Mishnah Taanit - A Phenomenology of a Community Living in the Shadow of Ostracism

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A. Introduction

Why does the community fast when the rains are delayed? The prevailing view is that those who fasted understood the absence of rain as punishment for the community's sins, and their fasting as atonement for those sins. This is the dominant tendency in the Bible, appearing both in the passages of blessings and curses in Leviticus and Deuteronomy and in the passage beginning "And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently."[1] It is no coincidence that tractate Megillah prescribes the reading of the passage of blessings and curses on a communal fast.[2] In chapter 3 of tractate Taanit itself, the language of the Mishnah also parallels Solomon's speech at the dedication of the Temple, a speech that explicitly presents the absence of rain as punishment for sin.[3] Moreover, in chapter 3 the Mishnah quotes the prophecy of Amos, according to which the absence of rain is punishment for sin.[4] Yet the Bible also offers a different way of confronting the absence of rain and the afflictions that befall the community. This second response demands an understanding of God's ways and asks that He explain His actions, since the absence of rain, like any other affliction that befalls the community, calls for interpretation. What exactly is God's position when rain does not fall? What sins account for the affliction that descends upon the people, or the rain that does not? According to this response, the

1 See the passage beginning "And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently": "And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto My commandments which I command you this day ... that I will give the rain of your land in its season, the former rain and the latter rain ... and the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and He shut up the heaven, so that there shall be no rain" (Deuteronomy 11:13-17). A similar conception appears in Deuteronomy 28:24; Leviticus 26:3-4; 1 Kings 8:35; Isaiah 5:5-8; Joel 2:23-24; Jeremiah 5:23-25; Ezekiel 34:25-27; Ezekiel 38:18-22. [Direct biblical quotations follow The Holy Scriptures: A New Translation (JPS, 1917). Biblical passages embedded in other quoted works are translated as part of those works.]

2 Megillah 3:6.

3 Solomon says: "If there be in the land famine, if there be pestilence, if there be blasting or mildew, locust or caterpillar ..." (1 Kings 8:37). Taanit 3:5 states: "For these they sound the alarm everywhere: for blight and mildew, for locust and devouring locust, for wild beasts and for the sword ..."

4 Taanit 3:3: "Likewise, a town upon which no rain has fallen, as it is written, 'I caused rain to fall upon one town, but upon another town I caused no rain to fall; one plot received rain,' and so forth" (Amos 4:7). The biblical conception that the absence of rain is punishment for sin also emerges from Albeck's introduction to his commentary on tractate Taanit, since he cites the same biblical passages expressing this conception. David Levine likewise regards the passage beginning "And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently" as a general example of "the way communal afflictions were perceived in antiquity, and an illustration of the form of the community's response. Affliction expresses God's desire to punish or deter deeds that ought not to be done. The solution therefore lies in atonement for those deeds and a commitment not to repeat them." See David Levine, Communal Fasts and the Sages' Sermons: Law and Practice in the Talmudic Period [Hebrew], Tel Aviv, 2001, p. 12. Levine writes about fasting in the context of rabbinic literature as a whole and accordingly does not treat tractate Taanit as a single literary unit. See also his references to anthropologists who regarded fasting as "rites of intensification," intended to unite the community in confronting an affliction that has befallen it (pp. 11-12). Noah Hacham qualifies the claim that those who fasted understood their fasting in terms of atonement: "Is fasting connected with atonement for sins and repentance? The natural answer is yes, yet this was not emphasized in our study, perhaps not by chance. In most of the cases discussed in the first part, atonement for sins was not explicitly mentioned in the accounts of fasting. By contrast, sins and repentance are more common in fasts held after disasters. It therefore seems that, in certain historical and literary contexts, communal fasts are more a means of prayer, and in others a means of repentance and atonement." Noah Hacham, "Communal Fasts in the Second Temple Period" [Hebrew], MA thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1996, p. 102. Amram Tropper examined the different motives for fasting in the biblical and Second Temple periods. With respect to natural disaster and drought, Tropper identifies the motives for fasting in the Bible, where disaster is punishment and therefore calls for repentance, with those of the Second Temple period. Amram Tropper, "Fasting: Its Meaning and Motives in the Second Temple Period" [Hebrew], MA thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1999.

absence of rain expresses God's silence and His disregard. I wish to emphasize the difference between these two approaches. In the first, the absence of rain has a single meaning: it expresses punishment and displeasure at the people's sins. In the second, the absence of rain is ambiguous: it expresses God's disregard and His silence. This disregard and silence may certainly result from anger at the people's sins, but their principal dimension is not necessarily God's anger; it is the fact that He is ignoring the people. Furthermore, in the second approach the central issue is not the people's transgressions but the ostracism practiced by the Holy One, blessed be He, and the silence He imposes on the community.

The book of Job is the Bible's sharpest expression of the conflict between these approaches. The second approach, represented by Job, sees the afflictions that befall a person as an expression of God's disregard and indifference. This disregard leaves Job with a profound sense of having no control, since he feels exposed to the world's misfortunes in a world in which God ignores human beings. Job's companions, by contrast, represent the approach that sees his afflictions as an expression of his sins:[5]

Then answered Bildad the Shuhite, and said: How long wilt thou speak these things, Seeing that the words of thy mouth are as a mighty wind? Doth God pervert judgment? Or doth the Almighty pervert justice? If thy children sinned against Him, He delivered them into the hand of their transgression. If thou wouldest seek earnestly unto God, And make thy supplication to the Almighty; If thou wert pure and upright; Surely now He would awake for thee, And make the habitation of thy righteousness prosperous. (Job 8:1-6)

Job rebels against this interpretation, arguing that God's greatness and remoteness make any communication between Him and human beings impossible: “Who alone stretcheth out the heavens, And treadeth upon the waves of the sea ... Lo, He goeth by me, and I see Him not. He passeth on also, but I perceive Him not” (9:8-11). Job therefore concludes that God is indifferent: “It is all one—therefore I say: He destroyeth the innocent and the wicked” (9:22). Job seeks God's answer and His presence so that he may demonstrate the uprightness of his ways: “I will say unto God: Do not condemn me; Make me know wherefore Thou contendest with me” (10:2). This theme, Job's plea that God speak to him and reveal Himself so that he may understand the meaning of the afflictions that have befallen him, recurs several times later in the book.[6]

As noted, tractate Taanit contains expressions of the community's understanding of the absence of rain as punishment for sins that require atonement. I wish to show, however, that the tractate's redaction expresses a continuing tension between the two approaches.[7] Indeed, certain editorial

5 Hananel Mack identifies Rava as an amora who continues the arguments of Job's companions against him: “Rava ... assumes that Job will examine his deeds, as should anyone upon whom suffering comes. But Job, although he saw that suffering had come upon him, did not follow the path that Rava or Rav Hisda propose to him: he did not examine his deeds but rebelled against his suffering ...” See Hananel Mack, “It Was Only a Parable”: Job in Second Temple Literature and in the Eyes of the Sages [Hebrew], Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, 2005, p. 156.

