Redemptive Mourning

The Sages' Seder at Benei Braq and the Productive Act of Memory

Daniel Stein

In his famous meditation on Jewish history, *Zakhor*, Yosef Haim Yerushalmi laments what he considers to be a lacuna of "historiography" in rabbinic literature. "Classical rabbinic literature," he writes, "was never intended as historiography, even in the biblical, let alone the modern, sense, and it cannot be understood through canons of criticism appropriate to history alone."[1] Yerushalmi follows Hannah Arendt in drawing a distinction between Jewish history and memory. History, he argues, is focused on constructing linear narratives with defined teleologies. Memory, on the other hand, is less concerned with chronology and is "by its nature, selective."[2] Memory, Yerushalmi asserts, and not history was the sustaining force behind the Jewish people prior to the advent of modernity. Yerushalmi expresses anxiety that in the modern period the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction: while there is no shortage of historical writing, Judaism has failed to create a metahistorical narrative that functions as memory once did. This failure of synthesis, he asserts, pushes the community toward a crisis.[3]

What if, though, the rabbis of the Talmud had a different approach to history and historical memory—one that is perhaps obscured by its very synthesis? We might argue that asynchronous tales of rabbinic literature are models of what Walter Benjamin famously called "the tradition of the oppressed."[4] In reading such traditions, one of Benjamin's translators, the philosopher Susan Buck-Morss has argued for privileging the fragmentary over the linear. "The detail that counts," she writes, "is the one that arrests the reader because it does not fit that narrative."[5] Such fragments, she asserts, can function as the Paris arcades did for Benjamin, as "a passageway that

[1] Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 18.
[2] Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 8–15.
[3] Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, esp. 137.
[4] Walter Benjamin, "Theses On the Philosophy of History," trans. Harry Zohn in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 257.
[5] Susan Buck-Morss, "Translations in Time," *October* 172 (Spring 2020): 149.

pierces through the street facade of the present, providing an entry point into the past."[6] Perhaps we could be even bolder in contemplating the role of rabbinic literature in the Jewish tradition: Could it be the passageway from the past that provides an entry point into the present moment?

This approach to memory challenges the nostalgia typologies recently explored by literary theorist Svetlana Boym.[7] Boym sees acts of memory as either restorative, embracing a dangerous desire to restore a simulacrum of a past that never was, or reflective, forever trapped in a narcissistic sense of loss. Indeed, recent interest in the fragmentary nature of rabbinic literature—a literature born out of the cataclysmic destruction of the Second Temple that Benay Lappe has called "The Crash"—may herald a contemporary renewal of the praxis of Jewish memory.[8]

In this essay, I will reread a famous tale from the Passover Haggadah, the account of the sages' *seder* at Benei Braq, seeking to understand the implications of reading this tale as such an entry point into the past. I hope that reflecting on this famous rabbinic narrative evidences a different and less pathologized form of memory than those Boym contemplates. The rabbis knew of a kind of memory that engages neither in narcissistic melancholy nor in restorative fantasy. Instead, we witness a trend in rabbinic literature that seeks to memorialize the past in order to redeem the present. As we will discuss below, and following Benjamin's understanding of melancholia, critical theorists Judith Butler and Enzo Traverso have named this kind of memory either "productive" or "fruitful" melancholia."[9]

Toward the beginning of the Haggadah, we read:

> A story is told of Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, and Rabbi Akiva, who were reclining in B'nai B'rak, and were telling of the Exodus from Egypt all of that evening, until their students came and said to them: Our Rabbis, the time has arrived to recite the morning *shema*.[10]

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[6] Buck-Morss, "Translations," 148.

[7] See, inter alia, Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic, 2002).

[8] Benay Lappe, "An Unrecognizable Jewish Future: A Queer Talmudic Take," Eli Talks (May 2014), https://www.myjewishlearning.com/eli-talks/an-unrecognizable-jewish-future-a-queer-talmudic-take/.

[9] Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 21.

[10] All Haggadah citations are from Mordechai Leib Katzenelbogen, ed., *Passover Haggadah: Torat Hayim* (Jerusalem, Israel: Mosad Harav Kook, 1998) (Hebrew).

