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THE BIBLICAL STORY OF THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF ISAAC'S BIRTH: A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

Naama Alfasi-Weiss

The biblical story of the announcement of Isaac's birth appears in the Bible in two different versions: one in Genesis 17 (1-27), the other in Genesis 18 (1-16). The comparison of different versions of a myth was the main method of research of Claude Lévi-Strauss, emphasizing that mythical thought highlights the great binary oppositions such as life and death, culture and nature, femininity and masculinity, producing a definition of myth as a mode of thought that contributes to the creation of cultural and intellectual identities.

The present structural analysis of the two versions of the biblical story of the announcement of Isaac's birth according to the model of Lévi-Strauss is an attempt to decipher the mythical code of the ancient story. This explication of the mythical code suggests that the myth underlying the two versions refers to a 'collective subconscious' revealed in structures. The decoding is performed on four levels, following Lévi-Strauss' method: geographical, techno-economical, sociological, and cosmological. All four levels materialize in the version in Genesis 18, only two in the version in Genesis 17. The transformative relationship between the two versions creates a new meaning that expresses the sociological and cosmological aspects of circumcision.

The two versions of the mythical story include the opposition between interior and exterior, expressing the fear of the penetration of foreigners into the community. The discussion further addresses Sarah's or Abraham's laughter, and blood of circumcision on the one hand and of menstruation on the other. The reinterpretation of cultural as well as natural and biological phenomena by mythical thinking creates a complex system of thought that contributes to the cultural and intellectual identity of biblical Israel.

Formulating the mythological characteristics of the story of the announcement of Isaac's birth in the two versions also sheds new light on the phenomenon of 'mirror stories' that has been shown to be central to the poetics of the Hebrew Bible by Yair Zakovitch.

ON THE ORIGINS OF THE EXPRESSION ‘AMEN, AMEN, AMEN SELA’

Avraham (Rami) Reiner

An investigation of Jewish gravestones from the medieval period in Ashkenaz reveals that the frequent appearance of the phrase ‘*Amen, amen, amen sela*’, in its various forms, begins in the early mid-13th century; later it is found on the vast majority of the gravestones in that area. The article suggests that the widespread usage of this phrase in Ashkenazi culture was related to the incorporation of the *Heikhalot* literature into various circles of *Hassidei Ashkenaz*. The expression ‘*Amen, amen, amen sela*’ commonly appears in the *Heikhalot* literature as well as in other Hebrew magic literature at the final position in incantations. The incorporation of this phrase into the repertoire of inscriptions on gravestones indicates the shift in the perceived role of the gravestones, from a sign of identification to a talisman through which various paranormal forces are summoned to accompany the deceased upon their journey into the afterlife.

BETWEEN THE HERITAGE OF THE MIDDLE AGES
AND THE WINDS OF THE RENAISSANCE: THE MIDRASH OF THE TEN
COMMANDMENTS IN THE PARMA MANUSCRIPT 2269 (DE ROSSI 473)

Rella Kushelevsky

This paper argues for the liminal status of *Midrash Aseret ha-Dibberot* (The Midrash of the Ten Commandments) as a text that bridges between the biblical canon and life. The study focuses on the Parma version of this compilation (ms. 2269) not only because it is the most expanded and rich version of *Midrash Aseret ha-Dibberot*, or because it has almost not been studied as a result of significant water damage, but also because it sets the issue of the work's status, whether *Midrash Aseret ha-Dibberot* is a homiletic composition or a story compilation, in sharp relief. The great number of both homiletic interpretations and tales included in it, emphasizes the tension between two contradictory trends within its framework

In the first part of the paper, the time and place of the Parma version are examined. The main parameters for comparing it to other versions of *Midrash Aseret ha-Dibberot* are the choice and sequence of the tales and style-linguistic characteristics. I conclude that the Parma version was created in Ashkenaz, not earlier than the 14th century and no later than the mid-15th century, the date of the manuscript itself.

