



Universität Potsdam

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From the Mole to the Male in a Talmudic Story

On the Meaning of Suffering in the Eyes of the Rabbis

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**Psalms chapter 58: From the Mole to the Male in a Talmudic Story –
On the Meaning of Suffering in the Eyes of the Rabbis**

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תהלים נח:

- (א) לְמַנְצֵחַ אֵל תִּשְׁחַת לְדָוִד מִכְתָּם:
(ב) הַאֲמַנְם אֲלֵם צְדָק תִּדְבְּרוּן מִיִּשְׂרָיִם תִּשְׁפֹּטוּ בְּנֵי אָדָם:
(ג) אַף בְּלֵב עוֹלֹת תִּפְעֲלוּן בְּאָרְץ חַמֵּס יְדִיכֶם תִּפְלֹסוּן:
(ד) זָרוּ רְשָׁעִים מִרְחֹם תְּעוּ מִבֶּטֶן דְּבָרֵי כָזָב:
(ה) חֲמַת לָמוּ בְדַמוֹת חֲמַת נָחַשׁ כְּמוֹ פֶתֶן חָרַשׁ יֵאָטֵם אֲזָנוֹ:
(ו) אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמַע לְקוֹל מְלַחְשִׁים חוֹבֵר תְּכַרִּים מִחֶכְם:
(ז) אֱלֹהִים הָרַס שְׁנִימוֹ בְּפִימוֹ מִלְתַּעוֹת כְּפִירִים נִתֵּן יְקִנֵּק:
(ח) יִמָּאֶסוּ כְמוֹ מַיִם יִתְהַלְכוּ לָמוּ יְדָרְךָ <חצו> חֲצִיּוֹ כְמוֹ יִתְמַלְלוּ:
(ט) כְּמוֹ שִׁבְלִיל תִּמָּס יִהְיֶה נֶפֶל אִשָּׁת בֶּל חָזוּ שְׁמֹשׁ:
(י) בְּטָרֶם יְבִינוּ סִירְתִּיכֶם אָטַד כְּמוֹ חַי כְּמוֹ חֲרוֹן יִשְׁעָרְנוּ:
(יא) יִשְׁמַח צְדִיק כִּי תִזְהַ נֶקֶם פְּעַמָּיו יִרְחֵץ בְּדָם הַרְשָׁע:
(יב) וַיֹּאמֶר אָדָם אֵךְ פָּרִי לְצְדִיק אֵךְ יֵשׁ אֱלֹהִים שְׁפֹטִים בְּאָרְץ:

Psalm 58 (New King James Version), Psalm 58:

To the Chief Musician. Set to "Do Not Destroy." A Michtam of David.

¹ Do you indeed speak righteousness, you silent ones?

Do you judge uprightly, you sons of men?

² No, in heart you work wickedness;

You weigh out the violence of your hands in the earth.

³ The wicked are estranged from the womb;

They go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies.

⁴ Their poison *is* like the poison of a serpent;

They are like the deaf cobra *that* stops its ear,

⁵ Which will not heed the voice of charmers,

Charming ever so skillfully.

⁶ Break their teeth in their mouth, O God!

Break out the fangs of the young lions, O LORD!

⁷ Let them flow away as waters *which* run continually;

When he bends *his* bow,

Let his arrows be as if cut in pieces.

⁸ *Let them be* like a snail which melts away as it goes,

Like a stillborn child of a woman, that they may not see the sun.

⁹ Before your pots can feel *the burning* thorns,

He shall take them away as with a whirlwind,

As in His living and burning wrath.

¹⁰ The righteous shall rejoice when he sees the vengeance;

He shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked,

¹¹ So that men will say,

“Surely *there is* a reward for the righteous;

Surely He is God who judges in the earth

1. a. Philological Discussion: Biblical Inquiry

This chapter in Psalms is one of the most difficult chapters in the whole book of Psalms. It includes a short ancient poetic-style complaint against unrecognized wicked people.¹ This psalm also raises a theological difficulty when it reveals the Psalmist's pure hatred and a clear wish from his side (which is directed to God) that they will all perish.