This tale appears in the Haggadah as a response to the preceding passage: "All who expand on the telling of the Exodus from Egypt are considered praiseworthy." In our story, we see many of the great sages of their generation doing exactly that—expanding on the story at such length and with such fervor that their students must interrupt their study for the only ritual obligation that could take precedence: the recitation of the morning prayers. The story of the sages is also linked to Eleazar ben Azaria's legal statement, which immediately follows it, and which may be understood, at least in this context, as a continuation of the story itself. This is markedly different than the way the story of Eleazar ben Azaria appears in the Mishnah.[11] There, Eleazar ben Azaria is responding to the legal statement that the exodus be recalled in the evening. Here, the Haggadah presents the legal statement alongside the narrative material as a single literary unit, generating further interpretive implications.

The reception tradition around the Haggadah has long been fascinated with this gathering, which brings together many—but not all—of the greatest rabbinic sages of the first century at a time of great upheaval. Is there a deeper meaning to this grouping of sages? Can we say with precision when exactly they met? Why did they apparently travel from their homes to the town of Benei Braq? Did their gathering signify anything at all beyond what is stated explicitly in the text?

One of the most well-known answers to these questions is of recent origin. In *Ḥagim umoʿadim* (*Holidays and Festivals*, 1943), Yehuda Leib Maimon wonders why the sages' students are absent from the seder and appear only at the very end of the meal. He offers this hypothesis:

> I speculate, therefore…that this party, which gathered the sages of Israel from a variety of locations, had a double purpose: while its expressed goal was to engage with the memories of the past in the form of the Exodus from Egypt, the sages also hoped to discuss the issues of the day from their national-religious (*datit-leumit*) perspective. They were especially concerned with the rebellion against the Roman Empire, which had recently started to develop in secret among the Jews of Israel and which would culminate in the Bar Kokhba Revolt and the Hadrianic War.[12]

[11] m. Berakhot 1:5

[12] Yehuda Leib Maimon, *Holidays and Festivals* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1943), 206 (Hebrew).

Maimon was an important Zionist religious and political leader. He was a founder of the Mizrahi movement, one of the most significant religious Zionist political organizations. He also founded Mosad haRav Kook, a religious research organization named after Israel's first chief rabbi, and served as Israel's first minister of religion. In Maimon's reading of the gathering of sages at Benei Braq, we see clear reverberations of a Zionist mythology that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. He introduces an element not found in the text—that the seder is no longer simply a religious gathering but a clandestine conclave planning revolt against Rome. Rabbi Akiva assumes a central role in this reading for his endorsement of Simon Bar Kokhba, the military leader whose doomed campaign against Rome marked the final chapter of Jewish life in Palestine and the true beginning of exile. This interpretive choice is reflective of broader trends; as Yael Zerubavel has observed, the Zionist movement rehabilitated the personage of Bar Kokhba, perhaps in countervalance to the rabbinic tradition:

> The transformation of Bar Kokhba from a dubious leader of a failed revolt to a prominent heroic figure from Antiquity is an important feature of the Zionist reshaping of the past.... National pride was a central Zionism theme, and the revolt was important because it symbolized the ancient Hebrews' proud and courageous stand.... The Zionist commemorative narrative thus shifts its focus from the *outcome* of the revolt to the act of rebelling.[13]

Maimon's reading, then, may be a kind of historical artifact; it is revelatory in helping to understand the early Zionist worldview but does little to help us understand the literary context that generated the Haggadah. A more compelling interpretation can be found in the commentary of Maimon's teacher, Yechiel Michael Epstein, widely known as the *Arukh hashulkhan* after his composition of the same name. In Epstein's commentary on the Passover Haggadah, he observes:

> We must look into this—for rabbi Eliezer lived in Lod, Rabbi Yehoshua lived in Peki'in, and Rabbi Akiva lived in B'nei B'rak. For what purpose did they gather at Rab-

[13] Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 96.