6 Job 13:21-23; 19:7; 23:3-5; 30:20-21.

7 I approach the analysis of the tractate from a literary perspective: that is, I regard it as a single literary unit with a beginning, middle, and end. On this understanding, the tractate has a central theme. For me, that theme is not stated in its title but consists of the problem the tractate seeks to confront and the answer it gives to that problem. Literary considerations of course guide every scholar of rabbinic literature, but I am aiming more at an approach that sees the “forest” and not only the “trees.” Neusner discussed approaching the mishnaic text from a literary point of view, particularly treating a tractate as a unit in its

decisions can be fully explained only by the approach that sees the absence of rain specifically as God's silence and His disregard for the community.

B. Mourning Customs

The first chapter of tractate Taanit describes an intensification of the community's mourning customs in four stages. If no rain has fallen by the seventeenth of Marheshvan, the “individuals” begin fasting from morning until evening.[8] If the drought continues until the beginning of Kislev, the court decrees three daytime fasts for the community.[9] After these three fasts, the character of the fasting becomes more severe: the court decrees three further communal fasts, but these last from evening to evening. In addition to fasting, the participants are forbidden “to work, to bathe, to anoint themselves, to wear sandals, and to have sexual intercourse, and the bathhouses are closed” (mishnah 6, Albeck edition). If these, too, pass without rain, the court decrees another seven fasts, which involve a further intensification: during these fasts, shofars are sounded and the shops are closed. If no rain falls even after these fasts, the fasting does not continue to intensify. Instead, “they reduce their business dealings, building and planting, betrothals and marriages, and the exchange of greetings, like people rebuked by the Omnipresent” (mishnah 7, Albeck edition).[10]

What does this increasing intensification of mourning customs mean? The straightforward explanation is that the gradual increase in severity expresses the community's growing awareness of its sins and its increasing desire to atone for them. Walfish argues that the first and second stages, in which individuals and then the community fast during daylight hours, express society's physical concern over the absence of rain. By contrast, the mourning customs and the fasts from evening to evening observed during the later fasts express the community's spiritual concern. Rain is understood as a means of communication between God and the community, and its absence has spiritual as well as physical significance.[11]

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own right: Jacob Neusner, The Mishnah: An Introduction, New Jersey, 1989, p. 11. For Neusner, however, a tractate's subject is usually the subject it explicitly declares. Abraham Walfish has analyzed the Mishnah's method of literary redaction, showing the importance of literary features for understanding an individual mishnah or a chapter. Walfish focuses on specific literary features, such as opening sentences, wordplay, and chiastic structure. Abraham Walfish, “Literary Phenomena in the Mishnah and Their Redactional and Conceptual Significance” [Hebrew], MA thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1994. I of course accept Walfish's treatment of the Mishnah as a literary text whose shaping is meaningful and not merely “associative.” My approach takes more of an overall view of the tractate, since I wish to understand the tendency of the tractate as a whole, as a single literary unit bringing together one central idea that runs through all its chapters or, as I seek to show here, two ideas expressed dialectically in its redaction.

8 Traditional interpretation identifies the “individuals” as Torah scholars, “distinguished in their deeds.” Levine sees them as those eccentric individuals capable of bringing down rain. See Levine, above, note 4, p. 136. In any event, the fact that the individuals fast first expresses the gradual way in which mourning customs begin to be observed.

9 As stated at the end of the tractate's first chapter, and in Tosefta Taaniyot 2:4, the fasts take place on Mondays and Thursdays. Levine argues that these days were set aside for communal fasts because they were market days, on which “the people of the villages assembled in the large town” (Levine, ibid., p. 41). Various rituals, such as Torah reading and communal fasts, were therefore assigned to these days, when the greatest possible communal participation was assured.

10 J. N. Epstein argues that most of the tractate dates from the Temple period. The later additions include its first two mishnayot. Epstein believes that the tractate began with the words, “On the third of Marheshvan they begin to ask for rain, so that the last Israelite may reach the Euphrates” (mishnah 3). J. N. Epstein, Introductions to Tannaitic Literature [Hebrew], Jerusalem, 1957, p. 46.

11 Walfish identifies mishnayot 1-3, which concern mentioning rain and asking for it, as one collection, and the remaining mishnayot of the chapter as another. The two collections were joined through an ending that echoes the opening, in the expressions “a sign of a curse” and “a sign of a blessing,” and through verbal association, “until Nisan has ended.” The idea

The Babylonian Talmud, in tractate Taanit, distinguishes between the mourning customs observed during a fast and those observed on the Ninth of Av and in mourning:

Rav Rafram said in the name of Rav Hisda: Wherever the reason is mourning, as on the Ninth of Av or in mourning, both hot and cold water are forbidden. Wherever the reason is pleasure, as on a communal fast, hot water is forbidden but cold water is permitted. (Taanit 13a)

Following this distinction, Levine argues that the mourning customs observed during a fast aim to deprive the community of pleasure, while the prohibition on work serves to achieve the day's purposes: uniting the community and enabling it to confront its affliction together. This differs from mourning on the Ninth of Av, which expresses sorrow over a grievous historical event:

This should not be understood as a matter of greater stringency in one case and greater leniency in the other. The different reasons reflect the different purposes of these days. Mourning for the destruction in the past defines the prohibitions of the Ninth of Av. By contrast, the experience of communal distress on account of which the communal fast was proclaimed leaves no room for activities devoted entirely to luxury and "pleasure." A concrete illustration of this difference is bathing in cold water, an activity regarded as functional. The permission to bathe in cold water on a communal fast follows from the fact that such bathing is not "for pleasure" and therefore does not impair the day's halakhic character.[12]

As is well known, mourning customs appear in rabbinic literature in different contexts. Thus, for example, tannaitic sources draw comparisons between a person under niddui (a formal ban), a mourner, and those observing a communal fast:

All those whom they declared forbidden to wear sandals may put them on when leaving the town; on reaching the town, they remove them. The same applies to a person under a ban and to a mourner. (Tosefta, Lieberman edition, chapter 1, halakhah 6)[13]

This comparison may point to different phenomenologies of mourning. The prohibition on wearing sandals in town during a communal fast need not have the same meaning when it appears in the context of ostracism.[14] Mourning customs constitute an ancient and powerful ritual, and it is quite

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uniting the two collections concerns "the importance of rain in the spiritual realm, and not only on the physical and biological plane: the heavens are a blessing because of their power to express, more than any other phenomenon, the divine response to human conduct and prayers." Walfish therefore holds that "rain stands at the center of the system of relations and communication between the Lord and the people of Israel." Abraham Walfish, "The Method of Literary Redaction in the Mishnah as Exemplified by Tractate Rosh Hashanah" [Hebrew], PhD dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2001, pp. 11-14.