The Christian theologian Dietrich Bohnhoeffer asked: "Is this frightful Psalm of vengeance our prayer? Are we actually allowed to pray in such a manner?"² His answer was clear: "No, we are certainly not permitted to pray like that". Not because it cannot sometimes take place – but because we are sinners, as according to Bohnhoeffer "we are sinful, too evil for it". And "Only he who is totally without sin can pray like that".³

Now, since Bohnhoeffer accepts literally the opening of our psalm, and believes that King David is the one who wrote this prayer – it raises a

¹ It is not clear who are these wicked people against whom the poet is directing his sharp complaints. Some suggest that this psalm "was written in the early Hebrew monarchy" and it is directed against "unjust rulers for their violence, venomous lying, and deafness to the pleas of the people" (Briggs, Psalms, vol. 2, p. 42). Another suggestion wanted to claim that this psalm reflects a very early stage in the formation of the Israelite belief – the transformation from the pagan belief in Canaanite goddesses to the believe in one God - and this psalm describes a "public trial" that was arranged for those Canaanite goddesses, blaming them for being corrupted and unmoral. This premise, however, does not fit to what we find in other places in the Tanach – like in the texts of second Isaiah – as the Tanach usually mock those goddesses for being so powerless, but this type of blame, namely, of being corrupt, is not to be found in other places in the entire Tanach (Glender, Psalms, p. 247-248).

² See Bohnhoeffer, Sermon, p. 468.

³ See Bohnhoeffer, Sermon, p. 468.

question, since we all know that David was not clean from sins. This was the turning point in the Sermon of Bohnhoeffer were he could lead the discussion to the Christian path when he says that “David himself was not innocent. But it pleased God to prepare for himself in David the one who will be called the son of David, Jesus Christ”.⁴

However, if we allow ourselves for a second to take Christ as a symbol for Christians for inner perfectness - then, strangely enough, one can see how the same explanation was given by Rabbi Abraham Hayim from Zlotchow (died 1848), a famous Hassidic leader, the pupil of Hamagid from Mezritch. He also claims: (it is written) “The righteous (The Zadik) shall rejoice when he sees the vengeance (verse 11 [verse 10 in KJV] in our psalm)” - “Only a person who already reaches the degree of the Zadik, and has no personal intention to enjoy himself (from anything, including here, revenge) but rather all his life is dedicated to God (“kulo laHashem”) – only he is allowed to be glad about revenge. But in the case of a normal person (=”adam beinoni”) it is written “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles” (Proverbs 24:17)”.⁵

This is, indeed, a very interesting topic to discuss – especially when one is willing to compare this explanation of Bohnhoeffer to the rabbinic reactions to this sharp attempt of our Psalm to recruit God for the mission of taking his private revenge on his enemies.

⁴ See Bohnhoeffer, Sermon, p. 468.

⁵ Avraham Hayyim from Zlotchow, Peri Hayyim, on Avot 4:19 p.40c-40d. According to his explanation because Lot and his wife were not “perfect people” they were not allowed to look back and “enjoy” the revenge that was taken on the wicked citizens of Sodom.

However, my focus at the moment on this Psalm will be very specific, as I will limit myself now to concentrating only on the meaning of verse no. 9 (verse 8 in KJV).

Following this I would like to examine how the two possible explanations of this difficult verse assisted in creating in the Beit Midrash an interesting Talmudic story. This, I hope, will give us a chance to get to know better one of the profound notions of the Rabbis concerning the Hebrew concept of *Emunah*, a difficult term that for that moment we will translate as: belief.

Let's start now with some simple clarifications of the difficult Hebrew words in this verse no. 9:

כְּמוֹ שֶׁבִלְוִיל תִּמְסַ יְהִלְךָ נֶפֶל אִשָּׁת בַּל חָזוּ שְׁמֶשׁ.

As we have seen the KJV translates it:

Let them be like a snail which melts away as it goes,
Like a stillborn child of a woman, that they may not see the sun.

In the original Hebrew wording there are, however, two main problems that we need to be aware of:

1. The word *shablul* here (and *temes* as well)⁶ appear only here in the whole Tanach - and therefore we are not sure what can be their original meaning.
2. *nefel eshet* is also difficult. *nefel* appears in the Tanach⁷ on other occasions as a foetus that fell (in Hebrew *nefel* is derived from the verb *nafal*=fall down) from his mother's womb dead, namely: stillborn. But then

⁶ Although it is quite clear *temes* is derived from the root ט"ם which means: melted. Ben Yehuda suggested to read it as *tames*, namely a call to God that he will melt the wicked people. See Ben Yehuda, Thesaurus, vol. 14, p. 5848 note 3.

