

Binding Metaphors: A Meditation¹

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Bruryah walked into the house and knew immediately that something was not right. She sensed it, but let it go. Rabbi Meir was praying — but that was anything but unusual. He prayed a lot, and when he wasn't praying, he was learning. The books that lined their living room (though not yet written or printed), were dog-eared and underlined. They belonged to both Bruryah and Rabbi Meir.

Bruryah was returning from performing and she was drained, exhausted. The Israel Museum had just opened up a new contemporary wing and had commissioned pieces by several artists as a *hanukat habayit* — a dedication. After performing her “midrashic musings” for six hours, all she could think of was a hot bath — almost scalding — and a glass of red Galilean wine from one of those new boutique wineries. Coltrane on the iPod and two scented candles rounded out the picture. God save anybody who got between her and the bath.

As she drew the bath, she reviewed the day's performance. In her pieces, she played with borders and boundaries. Standing on the edge of the inside of the inside, she would end up outside. She would usually begin with a provocation and someone in her audience would always take the bait. Today, she had had an especially satisfying exchange with that Sadducee² who was obviously from North Tel Aviv and who had come to thumb his nose at the Jerusalem scene. Now, stepping into the steaming waters, she wondered if she had been too harsh. “Wow,” she harshly interrupted herself, “I must be getting soft in my old age.”

She started thinking about why she had chosen to perform in front of the George Segal sculpture, “Abraham and Isaac.” Abraham, in his 50s, gripping a knife, stands over a kneeling, bound Isaac in his late teens or early 20s. The metaphorical power of this image was so overwhelming — the old slaughtering the young, sending the young to slaughter, Kent State, the Yom Kippur War, Massada, Gamla, Deir Yassin — that it didn't take much to tip the metaphor over the edge. In her movements and her lines — she called her performances “walking and talking” — she refashioned the death, the killing, and the power. She suggested that what was being killed was the unredeemed world, that what was left was salvation. Is that an

acceptable act of violence? “For through Isaac shall you bear seed.” And yet if no Isaac, no more seed. If no more seed, then the story is over and God would be forced to intervene. The world would have to be redeemed.

The Sadducee (she was sure now that he was some high-tech something or other) had arrived prepared, knowing that the audience would be invited to participate; he threw at her a verse from Isaiah: “Rejoice, O barren one, who has not given birth to children.” He added, “Because she is barren she rejoices? Where is the sense in that?” Ever since the death of her two children on one dark Shabbat, Bruryah had carried a hole in her heart that fueled her anger, her humor — even, indirectly, her creativity. But she never directly touched the pain. The Sadducee thought he had caught her. The binding of Isaac was much closer to home.

However, without a break in her step, she leaned on Abraham's dagger and rolled forward, declaring loudly, laughing: “Can't you read the rest of the verse, you fool? ‘For there are many more children of desolation than children of those husbanded.’ Therefore, ‘Rejoice, O Congregation of Israel, who is like a barren woman who has not given birth to children of damnation, as you have.’” And here she went almost *en pointe* and fell slowly forward, rolled onto her back then did a backward roll; then, she stood up and circled the sculpture. It was an impressive display.

As she was enjoying the memory of this encounter, Rabbi Meir's prayers were growing louder and they started breaking into the sanctuary of her steam and silence. Slowly, she realized that her pious, learned husband, who could command heaven with his words, was praying for the death of their neighbors. Admittedly, Bruryah would not have mourned their departure. Even though she didn't think they were evil — as her husband obviously did — they were annoying. It was almost impossible to walk by their place without being assaulted by the drunken ravings of one or another of the denizens of the house. And yet, Bruryah refused to give up on them. She also refused to allow Rabbi Meir to believe that the answer was to kill people with prayer.

So, with a massive effort of will, Bruryah dragged herself out of the tub, put on her robe,



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This essay is dedicated to Ruhama Weiss.

¹ This story is based on two stories in the Babylonian Talmud, *Brachot* 10a and a story that appears in Midrash Mishlei Chapter 29:3.