The second, and main, part of the paper closely examines three unique tales, on the basis of partial reconstruction of the work done by means of digital photography of the manuscript. The analysis encompasses the reading processes that the tales set in motion, the liminal situations they shape, and their dual affinity to the heritage of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Within this particular cultural context, the power of these narratives to bridge between the canonical text and life emerges – to anchor the absolute commandments within complex real-life situations.

ELIJAH'S CUP: AN UNKNOWN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY DEPICTION
OF THE CUSTOM IN THE ERNA MICHAEL HAGGADAH

Tal Goitein

Attestation to the custom of pouring a cup of wine for Elijah on the night of the *Seder* is rare in fifteenth-century Ashkenaz. In fact the sole testimony for this custom appears in a commentary by Zelikman Binga on Tractate Pesahim. The present article offers new evidence for when during the *Seder* the cup was poured and the door opened for Elijah, based on the analysis of a picture from the Erna Michael Haggadah (Bohemia, c. 1400-1420). According to Binga's commentary, the goblet of wine is placed on the table and the door opened during the first part of the *Seder* while reciting the '*Ha Lahma Anya*' (this is the bread of affliction) passage. He explains that Elijah needs a glass of wine, in line with the mishnaic regulation that even a poor man from Israel deserves four glasses of wine during the *Seder*. A similar depiction of this custom seems to appear in the Washington Haggadah (southern Germany, 1478).

In contrast, the placement of the scene depicted in the Erna Michael Haggadah suggests that wine for Elijah is set out during the second part of the *Seder*, when the fourth glass of wine is poured and before reciting the '*Shefokh Hamatkha*' (pour out thy wrath) passage. The shift in the custom in some Ashkenazi communities, as reflected in the Erna Michael Haggadah, is based on a quote of Israel Bruna (15th century) by Rabbi Moses Isserles, that the opening of the door takes place during the recitation of '*Shefokh Hamatkha*'

My interpretation of the picture in the Erna Michael Haggadah proves that it is part of the Jewish iconography developed in the 15th century, which illustrates the hope that the messianic era is imminent. The iconography of the Messiah and the custom of pouring a cup of wine for Elijah on the *Seder* night most probably evidence a messianic state of mind, and a belief that redemption is near. Based on the analysis of the poems of Avigdor Kara, the article shows that events in Bohemia, especially in the Hussite period, had a significant effect on the eschatological expectations of the Jews in Bohemia and elsewhere in the German lands.

‘THE LEGEND OF THREE AND FOUR’:
AN ACCOUNT OF JEWISH STORY-TELLING TRADITION
IN PRAGUE OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Noga Rubin

This essay closely examines the tale *Eyn Sheyn Mayseh*, ‘committed to print by Beyle, daughter of *hakadosh* Ber ben Hizkiya Hurvits, the wife of Yosi Hazan, and Rachel, the daughter of Natan Roznits’. The author’s name remains unknown. The tale attempts to present to the readers a description of the circumstances which led to the initial stages of the Jewish settlement of Prague and the further establishment of the Jewish community in the city. The tale is based on various sources, mostly Jewish (Ashkenazi and non-Ashkenazi), that have reached the author in the form of different writings, or that were orally transmitted. Some of the tale’s sources are not of Jewish origin. The main argument of the essay is that *Eyn Sheyn Mayseh* was not based on an arbitrary mix of several different sources; rather it has been constructed by a carefully chosen selection of tales, that were purposely put together. Alongside those tales, many supplementary details, which cannot be found in the currently available sources were added.

The special manner in which *Eyn Sheyn Mayseh* was moulded and the specific details woven into the story’s framework were intended, in my opinion, to introduce two competing models, perhaps even utopian in nature, concerning the foundation of the Jewish community in Prague. *Eyn Sheyn Mayseh* compares between two alternative arguments: according to the first the establishment of the community of Prague was carried out by a man; according to the second, Prague’s Jewish community was established by a woman. Another issue examined in this article is the early Ashkenazi sources of the tale.