⁷ See Job 3:16, Ecclesiastes 6:3.

we expect the next Hebrew word to be *isha* (woman) and not *eshet* - which is a form of status constructus (contract state; “*Smichut*”).

Let us see together what can be the solution of these problems:

1. Concerning the meaning of *shablul* and *temes*:

Some of the old suggestions were: Like wax that is melted (Septuagint); like water that flows (Rashi); like a worm that is smashed (Onkelos),⁸ or: Like a placenta (*shilya*) that is smashed or melted (Peshitta).⁹ Nevertheless, according to the second part of the verse Driver wanted to claim that *shablul* is simply miscarriage.¹⁰

Also the explanation that was chosen by almost all English translations is possible, although based not on the Biblical evidence but at least on a tradition that was kept in the Talmudic Hebrew. In Talmud Bavli Shabbat 77b (and according to one version also in Yerushalmi Berachot 9:3) one finds that the word *shablul* appears as a ‘snail’. However it is also clear from other texts in the Talmud that at the same time it was also used (see Yerushalmi AZ 3:7; 50d) as a Hebrew name for the placenta.

2. Concerning the second problem, there are two main suggestions how to read *nefel eshet* (*bal khazu shamesh*):

a. Those who insist to accept the meaning of *eshet* as: woman, *isha*, must say that (*nefel*) *eshet* is just a poetic form, as normally we would expect the Hebrew formulation here to be: *nefel isha*.

⁸ Probably this is the meaning of the Targum there: *Shablulita*.

⁹ See s.v. *Shablul* in EB vol. 7, pp. 498-499.

¹⁰ See Tate, Psalms 1-50, pp. 82-83.

b. Others prefer to explain this strange form of *eshet* as a name for a specific animal. This animal, as found in the Talmudic sources, is called there *ishut*,¹¹ which is probably the mole, (maulwurf).

However, this animal is probably the one which is called in Biblical Hebrew [Lev. 11:29]: *holed*, as well as in some other Talmudic sources, where we find a feminine form of this name (that is usually used today in modern Hebrew): *hulda*.¹²

For example: this is what the Mishnah says in tractate Moed Katan, chapter 1, mishnah 4, in connection with the Khol-haMoed laws:

צדין את האישות ואת העכברים משדה האילן ומשדה הלבן.

They may [by means of gins and pit-falls] catch moles and field-mice in orchards and fields.¹³

Following these options, we might now sum up:

¹¹ There are two different types of writing this word which were used in the middle ages: either *אשות* or *אישות*, (see: AC vol. 1, s.v. *אשת*, p. 327). the first one is closer to being connected to our verse in Psalms.

¹² Some say that *holed* or *hulda* (probably fem. for *holed*) is the animal which is called weasel (Septuagint and Targum Jonathan) or some kind of a big rat (Feliks). See Beyse, *הלד*, pp. 397-399. The important point for us is that it has to do with an animal which **dig**s in the earth and lives in the hollow underground passages it builds for itself. In Syriac and Christian Palestinian Aramaic this root *חל"ד* is used in the meaning of “dig” or “creep”. See Beyse, *הלד*, p. 398. This is also the meaning of this verb in Talmudic Hebrew, see Ben Yehuda, *Thesaurus*, vol. 3, p. 1556, s.v. *חלד* (which according to Ben Yehuda probably was the source of the name *holed*, namely: the one who digs tunnels in the earth, see Ben Yeuda there p. 1555 note 2).

¹³ See AC vol. 1, s.v. *אשת*, pp. 327-328.

According to the first explanation we will read the second half of our verse as follows:

נִפְּלָ אֵשֶׁת בֵּל הָזוּ שְׁמֶשׁ

Like an aborted foetus which never saw the sun.

While according to the second explanation we will read the second half of our verse in this way:

נִפְּלָ אֵשֶׁת בֵּל הָזוּ שְׁמֶשׁ

Like the falling (in the trap) of the mole which never saw the sun (the same will be the horrible fate which waits for the wicked people).¹⁴

¹⁴ See Hakham, Psalms 1, pp. 338-339 (following Rashi). Also Seybold, Psalm 58, p. 59 note 23, supported this translation of אשה as mole. Hakham's explanation however takes *nefel* as *mapelet* (=downfall). See Hakham, there (interesting in this connection is the note of Seebass, נפל, p. 497, who claims that *nefel* as aborted foetus is not to be connected to the fact that it falls down, but rather to: casualty, losing property in an accident. However, if we insist on *nefel* being explained as an aborted foetus, we will have then this translation: Like an aborted foetus or a mole which never saw the sun.