> bi Akiva's home in B'nei B'rak?...It appears, in my humble opinion, that this story should be read in accordance with this account in the Talmud.[14]

Here, Epstein points the reader to this famous narrative in b. Makkot:

> Once, Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elezar ben Azariah, Rabbi Yehoshua, and Rabbi Akiva…were coming up to Jerusalem together, and just as they came to Mount Scopus, they saw a fox emerging from the Holy of Holies. They fell a-weeping and R. Akiba seemed merry. "Wherefore," said they to him, "are you merry?" Said he: "Wherefore are you weeping?"- Said they to him: "A place of which it was once said, 'And the common man that draws nigh shall be put to death,' is now become the haunt of foxes, and should we not weep?" Said he to them: "Therefore am I merry; for it is written, 'And I will take to Me faithful witnesses to record, Uriah the priest and Zechariah the Son of Jeberechiah' [Isaiah 8:2]." "Now what connection has this Uriah the priest with Zechariah? Uriah lived during the times of the first Temple, while [the other,] Zechariah lived [and prophesied] during the second Temple; but Holy-Writ linked the [later] prophecy of Zechariah with the [earlier] prophecy of Uriah. In the [earlier] prophecy [in the days] of Uriah it is written, 'Therefore shall Zion for your sake be ploughed as a field etc.' [Micah 3:12]. In Zechariah it is written, 'Thus saith the Lord of Hosts, There shall yet old men and old women sit in the broad places of Jerusalem' [Zechariah 8:4]." "So long as Uriah's prophecy had not had its fulfilment, I had misgivings lest Zechariah's prophecy might not be fulfilled; now that Uriah's prophecy has been fulfilled, it is quite certain that Zechariah's prophecy also is to find its literal fulfilment."Said they to him: "Akiba, you have comforted us! Akiba, you have comforted us!"[15]

[14] Yechiel Michael Epstein, *Passover Haggadah: A Night of Vigil* (Warsaw 1889), 17 (Hebrew).
[15] Translation of the talmudic passage cited here, b. Makkot 24b, is taken from I. Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Makkoth* (London: Soncino, 1935).

Epstein, then, offers this gloss on the tale:

> Therefore, I say that it was for this reason that the sages gathered at Rabbi Akiva's home: he strengthened the hopes of the House of Israel *immediately* after the destruction of the temple. Therefore, they all came to the city and the house of Rabbi Akiva—except for Rabban Gamliel, who did not come because he was the *Nasi*.[16]

By setting the Haggadah's seder within the larger narrative context of the Talmud, Epstein's reading invites us to explore foundational questions. What was the relationship between these sages? Was there something significant about Rabbi Akiva's personality that caused his colleagues to travel to his home instead of their own? And can we read anything at all into the absence of their colleague Rabban Gamliel—who is absent from Rabbi Akiva's seder, but whose voice is essential to the Haggadah? Following Epstein, I would like to a suggest a reading that asks us to situate the story of the seder at Benei Braq alongside the Babylonian Talmud specifically and rabbinic literature more generally. I will also suggest a hermeneutic for understanding this rabbinic gathering and argue that, in recalling narratives of liberation, the rabbis may have been engaged in a task even more revolutionary than planning a revolt against their Hadrianic oppressors.

To understand the seder at Benei Braq, then, I suggest that we read the tale as part of a series of narratives that Daniel Boyarin has called "The Yavneh Cycle." Boyarin argues that the Babylonian Talmud's stories of the rabbinic academy at Yavneh are meant to be read collectively, and that Yavneh serves as an "icon of the Stammaitic yeshiva" of the fifth century.[17] Following Boyarin, Moshe Simon-Shoshan has argued that Yavneh functioned as a "narrative world" for the redactors of the Talmud, who "established the norms on which the society of the *beit midrash* is founded and the ground rules by which rabbinic study, dispute, and decision-making are to be conducted."[18]

The Talmud famously tells the tale of how the academy at Yavneh was

[16] Epstein, *Passover* Haggadah, 18.
[17] Daniel Boyarin, "The Yavneh-Cycle of the Stammaim and the Invention of the Rabbis," in *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammaim) to the Aggada*, ed. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 237–89.
[18] Moshe Simon-Shoshan, "Creator of Worlds: The Deposition of Rabban Gamliel and the Creation of Yavneh," *AJS Review* 41, no. 2 (2017): 287–313.

founded. During the Roman siege of Jerusalem, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, the first two protagonists mentioned in our story, hid the great sage Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai in a coffin and smuggled him out of the city. The story goes to relate how, while leaving the city, the trio encountered the Roman emperor Vespasian, and the quick-witted rabbi Eliezer was able not only to sweet talk his way out of trouble, but also to extract additional promises from the emperor. He secured the protection of Yavneh and guaranteed the safety of Rabban Gamliel, a descendent of both King David and Hillel the Elder, who would serve as *nasi*, leader of the rabbinic court, after Rabbi Yoḥanan. [19]

The other sages at our seder represent a younger, so-called second generation of sages. Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaria and Rabbi Akiva are the students in our story and are listed second to illustrate their subordinate position in the chain of transmission. Yet, according to the Talmud, three of the four sages mentioned do share at least one thing in common: they were participants in the controversy that led to the removal of Rabban Gamliel as *nasi*.

