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A Commentary on a Midrash: Metaphors about Metaphor

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In this chapter I offer a reading of a Midrash from *Shir Hashirim Raba* (1:8); a Midrash that David Stern (1994: 63) calls "the most programmatic description of the *mashal* [Hebrew for metaphor, or parable] in all Rabbinic literature, and possibly the most extensive statement about a literary form that the Rabbis ever made."[1] This Midrash, I argue, partially prefigures various modern theories about the nature of figurative language. Strikingly, it doesn't *state* any theories of metaphor so much as provide an array of competing *metaphors* for metaphor; and thus, this Midrash provides us with illuminating and surprisingly current metaphors about metaphor. The purpose of this chapter is to unpack, to some extent, those metaphors.

The Midrash in question is offered as an explanation of the first words (and title) of *the* Song of Songs. In the rabbinic tradition, the Song of Songs receives canonical status because it was regarded as a parable—an extended metaphor about God's relationship with His beloved people, Israel. The Midrash begins by arguing that since this extended metaphor was

[1] The Midrash in question is well known. It receives extensive treatment in Daniel Boyarin (1994) and, in medieval times, was repeatedly quoted in the introduction to Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed* (1974).

written by Solomon, who the rabbis identified with Koheleth—and, since Koheleth was, apparently, the master of metaphors, similes, and parables (a category captured by the Hebrew word, *mashal*), the Song of Songs is, divine inspiration aside, likely to be worthy of its name: a song that is, in some sense or other, superior to all others:

ד"א שיר השירים זהו שאמר הכתוב "ויותר שהיה קהלת חכם" אלו אדם אחר אמרן היית צריך לכוף אזניך ולשמוע הדברים האלה ויותר שאמרן שלמה ואילו מדעתו אמרן היית צריך לכוף אזניך ולשמעם ויותר שאמרן ברוח הקודש

"The Song of Songs . . . ," this relates to that which is said in the scriptures, "And even more so: Because Koheleth was a sage . . . [an incomplete quote from Ecclesiastes 12:9]" Had another person said [the Song of Songs], you would have had to incline your ears and listen to these words, "And even more so" given that Solomon said them. Had he said them from his own mind, you would have had to incline your ears and listen to them, "And even more so" given that he said them under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

"ויותר שהיה קהלת חכם עוד למד דעת את העם ואזן וחקר תקן משלים הרבה" ואזן דברי תורה וחקר דברי תורה עשה אזנים לתורה, ואת מוצא שעד שלא עמד שלמה לא היתה דוגמא

[The full quote from Ecclesiastes:] "And even more so: Because Koheleth was a sage, he continued to instruct the people. He weighed up, sought out, and established many maxims (*mashalim*)." [1] He weighed up words of Torah. [2] He sought out words of

> Torah. And [3], he made handles for the Torah. And one finds that before Solomon arose, there never was such a thing as a *dugma*.

The word *dugma* usually means "example"—from the Greek, δεῖγμα, an "example" or "pattern." But here it seems clear that it's being used as a synonym of "mashal." And thus, Maurice Simon (Freedman and Simon 1983) translates "dugma," in this instance, as *parable*.[2] Before Solomon, there were no parables. Of course, the authors of the Midrash don't think Solomon to be the first person in history to have fashioned a *parable* or an *extended* metaphor (we have a clear biblical example predating Solomon, in Nathan's parable offered in rebuke of David (II Samuel 12)).[3] Instead, this is hyperbole, intended to express Solomon's unparalleled mastery of the art.

There is wordplay involved in Solomon's weighing up the words of the Torah and creating handles for them. The verb for "weighing up" comes from the same root as the Hebrew word for the *ear*. Also, the Hebrew word for *handle* shares this root. Handles on ancient pottery resemble ears, and, like ears, they were used in ancient pottery for balance (the handles were often placed at the bottom of earthenware to add stability).

It is noteworthy that Solomon is presented as understanding the Torah's content *before* fashioning metaphors for it. This will become a controversial thesis, as we shall see.

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[2] David Stern (1994: 300, fn. 1) agrees with Simon's translation of "dugma," as do the standard rabbinic commentaries to the Midrash. Jastrow (1903: 282–3) uses this Midrash as an instance of "dugma" as *mashal*.

[3] Carl Mosser suggested this example to me as I was searching my cobwebbed memory for a pre-Solomonic example of a biblical parable.

Furthermore, we've already been presented with our first Midrashic metaphor about metaphors: metaphors that encode the message of *x* are *handles* for *x*.[4] We'll return to this metaphor later.

I move to the next section of the Midrash, marking with subscript numbers the fact that the Midrash uses a corresponding number of different cognate words for "understanding"—a feature of the Midrash that we'll return to.