1. b. Philological Discussion: The Talmudic-Midrashic Way

This inquiry into the Biblical text will assist us in our winding way in the Midrashic-Talmudic sources. I have found in the beginning of my research that the Talmudic sources have some kind of double-face approach toward the **symbol of the mole**. On one hand we can find in most of the sources a clear negative approach to the symbol of the mole as a creature which lives in the **dark** and is obsessively busy with collecting food (according to the rabbis' imagination at least). On the other hand we might find also some kind of positive attitude to this obscure creature, the mole as a symbol for a believer who “digs” his way of *emunah* (belief) in the “underground” ways of life.¹⁵

Let us have a look together at some preliminary notions one can find in the Midrash:

As the Midrash always shows high sensitivity to sounds and uses many associative ways of thinking - it is not surprising to see how the Rabbis connected the mole (*holed* or *hulda*) with another Biblical word: *haled* or *heled*, as we find, for example, Psalms 49:2:

שָׁמְעוּ זֹאת כָּל הָעַמִּים,
הֲאִינּוּ כָּל יְשֵׁבֵי חֶלֶד.

Here this all you peoples,

Listen all you inhabitants of the world.¹⁶

¹⁵ This double-faced symbolism of the mole appears in various world cultures, and not only in the Talmud. See Chevalier and Gheerbrant, Dictionary, p. 663. The mole was perceived as related to the discoveries of the world's mysteries, life and death, and was also connected in different cultures with illnesses - and their cure.

¹⁶ *haled* alone means either world or lifetime. See Ben Yehuda, Thesaurus, vol. 3, pp. 1555-1556, s.v. חלד.

The connection between "*benei heled*," or "*yoshvei heled*" (namely: us!) and the *hulda*, i.e. the mole – is the subject of the inquiry of the Talmud Yerushalmi which claims that the common denominator which *hulda* and *heled* share, is this: the life of the Mole, exactly like us people ("inhabitants of the world"), consists of the unceasing occupation with the collection and amassing of possessions for themselves. Says the Talmud:

Why is everyone in the world compared to a mole? Because just as the mole drags things and leaves them, without knowing for whom it leaves them, so, too, all those in the world drag [i.e., collect] and leave, drag and leave, without knowing for whom they leave them.

(Talmud Yerushalmi, Shabbat 14:1, 14:c).

The ideas contained in *Midrash Tehillim* might also explain this negative attitude to moles. The following Midrash expounds the inexplicable verse that we have seen in the beginning of our study in Psalms (58:9). The explanation of the verse has to be based on what precedes it in our chapter of Psalms, regarding the punishment of the wicked. As we have seen beforehand, this verse (no. 9) can be understood in two ways: In one understanding of the verse, the wicked will melt like a snail, and, similarly, they are like a stillbirth that never sees the light of day. The other interpretive direction reads the word *eshet* (woman) as "*Ishut*" – another name for the mole. The midrash, that presents both interpretations, also attributes special power to the mole:

"Like a woman's stillbirth, may they never see the sun" - you will be regarded like the stillbirths that a woman miscarries and never see the sun [...] Another interpretation (reads our verse differently): "Like the falling (in the trap) of the mole which never saw the sun

(the same the fate of the wicked people)” - you will fall like those moles [*ishut*] that do not see the sun, but dig holes [*holdin*] into the earth and squat there.

Three creatures are different from all others: the mole, the serpent, and the frog. The mole: if it could see light, no creature could withstand it.

(*Midrash Tehillim* 58:4, ed. Buber p. 300).

2. The Talmudic Story of the Mole and the Well

Now, if we understand well those two ways of dealing with our verse in Psalms 58, we would be prepared to see how these two ways were tied together in the associative imagination of the narrator of the following Talmudic tale. This Talmudic tale deals with both symbols: the mole and the motive of the death of the little children – whom the storyteller “melts” together in an interesting artistic design.

Here is the story, which is called in the Talmud: “the mole and the well” (this story, by the way, was not kept, as it happens sometimes, in the Talmud itself, but was transformed from generation to generation by heart until it was first written by a Jewish-Italian scholar, Rabbi Nathan ben Yehiel from Rome in his book “Aruch”, in the 12th century):

It once happened that a maiden who was going to her mother's house, and was bedecked in gold and silver, erred on the way, and went through an unsettled area. When midday came she was thirsty, and she had no escort. She saw a well, with a rope and bucket hanging over it. She took hold of the rope, and let herself down.