Several stories in the Talmud relate how Rabban Gamliel could be particularly cruel, especially to his contemporary, Rabbi Yehoshua. In one well-known incident, Rabban Gamliel disagrees on the calculation of Yom Kippur. Using his authority as the *nasi*, Rabban Gamliel orders Rabbi Yehoshua to appear before him with his staff and purse on the date Rabbi Yehoshua considered to be Yom Kippur. Rabbi Yehoshua is humiliated and distraught at having to violate the most sacred day of the year, as he understood it, to appease the *nasi*. It took the intervention of Rabbi Akiva to resolve the dispute, appease Rabbi Yehoshua, and honor Rabban Gamliel.

In another famous incident, Rabban Gamliel was deposed from leadership of the rabbinic academy. Here, again, in a dispute with Rabbi Yehoshua over whether the evening prayer was obligatory or optional, Rabban Gamliel humiliates his contemporary. He forces the aging Rabbi Yehoshua to stand for hours in the study hall and ultimately compels him to publicly recant his previous teaching. This shaming is more than his fellow can bear. The assembled sages—including Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaria—lock Rabban Gamliel out of the study house and appoint Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaria as *nasi* in his place.[20]

[19] b. Gittin 56a–56b and Avot deRabbi Natan 4:5.

[20] b. Berakhot, 27a–28b. For a rich exploration of the comforting role of Rabbi Akiva, see Miriam Gedwiser, "Rabbi Akiva the Comforter," Drisha Institute, https://drisha.org/audiolibrary/rabbi-akiva-the-comforter/. On the deposition of Rabban Gamliel, see Avi Poupko, "Lighting Up the Night: The Revolutionary Mandate of a Rabbinic Coup," *Ateret Tzvi Prize 5778* (2018),

Perhaps this rift explains Rabban Gamliel's absence from at Benei Braq. While Rabbi Akiva again intercedes to restore harmony, suggesting a rotating leadership of the academy, the damage has been done. Rabban Gamliel's absence from the seder suggests that he is unable or unwilling to celebrate Passover with the other sages. The association of the seder at Benei Braq and Rabban Gamliel's deposition is suggested by the Haggadah itself. The text that immediately follows is a quote from the Mishnah that begins "Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah said, 'Behold, I am *like* a man of seventy, and yet I did not know that the Exodus from Egypt was to be remembered in the evening." The Talmud is captivated by the word "like." It views it as superfluous and uses the irregular language as hook for another legend. I share the story below, in Emmanuel Levinas's telling:

> Rabban Gamliel, head of the rabbinic academy, was too strict a master. He was dismissed for that very excess of severity. A replacement is sought, and Eleazar ben Azaria is designated. He possesses wisdom, material independence and nobility—being descended from Esdras [Ezra] in the tenth generation; responsible for an exceedingly glorious spiritual heritage. Everything seems to portend an eminent role for him. But he is only eighteen years old—without one white hair. Can one teach without innovating? But can one innovate without reference to a tradition, without remaining the contemporary—real or apparent—of the discourse of the past? A miracle was needed! Eighteen rows of white hair appeared on Eleazar ben Azaria's head—who, at the age of eighteen, henceforth looked seventy, in order that all innovation should derive from earlier forms.[21]

While at first glance, it may appear that Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaria's statement—and therefore the legend of his overnight maturation—appears independent, disconnected from the story of the sages' seder that precedes it in the Haggadah, the manuscript tradition suggests reading the two texts together. While the majority of Haggadot today follow the text of Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaria's statement as preserved in the Babylonian Talmud, most

https://www.hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/lighting-night.