R. Nachman [gave] two [illustrations]. R. Nachman said it is like a large palace that had many entrances, and everyone who entered it got lost from the entrance. A wise man came and took a coil of string, and attached [one end of it] to the way of the entrance. Thereafter, everyone came in and left by way of the coil of string. Likewise: until the rise of Solomon, nobody was able to understand$_1$ words of Torah. And, after Solomon arose, everyone began to understand$_2$ the Torah.	רב נחמן תרתין רב נחמן אמר לפלטין גדולה שהיו בה פתחים הרבה וכל שהיה נכנס בתוכה היה טועה מדרך הפתח, בא פקח אחד ונטל הפקעת ותלאה דרך הפתח היו הכל נכנסים ויוצאין דרך הפקעת, כך עד שלא עמד שלמה לא היה אדם יכול להשכיל דברי תורה וכיון שעמד שלמה התחילו הכל סוברין תורה

We now have a second *mashal* for depicting the power of Solomon's *mashalim*, in terms of the wise man attaching string to an entrance of the palace. Upon entering, you can grab on to

[4] This metaphor, like many of the following metaphors, appears elsewhere in the rabbinic corpus (e.g. Tractate *Yevamot* 21a); but my comments, in this chapter, are going to focus on this Midrash in isolation.

that coil of string, unwinding it as you go. You'll never get lost, because you can follow the string back to the entrance. The string imposes some sort of structure to your journey, imposing a set end and starting point. There were initially many entrances; then the wise man selected one to function as everybody's start and end point. But, where you go in the middle is up to you; just keep holding onto that string, attached to the entrance, and you'll be fine.[5] For some reason, R. Nachman didn't think his first illustration was sufficient. He supplemented it with another.

R. Nachman's second illustration: It is like a thicket of reeds that nobody was able to enter. A wise man came and took a scythe and cleared [a path]. Thereafter, everyone began to come in and leave by way of the path that had been cleared; so too with Solomon.	רב נחמן לישנא חורי לחורשא של קנים ולא היה אדם יכול להכנס בה ובא פקח אחד ונטל את המגל וכסח התחילו הכל נכנסין דרך הכסוח ויוצאין, כך שלמה

This second illustration sheds quite a different light upon the nature of *mashalim*. It differs from the palace metaphor in three salient respects:

(1) It suggests that the metaphor cuts a specific route through the conceptual territory, so to speak; the travelers through the field don't have the freedom they have in the palace.

(2) It suggests that the wise man couldn't have traversed the territory himself without the metaphor (though he could have chosen a different metaphor, by cutting a different path)—that is to say, recourse to metaphor was unavoidable; in the

[5] This metaphor and the next one also appear in *Kohelet Rabba* 2:11 and *Bereshit Rabba* (Theodore Albeck's edition), *Parshat Bereshit* 12.

palace metaphor it is at least an open possibility that the wise man could have found his own way out without the rope, which he attached perhaps only for others.

(3) The metaphor damages the terrain (the thicket of reeds now has a man-made path beaten through it). The palace, on the other hand, was left unaltered.

The metaphor at the heart of the Song of Songs is supposed to impart some deep *theological* truth. According to the palace metaphor, the Song of Songs provides a way to think about the relationship between the human and the Divine, without saying much that's very specific. It's as if we're told: think of the relationship between God and Israel in terms of a loving relationship. No fine-grained propositional content is conveyed by such an instruction, but, we're given free reign to construct our own theologies within the boundaries somehow presented by the metaphor. In other words, according to the palace metaphor, Solomon's rope constrains our journey through the palace of theological speculation, but it doesn't constitute a very tight leash. This gels well with Menachem Kellner's (1999) presentation of the Hebrew Bible and pre-medieval Jewish theology, according to which there is no officially sanctioned systematic theology, despite some general coarse-grained constraints.

The thicket of reeds metaphor disagrees. According to that metaphor, a very specific path is cut through the conceptual territory by Solomon's metaphor. We're somehow presented, by Solomon's extended metaphor, with a whole set of, potentially, very fine-grained theological theses. Given that this sounds so alien to the theological liberalism of pre-medieval Judaism, it's tempting to say that R. Nachman sides with his first illustration, his palace metaphor, when it comes to what I have labeled point (1). The reason that R. Nachman didn't think that his palace metaphor was sufficient, I would suggest, is that he sided with the thicket of reeds metaphor over the palace metaphor when it came to points (2) and (3).

Siding with the reeds metaphor when it comes to point (2), R. Nachman seemingly prefigures the general attitudes at the heart of Nietzsche's approach to metaphor, and at the heart of Lakoff and Johnson's ambitious research program in the philosophy of language and cognitive sciences. Nietzsche was of the opinion that all language use was, in some sense or other, metaphorical.[6] His famous pronouncement to that end said that truth is a "mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms."[7] Lakoff and Johnson hope to add some scientific rigor to Nietzsche's basic thesis with their claim that, given a sophisticated appreciation of cognitive science and developmental linguistics, it becomes clear that all language and thought is inherently metaphorical.

Lakoff and Johnson (2003: 167–8) illustrate their point with an example. Take the allegedly non-metaphorical sentence, "The fog is in front of the mountain." In order to understand it, we first have to view "the fog" and the "mountain" as entities, when in fact they have no clear boundaries, and to treat them as discrete entities is really to engage in *ontological metaphor* (thinking of something non-bounded and non-discrete in terms of something bounded and discrete). Second, "we must project a front–back orientation on the mountain"; speakers of Hausas, for example, make a *different* projection than we do and would rather say that "the fog is in the back of the mountain" in situations which we would describe as the fog being *in front* of the mountain (p. 161). These orientational projections are just a new species of metaphor. They involve our transferring the orientation that we learn from experiencing our bodies onto other objects.

Part of what Lakoff and Johnson want to point out is that we structure our *experience* metaphorically. Ontological and orientational metaphors are perhaps the tamest ways in

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[6] For a very clear presentation of Nietzsche's view on this matter, see Hinman 1982.