After drinking, she wished to go up, but she could not, and she was crying and shouting. A man came by and heard her voice. He stood by the well and looked in, but he could not see [her].

He asked her: "Who are you? From humans, or from the *mazikin* [demons]?"

She replied: "I am from the humans."

He asked her: "Perhaps you are from the spirits, and are foreign to me [i.e., to humans]?"

She replied: "No."

He said to her: "Take an oath to me that you are from humans!"

She took an oath to him,

He asked her: "What is your nature?"

She told him everything that had happened.

He asked her: "If I bring you up, will you marry me?"

She answered: "Yes."

He brought her up.

Once he had brought her up, he asked to lie with her immediately.

She asked him: "What people are you from?"

He replied: "I am from Israel, I am from such-and-such a place [variant: and I am a *kohen* (of the priestly class)]."

She said to him: "I, too, am from such-and-such a place, from prominent people known by name."

She said to him: "A holy people like you [= you, who belong to this holy people], who was chosen by the Holy One, blessed be He, who sanctified you from all Israel, and you want to act as a beast, without a *ketubah* [marriage contract] and without a wedding? Come after me to my father and my mother, and I will be betrothed to you."

They made a covenant with each other.

He asked her: "Who will be a witness between us - between me and you?", and a mole happened to pass by them.

She told him: "Heaven, this mole, and this well will be witnesses that we do not lie to each other."

Each one went on his way.

That maiden remained faithful, and she would refuse everyone who asked for her hand.

Since they bedeviled her, she began to act as if she were a fool,

and tear her clothes and the clothes of anyone who approached her, until people kept their distance from her, while she kept her pact with that man.

But he, once he went away from her, his base instincts overwhelmed him and he forgot her. He went to his city and turned to his work. He married a woman, she became pregnant by him, and bore him a son. And when three months had passed, the mole choked him.

Once again she became pregnant and bore a son, and he fell into a pit.

His wife said to him: "If my sons had died in the manner of people, I would have recited *tzidduk ha-din*.^{@01} Now, when they died a strange death, this was not without something [undoubtedly concealed here, that was the reason]. Tell me what you have done!"

He revealed the entire episode to her.

She was divorced from him, and she told him: "Go to your portion that you were given by the Holy One, blessed be He."

He went and asked in her [the first maiden's] city. He was told: "She is an epileptic [which at the time was thought to be a mental illness]. For anyone who asks for her [hand in marriage], she does such-and-such [a "show," of an epileptic fit]."

He went to her father, [who] explained to him all her actions [i.e., warned him that she was an epileptic].

He [the man] said to him [her father]: "I accept any defect in her."

[The father] brought witnesses [for this promise]. He came to her. She began to act as she customarily did [= as an epileptic].

He told her the episode of the mole and the well.

She said to him: "I, too, honored my pact!"

They immediately were put at ease and reconciled, and they were fruitful and multiplied with sons and possessions.

To them the verse is applied [Ps. 101:6]: "My eyes are on the trusty men of the land, to have them at my side".¹⁷3.

¹⁷ Nathan ben Jehiel, AC s.v. "*Heled*," vol. 3, pp. 395-96. The version translated here follows the manuscript possessed by Lewin, *Otzar ha-Gaonim, Taanith*, "Commentaries," pp. 57-58.

Theological Remarks

This narrative is concerned with the meaning of the concepts of **faith** and **faithfulness**.

Its central argument, that appears in its concluding line, is that a person will have no rest or repose in his life if he is not faithful to himself and those around him.

What is faith (*emunah*)? Linguistic testimonies from languages close to Hebrew are indicative of two different possibilities: one is that of *ne'emanut* (faithfulness), namely: **continuing over time**, and the other, of **responsibility**, trust, and tranquility.¹⁸

It seems to me that the connection between these two meanings teaches of the profound significance that the ancients ascribed to faithfulness, as regards sharing the burden and responsibility; and of the proper attitude to the suffering that is closely bound up with patience, that is, to the concepts of prolonged time, and not to the search for "quick fixes" in the short term.