² The Sadducees were one of the groups of non-Rabbinic Jews who lived in the Land of Israel around the time of the Second Temple.

and stormed loudly into the dining room, dripping wet. This caused Rabbi Meir to pause.

“What exactly are you doing?” she demanded.

“The neighbors, you know, down the block. They are evil and need to be punished.”

“What?!! What are you thinking? Is drinking beer at 10 o’clock in the morning now a capital crime?”


“Well, King David thought it was. He wrote in Psalms: ‘Let sinners cease out of the earth, and let the wicked be no more.’ I am doing no more than King David inscribed in Torah.”

“Sometimes, Meir, dear husband, I think that you go through Torah over and over, but you don’t let it go through you. Why do you in-

sist on reading *hata'im* as sinners when you can just as easily read it as ‘sins?’ If the sins cease, then there will be no more wicked people. Not that they will die.”

“And if I read the verse differently, the people will be different?”

“Perhaps they will. Perhaps if you read the verse differently, you will read the people differently. Perhaps if you read the people differently, they will be different people — they will have room to be different people. Perhaps. Perhaps we will finally embrace the distance of exile, mourn our children, and cry for God. Perhaps.”

Bruryah returned to her bath. Rabbi Meir actually did change his prayers and, believe it or not, the neighbors moved out. 

Maimonides, Herzl, and Company

ATAR HADARI

When I teach writing, I ask people to write down two names: the person they most admire and the one they most despise. Then, depending on which is more interesting (no, don’t admire mom), I ask them to write a scene that makes either their hero seem a heel or their villain seem sympathetic. Villains work best. A liberal student wrote a scene of Rush Limbaugh being harassed in a hospital. Another student wrote about Margaret Thatcher clearing her desk. The exercise is a shortcut to creating three-dimensional characters and understanding what makes them tick.

Lately, I’ve added a caveat: “Try to visualize the person. What is he or she doing? In what sort of play would the character appear?” One would think that the kind of play would depend on the author, not the subject, but I find that a character’s life must have within it an embedded shape, a metaphor, if you will, in order to yield to dramatic form.

Take former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. For the past several years, I have been writing a series of monologues about his life. When asked unexpectedly by my wife about the archetypal story I was telling, I thought about it a minute and then said, “Don Juan,” the legendary fictional womanizer. Any version of the Don’s career is a series of seductions or skirmishes in which the Don outwits his adversary. Finally, the Don is dragged off to hell by the statue of his former lover. Despite the

Kahan Commission’s findings (which found then-Defense Minister Sharon personally responsible for failing to take appropriate measures to prevent bloodshed during the massacres at Sabra and Shatila in Lebanon in 1982), Sharon retained his role in the cabinet and later enjoyed years as prime minister. Later, when the press unexpectedly resurrected the Greek Island affair, a 2004 political scandal involving the granting of a favor in exchange for money, Sharon suffered a stroke and fell into a coma. That was the end of the Don.

Why write metaphorically about Sharon rather than a heroic biopic? No other shape — it seems to me — would adequately encompass his roller-coaster story.

Here is another example: Imagine Maimonides on stage. The central metaphor of the Rambam’s life is a page of his *Mishneh Torah*, a masterpiece composed line-by-line. While alternative opinions are excluded from the text, they keep erupting on stage as arguments, interruptions, trouble. He keeps trying to add to the one page, which is projected on the stage, but it goes up in flames. He has the distinction of having his works burned at the behest of other rabbis in France. Yosef Karo’s universally accepted *Shulchan Aruch*, which includes a veritable chorus of other commentary in addition to that of Rambam, provides a chorus of dissenting voices that overwhelm the stage. Curtain.

An action must sum up the person.

For many years, I have pondered how to tell

Atar Hadari’s verse monologues about Ariel Sharon, “The General’s House,” have won the Daniel Varoujan Award from New England Poetry Club and a Paumanok Poetry Award among other prizes. His plays about Michelangelo, Janis Joplin, and Ben Jonson have appeared in London, Cincinnati, Alaska, and at the Royal Shakespeare Company, where he won the Young Writer Award. He is currently an associate of the Royal Court Theatre in London.