[7] Quoted in Hinmann 1982: 184.

which we do this. More radical, and equally pervasive, is our attempt to structure our less well-delineated experiences by thinking of them in terms of other, better-delineated experiences. A good example is the experience of love. As they point out (p. 86), love is not a very well-delineated experience. It can often be intensely powerful, and yet it is certainly difficult to express what it is exactly. So, we structure it in terms of a whole array of culturally entrenched metaphors: we think of love as a journey when we say, "it's been a bumpy road, but we've come a long way together"; we think of love as a patient when we say, "I really feel that we're on the mend"; we think of love as a physical force when we say, "We were drawn together"; and we think of love in terms of mental illness when we say, "I'm crazy for her."

As I read R. Nachman, he's telling us that metaphor is *just* as pervasive as Nietzsche and Lakoff and Johnson claim (or, at least they are in the realm of theology—our real subject matter). That's why the palace metaphor isn't sufficient for R. Nachman. He doesn't think that anybody can enter the palace, even the wise man, without the aid of something like the coil of string. The wise man cannot go in unaided and attach a coil of string for everybody else as he leaves. If there's no coil there, even the wise man will get lost. Matters theological are just too abstract to think about unless we think about them, metaphorically, in terms of less abstract things. R. Nachman therefore moves to the metaphor of the reeds because he wants to capture the fact, and to make clear, that even the wise man couldn't traverse this terrain unless he took a scythe and carved a path. The path that he carved—i.e., the metaphor—wasn't the only path he could have carved, but if there were no path at all, he couldn't so much as enter into the terrain. R. Nachman is disagreeing with the anonymous preamble to the Midrash. It could not be that Solomon first understood the Torah and only then forged the metaphors.

Preferring the reeds metaphor over the palace metaphor vis-à-vis point (2), R. Nachman leans towards Lakoff and Johnson. However, on my reading, he also prefers the reeds metaphor over the palace metaphor vis-à-vis point (3). This constitutes a step back from Lakoff and Johnson's most radical thesis. Lakoff and Johnson, at their most extreme, believe that their work has done enough to motivate a wholesale rejection of the notions of objective meaning and objective truth—Nietzsche certainly thought the same thing. According to them, language never neatly corresponds to the world, passively mirroring it, in the ways envisaged by many analytic philosophers of language. Instead, thought imposes structures upon the world and plays a significant role in constructing reality. The "myth of objectivity" is merely a *myth*: it fails to realize the numerous and pervasive ways in which language and thought actually *structure*, rather than simply mirror, our reality. R. Nachman seems to demur.

There *is* an underlying reality. There is a thicket of reeds. It's true that the path that we cut through it does damage to the thicket. The path obscures certain features; it imposes an artificial structure upon it. But, the very fact that we can talk about the damage done to the field indicates that we have some understanding of an underlying objective reality that we're having trouble doing justice to in the metaphors that we use to explore it.

On my reading, R. Nachman presents his two metaphors in tandem because he prefers the metaphor of the palace in respect of point (1), but he prefers the metaphor of the reeds in respect of points (2) and (3). This suggests an outlook that combines the pre-medieval theological liberalism that Kellner would urge us to respect as historical fact, with a restricted form of Nietzscheanism: all thought, or at least all thought about theological matters, is bound to be structured according to some metaphor or other, even though there really is an objective reality out there, hazily grasped through metaphors that both convey and do damage to the content of that reality.

The Midrash continues:

R. Yossi said: it is like a great basket of fruit, and it had no handles, and nobody was able to move it. A wise man came and made handles, and began to move it by way of [these] handles. Likewise: until the rise of Solomon, nobody was able to understand$_1$ words of Torah. And, after Solomon arose, everyone began to understand$_2$ the Torah.

א"ר יוסי לקופה גדולה מלאה פירות ולא היה לה אזן ולא היתה יכולה להטלטל ובא פקח אחד ועשה לה אזנים והתחילה להטלטל ע"י אזנים, כך עד שלא עמד שלמה לא היה אדם יכול להשכיל דברי תורה וכיון שעמד שלמה התחילו הכל סוברין תורה

In contemporary English, we describe ourselves *getting a handle upon* a complicated thought or notion. R. Yossi's idea, echoing the preamble to the Midrash, is that metaphors do just that; they help us to get a handle upon something otherwise difficult to contemplate. It's not that metaphor is essential for "moving the fruit," but instead, metaphor offers us ease and speed. However heavy the pile of fruit may be, we *could*, if we wanted to, and had the time, move the fruit one by one, re-piling them in the desired location. The handles on the basket allow us to move the pile with much greater convenience. Metaphors (at least in theology) are essential according to R. Nachman, but optional for R. Yossi. But it seems to me that there is more to R. Yossi's metaphor than the mere denial of R. Nachman's (restricted) Nietzscheanism.