Faith is therefore a type of vision, possibly more similar to "night vision", but definitely not blindness. This is why the heroes in our narrative took an oath by the symbols of the mole and the well. The mole can barely see, because of the skin covering its tiny eyes, but this blindness does not prevent it from digging complex tunnels in the darkness of the earth, because of its other highly-developed senses.¹⁹

As I see it, the mole symbol in this narrative apparently takes two different directions.

On the one hand, it symbolizes the faith that is represented by **the maiden**:

¹⁸ See Jepsen, נמא, p. 292.

¹⁹ See Biliq, גלג, EB vol. 3, pp. 140-142.

digging in the dark as a suitable metaphor for her situation, from the beginning of the tale to the salvation that comes in its end. She descends to the pit, as in the language of the Psalmist's entreaty: "Answer me quickly, O Lord; my spirit can endure no more. Do not hide your face from me, or I shall become like those who descend into the Pit" (Ps. 143:7; see also 28:1 - that is, if you do not answer my pleas, I am as one dead). The idea on which the depiction in Psalms is based is that man's life is dependent upon God's constant providence. When God does not show favor to man, he is doomed to be among those "who descend into the Pit".²⁰

The maiden's descent does not end with her "physical ascent" from it. Actually, her aboveground "pit life" starts here. Like the mole, she digs her tortuous path in the world, without being able to see the light at the end. *la-hlod*, namely "digging under something," as she is guided by her faith in the justness of her cause, that the pact she has made must be steadfastly maintained, even at the cost of harsh suffering.

On the other hand, - in addition to the negative significance that we have seen before, that was attributed to the mole, because of its action of gathering up in piles - the mole symbol also has a negative function here, because of another reason. Here, I believe, that if one looks from **that** angle at the story one finds that **the man is the mole**, who, in dark ways, undermines the spiritual truth.²¹

He conceals the truth of the pact, and even hides it from his wife, and in this

²⁰ Following M. Gruber, *Psalms*, p. 262.

²¹ Judah Loew ben Bezalel (*Maharal, Netivot Olam*, ed. H. Pardes, Tel Aviv 1982), I, pp. 491-92, notes the possibility that the mole is a masculine symbol, with the penetration effected by his digging within the soil, in comparison with the well that is penetrated, which is the female symbol.

reading, the mole represents threatening death. In the Greek world, as well, the mole was thought to be an unlucky sign foreboding evil, and in antiquity the future was divined sometimes by observing moles.²²

²² See Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, p. 98 n. 19.

4. Discussion on the Talmudic Story

Now, if I may, I would like to muse shortly on some notes that might shed light on the meaning of this story.

The faith motive stands as a leitmotif at the basis of our narrative. The relation between the man of faith and the unbeliever is that between the one who sees the reality as a whole (even if this vision is somewhat unclear when a person suffers) and the one who sees only a partial picture. **Lack of faith** is not expressed in some sociological definition or other, but (this is my way to define it): in the **asymmetrical relationship between suffering and patience** (that are associated in the Hebrew: *sevel-savlanut*) in a person's inner life. "Faith" is closely connected to the concepts of time and changes over the course of time, and it shows that ability of the believer to be patient (סבלנות) and wait in the dark (סבל).

Suffering is therefore a narrow place (in Hebrew associated: *tzarah*-suffering, *tzar*-narrow; with both meanings expressed in the English word "straits") within the continuum of time, from where the **joining of the parts into the whole** cannot be seen. The believer feels that the partial is a fragment of a more complete puzzle, which leads to his basic attitude to suffering, as connected to a plane which might be unknown to us **now**, and all that we can do is to keep our integrity, as Job (2:9-10) teaches.

"Integrity [*tom*]," too, is basically connected to the whole and the completeness of that puzzle.²³

Therefore, contrary to the common thought that "faith" is a trait belonging to

²³ See Ben Yehuda, Thesaurus, vol. 16, s.v. "תם" p. 7784 n. 1: "Even though *tam* mainly means whole, as *tamim*, *tam* is used in the Bible only metaphorically, for mental traits, and not with a physical meaning."

the "religious" society, and that it is to be defined as blindly following an individual or idea, the precise meaning of "faith" teaches the exact opposite. The lesson of our narrative is that the faithful maiden does not surrender to the external pressures to which she is subjected, to act as is commonly accepted. In her guise of "madness" she deceives all those around her, and is not drawn after temptations and pressures, but follows the inner voice that tells her to wait for the clarity that will come in time, when the picture puzzle is complete.