12 Levine, above, note 4, p. 58. See also the discussion in Pesahim 54b and Rabbi Yohanan's opinion there that "the Ninth of Av is not like a communal fast."

13 This halakhah has parallels in the Jerusalem Talmud and in Evel Rabbati. The Jerusalem Talmud states: "It was taught: a mourner and a person under a ban who are traveling may wear sandals; when they reach the town, they remove them. The same applies on the Ninth of Av and on a communal fast" (Jerusalem Talmud, Berakhot 2:7 [5b]). Evel Rabbati states: "A mourner and a person under a ban who are traveling may wear sandals; once they reach the town, they remove them. The same applies on the Ninth of Av and on a communal fast" (Evel Rabbati 5:12).

14 In his book on the Jerusalem Talmud, Ginzberg compares the sources cited above and argues that the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds differ regarding the relative leniency or severity of mourning as it applies to the Ninth of Av, communal fasting, a mourner, and a person under a ban. Louis Ginzberg, Commentary and Novellae on the Jerusalem Talmud [Hebrew], vol. 1, pp. 383-384. As noted above, Levine rejects the question of relative severity and argues that these are different

possible that they migrated into other contexts. Yet the Babylonian Talmud also displays an opposite tendency. In his discussion of the mourner, the ostracized person, and the person afflicted with tzaraat (Moed Katan 14b-16a), Rav Yosef draws a full comparison between the ostracized person and those observing a communal fast. The ostracized person is forbidden to wear sandals, like those observing a communal fast; is forbidden to bathe, like those observing a communal fast; and is permitted sexual intercourse and the sending of offerings, like the Israelites, who were under a ban in the wilderness.[15] The laws of ostracism are clarified through a direct connection with the laws of communal fasting. Where Rav Yosef finds no source for a law of ostracism in communal fasting, he cites a source that also concerns communal ostracism: the collective state of ostracism of the Israelites in the wilderness. For Rav Yosef, the individual mourning customs observed by the ostracized person reflect the mourning customs observed by the community as a whole when it is under a ban. Rav Yosef does not make the methodological distinction between community and individual. On the contrary, he regards the communal fast as the model for the ostracism of the individual.

The ostracized person is someone subjected to various social restrictions for refusing to accept the authority of the sages. According to the discussion in tractate Moed Katan (14b-16a), this person must observe several mourning customs. The question is why an ostracized person should observe mourning customs at all. Libson suggests that their purpose is to humiliate the ostracized person.[16] There is no doubt that stripping the ostracized person of their social face, through prohibitions on bathing, haircuts, laundering, and footwear, involves humiliation and degradation. Yet this seems too narrow a framework for examining the mourning customs observed by the ostracized person. Humiliation and degradation are merely the external and symbolic aspect of another system. Falk briefly called this system "civil death," without elaborating.[17]

Williams, who has spent years studying the phenomenon of the silent treatment, or ostracism through silence, identifies several effects on the parties to a relationship in which the silent treatment is practiced. One of his most striking findings is that, in most cases in which one party to a relationship ostracizes the other and stops speaking to them, the ostracized party does not understand the reason for the ostracism.[18] This lack of understanding produces two reactions in the ostracized person:

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phenomenologies of mourning.

15 "What is the rule for a person under a ban with regard to covering the head? Rav Yosef said: Come and hear: 'They wrap themselves and sit like mourners and like persons under a ban'" (those observing a communal fast sit like mourners and persons under a ban) (Moed Katan 15a). "What is the rule for a person under a ban with regard to exchanging greetings? Rav Yosef said: Come and hear: 'And the exchange of greetings, like people rebuked by the Omnipresent'" (those observing a communal fast must behave like people who have been rebuked) (15a). "What is the rule for a person under a ban with regard to doing work? Rav Yosef said: Come and hear: 'When they said that work is forbidden, they said so only of the daytime; at night it is permitted.' The same applies to a person under a ban and to a mourner" (15b). "What is the rule for a person under a ban with regard to bathing? Rav Yosef said: Come and hear: 'When they said that bathing is forbidden, they said so only of the entire body; the face, hands, and feet are permitted.' The same applies to a person under a ban and to a mourner" (15b). "What is the rule for a person under a ban with regard to sexual intercourse? Rav Yosef said: Come and hear: 'Throughout those years when Israel was in the wilderness, they were under a ban and had sexual intercourse'" (the Israelites in a state of ostracism in the wilderness) (15b). "What is the rule for a person under a ban with regard to sending his offerings? Rav Yosef said: Come and hear: 'Throughout those years when Israel was in the wilderness, they were under a ban and sent their offerings'" (15b).

16 See Gideon Libson, "Ostracism and the Ostracized in the Eyes of the Tannaim and Amoraim" [Hebrew], Shenaton Ha-Mishpat Ha-Ivri, vols. 6-7, pp. 177-202.

17 Ze'ev Falk, Introduction to Jewish Law in the Second Temple Period [Hebrew], Tel Aviv, 1971, pp. 171-172.

The ostracized person does not know how to improve the situation or how to defend against the attack. Ironically, therefore, ostracizing silence that comes without explanation leads many targets to apologize to the source of the ostracism, even though they do not know what they are apologizing for.[19]

The principal human need threatened by the ostracizer's failure to explain why they are angry with the ostracized person is the need for control, regarded as a "basic human motivation."[20] When no explanation is given for the ostracism, the ostracized person feels helpless:

The ostracized person's sense of control is significantly diminished when ostracizers do not respond to their questions or provocations. Unlike other forms of distancing behavior, silence in ostracism is a unilateral act by one person against another.[21]

The sense of control is undermined still further when the ostracized person can think of several reasons that might have prompted the ostracizer to act. This situation leads the ostracized person to dwell increasingly on the reasons that might have led to their ostracism. It arouses guilt and a sharp decline in self-esteem.

No more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically possible, than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met 'cut us dead,' and acted as if we were non-existing things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from which the cruellest bodily tortures would be a relief; for these would make us feel that, however bad might be our plight, we had not sunk to such a depth as to be unworthy of attention at all.[22]

Ignoring someone can therefore affect several basic and vital needs: belonging, self-esteem, control, and a sense that life has meaning. The need to belong finds expression in human beings' need for frequent and positive interactions with others within a stable relationship in which each cares for the other's well-being. Ostracism and exclusion, whether social or physical, seriously undermine this basic need. Self-esteem is a "vital human need."[23] Ostracism inherently conveys the message that something about the ostracized person is undesirable or bad, and that person may internalize this feeling. Another need threatened by ostracizing silence is the need for control, also considered a "basic human need."[24] Without a sense of control, human beings feel helpless and generally become depressed. A sense of control enables a person to cope with failure and succeed later. Verbal aggression does not pull the ground out from under one's feet. Being ignored, however, destroys the

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18 Kipling D. Williams, Ostracism: The Power of Silence, New York, 2001. All quotations from Williams's book in the Hebrew original are my free translations. [The English quotations here are back-translations of those renderings; their wording has not yet been verified against Williams's book.]

