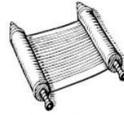


CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

MINDING THE MASHAL-NIMSHAL GAP

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Parables (*meshalim*) are intended to make ideas or situations more comprehensible by analogizing them to ideas or situations we already understand. They are particularly popular in the realm of religion because G-d is beyond human comprehension, and so we are forever tying more and more rope-lengths together in the hope that our bucket will finally reach the water in the well.

The problem is that the *mashal* is often culturally bounded, and as it obsolesces, Torah becomes stranded in the past and the *mashal* replaces the *nimshal* as an object of study; it no longer points beyond itself. We spend our time seeking to explain the *mashal* rather than seeking to understand G-d. Or worse, we seek to stuff our experience of G-d into the straitjacket of an obsolete parable.

So when G-d is compared to a ruler with arbitrary power over life and death, we end up questioning His justice rather than understanding it. And when G-d is compared to a teacher with psychologically unsound techniques, we end up questioning His pedagogy. Is it our fault that we don't learn, or His?

And yet, should we conclude easily that a text of the Tradition no longer has anything to teach us? Here is an example of such a parable, from Chatam Sofer in *Chut HaMeshulash*:

The truth serves as a parable:

In the city of my birth, Frankfurt-on-Main, there was a teacher of children who did his work – the work of Heaven – superbly. He did not discipline his students with a strap, rather he would terrify them by threatening to throw himself from a window or hang himself by a string, so that the children would be scared and promise him to obey and learn.

Until one time, a corrupt but clever boy, when this teacher was threatening to throw himself from a window, stood up and said: "if you fall, won't we get out free from school?!"

So too when The Holy Blessed One in His mercy has pity on us, seeking not to impose on us "a king with decrees as harsh as Haman's" as the necessary antecedent of repentance and redemption, He as-if-it-were-possible seeks to terrify us with the prospect of the fall of His glory – if you look away slightly, in the end the Name of Heaven will be greatly desecrated . . .

So too – Hashem seeks to discipline us by warning us that our sins cause the desecration of His Name, and the removal of His attention from us. But when we respond by celebrating our new freedom, He is compelled to punish us directly and severely.

This analogy does not at first glance make G-d more comprehensible to me. I would argue, rather, that the teacher's technique was risky in the first place; should children genuinely believe that they have that kind of psychological power over teachers (granted that they often do)? Is their learning in the end properly motivated?

At the same time, as Jeff Spitzer taught me, there is almost always a gap between the *mashal* and the *nimshal*. To properly understand a parable, we have to figure out what about the *nimshal* it does not fully correspond with, because that is what the composer of the *mashal* thought required explanation. Likely it still requires explanation.

In its original time and context, our parable is first and foremost a reading of *Vayikra* 20:1-4:

Hashem spoke to Mosheh saying:

To the Children of Israel you must say as follows:

*Each and every man from the Children of Israel, or from the converts among Israel, who gives of his offspring to the Molekh, **he must die, yes die** - the people of the land will stone him with rocks.*

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And I will turn My face **against that man** and excise him from amidst his people because he gave of his offspring to the Molekh **thereby defiling My sanctuary and desecrating My Holy Name.**

But if the people of the land avert, yes avert their eyes from that man when he gives of his offspring to the Molekh. so as not to kill him, then I will place My face **against that man and his clan** - I will excise him and all those who stray after him to stray after the Molekh from amidst their nation.

The textual anomaly the *maschal* explains is that the rationale “thereby defiling My sanctuary and desecrating My Holy Name” appears only in the first section, where the Jews respond to Molekh-worship amongst them by extirpating it. It does not appear in the second section, in which the Jews avert their eyes from such worship, even though G-d’s reaction there is broader.

The *maschal* explains that in the first section G-d seeks to inspire the Jews to act out of regard for Him, rather than out of fear, while in the second section He has abandoned hope that they will respond to anything other than the rod.

But the gap is clear. In the *maschal*, the teacher threatens to cause **himself** harm. The teacher accordingly makes the **choice** to cease threatening self-harm and discipline the students instead. But does G-d have a choice as to whether His name is profaned by our sins, or is that profanation the inevitable consequence of our sins?

The available alternate explanation seems even stranger, however. Why would there be **less** desecration of G-d’s name if the people ignore the sin?

This Biblical passage contains two infinitive absolutes: “die, surely die,” and “avert, surely avert.” These emphatics are parallel, perhaps meaning that this is no occasion for the usual attempts to prevent the death penalty via technicalities, as any failure to punish will be treated as condoning the crime. But the Rabbis read the second sequentially, as saying that one aversion leads to another.

Among the more interesting slippery slopes proposed (*Sifra Kedoshim* 10:11) is:

If a lesser Sanhedrin averts its eyes from a crime, eventually the Great Sanhedrin will avert their eyes, and capital jurisdiction will be taken from them

This likely relates to the puzzling claim (*Avodah Zarah* 8b) that forty years prior to the destruction of the Second Temple, the Sanhedrin left the Chamber of Hewn Stone in the Temple

so as to avoid judging murderers, because “they saw there were so many murderers that they could not judge them, so they said that it was better to go into exile so that they would not be convicted.” Rav Aharon Soloveitchik zt”l explained that when the death penalty is no longer an effective deterrent, applying it, at least to non-Jews, is nothing other than judicial murder. The question he posed is whether the death penalty can be an effective deterrent without dropping vital procedural safeguards, and if not, whether deterrence is worth the inevitable executions of the innocent. This question remains crucial to US-constitutional jurisprudence on the issue.

My preferred slippery slope is that proposed by the 17th century *Sifra* commentary *Korban Aharon*, cited later by Chofetz Chaim in his own *Sifra* Commentary:

Once you have not admonished them about one thing, you will find yourself unable to admonish them about other things.

Perhaps we have here an earlier version of the “broken windows” theory of policing, which argues that criminals are emboldened when they see “quality of life” crimes go unpunished. But I read the text as focused on the psychology of the courts, not the criminals.

Perhaps the proper understanding is this: When we fail to protest a small crime, we become complicit in it; and so protesting a larger version of that crime feels like self-indictment, or hypocrisy, and furthermore we fear that we may ourselves be swept up if it turns out that such crimes matter after all.

Such cover-ups generally fail eventually, and thus lead almost inevitably to massive desecrations of G-d’s Name. But ironically, we often justify them initially as an attempt to avoid that desecration.

Perhaps this is a better explanation of the anomaly that generated our parable. The reminder that sin is a desecration of G-d’s Name works only at the outset, to prevent the first level of complicity. Once that has been breached, once we have looked away, our calculus is so distorted that this reminder can no longer serve a deterrent purpose, even as the true consequences worsen.

Sometimes you really do have to sweat the small stuff, even if it means paying sales tax. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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