Actually, we know that in an impatient world such as ours, the patient individual, who, in his gentle manner, is willing to relinquish, who makes way for "successful" others, is thought usually to be "mad" - a "patsy".

A lack of faith, however, is expressed in situations of suffering and loss when a person becomes bitter and loses his authentic self. The believer, in contrast, might not know anything about the existence of "God," but his entire essence in these trying times radiates faith, which means responsibility and mature commitment to the other (as, for example, does Dr. Bernard Rieux, the hero of *The Plague* by Albert Camus).

Our narrative highlights the tension between the temporary, the passing, that lacks meaning and depth, and the concept of the oath and the pact.

It opens with a portrayal of an encounter - the equivalent of the modern "blind date." At this point, the blindness is physical. The maiden is within the well, and is forced to promise to marry someone she cannot see (like the **mole**, that feels its way in the **dark**).

The man in the tale, who hears the woman's voice coming from the darkness of the well, does not see her, either. For him, she is a sort of frightening and threatening Other. He first imagines that she is a dangerous she-demon, and he makes the transition from alienation to intimacy after she "takes an oath"

to him that she is a human being, and not a fiend.

The first "oath" leads to a second one: the maiden's promise to be married to the man, which in turn, after a short discussion, results in "engagement vows" between them.

The evolution of matters between the man and the woman at this junction is intriguing: from the moment that the man is convinced that she is a flesh-and-blood woman, he undergoes an inner upheaval that accurately symbolizes a very common attitude of men to women in general: from a frightened attitude, lest he be harmed by a she-demon, **he himself becomes a demon**, and from now on he can think of only a single matter: how to take advantage of the encounter with an actual lady in distress to satisfy his egotistical needs.

The narrator thereby portrays the "male" side in the tale as childish and immature. The man's immediate self-centered needs take precedence over all. He even translates the emotional moment of saving the maiden's life into a crude sexual demand. And it seems that the condition she undertook, to be married to him, while still in the well, also alludes to this, since she had not met him and knew nothing about her potential "husband."

The time span within which the man acts is **very short**, and is built on the need for the selfish and **immediate** satisfaction of his desires.

This lack of maturity is also expressed in the immediacy of his **forgetting** and violating of the pact forged between him and this maiden: "But he, once he went away from her, his base instincts overwhelmed him and he forgot her."

The maiden, in contrast, exhibits faithfulness and faith that, as we explained, are intimately connected to patience and moderation, and the ability to sense that the "trouble," (Tzarah) namely the descent into **the narrow inner place**,

which is illustrated here metaphorically as being stuck down in the "well," and the harsh situation in which she finds herself, with the "madness" imposed on her and its accompanying loneliness, are only part of a more complete "puzzle" in which she proceeds **in the darkness**.

It is specifically the "madwoman" and the "**epileptic**" who suffers from "**falling**" and a seeming lack of stability (and we recall for a second the *nefel* in our Psalms verse!) - who is **the stable** one, who reveals true faithfulness to the whole, that is represented in the narrative by the concept of the "covenant."²⁴

It should be recalled, in this context, that in antiquity the epileptic was thought to be possessed by demons.²⁵ And now, the narrative plays between the man's initial suspicion that the woman in the well is a demon, who succeeds, only after much effort, in convincing him that she is a human being, and their later meeting - after she repeatedly put on a "**demon**"-show for everyone - and now only he can reveal the face hidden under this mask, the human face.

²⁴ Interestingly enough, this "crazy woman" is actually the one perceived by the halakhic norm as exemplary. *Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah* 228:20 determines: "If a man or a woman [...] took an oath to one another to marry each other, they may be permitted to another only with the consent of the other [of the two]." See also the discussion by R. Moses Sofer of Hungary, regarding a similar case that occurred in the eighteenth century, *She'eilot u-Teshuvot Hatam Sofer* 2 (Vienna, 1897), *Yoreh Deah*, para. 228.

²⁵ M Bekhorot 7:5: "If he suffers from epilepsy, even rarely; if he suffers from asthmatic spells." The meaning of such spells is interpreted in the Talmud (BT Bekhorot 44b): "If he suffers from asthmatic spells' - what are they? A Tanna taught: The spirit of a demon comes upon him," which Rashi ad loc. interprets as "the spirit of a demon." This also seems to be indicated by BT Rosh Hashanah 28a.

The "pact" forged between the two (once again, only the Hebrew expresses this fully: a covenant is literally "cut") expresses the fact that the incomplete and the **cut part** must remain connected to the **whole**, even in difficult moments. This is the definition of responsibility.