[21] Emmanuel Levinas, "Beyond Memory: From Tractate Berakhot 12a–13b," in *In the Time of Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Continuum, 2007), 64–79.

extant geniza fragments of the Haggadah offer a reading with a critical addition, which is also preserved by Maimonides in his Haggadah text. They all add the word להם, "to them," so that the line reads "Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said **to them**, 'Behold I am like a man of seventy…'" This addition demands that the reader understand this paragraph as continuation of the story that precedes it.

A second text also asks us to imagine the sages at Benei Braq as being in dialogue in some ways with the legal and political attitudes that led to the deposition of Rabban Gamliel. While Rabban Gamliel is absent from the seder in the Haggadah, the Tosefta shares a story of his own all-night seder:

> A story is told of Rabban Gamliel and the Sages: Once they were reclining at the house of Boethus ben Zonim in Lydda and were occupied with *the laws* of Passover all evening until the early morning [*kerot ha'gever*]. They removed [the table] from before them, gathered themselves and went to the study hall.[22]

While this narrative differs in several ways from the seder in the Haggadah, perhaps the most critical distinction is in the contents of the Passover service. At the seder in Benei Braq, the sages spend the evening telling the story of the exodus, while Rabban Gamliel and the unnamed sages with him spend the evening "engaged with the laws of Passover." How are we to understand the difference in practice between these two groups?

Barry Wimpfheimer has argued for the importance of deconstructing the division between so-called halakhah (legal) and aggadah (narrative) in reading rabbinic literature. At a minimum, he maintains that narrative material should be read within a legal context and vice versa.[23] This methodology is useful here. Immediately prior to the story of the sages, the Haggadah enjoins the act of communal memory: "Even if we were all sages—even if we all knew the Torah, we would still be obligated to tell of the Exodus from Egypt. And all who expand in their telling of the story is deemed praiseworthy." Rabban Gamliel's seder, though, comes as an example of fidelity to a different legal tradition cited in the Tosefta: "One should not

[22] Tosefta (Liberman) Pesahim 10:12. On the expression *kerot hagever*, see Avraham Yoskovich, "Keroth Ha-Gever (A Cock Crow) in Rabbinic Literature" (paper presented at the World Union of Jewish Studies, 2013).

[23] Barry Wimpfheimer, *Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

consume dessert, such as nuts, dates, or roasted grains, after the [eating] the Passover offering. A person is obligated to occupy themselves with the laws of Passover all evening, whether with his son, his students, or even with himself alone."[24] We have, then, two traditions about what the content of the Passover seder should be, one that privileges the study of the law and one that centers the seder around the telling of a story. It is perhaps surprising that the Passover Haggadah ultimately embraced the second approach. If legal dispute is at the heart of the rabbinic tradition, why did the rabbis choose narrative and memory as the most appropriate modes of discourse for Passover?

S. Daniel Breslauer has argued that the two narratives reflect divergent ethical traditions within rabbinic literature. Rabban Gamliel's seder "focuses on actions rather than on thought, on deed rather than on motivation." The Seder at Benei Braq, conversely, is an example of Rabbi Akiva's messianic optimism, even if it predates his revolutionary activities: "The purpose of telling stories is to motivate political action," Breslauer argues. "Political action does not precede but depends upon theology. In such a case, theology can succeed even when the political action fails." He understands the Haggadah's call to remember the exodus as an example of Abraham Joshua Heschel's "depth theology," which he understands to mean "the sense of divine challenge and the desire of human beings to answer that challenge."[25] Or, as Heschel writes, "[t]heology declares. Depth theology evokes…theology deals with permanent facts. Depth theology deals with moments."[26]

Similarly, Levinas asserts that the memory of a singular event—the exodus—becomes the very *breath* of Jewish existence. Reflecting on Eleazar ben Azaria's enjoinment to recall the exodus in the evening that follows the seder in the Haggadah, he writes:

> The going forth from Egypt—the Exodus—and the evocation of that exodus in which freedom was given to a people, the coming to the foot of Mount Sinai where that freedom culminated in Law, constituted a privileged past, the very form of the past, as it were. But by the same token it is a thought virtually obsessed by the theme of freeing

[24] Tosefta Pesahim 10:7.

[25] S. Daniel Breslauer, "When Halakha is Haggadah: The Ethics of the Passover Seder," *Shofar* 3, no. 4 (1985): 5–18.