‘A WOMAN IS LIKE A STEW, WARM AND NOURISHING’:
KITCHEN AND FEMININITY IN THE FOLK CULTURE OF AFGHAN JEWS

Tsila Zan-Bar Tsur

The stew (*āsh*) as a component in the culinary system of the Jews of Afghanistan served also for defining inter-cultural hierarchies in the lives of the women in their differential state. The parturient’s stew and the barren woman’s stew, the adolescent girl’s stew and the post-fertile woman’s stew – all were culturally identified with the personal and social status of women and their body, in their various stages of transition: the body of the biologically adolescent woman, the body of the parturient woman, the body of the barren woman and the body of the post-fertile woman.

Apart from its satisfying and nourishing qualities in the culinary repertory of central Asian ethnic groups, the stew served as a biological and cultural signifier for Afghan women in their differential state. The stew is an important component in feminine rites of passage: from the ‘red stew’ of puberty ritual, in which fertility is given prominence, establishing the girl as a woman with childbearing potential; via the ‘womb stew’, a formula given to a barren woman to magically and medically enhance her fertility; to the ‘parturient’s stew’, given to the parturient for forty days following the birth of a son, or for eighty days following that of a girl – thus defining the woman’s post natal period of impurity; and the ‘white stew’, which establishes the woman in her post-fertile stage as ‘experienced’ (*sar gozasht*) – the leader of both the female and the male factions.

The stew is prepared in the kitchen – a liminal space located between the living quarters and the lavatory – between the consumption of food and its excretion, with women controlling these systems of entrance and exit, and thus regulating their desired manner of living. A system of reciprocal relations existed between all three adjacent spaces: the home, the kitchen, and the lavatory. There the woman who cooks the stew is the one controlling the feeding and the emptying, the one responsible for regulating the imbibing of substances and the excreting of substances, which allows her to manipulate and control the ways of nourishment of every family member: the husband, the children and the mother-in-law, and manoeuvre them according to her wishes.

‘I WOULD HAVE DIED HAD GOD NOT SENT ME ELIJAH THE
PROPHET’: CLASS, BODY, AND SEXUALITY IN THE LIFE STORIES OF
ELDERLY ORIENTAL (*MIZRAHIOT*) WOMEN OF BEER SHEVA

Yael Zilberman

The humanities and social sciences of recent years in Israel deal much with marginal groups and various ‘others’. A conspicuous group of this kind is oriental or *mizrahiot* illiterate women, living in periphery areas and considered marginal in terms of geography, class, ethnicity, gender, and – with time – age, in relation to both hegemonic and other marginal groups. Different studies analyze their life stories and experiences in their countries of origin, with the intent of presenting the women as active subjects. These studies often voice the claim that the women have internalized the marginality attributed to them within Israeli society, and therefore they face hardships in experiencing their life events as meaningful and themselves as people that have a say.

Contrary to this view of *mizrahiot*, I aim to show that though they may appear by other groups as marginal, the women can still create and tell rich, complex – at times virtuoso – narratives and thus connect themselves to central events and issues in our society and culture. Moreover, some of them take advantage of their encounter with the institution of research and with an inquisitive and respectful researcher, to express explicit or implicit objection to stereotypical conceptions of themselves, thus asserting themselves as far from marginal. The interpretative-theoretical approach at the basis of my essay wishes to emphasize the women’s feminine creative power, and view it not only as expressing power relations and conflicts, but also as a creative means for constructing their own discursive worlds and for manipulating an existing social reality.