19 Williams, ibid., p. 23.

20 Williams, ibid., p. 62.

21 Williams, ibid., p. 62.

22 See William James, The Principles of Psychology, New York, 1890, vol. 1, pp. 293-294. [The original English is restored here, checked against the 1918 Henry Holt printing. The Hebrew chapter quotes a free translation.]

23 Williams, above, note 18, p. 61.

24 Williams, above, note 18, p. 62.

ostracized person's sense of control: a unilateral act has been imposed upon them, and when the reason for the ostracism is unclear, or when there are several possible reasons for it, their sense of control is further undermined. The final basic need Williams identifies is the need for meaningful existence. Here the metaphor of ostracism appears in its full force: ostracizing and ignoring someone allows that person to see what life looks like without their presence. Human beings have a basic need to avoid thinking about their death, and ostracism leads them to contemplate the fragility and inherent transience of life. In other words, the mourning customs observed by the ostracized person are, in fact, mourning for their own social death.

What, then, of the communal fast? According to the tendency that sees the absence of rain as God's silence and disregard, the community observes mourning customs just as the ostracized person does. God's disregard for the community produces deeply painful feelings, foremost among them the ability to imagine life without that community's existence. The mourning customs aptly express the ostracized community's "death" in its own eyes.

Furthermore, the intensification of fasting practices, and the widening circles of the community that observe them, reveal that these practices have a physical and communicative purpose: drawing the remote God's attention to the condition of His suffering people. The increasingly intense mourning customs are a mechanism intended to help make sense of this silence: Is God simply indifferent to the people's condition? Is He angry? And if He is angry, what is He angry about? In other words, as Walfish has observed, the absence of rain is, according to tractate Taanit, a cessation of communication with the people, and the mourning customs are a mechanism for confronting this ostracism through silence. As noted, whereas in the first response the principal concern was to assuage God's anger, in the second it is to respond to God's silence and disregard. The gradual progression of mourning customs must be examined in light of the relationship with God as the Mishnah describes it. God's silence and the silent treatment He imposes on the people terrify the community and oblige it to exercise particular caution in every appeal to Him, for fear of making matters worse. This is why, after thirteen fasts, the decreeing of fasts suddenly stops, and certain mourning customs are observed "like people rebuked by the Omnipresent." The assumption here is that the gradual intensification of fasting practices, intended to draw the ostracizing God's attention slowly rather than through a sharp and direct appeal, has reached its peak. From this point onward, it poses a danger to the people, since its repetition and severity may provoke an unpredictable response from God.[25] The Tosefta's comparison between those observing a communal fast and the ostracized person, and the approach Rav Yosef takes in the discussion of the mourner, the ostracized person, and the person afflicted with tzaraat, may be part of a conception present in Mishnah Taanit: afflictions are interpreted as God's silence, and in the face of His silence the entire religious community experiences itself as living in an enduring state of ostracism.

25 In the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, nezifah, or rebuke, becomes a category of exclusion, like niddui, a ban. This is an exclusion a person undertakes voluntarily, unlike niddui or herem, which are imposed, in response to criticism or anger from an authority figure. It applies to that authority figure alone, not to the world at large. The Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds discuss niddui and nezifah within a single conceptual framework, although they are fundamentally different systems of exclusion. The logic behind this connection is that all forms and degrees of exclusion are seen as parts of one system. For our purposes, the mention of rebuke in chapter 1 of Mishnah Taanit may be said to connect the mourning customs mentioned there with ostracism and with the fasting community's status as an ostracized community.

C. The Fast Day Ritual in the Town Square

Chapter 2 of tractate Taanit provides a detailed account of the "order of the fasts." The fast-day ritual in the town square is a ritual performed during the stage of intensification, on the last seven fasts, during which "they sound the alarm and close the shops." In this ritual, the holy ark is taken out into the town's central square, and ashes are placed upon it and upon the heads of the Nasi and the head of the court. The "elder among them" delivers a sermon of "words of admonition," that is, words of rebuke. A prayer is recited, centered on the addition of six blessings to the Eighteen Benedictions, and shofars are sounded.[26]

The fast-day ritual in the town square expresses the same dialectic that appears in chapter 1 of tractate Taanit. On the one hand, the absence of rain expresses punishment for sins requiring atonement; on the other, it is interpreted as God's silence toward the community. The conception that sees the absence of rain as punishment for sin finds forceful expression in the elder's sermon: "Our brothers, it is not said of the people of Nineveh, 'God saw their sackcloth and their fasting,' but 'God saw their deeds, that they had turned from their evil way'; and in the prophetic tradition it says, 'Rend your hearts and not your garments'" (Taanit 2:1). By contrast, the special prayer recited during the fast expresses precisely the approach that longs for an answer from God. Six special blessings are added to the Eighteen Benedictions, each preceded by the reading of biblical verses. After the verses are read, the following formula is repeated: "May He who answered ... answer you and hear the sound of your cry this day." This is followed by the concluding formula, "Blessed are You, O Lord ..." All the biblical verses in question concern a longing for an answer from God. The recurring formula, "May He who answered ... answer you," likewise makes clear the longing for some response from God and for an end to the ostracism.[27] These explicit messages focus principally on the question of an answer from God. The people's affliction is secondary; the more important issue is God's silence and His disregard for the community. The mention of God's answering Abraham on Mount Moriah, Israel at the Red Sea, Joshua at Gilgal, Samuel at Mizpah, Jonah in the belly of the fish, and David and Solomon in Jerusalem serves specifically to emphasize the element of an answer. Abraham, Israel at the Red Sea, Samuel, Joshua, Jonah, David, and Solomon are not archetypes of sinners pleading for their lives. Rather, they are people who turned to God when they experienced the hiding of His face.

Moreover, the explicit connection between the absence of rain and the community's sins, expressed in the words of admonition, is tempered in two ways. First, the elder's words of admonition in Mishnah Taanit are a greatly abbreviated version of those found in the Tosefta, which reiterate the

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26 Levine argues that "the town square," at least in its original meaning, was the town's central square or central street, and that the ritual required going outdoors. Levine, above, note 4, pp. 70-71. On the shofars, see Epstein, above, note 10, p. 45, and Levine, ibid., pp. 107-113.