According to Max Black (1954–55), one of the really important functions of a metaphor is to bring two sets of association into conversation. For every common word in English, the English-speaking community has a set of what Black calls "commonplace associations." Some of these associations may be completely false. The word "wolf" might conjure up associations of cunning cruelty, when wolves may in fact be loving creatures. And, indeed, within subcultures, say the Anglian Wolf Society (which I found online), the commonplace

wolf-associations might be quite different from the wider culture's wolf-associations. Nevertheless, in any given conversational circumstance, the interlocutors will be able to tap into the same system of commonplace associations with wolves. Similarly, the English word "man" conjures up a whole different system of commonplace associations. Against this backdrop, Black explains (p. 288), "The effect, then, of (metaphorically) calling a man a 'wolf' is to evoke the wolf-system of related commonplaces. If the man is a wolf, he preys upon other animals, is fierce, hungry, engaged in constant struggle, a scavenger, and so on." But the metaphor doesn't attempt to impose all of our wolf-associations upon man. Wolf-associations that gel less well with our man-associations are not at all emphasized by the metaphor. And thus, due to the ways in which the two systems of associations interact, the wolf metaphor emphasizes man's ferocity; but not his inclination to live among the trees and eat raw meat. Black goes on to construct his own metaphorical device for talking about metaphors (pp. 288–9):

> Suppose I look at the night sky through a piece of heavily smoked glass on which certain lines have been left clear. Then I shall see only the stars that can be made to lie on the lines previously prepared upon the screen, and the stars I do see will be seen as organised by the screen's structure. We can think of a metaphor as such a screen, and the system of "associated commonplaces" of the focal word [i.e. "wolf"] as the network of lines upon the screen. We can say that the principal subject [i.e. man] is "seen through" the metaphorical expression. .
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On Black's account metaphor doesn't merely convey certain content—that men are ferocious and prey upon the weak. It does more. In Black's words (pp. 291–2), "The metaphor selects, emphasizes, suppresses, and organizes features of the principal subject [i.e. man] by implying statements about it that normally apply to the subsidiary subject [i.e. wolves]."

You *can* paraphrase the content of the "man is a wolf" metaphor with a list of the propositions conveyed. The problem is that, when you're confronted with the metaphor, you're given a sense of which of these propositions have most weight. Given the various systems of commonplace associations in play, which of these propositions did you infer most strongly and most quickly? A sanitized paraphrase will merely give you all of the propositions that were conveyed by the metaphor, but it will give them each an equal weight. According to Black, this isn't easily recovered with some sort of further proposition telling you how to weight all of resulting propositions, because these matters are very subtle.

Of course, it would be absurd to suggest that R. Yossi had prefigured any of the specific *mechanics* of Black's view of metaphor. And yet, what R. Yossi's metaphor does illuminate is this: metaphors are used not merely to convey first-order content, but in order to respect second-order relations that obtain between different elements of that first-order content. The handles on the basket allow you to move the fruit, not one by one, but as they are; in the arrangement and formation in which they're currently piled. Moving the fruit in this basket with its handles preserves the *structure* of that pile of fruit, which could easily be destroyed if you moved the fruit one by one. It seems to me that R. Yossi agrees with Max Black, at least to the extent that they both see metaphors playing a role, not just in conveying propositional content, but in imposing some meta-structure upon that propositional content.

I move on to the next stage of the Midrash:

R. Shila said: it is like a large jug of boiling water, and it had no handle with which to move it. A wise man came and made a handle for it and began to move it by way of its handle.	א"ר שילא לקיתון גדול שהוא מלא רותחין ולא היה לו אזן להטלטל ובא אחד ועשה לו אזן והתחיל להטלטל ע"י אזנו

R. Shila's comment is presented as a critical response or emendation to R. Yossi: "No, it's not a barrel of fruit! It's a jug of boiling water that gets moved by the handles of the wise man." On one level, this could be viewed as a disagreement, not about the nature of metaphor, but about the nature of *Torah*. According to R. Yossi, the Torah contains fruit-like nuggets that can be appreciated, one by one, without the structural metaphors imposed upon the whole by Solomon. According to R. Shila, the Torah viewed not through the prism of Solomon's metaphors is dangerous: there are no fruit-like nuggets that can be processed or enjoyed in isolation from an appreciation of the whole.

R. Shila's assertion that the Torah is dangerous shorn of later metaphorical and interpretative glosses is reminiscent of other Midrashim with anti-Sadducee (or anti-Karaite) undertones. For example, according to one Midrash (*Tanchuma, Teruma* 8), the words of the Pentateuch can be compared to the words of the forbidden woman mentioned in Proverbs 5. Given half the chance, she will lead you astray; to death. You shouldn't heed her word, nor fall for her temptations. Instead, you should heed the voice of wisdom. The Midrash in question casts the Pentateuch in the role of the forbidden woman, and casts rabbinic interpretation in the role of wisdom. The suggestion is: if you do as the Sadducees and Karaites, and hope to understand the Bible shorn of interpretation, you'll be lost. Likewise, if you drink the water in R. Shila's jug, you'll scald your mouth.

Of course, behind their debate about the nature of Torah, there is a debate about metaphor too. A metaphor, according to R. Shila, isn't used to preserve the internal structure of the contents of the jug. Water *has* no internal structure comparable to a pile of fruit—or, at least, it doesn't until you discover the existence of water molecules. For R. Yossi, metaphors help us to perform two jobs: (1) they help us convey, speedily, a great deal of propositional content; (2) they help to convey the internal structure that holds between that propositional content. For R. Shila, a metaphor is simply for the first of these jobs—conveying content.