[26] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Noonday, 1967), 118.

> slaves.... Here we have a dimension of the memorable and as it were the spirituality—or the respiration—of consciousness, which already, in its content of presence, is memory of affranchisement, and lived concretely as the soul of freedmen. The Jew is free qua affranchised: his memory is immediately compassion for all the enslaved or all the wretched of the earth, and a special flair for that wretchedness that the wretched themselves are prone to forget.[27]

Perhaps, by including the seder at Benei Braq and excluding Rabban Gamliel's seder at Lod, the editors of the Haggadah were simply preserving the tradition best known to them by its transmission in the Babylonian Talmud. It is plausible, though, that the text is also making a claim about the function of memory as a redemptive act.

In the rabbis' telling, the two Passover meals come at a time of crisis for the Jewish community: the Jerusalem temple lays in ruins, and Jewish ritual practice must find a way to move forward. In recalling the specific laws of Passover as they would have been carried out in the temple, Rabban Gamliel is recalling a recent past to which he was a direct witness. A psychoanalytic reading might suggest that Rabban Gamliel is trapped in a pathologized melancholy; he longs to maintain and restore those customs and rituals that were central to his identity when the temple stood. This perhaps contributes to the lack of empathy he displays toward his contemporaries. In Rabban Gamliel's world, there is no room for the kind of innovative teaching that Levinas sees manifest in Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaria. How can one innovate? "The footrest of our God is burnt in fire. Should we not weep!"

In the seder at Benei Braq, though, another mode of memory prevails. Where Rabban Gamliel weeps, Akiva laughs. These sages are no less traumatized—they are products of the same calamity as Rabban Gamliel. They deploy, though, a messianic vision of history that sees the world not through the lachrymose lens of recent destruction but with an eye—or, better, soul—toward past and future redemption. Telling the tale of redemption is an act of defiance against destruction. Seen this way, the purpose of historical narrative is not to create linear arcs, but to disrupt them.

[27] Levinas, "Beyond Memory."

Daniel Stein

Fruitful Melancholia and Jewish Memory

In *Mourning Becomes the Law*, philosopher Gillian Rose reflects on the perseverance of narrative in Jewish thought, even in the midst of catastrophic loss. She cites a famous Hasidic tale that she learned from Elie Wiesel:

> When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov
> Saw misfortune threatening the Jews
> It was his custom
> To go into a certain part of the forest to meditate.
> There he would light a fire,
> Say a special prayer,
> And the miracle would be accomplished
> And the misfortune averted.
> Later when his disciple,
> The celebrated Magid of Mezritch,
> Has occasion, for the same reason,
> To intercede with heaven,
> He would go to the same place in the forest
> And say: "Master of the Universe, listen!
> I do not know how to light the fire,
> But I am still able to say the prayer."
> And again the miracle would be accomplished.
> Still later,
> Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov,
> In order to save his people once more,
> Would go into the forest and say:
> "I do not know how to light the fire,
> I do not know the prayer,
> But I know the place
> And this must be sufficient."
> It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.
> Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn
> To overcome misfortune.
> Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands,
> He spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire
> And I do not know the prayer;
> I cannot even find the place in the forest.

> All I can do is to tell the story,
> And this must be sufficient."
> And it was sufficient.[28]

Rose comments:

> The tale plus the comment which questions the continuing ability to tell the tale is the tale renewed by the questioning of its transmission in spite of the loss of its truth. Not to tell the tale of perhaps not being able to tell the tale would make the loss of the tale and the occurrence of the catastrophe absolute: it would fix the catastrophe as the meaning, or, rather, as the devastation, of meaning.[29]

Rose would have perhaps been delighted to learn that the tale she cites here, one that she hopes "countless others" would also relate, has a rich history of its own—one that, ultimately, helps us finally understand Rabbi Akiva's seder.