The testimony of **Heaven**, the **mole**, and the **well** is the quiet, mute testimony of the divine truth that is present in all, in Nature as in culture, and therefore can be preserved even after the false human verbiage disappears. It is **as eternal as the whole**, and is revealed after the smoke screen of the man's false vows dissipates.

This silent truth shatters the false "family" that the man built. The children die, the wife who is not right for him sends him away.

Thus, the element of intimacy arises in the narrative. "Pact" means intimacy, and with this profound understanding the woman in the story raises several levels above the frivolous man. The narrative begins with a scene of strangeness and alienation so great that the man does not know if he is facing a woman or a harmful she-demon; once, however, that he realizes that she is a flesh-and-blood woman, he himself all at once turns into a hurtful "demon" who sees in her only a body. According to those versions in which this man is a *kohen (priest)*, we have here a subtle irony directed against the members of the "priestly class," who are meant to preserve the "pact" **between man and God**.

The man's stance also expresses the close link between the shortsightedness of the egotistical, that is impatiently bound up in its "demonic" nature, and the worldview that sees the movement of life as a random collection of alien objects, lacking intimacy, with no inner "pact" between them connected to that whole "puzzle" of which we spoke above.

In contrast to all this, the maiden says: We are not "demons," we are human

beings, people known by name.

The symbolism of the male and the female that are attracted to each other to become whole therefore represents every movement of the partial to its becoming whole: but in this respect, the maiden is the only one who is truly faithful to the "whole."

The polarization between the male and the female is highlighted also in the second woman's refusal to live a life of falsehood, and she acts no less courageously than the first. She, too, fully understands the relation between the partial and the whole, and therefore tells him: "Go to your portion [or: part] that you were given by the Holy One, blessed be He." It is not I who is your true completion, but this first woman, with whom your pact is still in force.

The narrative ends on an optimistic note, when it casts the male frivolity in the shadow of the female maturity, and teaches that these two women taught the man an authentic lesson. When he learns that she has "gone mad," he wholeheartedly promises her father to care for her in any condition, declaring: "I accept any defect in her." That is, I am willing to accept any defect = a broken part, that is coming to me (once again, the Hebrew - literally, that **"fell in my part"** - perfectly captures this thought), with the knowledge that the part is simply a short fragment of the whole puzzle; and when a person wholeheartedly accepts responsibility for the partial (= suffering), in the end it is revealed to him to be the whole, as happens in this narrative: the **"madwoman" proves to be more "sane" than everyone.**

5. Last Words: on the Concept of recompense

In this sense, the narrative offers a profound interpretation of the concept of recompense, that might be taken as some sort of echo to the complain of the Psalmist, and therefore as an answer to our opening theological question.

Reward and punishment are not perceived here in the accepted, external sense, but in their inner meaning. The person who follows the inclination of the moment, the egotistical, brings disaster upon himself, even if this has no obvious external manifestation. And the one who follows the straight path, with a pure heart, will eventually clearly see the course of his life as a “whole”, as meaningful life, in the long view, and his creations, that is, his "children," will not drown in the "well"-trap that time sets.

This is the realization on the temporary "earth" of the eternity of the “testimony” of "Heaven." Accordingly, the narrative ends by citing the verse from Psalms:

עֵינַי בְּנֹאמְנֵי אֶרֶץ לְשֹׁכֵת עֲמֹדֵי, הַלֵּל בְּדַרְךְ תְּמִים הוּא יִשְׂרָתְנִי.

"My eyes [the eyes of God in "Heaven"] are on the trusty men of the land, to have them at my side." (Psalms 101:6). Now we see how the narrative is built as a sort of expanded commentary on the entire verse in Psalms, that originally connects the realization of faith in earthly life with innocence and blamelessness (that are represented in the narrative by the maiden).

The verse says that the darkness is not to be feared, because God in "Heaven" sees what is truly in the dark "well" on earth - the inner picture of human life, where there is only perfect light: "My eyes [the eyes of God in

"Heaven"] are on the trusty men of the land, to have them at my side - he who follows the way of the blameless shall be in my service."²⁶

²⁶ I would like to thank Dr. Jonathan Magonet for improving the English of this text, and giving me the option to read this lecture in front of the colloquium which was gathered to listen to it in Haus Ohrbeck, near Osnabrueck, on August 2010.

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