But, even though metaphors do less for R. Shila, their job, on his account, is *more* important. For R. Yossi, metaphor allows you to perform two jobs that could be performed (albeit clumsily) *without* metaphor. But, for R. Shila, the content of the Torah is the sort of stuff that simply cannot be moved without a container. Like R. Nachman, R. Shila thinks that, at least when *Torah* is the subject matter, metaphor is inescapable. Why? It seems as if the content of the Torah just isn't a normal type of content. The content of this chapter, for example, can be divided into sections, paragraphs, and sentences. But, the content of the *Torah*, for R. Shila, is different somehow. He's inviting us to widen our notion of *content*. Some content can be conveyed in normal sentences. Some can't. That is why, sometimes, metaphor is essential. Perhaps this prefigures, in some way, Elisabeth Camp's view (2006), according to which we can use metaphors to ostend towards properties that we don't currently have the linguistic resources to express without metaphor.

The Midrash continues:

א"ר חנינא לבאר עמוקה מלאה מים והיו מימיה צוננין ומתוקים וטובים ולא היתה בריה יכולה לשתות ממנה, בא אדם אחד וספק לה חבל בחבל משיחא במשיחא ודלה ממנה ושתה התחילו הכל דולין ושותין, כך מדבר לדבר ממשל למשל עמד שלמה על סודה של תורה דכתיב "משלי שלמה בן דוד מלך ישראל [לדעת חכמה ומוסר להבין אמרי בינה" ע"י משלותיו של שלמה עמד על ד"ת

R. Hanina said: it is like a deep well full of water. And its waters were cold, and sweet, and good. But, nobody was able to drink from it. A man came along and tied string to string, and rope to rope, and drew from the well and drunk. Thereafter, everybody began to draw and drink [from it]. So too, [moving] from word to word, and from mashal to mashal, Solomon was able to understand$_3$ the secrets of the Torah. As it is written, "The Proverbs of Solomon,

> the son of David, King of Israel: [For learning wisdom and discipline; for understanding$_4$ words of discernment" (Proverbs 1:1–2). [This means]: By means of his mashalim, Solomon came to understand$_3$ the words of the Torah.

It is hardly surprising that this suggestion is attributed to R. Hannina. R. Hannina is the thinker responsible for perhaps the most apophatic moment in the entire Babylonian Talmud (Tractate *Brachot* 33b). When he heard an unnamed Jew leading the communal prayers and adding new superlatives to the officially sanctioned liturgical descriptions of God, R. Hannina waited until the man had finished and then asked him sarcastically if his finishing was supposed to indicate that he had managed to complete an accurate and adequate description of God. R. Hannina goes on to say that even the words that are officially sanctioned are actually offensive to God, but since we have to say *something*, and since *Moses* formulated the relevant list of superlatives, we say what we have to say, and no more.

R. Hannina's complaint is based upon his assumption that even the most accurate praise we could coin in our own language would be like praising a king who has a tremendous collection of gold for all of the silver he had. Maimonides, it seems to me, was not misreading this Talmudic story when he explains that, according to R. Hannina, using words of human language to talk about God is simply to use the wrong sort of currency: silver instead of gold.[8]

In our Midrash, the same rabbi implies that the content of the Torah lies beyond the reach of any word; and even beyond the reach of any metaphor. You have to tie metaphor to

[8] Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed*, I.59 (1974: 142–3).

metaphor, and only then will you be able to access the water. Here, R. Hannina presents us with something of an antidote to his apophaticism. True, there may be things that lie beyond the reach of *literal* language. But certain types of metaphor may be of use.

An *entrenched* metaphor is one that can't be faithfully cashed out without reference to further metaphors. When I say that So-and-so has a cold heart, my metaphor can be cashed out metaphor-free via the following translation: So-and-so lacks compassion; thus, my metaphor wasn't entrenched. But, when Romeo describes Juliet as the sun, he says something that we struggle to translate without recourse to further metaphors: his life revolves around her; she sustains him; she gives him warmth and light; life without her would be dark. Some of these metaphors can be translated, in turn, into metaphor-free sentences; some may give rise, in their explanation, to new metaphors; either way, the first metaphor was entrenched. A metaphor is entrenched when its explanation requires at least one more metaphor.

The chain of metaphors in an entrenched metaphor supervenes upon a chain of associations: the mind moves from the sun, to warmth and light, and from there to sustenance, etc. A chain of associations moves in an order; it is, in some sense or other, a *directional* affair. Negative theology, especially as developed by Maimonides, tries to point us towards the ineffable God. Maimonides' negations move in a very specific order. First we deny that God has eyes, recognizing that the Bible's talk of his eyes is supposed to indicate that God can see. Then we deny that God can see, recognizing that our earlier claim was merely indicating that he has knowledge of our actions. Then we deny that he has knowledge of our particular actions, recognizing that our earlier claim was merely intended to communicate his perfection. By telling us all the things that we *shouldn't* say about God, and by doing so in a specific *order*, we are lead in a direction that supposedly transcends the limits of language, towards a God who cannot be spoken about.

R. Hannina's claim is that entrenched metaphor is actually a more powerful vehicle for performing the same feat. By moving in steps, in a certain direction, we give rise to this notion of *pointing*; where Maimonides points with a chain of negations, R. Hannina points with a chain of associations. Perhaps the idea of metaphors pointing beyond our linguistic capabilities develops further Camp's notion of metaphors that ostend towards things that we can't currently name.

The view here, unlike the views of R. Yossi and R. Simla, is that metaphor doesn't *contain* the content that it wants to convey. Even if the content in question cannot be squeezed into a proposition that we could grasp, we can still be *pointed* in the direction of that content with a potentially infinite chain of associations: metaphors within metaphors.