The letters between Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, both philosophers, bear witness to the growth of and ultimately the tragic demise of a friendship that developed during the most catastrophic moments in world history. Despite this—or perhaps because of it—they also display a consistent theme: the urgent desire the two men shared to write and hopefully publish books of lasting impact.[30] While Benjamin's influence has ascended in recent years, he died tragically, before seeing his mature works through to fruition. Scholem, on the other hand, published arguably his most important book, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1946), just after the conclusion of World War II. It carries this dedication:

> TO THE MEMORY OF
> WALTER BENJAMIN
> (1892–1940) The friend of a lifetime whose genius united the insight of the Metaphysician, the interpretative power

[28] Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire*, trans. Marion Wiesel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), quoted in Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 99.
[29] Rose, *Mourning*, 100.
[30] Gershom Scholem, ed., *The Correspondance of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, trans. Anson Rabinach (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

> of the Critic and the erudition of the Scholar.
> DIED AT PORT BOU (SPAIN)
> ON HIS WAY INTO FREEDOM[31]

In the afterward to the collection of lectures that formed *Major Trends*, Scholem concludes with the same Hasidic tale cited by Rose. It is, to my knowledge, the first time the story appears in English. Scholem, though, does not attribute the tale to Martin Buber's famous collections of such tales. Instead, he notes that he heard the story from Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the Hebrew author who, in the 1920s, had served as a kind of spiritual mentor to Scholem and Benjamin in their early studies of Judaism in Berlin.[32] This is how Scholem understood the story:

> You can say if you will that this profound little anecdote symbolizes the decay of a great movement. You can also say that it reflects the transformation of all its values, a transformation so profound that in the end all that remained of the mystery was the tale. That is the position in which we find ourselves today, or in which Jewish mysticism finds itself. The story is not ended, *it has not yet become history*, and the secret life it holds can break out tomorrow in you or in me.[33]

How are we to understand such an approach to memory?

Traverso has contemplated the fate of Marxism after the collapse of the Soviet Union and has suggested an approach to mourning that might also be applied to Rabbi Akiva: "This melancholia does not mean lamenting a lost utopia, but rather rethinking a revolutionary project in a nonrevolutionary age. This is a fruitful melancholia that, one could say with Judith Butler, implies the transformative effect of loss."[34] Traverso also offers a moving example of this kind of "fruitful melancholia":

[31] Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1946, 1995), dedication page.
[32] Cynthia Ozick, "The Heretic," *New Yorker* (August 25, 2002), https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/09/02/the-heretic.
[33] Scholem, *Major Trends*, 264–65.
[34] For Butler's construction of such melancholia, see Judith Butler, "After Loss, What Then," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 467–73.

> One of the most significant examples of a fruitful work of mourning that, instead of paralyzing action, stimulates it in a self-reflexive and conscious way deals with the reactions of gay activists to the disruptive consequences of AIDS, a pandemic whose outbreak coincided with the fall of communism.... Rather than escaping melancholia, [activists] channeled it toward a fruitful work of reconstruction, creating medical centers, assuring psychological care, defending recently achieved rights, and rebuilding a network of associations. Act Up [The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power—an early HIV-AIDS advocacy group] was the product of a fruitful, political melancholia.[35]

Rabbi Akiva's approach to memory is similarly productive. As Rose notes, the act of telling stories is an act of resistance against catastrophe. For Rabbi Akiva and his fellows, telling the tale of redemption and plunging its interpretive depths while experiencing their own personal loss inspires them to work for a better future. Instead of striving to rebuild an irreplaceable past, their memories remind them of what was and allow them to envision the world as it might be. As Levinas asserts, the exodus is evidence that it is possible, against all odds, to move from suffering to freedom. In renewing this memory, then, Rabbi Akiva and his fellows were simultaneously bearing witness to a redeemed past and calling on each other to be agents in creating a holier future. It is in this way that Akiva brings comfort to his colleagues. And it is perhaps for this reason that new approaches to Jewish memory are ascendant today. We live in a turbulent time, when the impacts of catastrophes beyond name are regularly experienced by so many. While petty tyrants may call on their followers to seek refuge in imagined pasts that never were, Rabbi Akiva's seder teaches us that embedded within crisis is the promise of redemption, if we only seek it out and heed its call to action. As Scholem writes, "The story is not ended, it has not yet become history, and the secret life it holds can break out tomorrow in you or in me."

Rabbi Daniel Z. Stein is the spiritual leader of Congregation B'nai Shalom in Walnut Creek, California and a doctoral student at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley. He is the 2023–2024 Daniel Jeremy Silver Fellow at the Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies.

[35] Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, 21.