27 See chapter 2, mishnayot 3-4. See also Levine's discussion of their construction, above, note 4, pp. 82-94. Levine shows the correspondence between the verses and the concluding blessing formulas and attempts to explain several mismatches. For our purposes, it is important to mention his conclusion: "Thus the fast-day ritual reaches its climax. The checks and balances that governed the course and practices of the communal fast give way, in the fast's prayer, to an unequivocal demand that a solution to the affliction be found ... There is no attempt to maintain an appearance of 'Let us search and examine our ways' or 'Repentance and good deeds bring this about.' These emphases, which were so important in shaping the fast-day ritual, and through which the sages expressed their conception of fasting, play no role here" (p. 94). Yet the prayer in the fast-day ritual in the town square can also be read as the culmination of the tendency that sees fasting as a response to God's silence toward the community: not as a departure from an earlier tendency concerned with the people's sins, but precisely as an explicit expression of the community's fears and longings concerning God's silence.

connection between drought and the community's sins in still more explicit terms.[28] Second, we must recall the relationship between the two basic approaches to the absence of rain. The approach that holds that the absence of rain results from sins and requires atonement does not also include a sense that God is ignoring the people and remaining silent. By contrast, the approach that sees the absence of rain as God's disregard and silence includes, as does any social ostracism, a certain interpretation in terms of guilt. The person subjected to the silent treatment is confused by not knowing the reason for it and, among other things, blames themselves. The elder's words of admonition, in their abbreviated and muted formulation, can therefore also fit a situation of ostracism through silence. In this sense, the fast-day ritual in the town square means that, after the initial tentative attempts, the first fasts, to determine whether communication with the ostracizing God is possible, and after the intensification of mourning customs, the time has come for the ostracized to address the silent God explicitly. The fast-day ritual in the town square appears after God's sensitivity has already been tentatively tested. The ostracized are now psychologically prepared to make their voices heard. This voice asks for God's attention: everything that was merely implicit in the mourning customs is stated here more explicitly.

Levine regards the ashes placed upon the ark as "a clear sign of sorrow and mourning; the ashes express the gravity of the situation and the distress of those taking part."[29] The sorrow to which Levine refers is sorrow over the absence of rain, which signifies the community's sins. Yet the placing of ashes also reveals the conception according to which the absence of rain means God's silence and ostracism, which express the community's death in its own eyes. Burnt ashes, unlike ordinary ash, which is also called dust, are the residue of burned organic matter. Placing ashes on the heads of the Nasi and the head of the court is therefore intended to intensify their sense of ostracism. As noted, ostracism is an existential condition, since the ostracized person senses what life might look like without them. Placing burnt ashes on the head symbolizes this death: the ashes themselves symbolize the finitude of every organic creature and the fact that we are perishable beings destined to become dust and ashes. Here, however, in Mishnah Taanit, what matters specifically is that the Nasi and the head of the court perform this act, because it is the community as a community that has died, and the Nasi and the head of the court represent that community. Placing burnt ashes on the ark is a further step. The ark, that is, the holy ark with the Torah scroll it contains, represents the relationship between the community and God. The ark in the synagogue, toward which everyone turns in prayer, is regarded as the instrument mediating between the community and God. Placing burnt ashes upon it is mourning for the death of that communication.[30]

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28 Tosefta Taanit 1:8: "The elder among them speaks words of admonition before them: My children, let a person be ashamed before another and not be ashamed of his deeds; better that a person be ashamed before another than that he and his children waste away from hunger. And so it says, 'Why have we fasted, and You have not seen ... taken notice?' What does He answer them? 'On the day of your fast,' and so forth; 'You fast for strife and contention,' and so forth; 'Is this the fast I choose, a day for a person to afflict himself?' and so forth. Rather, what is the fast I desire? 'To loosen the bonds of wickedness.' If someone holds a dead creeping creature in his hand, even if he immerses in the Shiloah and in all the waters of Creation, he will never become pure. Once he throws the creature from his hand, immersion in forty seah avails him. And so it says, 'One who confesses and forsakes will receive mercy,' and 'Let us lift up our hearts with our hands,' and so forth."

29 Levine, above, note 4, p. 74. Levine believes that the ashes also express consolation and hope, since "the same act that expresses humiliation and degradation can at the same time make tangible the merit of the ancestors" (ibid.).

30 The Gemara in Taanit (16a) records a dispute concerning burnt ashes: "Why are ashes placed on each person's head? Rabbi Levi bar Hama and Rabbi Hanina disagree. One says: We are regarded before You as ashes. The other says: So that He may remember for us the ashes of Isaac." Levine sees this dispute as expressing the complexity of the ashes' symbolism: according

D. A Clear and Present Danger

Chapter 3 of tractate Taanit concerns situations in which fasting from evening to evening and the sounding of shofars begin immediately, as in the later fasts described in chapter 1. One such case is a prolonged interval between one rainfall and the next: “They sound the alarm immediately, because it is a plague of drought.” The same applies to rain that benefits only plants but not trees, or the reverse: in such a situation, the Mishnah permits the alarm to be sounded immediately.[31] The chapter then lists a series of situations in which the alarm may be sounded and fasting begun at once: “a town afflicted by pestilence or collapsing buildings,” and “blight, mildew, locusts, devouring locusts, wild beasts, and the sword.” This departure from the rules, however, is permitted only in the specific place where the danger exists, not throughout the surrounding geographical area. Thus, a town “upon which no rain has fallen” (chapter 3, mishnah 3) “fasts and sounds the alarm,” while the surrounding towns “fast but do not sound the alarm.” Yet epidemics that can spread, a “spreading plague,” warrant “sounding the alarm everywhere.” This mishnah, which permits the alarm to be sounded everywhere, alludes to Solomon's words at the dedication of the Temple (1 Kings 8:37). As noted, Solomon's words constitute the classic text directly attributing affliction to the sins of the individual or the community.

The abbreviation of the stages in the Mishnah is formulated in the words “they sound the alarm immediately.” The Mishnah does not use some other expression to indicate a leap to the severity of the later fasts; it focuses on sounding the alarm. The central feature of sounding the shofar is, of course, the sound it produces. Sound is the central element in the abbreviation of the stages of appealing to God in emergencies. This makes clear that, when there is no emergency, the central concern is to find the right voice with which to appeal to God.[32] As noted, the ostracized regard a direct appeal to the ostracizing God as dangerous, since His wrath is difficult to predict. When the afflictions are both life-threatening and urgent, however, it is permissible, despite the danger, to skip several stages in the process of drawing the ostracizing God's attention.

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to one opinion, the ashes express sorrow and mourning; according to the other, the mourning expresses hope and consolation. I read it as a fundamental dispute about the meaning of mourning customs in general, and about the community's understanding of itself when the rains fail to come. According to one opinion, the mourning customs serve to make tangible the community's death as a result of the absence of rain. According to the other, the absence of rain expresses punishment rather than a severing of the relationship between God and the community, and the mourning customs serve to atone for the sins for which the community has been punished.

31 Levine adduces several proofs that sounding the alarm in fact means an immediate transition to the model of the later fasts, that is, a more severe fast. One of these proofs is, of course, the literary parallel between “they sound the alarm immediately” and chapter 1, mishnah 6, which states, “These exceed the earlier ones in that during these they sound the alarm.” See Levine, ibid., p. 47.