We can now move on to the final section of the Midrash:

ורבנן אמרין אל יהי המשל הזה קל בעיניך שע"י המשל הזה אדם יכול לעמוד בד"ת, משל למלך שאבד זהב מביתו או מרגליות טובה לא ע"י פתילה כאיסר הוא מוצא אותה כך המשל הזה לא יהיה קל בעיניך שע"י המשל אדם עומד על ד"ת, תדע לך שהוא כן שהרי שלמה ע"י המשל הזה עמד על דקדוקיה של תורה.

Our Rabbis say: don't look lightly upon this notion of the mashal. For, by way of the mashal, a person is able to understand$_3$ the words of the Torah. It is like a king who lost some gold in his house, or a precious jewel. Doesn't he find it using a wick that's worth a penny? Likewise: you shouldn't look lightly upon this notion of the mashal because, by using the mashal, a person can understand$_3$ the Torah. Know that this is so, for Solomon understood$_3$ the

subtleties of the Torah by way of this notion of the mashal.[9]

The metaphor of the wick has a great deal in common with the metaphor of R. Hannina. Both disagree with the notion that a metaphor somehow *contains* the content it wants to convey; instead, it *points* you towards the content it wants you to apprehend. In this respect, both R. Hannina and the rabbis pre-echo the approach that Donald Davidson adopts towards metaphors and their meanings.

There is a temptation, when thinking about metaphors, to say that they contain two layers of meaning. When I say that, "Peter has a cold heart," my words have a literal meaning and a metaphorical meaning. The literal meaning, which I didn't mean to convey, concerns the temperature of Peter's *cor humanum*. The metaphorical meaning, which I did intend to convey, concerns Peter's *character*. Donald Davidson (1978) rejects this picture. Words just mean what they mean. There are no two layers of meaning. There is only literal meaning. Davidson brings a number of arguments to motivate his peculiar thesis. One of his central arguments has been usefully paraphrased by Marga Reimer (2001), in terms of the following *modus tollens*:

(4) If a metaphor had a metaphorical meaning in addition to its literal meaning, then it would be possible to give literal expression to this (putative) meaning.

[9] A textual matter that isn't clear here is whether the rabbis are saying, "don't look lightly upon this particular *mashal*," i.e., upon the extended metaphor of the Song of Songs, in particular, or whether they're saying, as I've provisionally translated it, "don't look lightly upon this *notion* of the mashal," i.e., don't belittle the power of metaphors/parables in general. The paragraph could be read either way.

(5) It is not possible to give such a complete non-metaphorical paraphrase for a metaphor.

(6) Conclusion: a metaphor has no special meaning above and beyond that which is expressed by its literal meaning.

In order to undermine this argument, we could claim that meaning isn't always sentential in its form; if that's the case, then it won't be true that a meaning/proposition can always be given a literal expression. Just because I can't paraphrase the metaphorical meaning of my words into the literal meaning of some *other* words, it doesn't mean that there was no metaphorical meaning to begin with; not all meaning can be stated literally.

Reimer defends Davidson against this charge. If we think that some meanings can be put into literal words and that some meanings *can't* be put into literal words, then we lose sight of an important distinction. Indeed, it is clear that Davidson doesn't deny that metaphors are *representational*; he isn't trying to deny that Romeo was trying to represent the world in a certain way when he described Juliet as the sun. Davidson is, instead, trying to distinguish between propositional content and non-propositional content. Calling both sorts of content, *meaning*, threatens to blur the distinction.

Some content is well placed to be expressed by propositions; some content isn't, and it might even be deceptive to call it "content" or "a meaning," because that implies that it is some neatly delineated bundle of information, when in fact, we might be talking about something that has no formal end; hence the impossibility of paraphrasing a metaphor (or at least many metaphors). Metaphors are, according to Davidson, what we can use when we want to represent something about the world that no proposition can contain. Meaning is something quantifiable. The metaphor just means what the words say. We should, instead, be talking about the metaphor's *point*. Why did Romeo say those odd words about Juliet being the sun, when he knew that she wasn't a burning ball of gas? What was his *point*?

> When we try to say what a metaphor "means," we soon realize there is no end to what we want to mention . . . How many facts or propositions are conveyed by a photograph? None, an infinity, or one great unstatable fact? Bad question. A picture is not worth a thousand words, or any other number. Words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture. (Davidson 1978: 46–7)

For R. Yossi and R. Simla, the content conveyed by the metaphor is *in* the metaphor: the basket *contains* the fruit; the jug *contains* the water;[10] but, for R. Hannina and the rabbis, the metaphor leads you to find the body of water or the ruby that lies *beyond*. In this respect, R. Hannina and the rabbis are proto-Davidsonians.

Where R. Hannina and the rabbis seem to come apart is on the notion of cheapness. The rabbis' metaphor allows for the possibility that once you've understood what the metaphor was trying to convey, you can throw the metaphor away. Once you realize that talk of God's hand is a metaphorical device for conveying information about his providence, you can discard all talk of his hand. Sometimes, Maimonides seems to adopt this attitude towards metaphors.[11] R. Hannina's illustration seemingly gives the metaphor a longer life of service.

