stereotype plates and cheaper forms of bookbinding as a reason for reconsideration. He therefore suggested a changed regime in the halls of the yeshiva aristocracy.

In the past, scholars envied individuals endowed with prodigious minds, able to recall every morsel of learning. Memory bested creativity. Long ago, the sages likened this person to Mount Sinai, the site of Torah revelation (*Horayot* 14a). The adage helped place Rabbi Yosef ben Hiyya at the head of the academy in Pumbedita. His Sinai-like recall elevated Rabbi Yosef above Rabbah bar Nahmani, known as a master *oker harim* for his creativity and analytical skills to "overturn mountains."

Things were different, perhaps, in the nineteenth century. Like other faiths, Judaism could express a "belief in the power of print."[5] Rabbi Kluger argued that the new print technology signaled a need to reconsider that wisdom. "It seems to me that we cannot draw from the judgment of *Hazal* who did not possess printed books and therefore preferred the *Sinai*. Nowadays, he concluded, the "clever scholar—who cannot just intuit but is able to discern based on innate talent—is preferable."[6]

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[4] Rabbi Shneur Zalman, *Shulhan Arukh Ha-Rav, Talmud Torah* 2:4.

[5] See, for example, Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 141-44.

[6] Rabbi Shlomo Kluger, *Hagahot li-Pri Megadim, Orah Hayyim* no. 136.

Memorizing was good. But an ability to probe texts and draw out new meaning and ideas was henceforth better. The former was outmoded, the victim of a growing (and printed) rabbinic literature sprinkled with footnotes and bibliographies. Instead, these resources enhanced the Torah learning experience, empowering the new ideal, the champion Torah scholar seeking a novel and well-grounded *hiddush*.

A Democratized Communal Torah Discourse

Rabbi Avraham David Wahrman of Buczacz agreed that Torah forgetfulness might "not be a concern in our time since all of Torah is recorded."[7] But his rationale had nothing to do with defining the best Torah study practices. To the contrary, the Talmud's apprehension over forgetfulness, as Rabbi Wahrman understood it, had nothing to do with maximizing the individual student/scholar experience.

After all, in most cases there is a recourse for the Jew who misrecollected an item relating to standard religious practice: other Jewishly literate people. "The *halakhah*," wrote Rabbi Wahrman, "is also within the grasps of others who have studied them."

Rather, Rabbi Wahrman argued, the Talmud's fear of forgetting concerned communal knowledge. Only *hiddushim*, original thoughts untapped by prior generations, are truly irretrievable. Rabbi Wahrman's concern was for the communal conversation. Missing out on a *hiddush* diminishes the quality of that intergenerational dialogue.[8]

Our Digital Moment

In 1979, a group of researchers at Bar Ilan University published a "status report" of the Responsa Project in the proceedings of the Associations of Orthodox Jewish Scientists. A dozen years earlier, Aviezri Fraenkel conceived the ambitious project to index, collect, and reproduce thousands of rabbinic texts. In the late-1970s, the Bar Ilan team anticipated that its efforts would revolutionize Torah study for the traditional scholar as well as the "historian, the sociologist, the linguist, the educator, and, in fact, any scholar interested in this literature."[9]

In its earliest stages, the Bar Ilan research garnered tremendous attention because of its attempt to democratize Torah learning. Other experts and institutions offered to collaborate. [10] The project encountered political and financial challenges, but persevered.[11] To date, the latest version of the Bar Ilan Responsa Project contains about 100,000 *teshuvot* and many essential biblical and rabbinic works.

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[7] Rabbi Avraham David Wahrman, *Divrei David* (Kolomyia, 1892), 122-25.

[8] For a slightly different interpretation of Rabbi Wahrman's view, see Levi Cooper, "Forget-Me-Not," *Jerusalem Post* (July 3, 2009): 42.

[9] Yaakov Choueka, Menachem Slae and Samuel W. Spero, "A Computerized Retrieval System for the Responsa Literature—Revisited," *Proceedings of the Associations of Orthodox Jewish Scientists* 5 (1979): 21.

[10] See Aviezri S. Fraenkel, "A Retrieval System for the Responsa," *Proceedings of the Associations of Orthodox Jewish Scientists* 2 (1969): 3-42.

[11] See "Yeshiva May Lose Responsa Project," *Hamevaser* (October 5, 1981): 1.

Add to this more recent tools like Otzar HaHochma, Sefaria, HebrewBooks.org, JSTOR, ProQuest and, of course, Google. These searchable databases present the same sort of tools that provoked rabbinic writers around the turn of the nineteenth century to reconsider the aims and execution of Torah study.