32 Mishnah 7 permits the alarm to be sounded on the Sabbath: “For these they sound the alarm on the Sabbath: for a town surrounded by gentiles or by a river, and for a ship being tossed at sea. Rabbi Yose says: for help, but not for crying out. Shimon the Timnite says: also for pestilence.” When there is a danger to life involving urgency, such as being tossed at sea or war at the gates, the alarm is sounded even on the Sabbath. According to Rabbi Yose's dissenting opinion, it is permitted “for help, but not for crying out”: in other words, the permission to desecrate the Sabbath applies only to obtaining help, not to proclaiming a fast, “crying out.” The use of the root meaning “cry out” to express communal fasting seems to me more suited to describing the fast as a mechanism for sharply and directly addressing the silent God than as one expressing mourning for sins. The cry expresses the desire to break through God's disregard and indifference to the community's condition, without preliminaries, because time is pressing. Levine sees Rabbi Yose's opinion, which permits desecrating the Sabbath only “for help” and not “for crying out,” as expressing reservations about the efficacy of sounding the alarm and observing mourning customs, in contrast to the importance of repentance of the heart. In terms of silence and ostracism, Rabbi Yose does not believe that sounding the alarm and observing mourning customs are effective in drawing the silent, indifferent God's attention. See Levine's analysis of this mishnah, ibid., pp. 50-55.

E. Caution in Physical and Metaphysical Proximity to the Ostracizing God

The first five mishnayot of chapter 4, the tractate's final chapter, concern the members of the maamad, the representative group attending the communal offerings. The Mishnah explains:

What are the maamadot? Since it is said, "Command the children of Israel and say to them: My offering, My food," how can a person's offering be sacrificed when that person does not stand beside it? The early prophets established twenty-four watches. For each watch there was a maamad in Jerusalem consisting of priests, Levites, and Israelites. When the time came for the watch to go up, the priests and Levites went up to Jerusalem, while the Israelites belonging to that watch assembled in their towns and read the account of Creation. (Chapter 4, mishnah 2)

Our mishnah concerns representation. The bringing of an offering requires its owner's presence at the time of sacrifice; communal offerings therefore require the presence of the entire community. For this reason, the people were divided into twenty-four priestly watches. To each watch was assigned a maamad of Israelites, that is, those who stood in the Temple courtyard while the offerings were sacrificed. An Israelite who could go up to Jerusalem when the maamad to which he belonged was on duty was appointed as a representative of the entire people in the courtyard during the sacrifice of communal offerings. The Mishnah goes on to specify the prayers of the members of the maamad while the priests of their watch were sacrificing offerings in the Temple, their times and content, and the fact that the members of the maamad fasted on the weekdays during which their maamad was on duty in the Temple. The end of the chapter and of the tractate is devoted to the events that occurred on the seventeenth of Tammuz and the Ninth of Av, and to the famous mishnah, "There were no days as festive for Israel as the fifteenth of Av and the Day of Atonement."

What is the place of this chapter in the tractate as a whole? There is, of course, an associative connection: the members of the maamad fast, and the chapter even begins by stating that the priests raise their hands in blessing during fasts and maamadot. Yet the substantive connection between these mishnayot and the subject of the tractate as a whole is unclear. The question becomes sharper in view of the relatively detailed treatment of the prayers of the maamad. Mishnah 3 describes the verses read from the Torah and the procedure for being called up to read; mishnayot 4-5 set rules for the supplications and prayers of the maamad ("On any day on which Hallel is recited, there is no maamad at the morning service," and so forth), and precise dates for bringing wood for the altar fire. Furthermore, how do the mishnah beginning "Five things befell our ancestors on the seventeenth of Tammuz and on the Ninth of Av" and the mishnah beginning "There were no days as festive for Israel" connect with those concerning the prayers of the maamad?

The tendency to interpret the absence of rain and the afflictions that befall the community as God's disregard for it, rather than as punishment for sin, helps explain this chapter's place. According to this tendency, the preceding chapters were devoted to the proper response when a process of ostracizing the people begins, marked by the absence of rain. The way to confront God's disregard and silence is to walk on tiptoe, slowly testing His responses, and only in the later fasts to address Him explicitly, in the fast-day ritual in the town square. Chapter 3 discussed emergencies that require breaking with the slow process and making an explicit appeal to God. The tractate now broadens its scope. Sensitivity in appealing to God is required not only during a drought or an emergency. Particular sensitivity is needed in every appeal to Him when physical proximity, in the Temple and in Jerusalem,

and metaphysical proximity, among the priests of the watch and the members of the maamad in the Temple, in Jerusalem, and outside Jerusalem, are involved. According to this chapter, even in the absence of drought, the relationship with God, insofar as the Temple is concerned, requires particular caution. The prayers of the maamad in the Temple must therefore be structured so as not to anger God or trouble Him excessively. The Mishnah states, "On any day on which Hallel is recited, there is no maamad at the morning service" (mishnah 4). The "maamad" is the Torah reading by the members of the maamad during the morning service.[33] The Mishnah sets out this Torah reading in exact detail:

On the first day: "In the beginning" and "Let there be a firmament"; on the second: "Let there be a firmament" and "Let the waters be gathered"; on the third: "Let the waters be gathered" and "Let there be lights"; on the fourth: "Let there be lights" and "Let the waters swarm"; on the fifth: "Let the waters swarm" and "Let the earth bring forth"; on the sixth: "Let the earth bring forth" and "The heavens were finished." (Chapter 4, mishnah 3)

In other words, each day of the week they read about what was created on that day and what was created on the following day. The members of the maamad also fasted:

The members of the maamad would fast four days a week, from Monday through Thursday. They would not fast on the eve of the Sabbath, out of respect for the Sabbath. (Mishnah 3)

Reading the account of Creation expresses the understanding that every act in the Temple, in such close proximity to God, has existential significance. Reading the account of Creation reflects the conception that every day in the Temple is a threatening day in the presence of an ostracizing God. The overlap in each day's reading expresses the desire to be present for the reading on the following day as well. Moreover, this is the most flattering, most universal, and least problematic reading. Like Job, who describes God's greatness in the shadow of his great fear of Him and of the disregard and ostracism he experiences, the members of the maamad remind God of His greatness, hoping that this reading will not anger Him or arouse His wrath against them. The commentators explain the rule "On any day on which Hallel is recited, there is no maamad at the morning service; when there is an additional offering, there is none at the closing service; when there is a wood offering, there is none at the afternoon service" by saying that the recitation of Hallel and the additional offering leave no time for the "maamad." Yet lack of time is only the external layer of the maamad's cancellation. It is canceled because Hallel, the additional offering, or the wood offering, together with the maamad, would place an unnecessary burden on communication with God. The cancellation of the maamad should therefore be read in terms of the relationship between the Holy One, blessed be He, and the community: God must not be burdened with excessive flattery, since His behavior and response may be unpredictable. This interpretive position also enables us to understand the placement in chapter 2 of the mishnayot concerning the members of the maamad. The Mishnah states that, during a communal fast, mourning customs intensify more quickly outside the Temple than within it:

During the first three fasts, the members of the priestly watch fast but do not complete the fast; the members of the priestly household do not fast at all. During the second three, the members of the watch fast and complete the fast, while the members of the household fast but do not complete it.