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[10] Perhaps I'm being unfair here to the sophistication of R. Yossi and R. Simla. To be fair to them, the jug and the barrel are not supposed to represent Solomon's metaphor so much as the handle. In this paragraph I'm choosing to overlook that distinction as not pertinent to their point.

[11] In the introduction to his *Guide*, Maimonides argues that once a metaphor has been cashed out in terms of a literal analogue, the image presented by the metaphor itself loses *all* of its worth (1974: 11). He then argues that with a particularly well-constructed metaphor, the worth of the metaphor can be compared to the worth of silver, whereas the worth of its literal analogue can be compared to the worth of gold (1974: 12). And, even then, the lasting worth of the metaphor may merely lie in its social utility when taken literally by the ill-educated. I quote: "Their external meaning contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies . . .

A chain of rope at a well can be used many more times than a wick. Furthermore, if we take seriously the notion of content that can *only* be grasped via chains of association, then even the wisest of the wise will need to use those chains. Without the candle, you could stumble in the dark until you find what you're looking for with your groping hands. Without the ropes, on the other hand, the water in that well remains inaccessible.

Another element of the Midrash calls out for explanation: its collection of synonyms for understanding. The following phrase appears with exactly the same Hebrew formulation within the R. Nachman section of the Midrash *and* within the R. Yossi section of the Midrash:[12] "Until the rise of Solomon, nobody was able to understand$_1$ words of Torah. After Solomon arose, everybody began to understand$_2$ the Torah." The first verb for understanding is *lahaskil*. The second verb for understanding is *lisbor.* What are these two types of understanding?

Philosophers often refer to belief, knowledge, and understanding (among other things) as propositional attitudes. When I believe, or know, or merely *understand* the claim that Paris is the capital of France, then there needs to be a proposition—the proposition *that Paris is the capital of France*—and, I need to be standing in a certain relation to it. Furthermore, philosophers generally argue that knowledge is just a very privileged form of belief. Knowledge is a belief that is both true and well justified. So, it turns out that knowledge is also a propositional attitude; the attitude of belief plus some other stuff. In order to stand in the knowledge-relation to a proposition, you must be standing in the belief-relation to that proposition, and, in order to stand in the belief-relation to a proposition, you have to stand in

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Their internal meaning, on the other hand, contains wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is."

[12] Some of the remainder of this chapter echoes parts of Lebens 2013.

the relation-of-*understanding* to that proposition: you can't straightforwardly believe a proposition that you don't understand.

Fighting against this standard view, Eleonore Stump (2010: chs. 2, 3, and 4) argues that some types of interpersonal knowledge are *non*-propositional.[13] She motivates her claim by comparing neuro-typical people and people with autism. Commonly a person on the autistic spectrum will find it hard to infer your emotional state from your facial expression. A neuro-

[13] The view that there can be such a thing as non-propositional knowledge would strike some contemporary epistemologists as something akin to a category error (although see, footnote 21, below). Nevertheless, it has long been a mainstream position in the philosophy of language, and especially in the metaphysics and epistemology of meaning, that a certain species of propositional knowledge (viz. *de re* knowledge) can only make sense if it is somehow undergirded by a species of *non*-propositional knowledge. The basic intuition runs as follows: in order to entertain a proposition that is about *x*, and in order to have epistemic mastery over that proposition, you better already have some sort of cognitive contact with *x*. How can you assert a *de re* proposition, or have epistemic mastery over it, if you don't have some sort of epistemic contact with that which the proposition is about? Since the *x* in question doesn't have to be a proposition, the thought is that the first level of epistemic contact, your contact with *x*, will have to be *non*-propositional. See, for example: Russell (1912: ch. 5; 1914) and Fitch (1990). Russellian acquaintance is often thought to place the epistemic bar too high. A looser variety of cognitive contact might suffice. David Kaplan (1968) talks about a "rapport" with *x*; Jaegwon Kim (1977) talks about having "direct cognitive contact" with *x*; Chisolm (1957) talks about "episemtic intimacy" with *x*; and John Campbell (2011) talks about a species of acquaintance that's mediated via a standpoint. Kent Bach (1987: 15) thinks that all such approaches misfire, but he characterizes the approach—and its motivation—well, when he says that "Russell's doctrine of acquaintance . . . can be said to be to Russell's semantics what foundationalism is to traditional epistemology" (p. 123, fn. 2). It's fair to say that non-propositional knowledge is a going concern.

typical person, on the other hand, doesn't feel that they have to work much out, in order to see that another person is happy or angry.

Contemporary neuroscience seems to indicate that the processes involved in a neuro-typical person and in an autistic person, when registering the emotions of another, are mediated by quite different neurological mechanisms. When a neuro-typical person sees somebody smiling, mirror neurons in the parts of their brain that are generally responsible for making *them* smile, will fire. Though we don't understand the mechanisms well,[14] what does seem to be clear is this: a neuro-typical person seems to have something that you might want to call direct access to another person's happiness. But, the autistic person, who we now know suffers from decreased mirror neuron activity,[15] has to work out *that* you are happy. They don't have any direct access. We could put it this way: the neuro-typical person simply sees your happiness; the autistic person, lacking in mirror neuron function, doesn't see your happiness. At best, he or she works out *that* you're happy. The autistic person has propositional knowledge of your happiness. The neuro-typical person's knowledge of your happiness, on the other hand, isn't mediated by any proposition.

