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Modern Jewish Literature

"As if to break\ The drum, I bang\ And then I make\ The cymbals clang....."

Rather than rendering a protagonist rootless and dangling, these parodic stories make the tradition itself a kind of "Talush". Whether as a result of the jolt of modernity, or its re-setting into the new context of America, tradition is ripped from the structures that provide its sense of unquestioned meaning, its age-old honor. The conventions of traditions without these structures are rendered ridiculous, meaningless, rootless; thereby the quest for meaning is embodied in parodying religious conventions, in making them laughable. It is not however a happy laugh; it is the bitter laugh of loss, of grief. However, the betrayal of these old forms is exactly what creates hope; the parodic tearing away of the old and rigidified creates the possibility of fresh meanings, achieved through the re-configuration of sign and symbol.

Although initially -at least until the shock of the very end- the reader finds herself seduced by religiously conventional trappings of this story, upon a second reading Bontsha the Silent reveals the subtle artistry through which Judaism is subjected to the harshest of condemnations throughout the story. In fact, we find that the root of the tradition, the very covenant of God, has

been turned against Bontsha:

He existed like a grain of sand at the rim of a vast ocean, amid millions of other grains of sand exactly similar, and when the wind at last lifted him up and carried him across to the other shore of that ocean, no one noticed, no one at all.

The symbolism of God's covenant with Abraham is used against Bontsha, as if to say: yes, yes the covenant has been fulfilled, but look and see what kind of fulfillment it is for Bontsha: God's blessings to Abraham, have become a curse for Bontsha, the curse of anonymity rather than the blessing of fertility and continuity. Another image of the sign of the Covenant going awry for Bontsha is placed in the mouth of the defending angel despite the protests of the Judge:

"When he was eight days old he was circumcised-"
 "Such realistic details are unnecessary-"
 "The knife slipped, and he did not even try to staunch the flow of blood-"
 "--are distasteful. Simply give us the important facts."
 "Even then, an infant, he was silent, he did not cry out his pain,".....

The Judge, God himself, is uncomfortable with these "realistic details"- the details of God's own covenant. Could it be that even God cannot face the cruelty of his own covenant?

However it is not only religion which is parodied in this story; consider the way Peretz points out the care for which humans would bestow on horses and not on human beings:

If a horse, dragging a cart through the streets, should fall, people would run from blocks around to stare, newspapers would write about this fascinating event, a monument would be put up to mark the very spot where the horse had fallen.....How many horses are there, after all? But human beings-there must be a thousand million of them!

Thus it is through human hands that Bontsha suffers so

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profoundly. So how is it that the traditions itself is being indicted? If humans are indicted for the cruelty which they inflict upon one another, then religion is condemned for the meekness with which humans respond to cruelty:

A silence falls upon the great hall, and it is more terrible than Bontsha's has ever been, and slowly the judge and the angels bend their heads in shame at this unending meekness they have created on earth.

Then the silence is shattered. The prosecutor laughs aloud, a bitter laugh.

So how is it that religion is responsible for the meekness of humans on the earth, for the silence of all the Bontshas in the world? Is it because it is considered pious to remain silent in response to injustice? The defending angel's case rested on the virtue of Bontsha's silence- more so than on his good deeds. The only actual deed that Bontsha enacted was saving the rich philanthropist by catching the reins of his runaway coach.

This understanding does not completely satisfy since I associate this "virtue of meekness" with Christianity. In fact speaking out is a central value embodied in Judaism beginning with Abraham. An alternate understanding (davar acher) could be that religion creates meekness on earth because those on earth are waiting for what they may receive in heaven. In other words, lacking the courage to respond fully to the injustice and cruelty of this world they enter into an endless waiting, an endless silence until they reach the next world. Why protest in this world when all injustice will be redressed in the next? Why speak out when all reward unfairly withheld in this will be had in the next?

In either case religion is held responsible for this cruel

silence and thus God and the angels provide a victory for the prosecutor. Peretz by exposing pietistic masks enables his reader to truly question our world and the role of religion in it. By parodying deeply ingrained religious values he frees us from the conventions that bind us into silence. Thus his "sacrifice" of the sanctity of religion, clears a path for the possibility for a radical questing in the world- one that forges a covenant with the God who rejects the idolatry of old forms, and challenges human beings to constantly re-imagine their forms of worship.

Whereas it was the dissonance of modernity that allowed Peretz to offer a harsh critique of piety, it was the additional resetting of a tradition into an American context that produces such stories as Malamud's The Magic Barrel and Roth's Defender's of the Faith. Moreover, perhaps this mocking of tradition is part of the process of becoming American, of distancing oneself from the tradition in order to become American. In both stories the character who embodies tradition is a liar and a rather slimy (might we say "fishy") figure, who, nevertheless, provides the impetus for the protagonist to begin a process of (spiritual) transformation. However, despite the fact that both stories end in some kind of religious moment, The Magic Barrel begins with the conventions of a Yeshivah University rabbinical student, whereas Defenders of the Faith begins with the trappings of the American military. I will attempt to illustrate the protagonists movement from the respective predictability at the beginning of each story to the surprising achievement of a new setting for the tradition by

the conclusion of the story.