33 See Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Temple Vessels, chapter 6.

During the last seven, both groups fast and complete the fast. This is the view of Rabbi Yehoshua. The sages say: During the first three fasts, neither group fasts at all. During the second three, the members of the priestly watch fast but do not complete the fast, while the members of the priestly household do not fast at all. During the last seven, the members of the priestly watch fast and complete the fast, while the members of the priestly household fast but do not complete it. (Chapter 2, mishnah 6)

The priests' physical proximity to God, as well as their metaphysical proximity to Him, subjects them to different rules of intensification. They must be more cautious, because their seismograph produces sharper tremors in the ostracizing God. Physically, too, in the Temple in Jerusalem, regarded as the place where God's attention is greater, mourning customs must be observed cautiously and introduced later than elsewhere in the land. An appeal to God has an amplified effect there and may undo the people's efforts to approach the angry, ostracizing God gradually. From this perspective, the placement of the mishnayot concerning mourning customs in the Temple at this point in the tractate becomes clear: the movement is from places less sensitive in terms of communication with God to the Temple, where God's ear is most attentive. Thus, there will always be an attempt to communicate with God through fasting outside the Temple before the fasting reaches the Temple itself. The Temple's particular sensitivity means that fasting there does not follow the same pattern as fasting outside it. In this way, the ostracized decide that no risks should be taken in God's "private study"; His attention should instead be drawn in the more public spaces. In other words, this mishnah is not concerned with making things easier for the members of the watch and the household charged with serving in the Temple at the time of year when the fast was proclaimed. Its concern is, rather, the cautious application of fasting to those whose actions receive God's particular attention.

The tractate concludes with well-known mishnayot:

Five things befell our ancestors on the seventeenth of Tammuz and five on the Ninth of Av. On the seventeenth of Tammuz the tablets were broken, the daily offering ceased, the city was breached, Apostomus burned the Torah, and an idol was set up in the Sanctuary. On the Ninth of Av it was decreed that our ancestors would not enter the land, the Temple was destroyed the first and the second time, Betar was captured, and the city was plowed over. When Av begins, rejoicing is reduced. (Mishnah 6)

Mishnah 7 concerns the laws of the Ninth of Av and the days close to it. Mishnah 8, which concludes the tractate, states:

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: There were no days as festive for Israel as the fifteenth of Av and the Day of Atonement, when the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in borrowed white garments, so as not to embarrass anyone who had none ... And so it says: "Go out and see, daughters of Zion, King Solomon, wearing the crown with which his mother crowned him on his wedding day and on the day of his heart's joy." "On his wedding day": this is the giving of the Torah; "on the day of his heart's joy": this is the building of the Temple. May it be rebuilt speedily in our days. Amen.

Scholars regard this mishnah as an ending "on a positive note."[34] An optimistic conclusion to a tractate concerned with fasting is fitting. Yet we still need to consider the significance of "Five things befell our ancestors" in relation to "There were no days as festive for Israel." The seventeenth of Tammuz and the Ninth of Av are indeed fast days, but the purpose of making them days of calamity is not fully clear. Either way, a difficulty remains: if fasting is a matter of repentance and atonement in response to an approaching affliction, then on the Ninth of Av and the seventeenth of Tammuz the fast concerns past afflictions rather than present ones. It is precisely the reading of fasting as a means of confronting God's silence and ostracism that clarifies the connection between the mishnah of the "Five things" and tractate Taanit. After setting rules for sensitive conduct in the Temple out of concern for unpredictable responses from God, the Mishnah goes on to state that there are days on which particular caution and sensitivity are advisable, because there are indications that God is in an ostracizing "mood": the seventeenth of Tammuz and the Ninth of Av. On these days there is greater reason to fear uncontrolled outbursts, and communication with God must therefore be conducted cautiously. Mishnah 7, which concerns the laws of the days adjoining the Ninth of Av, reflects the assumption that sensitivity is also advisable in the approach to those days on which an outburst from God is anticipated. By contrast, the mishnah beginning "There were no days as festive" lists days on which God's mood is receptive and positive: the fifteenth of Av and the Day of Atonement. On these days, greater freedom is possible in approaching God. On these days, the community reminds God of the origin of the relationship between the people of Israel and the Holy One, blessed be He, and of the deep feelings between them: "On his wedding day: this is the giving of the Torah; on the day of his heart's joy: this is the building of the Temple."

F. Honi the Circle Drawer

The story of Honi the Circle Drawer (chapter 3, mishnah 8) has drawn scholarly interest in the tension between his figure and the sages and their world.[35] In his book on communal fasting, Levine sees the rainmaking pietist as a counterpart in rabbinic literature to the holy man of the Byzantine East, who "lived on the margins of settled society, both physically and in terms of consciousness, and embodied extreme spiritual and behavioral values. The holy man was someone to whom people turned with personal and communal concerns. The figure of the rural pietist has points of contact with this phenomenon."[36] It is in this light, Levine argues, that we should understand Shimon ben Shetah's response to Honi, "You ought to be placed under a ban," since "this power of the individual was perceived as a blatant intervention in the order of the world."[37]

The question arises: what is the connection between Shimon ben Shetah's threat of a ban and Honi's actions? How does ostracizing Honi answer a blatant intervention in the order of the world? In the Talmud, Honi is regarded as someone who "acted presumptuously toward Heaven."[38] In what sense was Honi presumptuous? What does he treat with disrespect? Does the disrespect consist in the very

34 Epstein writes: "It is possible that Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel II was the last tanna to teach this tractate, and therefore concluded it with words of consolation and aggadah." Epstein, above, note 10, p. 46. On "ending on a positive note," see Yonah Fraenkel, Midrash and Aggadah [Hebrew], vol. 3, Tel Aviv, 1997, pp. 702-703.

35 See Levine, above, note 4, pp. 136-140 and the references there. See also, for example, Yisrael Rosenson, "The Story of Honi the Circle Drawer" [Hebrew], Tallei Orot 4 (1992-1993), pp. 62, 66.

36 Levine, ibid., p. 139.

37 Ibid.

activation of Honi's mechanism of miracles? If so, the question arises again: what is the connection between Honi's transgression and the punishment of which Rabbi Shimon ben Shetah speaks, namely, ostracism?