Against this background we can return to our two verbs *lahaskil* and *lisbor*. *Lahaskil*, I would argue, is the normal propositional form of understanding. But the word *lisbor* is much more exotic. Let's look at some words that share the same root:

[14] Stump (2010) points out a number of relatively crude philosophical errors made by scientists who are trying to describe these findings; e.g., pp. 69–71.

[15] Ramachandran and Oberman 2006.

- ***sever***, which refers to a person's facial countenance—the sort of thing that a neuro-typical person can understand directly, but poses real obstacles before an autistic person;[16]
- ***sabar***, a great storyteller;[17]
- ***sever***, which can mean hope[18]—hope is an attitude towards a proposition, but one that doesn't answer to the normal standards of evidence and warrant. Optimism can be warranted only if you have good reason to believe that there's a 51 percent chance, or more, of things turning out well. But hope, on the other hand, is often justified come what may, or more accurately, it doesn't answer straightforwardly to justification or warrant; we often hope against all odds.[19]

And thus, the word, *lisbor*, as a form of understanding, conjures up the image of somebody who understands people; somebody who understands faces; somebody who tells good stories; somebody whose attitudes don't answer to regular epistemic norms. Most of these things are not propositional. You'd have to have a very crude philosophy of art if you think that a story can be reduced to a list of propositions. And, even though *hope* is a propositional attitude, it certainly isn't one that conforms to the norms of classical epistemology. Solomon's greatness, according to this phrase of the Midrash, was that he opened the door to the non-propositional content of the Torah.

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[16] This word is used with this meaning in Mishna *Avot* 1:15.

[17] This word is used with this meaning in Tractate *Sofrim* 16:7.

[18] This word is used with this meaning in *Bereshit Rabba* 91:1.

[19] I first heard of this distinction between hope and optimism from Lord Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi Emeritus of the UK.

That the exact same phrase appears in the mouths of R. Nachman and R. Yossi is good reason for thinking that the phrase really belongs to the editor of the Midrash. Perhaps it's something that all of the personalities in the Midrash could have agreed to, perhaps not, but it certainly seems to be the view of the editor and doesn't seem to contradict anything said by any of the particular rabbis. What it says is this: Whatever else a metaphor may do—whether it contains propositional content or points you to some; whether it contains its own type of ineffable content, or gestures in the direction of the unsayable—it also has the power to transmit non-propositional knowledge. For instance, religiosity doesn't just depend upon the knowledge of certain propositions—propositions of the form "God is Φ"—religiosity also depends upon the personal, non-propositional, knowledge of God (cf. Lebens 2013). Solomon's metaphors, whatever else they could do, and however they managed to do it, also had the power to transmit that sort of personal knowledge of God.

The only other type of understanding explicitly[20] mentioned by the Midrash is understanding$_3$—my translation of the phrase עמד על, which literally means *stood upon*. The claim of the Midrash is that, in virtue of his metaphors, Solomon *stood upon* the secrets of the Torah (סודה של תורה); he *stood upon* the subtleties of the Torah (דקדוקיה של תורה). It's interesting to note how English describes cognitive mastery as standing *under* something (i.e., under-standing) where rabbinic Hebrew describes cognitive mastery as standing *over* something. But, as we shall see, perhaps there's a big difference, in this Midrash, between

[20] Understanding$_4$, (להבין) which appears in the translation doesn't appear explicitly in the Midrash, but merely in the continuation of a verse that the Midrash partially quotes. It merits further consideration, how understanding$_4$ is supposed to relate to understanding$_3$ (לעמד על), given that the verse that includes understanding$_4$ (Proverbs 1:2) is supposed to motivate the Midrash's claim that Solomon achieved understanding$_3$.

understanding and overstanding; although I admit that my comments on this distinction are speculative.

One type of knowledge regularly claimed to be distinct from propositional knowledge is *know-how*. Knowing how to play piano doesn't obviously reduce to the knowledge of a particular set of propositions.[21] There simply seems to be a gap between knowing any particular propositions *about* how to play piano, and being *able* to play the piano. Your knowing how to play piano, more than cognitive mastery over a set of propositions, seems therefore to be, or to require, a disposition to perform certain actions; actions that tend to require training. Perhaps Solomon's standing over the subtleties of the Torah is just too subtle to reduce to his understanding certain propositions. Something more fine-grained is going on. Solomon has achieved, via his metaphors, a certain sensitivity and sensibility that give him a mastery over the non-propositional content of the Torah. He has achieved a certain vantage point (standing over the terrain) in which he can apprehend things that are too subtle for words to convey; perhaps his new found standing gives him new dispositions.

The Midrash has presented us with a number of metaphors for metaphor. Those metaphors express a divergent array of attitudes towards the *nature* of metaphor, be those attitudes Nietzschean, Blackean, Campean, or Davidsonian. They encode debates about the dispensability of metaphors, their function and the nature of the content that they seek to convey. Furthermore, the editor of the Midrash seems set upon one thesis that is compatible

[21] The most prominent defense of intellectualism, the view that know-how reduces to propositional knowledge, can be found in Stanley and Williamson 2001 and Stanley 2011. But the proposal has serious obstacles to overcome: see Bach 2012, Kumar 2011, and Glick 2015—some of these obstacles are alluded to in the continuation of this paragraph.

with all of the various views on offer: whatever else metaphors are good for, they have the (mysterious and still unexplained) power to transmit non-propositional knowledge.[22]

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