We must take advantage of the Digital Age. With so much data available, our quest should be to improve our powers of analysis and produce *hiddushim* that invigorate and inspire. Apprehension to change provides needed warning but cannot undercut a good vision. With proper chariness, we can transform our classrooms and pulpits from slow-paced Lancastrian information-transmission centers to creative laboratories full of revitalized discourse.

Rabbis and educators will lead these conversations on the grounds that they have been trained to *think* better, not just because they know more. The Orthodox recognize that the once-vast knowledge gap between rabbi and lay person has been shrinking for some time. In the 1990s, for example, Shalom Berger surveyed alumni of the post-high school *yeshivot* and seminaries. He found that three-quarters of these young women and men anticipated continued text-learning during adulthood. Ninety percent expected "that their library of Jewish texts will be a central part of their home."[12] Since then, the preponderance of freely available digitized texts makes an even better case for knowledge parity.

What are rabbis to do? They'll lead the search for responsible and integrity-minded *hiddushim*. It was not too long ago, before the expansion of university-based Jewish Studies, that leading scholars occupied pulpit positions. In Chicago, for example, Hebrew Theological College produced rabbi-scholars like Rabbi Charles Chavel and Rabbi David Shapiro. In the twenty-first century, Rabbi Shlomo Kluger might have doubled-down on his call to focus on analysis-training and creativity-cultivation.

The same goes for the classroom. To a large degree, teachers have surrendered their monopoly on facts. Today, more than a few educators have introduced Sefaria and "Bar Ilan" into their classrooms to ensure that students are not limited by a single static text.[13] Greater fluidity improves the chances that young people will ask questions and engage the text on their own terms. An effective teacher will manage the classroom and keep to a lesson plan that anticipates the give-and-take of student-centered discourse.

But the heft and depth of learning cannot be compromised, as Rabbi Shneur Zalman warned. The *Alter Rebbe* was no doubt correct that the experience of Torah study ought to be an encounter enriched by new resources, not circumvented by them. New digital resources cannot replace *amelut*, the hard work of traditional study. As well, E.D. Hirsch's concerns in the late 1980s for "cultural literacy" and sincerity is still a relevant reminder of the perils of shallow reading and lazy shortcutting.

A personal example: after I was admitted to graduate school, I asked my teacher, Jonathan Sarna, how I might use the summer to prepare for my studies in American Jewish history. He

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[12] Shalom Z. Berger, "Engaging the Ultimate: The Impact of Post-High School Study in Israel," in *Flipping Out: Myth or Fact, The Impact of the "Year in Israel"* (New York: Yashar Books, 2007), 36.

[13] See Julie Wiener, "Open-Source Text Site Could Expand Jewish Learning," *Jewish Week* (June 21, 2013): 1.

advised me to spend time reading through the journal of the American Jewish Historical Society, a periodical that dates back to 1893.[14] I spent much of the summer reading that journal, at least two articles in each issue. At the fall semester orientation, I happily informed Dr. Sarna of my summer labors, expecting to receive some sort of congratulations for my efforts. "Alright," he responded with a smile. "The *American Jewish Archives Journal* began in 1948. Start reading."

The lesson was all too clear: even in our time, clever scholarly calculus—in any field—must be fortified by the arithmetic and skills gained through painstaking *bekiut*.

Perhaps most of all, the Digital Age must democratize the conversation, to ensure that we make space for *hiddushim* that might otherwise go missing. Like Rabbi Avraham David Wahrman explained it, our communities, through initiatives like *The Lehrhaus*, can nurture new and nuanced voices.

If we believe that our educational systems have performed admirable work then it makes good sense that the thoughtful people it has produced should not be stymied from lifelong learning and discussion. At present, social media has an uncanny ability to furnish community. They serve as platforms for individual expression, sometimes preferable to a non-digital community that provides limited opportunity for this democratized discourse.

Cultivating that discussion, removing its unseemly and unwieldy parts, may well be our greatest challenge yet.

Nonetheless, in place of dogged cynicism and an overreliance on the status quo, these sentiments and challenges must animate our discussions of the aims for Torah study and Jewish education. Too much, we mustn't forget, is at stake.

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[14] On the history of the journal, see Jeffrey S. Gurock, "From '*Publications* to *American Jewish History*': The Journal of the American Jewish Historical Society and the Writing of American Jewish History," *American Jewish History* 81 (Winter 1993/1994): 155-270.

Narcissus and the *Nazir*

Tzvi Sinensky

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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

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 שאגלחך לשמים

מיד עמדתי ונשקתיו על ראשו. אמרתי לו בני כמוך ירבו גוזרי 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_1-B_1 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_1), citing his conversation with his evil inclination ("*amarti lo*"). Finally, the priest responds ("*amarti lo*") by accepting the reframing (B_1) 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_1-B_1 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 precoccupation 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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