Here, too, the tendency to see tractate Taanit as a reflection of the community's understanding of itself as ostracized can explain the story of Honi. Honi embodies the overall effort, expressed in the mourning customs, to bring God to attend to the people of Israel and their condition. Yet he also departs from all the procedural rules and the gradual progression associated with this effort. The rules provide a framework for drawing God's attention, and any departure from them can bring about His uncontrolled anger. The gradual intensification of mourning customs during communal fasting is therefore a recipe for drawing the angry God's attention without arousing His wrath against us. The ostracizing, angry, and exacting father will see that the people, his son, are suffering, and he will have to attend to them and stop ignoring them. For this reason, Honi's departure from the rules is extremely dangerous, not only to himself but to the entire community. Shimon ben Shetah's response confirms this explanation. He decides not to place Honi under a ban because Honi "wheedles before the Omnipresent ... like a son who wheedles before his father." Honi has indeed acted within a relationship different from the one that he, Shimon ben Shetah, and the community as a whole maintain with God. But what is at issue here is Honi's "wheedling," his indulgent, ingratiating behavior: he is God's favorite, and the danger of breaking with the ostracized community's pattern of behavior is therefore smaller. On this reading, the threat to ostracize Honi is no accident. The mishnah about Honi concerns God's ostracism of the community. Honi, whose rash actions could have deepened this ostracism, is threatened with ostracism himself. This is not only a matter of measure for measure. Above all, it is the ostracizing behavior of one who is himself ostracized and afraid: the victim becomes the ostracizer. In its very exceptionality, Honi's action confirms the pattern of relations present throughout the tractate: the relationship between an ostracizing God and a frightened, ostracized people.[39]

G. In Place of a Conclusion - The Book of Job and Tractate Taanit

How should someone subjected to ostracizing silence act? What can a person do when they are being ignored and their basic needs for control, belonging, self-esteem, and meaningful existence are consequently gravely harmed?

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38 Berakhot 19a: "Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: In twenty-four cases the court imposes a ban for an affront to a sage's honor, and all of them are taught in our Mishnah. Rabbi Elazar said to him: Where? He replied: Go and find them. He went, examined, and found three: one who treats washing the hands with disrespect, one who speaks ill of Torah scholars after their deaths, and one who acts presumptuously toward Heaven ... What is the case of one who acts presumptuously toward Heaven? As we learned: Shimon ben Shetah sent word to Honi the Circle Drawer: You ought to be placed under a ban ..."

39 "It happened in the days of Rabbi Halafta and Rabbi Hananya ben Teradyon that someone went before the ark and completed the entire blessing, and they did not answer Amen after him" (chapter 2, mishnah 5). This practice, of answering the blessing not with Amen but with "Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever," followed by the attendant's instruction "Sound the blast, priests, sound the blast," as though they were in the Temple, brings the sages' criticism at the end of the mishnah. The story belongs here because of its close connection to the view of the Temple as a place where the relationship with God is more direct, and where particular caution is therefore required in the ways of communicating with Him. A desire to change the order, especially in matters expressing physical and metaphysical proximity to God, may bring about a sudden and unpredictable divine response and thus threatens the community. This story also expresses the longing of Rabbi Halafta and Rabbi Hananya ben Teradyon, in the generation after the destruction, to communicate with God as though the Temple still stood. This act naturally threatens the ostracized community, which fears an outburst.

One response is to provoke a reaction from the ostracizer. This can, of course, be somewhat dangerous if the provocation involves verbally or physically attacking the ostracizer ... Insults will not improve the situation either ... Nor will trying to make the ostracizer laugh, which sends the message that their anger is trivial ... Another response may be to ostracize the ostracizer in return ... This response, too, fails to improve the situation, because neither party wants to be the first to give in. Both provocation and retaliatory ostracism give the ostracized person a sense of control, which explains why they are so common. But this control is illusory, since the commitment to silence very quickly takes control itself. What, then, remains to be done? Because ostracizing silence is a continual reminder of the ostracized person's being ignored, of being one of the "walking dead," leaving the ostracizer's physical presence becomes the best course of action. Physical separation allows both parties to think about the problem without remaining within the pattern of disregard and ostracism.[40]

When the ostracizer is the Holy One, blessed be He, however, physical separation is impossible for a believer. Job's insistence on getting God to speak to him stands out against the morbid pattern of tractate Taanit. The community's mourning customs express fear and terror before the ostracizing God, and a desire to maintain the status quo of ostracism for as long as possible, despite the serious difficulties it entails. Job, by contrast, insists with all his strength on breaking God's ostracizing silence. He does not accept God's disregard and wants to understand why he has been treated as he has. On the one hand, Job recognizes the disparity in power between himself and God, and God's greatness. On the other, he refuses to regard the afflictions that have befallen him as an indictment. Unlike the community in tractate Taanit, Job does not allow the ostracizing God to determine the rules of ostracism. Instead, he takes control by setting a new agenda for their relationship until God responds. God's answer in the final chapters of the book is disappointing.[41] God does not explain to Job why the afflictions have befallen him. This answer offers Job some consolation, not because of its content but because God has addressed him and ceased His ostracizing silence. Yet the relationship between God and Job will never again be what it was. Job, whose flowing language and lengthy speeches testified to his great desire to converse with God, now answers Him briefly:

Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer Thee? I lay my hand upon my mouth. Once have I spoken, but I will not answer again; Yea, twice, but I will proceed no further. (40:4-5)

40 See Williams, above, note 18, pp. 255-256.

41 Yeshayahu Leibowitz takes a Maimonidean position on this matter: "The answer the author of the book of Job places in God's mouth in the last three chapters seems beside the point: it does not answer the question 'Where shall wisdom be found?'; it does not address the problem of justice and righteousness, judgment and mercy, reward and punishment. None of these matters is mentioned in God's answer to Job. Instead, the answer presents natural reality without explaining it, 'what is' as it is, without passing judgment on it. It presents the cosmic and earthly world ... God's answer is that this reality itself is the Creator's providence, and this is what satisfies Job ... This providence is embodied in natural reality itself and is not intended or directed toward any particular purpose within reality, not even Job's needs and desires" (Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Five Books of Faith [Hebrew], Jerusalem, 1995, pp. 29, 34-35). For a clear summary of the approaches to God's answer to Job, see Katharine J. Dell, The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature, Berlin, 1991, pp. 35-44.

Job is glad that his ostracism has ended, but God's answer makes clear to him that his longing for a transparent relationship with God is a vain hope. His laconic response expresses this understanding: no longer a conception of God as close, but the realization that God is indeed remote, and that true closeness with Him is impossible. This disappointment stands in contrast to the great optimism at the end of tractate Taanit. In tractate Taanit, where the relationship between the community and God is a troubled relationship of ostracism, there remains a sense of hope and a desire to attain closeness and transparency with God, as on the wedding day, the day the Torah was given at Mount Sinai. Unlike Job, whose words express a relinquishment of the richness of a close relationship in the understanding that such a relationship with God cannot be established, tractate Taanit expresses the hope that such a relationship is possible.