The essay analyzes the narratives of courtship and marriage of two elderly non-literate Beer Sheva women, and the daughter of one of them, as well as their descriptions of giving birth and child rearing. The passage from singlehood to marriage is depicted by both narrators as a situation that made them face crucial dilemmas and even risked their lives. Yet, through their successful tackling of these challenges they reconstructed themselves as heroines who managed to overcome life’s difficulties. At face value, these life stories are far from feminist manifestoes in the modern sense, and they are clearly anchored in masculine social norms. However,

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a careful reading of the narrative and performative artistry of the women exposes that both carry on a significant, charged, at times conflictive and subversive, relationship with the tradition in and by which they live, as with the stereotypes attributed to them and to the authorities they overtly accept and respect. Thus the narratives move along the scale connecting preservation of patriarchal norms and fracturing or undermining them. In conclusion I stress the importance and contribution of folkloristic research to exposing the 'emic' or intrinsic viewpoint of women-narrators and to the understanding of home and marriage politics, connecting intellectual discourse and the poetics of everyday life.

‘IN THE MERIT OF A WOMAN – THE MIRACLE HAPPENED’:
CONFORMISM AND SUBVERSION IN THE STORY OF JUDITH AS TOLD
BY AN ULTRA-ORTHODOX WOMAN

Noga Libi Cohen

The story of Judith deals with a pious and beautiful Jewish woman who saves her brethren from the threats of the Assyrian enemy Holofernes. Using beauty and guile she enters the enemy camp, approaches Holofernes, and during a feast arranged by him in order to sleep with her she succeeds in killing him. The source of the story is in the deuterocanonical *Book of Judith*, written in the Second Temple period, probably in the Hasmonean era. The book was not included in the biblical canon sacred to Jews. Even though the book was excluded from the Jewish canon, the story reappeared in the Middle Ages in various Hebrew versions, probably taken from Christian sources. In the most popular medieval versions the story is connected with the Hasmonean rebellion, and the enemy is identified as a Greek king. It is in this form that the story is retold both orally and in literary versions since then. Today the story of Judith is an accepted traditional and even sacred story among Orthodox Jews.

This study focuses on one story-telling event that occurred in Beth Ya'akov – an ultra-orthodox school for girls, when the story of Judith was told by the teacher, an ultra-Orthodox woman, to her class – girls in the third grade. Using the methods of contextual literary analysis and gendered interpretation, the article shows that this event expresses a tension between the traditional conservative indoctrination in the school, that the teacher is committed to, and the subversive materials that exist in the story of Judith. The article offers a challenge to the accepted assumption about the contrast between hegemonic written stories and feminine folklore, and to the ability of feminine folklore to express the feminine voice, inasmuch as a close comparison between the ancient written version and the modern oral version shows how the ultra-Orthodox teller tries to restrain and even conceal some of the feminist messages that can be found in the ancient story.

BLESSING SCROLLS AND THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM:
THE CASE OF THE BLESSING SCROLL FROM MŁAWA – 1925

Rina Benari

The paper discusses the different aspects of blessing scrolls sent in the spring of 1925 from the Diaspora to Eretz Israel, acclaiming the inauguration of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on Mount Scopus, focusing on the individual case of the scroll from the town of Mława in Poland.

Three central dialogues will be presented: (a) the dialogue between the Diaspora and the Jewish population in Eretz Israel, *Yishuv*, as special publications dedicated to the event were published in Poland, acclaiming the advent of the new University in Jerusalem as ‘a new national temple’; (b) the dialogue between the small town’s educational institutions in Poland and the academic institution developing in Eretz Israel, emphasized by the changing political situation in parts of Poland, i.e. the growing of the anti-Semitic political trends during the inter-war period. New restrictions were issued on the Jews in general and on Jewish students in particular, such as the *numerus clausus*, which limited the number of students accepted to the universities, and others, that relegated the Jewish students to the rear end of the class. In protest, the Jewish students stood up during the lectures while some of the Polish students joined them in solidarity; (c) the unique symbolical dialogue between the text and the illustration in the scroll from Mława, focusing on the tension between the traditional past and the modern scientific future at the Hebrew University.

The essay concludes with the scroll’s journey home to Mława in the fall of 2008.