The conformity of the Y.U. rabbinical student, Leo Finkle, is everywhere in evidence at the beginning of the story. He is a protagonist who has devoted himself to his books and is beginning to think of marriage- in the most predictable of terms. Firstly he thinks that "he might find it easier to win himself a congregation if he were married" and secondly he appeals to the institution of the marriage broker as "ancient and honorable, highly approved in the Jewish community....." , furthermore "his own parents had been brought together by a matchmaker". As soon as Salzman is introduced into the story, however, the reader knows something is amiss. Somehow Salzman does not fit the honorable image Leo has of the institution. Besides his constant eating of fish, which in itself alerts the reader to something "fishy" going on, every woman that Salzman describes is flawed- whether maimed, too old or widowed. In fact comedy begins in the story when the reader is struck by the dissonance between Leo's expectations and Salzman's delivery:


Noticing that Salzman had snatched a glance at the next card, cleverly asked, "How is her health?"
"Perfect," Salzman said, breathing with difficulty. "Of course, she is a little lame on her right foot from an auto accident that it happened to her when she was twelve years, but nobody notices on account she is so brilliant and also beautiful."

Salzman tries to seduce Leo with the externals of the women he presents to him: their beauty, their wealth, their father's professions. Their flaws then are all the more disturbing in the context of their descriptions as some sort of merchandise.

Leo is on a failed quest- a failure that opens him up to the truth about himself and begins to break open the shell of his

conventionality. In his date with Lily he declares that he is not "a talented religious person'....."I think,' he said in a strained manner, "that I came to God not because I loved Him, but because I did not". This declaration shocks him and leads him to further realizations about himself:

Her probing questions had somehow irritated him into revealing- to himself, more than her- the true nature of his relationship to God, and from that it had come upon him, with shocking force, that apart from his parents, he had never loved anyone. Or perhaps it went the other way, that he did not love God so well as he might, because he had not loved man. It seemed to Leo that his whole life stood starkly revealed and he saw himself for the first time as he truly was-unloved and loveless.

It is this revelation of lovelessness and emptiness that  begins to estrange him from his books, from his conventional lifestyle and thus allows him to fall in love with Stella. For the first time he sees in a photograph (the seventh holy photograph) the spirit and life of a woman- something beyond her attractiveness and conformity to his expectations:

Her face deeply moved him. Why he could at first not say. It gave him the impression of youth- spring flowers, yet age- a sense of having been used to the bone, wasted; this came from the eyes, which were hauntingly familiar, yet absolutely strange.....It was not, he affirmed, that she had an extraordinary beauty- no, though her face was attractive enough: it was that something about her moved him.

It turns out however, than not only does Stella not conform to Leo's image of a wife, from her father's reaction it seems as though she is a prostitute:

"She is not for you. She is a wild one-wild, without shame. This is not a bride for a rabbi."

"What do you mean wild?"

"Like an animal Like a dog. For her to be poor was a sin. that is why to me she is dead now."

Perhaps because Leo falls in love with a woman who shatters any possibilities for conventionality, what the reader finds here is real love- not one determined by externals. "He pictured, in her, his own redemption", despite her depravity. While it is true that at the end of the story Salzman "chanted prayers for the dead"- maybe the death in this story is that of the old religious forms- the ones that do not allow any life or real relationship through their rigid prisms. Alternatively perhaps he was saying kaddish for himself, for himself as priest and manipulator of those old forms. Perhaps in breaking open those forms Leo has his first redemptive moment, his first act of love.

In Defender of the Faith there is a more subtle opening of the heart. We find in the protagonist of Sergeant Nathan Marx that in response to his WWII experience in Europe that he had become numb:

After two years I had been fortunate enough to develop an infantryman's heart which, like his feet, at first aches and swells, but finally grows horny enough for him to travel the weirdest paths without feeling a thing.

However, it is Grossbart, whose eyes "flashed like fish in the sun" who, despite his fishiness effected a change in his Sergeant. Listening to Grossbart singing the "double time cadence" caused him to reach past the numbness to remember his childhood in the Bronx: "But now one night noise, one rumor of home and time past, and memory plunged down through all I had anesthetized and came to what I suddenly remembered to be myself". That coming to himself led him into shul that Friday night and into a continuing relationship with the slimy Grossbart.

By degrees Sergeant Marx finds himself becoming the defender of the faith: he defends his Jewish "men" in their quest to attend Friday night services, in their kosher food dilemma, and finally writes them illicit passes to have a sort of Pesach Sheni with Grossbart's aunt. When he realized that Grossbart had been using the "faith" falsely to gain privilege, he takes his revenge on him and sends him over to the Pacific with the rest of the men. By now it has become clear that Marx himself and not Grossbart, has become the defender of the faith:

"For each other we have to learn to watch out, Sheldon. You told me yourself."

"You call this watching out for me, what you did?"

"No. For all of us."

Through revenge itself he crystallizes his transformation into the "defender of the faith", by making sure that Grossbart ceases to use his religion for his own privilege. At the end of the story we see Marx's conflicts cast into specifically religious language:

"And then resisting will all my will an impulse to turn and seek pardon for my vindictiveness, I accepted my own". It seems to me that the acceptance of his fate, is the acceptance of a Jewish fate. As in The Magic Barrel we also have in this story the recasting of spirituality in non-conventional terms. Both Salzman and Grossbart, representing the more conventional forms of piety are proved to be empty, false. However both Leo Finkle and Nathan Marx touch something beyond the old forms, both characters surprise the reader and achieve some new definition of religiosity.

In conclusion I would like to posit the claim that parody is a profoundly religious form, one that cuts away at the idolatry of

old forms and provides new ways of relating to the world and God, provides the possibility for new covenants. Parody is not always anti-religious in the narrow sense, however it always attacks the rigidity of the idols to which we cling and in some way reawakens its readers to new possibilities. To draw on the poem by Moshe-Leyb Halpern- it is the breaking of the old drum and reaching for the new instrument on which to clang.