

## JOB AND RUTH – DIVINE AND MORTAL SALVATION

*Gilad Jacobson*

Good evening everyone. It is an honour to be here, and to share with you some thoughts on the Book of Job. I want to thank the organising committee for inviting me, and I hope that in the future, I will have the opportunity to repeat the Bibelwoche experience *in situ*, and get better acquainted with this inspiring community.

My talk will focus on the narrative envelope of The Book of Job that frames its philosophical, or dialogic, core. This includes the prologue in chapters 1-2, and the short epilogue at the end of the last chapter of the book. Thus, of the book's 42 chapters, only two chapters and a short paragraph are dedicated to the storyline. There is a tendency within some religious and academic circles to dismiss the narrative envelope as inferior from a literary perspective, perhaps even alien to the "pure" core of the book, or as a scaffold erected solely to captivate the reader and entice her to enter the poetic argument regarding theodicy. I think there are lessons to be learnt from shifting our gaze to the story itself.

Let us briefly go over the storyline. A rich and righteous man, Job of Uz, loses everything within a brief timeframe – his sons and daughters, his fortunes, and his good health. Grief-stricken and reduced to a pitiful condition, he remains devout to God. At the end of the story, Job recovers his fortunes, now doubled, and is blessed with seven sons and three beautiful daughters. His three friends, who engaged him during his mourning in what can perhaps be seen as a gaslighting session disguised as a philosophical argument, take their leave, and family and acquaintances reappear, consoling him for his previous losses and providing material support. This description *should* make you uncomfortable – I just skipped over half of the storyline, focussing on The Earthly Life and overlooking entirely The Heavenly Life. The story is written in counterpoint, with heavenly and earthly scenes intermingled, like in a cinematographic cross-cut. Satan, the Adversary, doubts Job's devotion, assuming it results from his good fortune, and God and Satan end up placing a bet – for lack of a better term – on Job's sincerity and integrity.

Superficially, the earthly part of the story bears an uncanny resemblance to the Book of Ruth. Both books deal with grief and loss; both books end with a recovery of both progeny and material wealth; in both, gentiles play a significant role, and their words are heard (in Job, it's debated whether any Israelites are present); and in both, we meet a grief-stricken individual, who suffered multiple blows. And yet, the two books provide us with very different models of how to conceptualise loss and stand on opposite poles from a poetic point of view. We shall start by looking at the different literary devices used by the two books, and by loosely following the footsteps of Mikhail Bakhtin, the great philologist and literary scholar, we shall look at the ways in which they employ space and time.

The Book of Ruth opens with an assertion of time and location: “*In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah ...*”. The author elaborates, lest we mistaken the Judaeian village for the Galilean one. The lineage from Ruth to King David, presented at the end of the book, further helps place the story within historical time. The text is rich with local and seasonal-agricultural customs, further augmenting the immersive nature of the story, probably much more so for a contemporary reader. Furthermore, the main characters bear names that are typical of the era, except for some secondary characters with symbolic names (Mahlon and Chilion, the sons of Naomi, and Orpah, her abandoning daughter-in-law). Ruth is thus a short novella that is both pastoral and historical in character.

In The Book of Job, in contrast, space and time are ambivalent: the place names, foremost Uz, are mostly unidentifiable; the friends seem to come from faraway lands, and no personal history is provided to account for the friendship. There is no rooting in historical time, leading to the ridiculous situation where different Talmudic sages place the story across almost one and a half millenia: from the time of Abraham to the return from the Babylonian Exile. Little detail is provided of the locale, and most personal names are strange, evoking a sense of wonder and alienation.

I’ve spoken so far about poetics / aesthetics, but before suggesting what I think can be learnt *ethically* from the comparison, I would like to side-track a little, and make an observation about the different ways in which writers – poets, novelists and some Talmudic Sages – have responded to the two books.

I will start with quoting a beautiful poem by Dan Pagis, an Israeli poet and professor of Medieval Hebrew Literature, and a Holocaust survivor from Bukovina, Romania. His irony, which permeates much of his poetry, is especially pungent in this prose-poem:

### **Homily**

From the start, the forces were unequal: Satan a grand seigneur in heaven, Job mere flesh and blood. And anyway, the contest was unfair. Job, who had lost all his wealth and had been bereaved of his sons and daughters and stricken with loathsome boils, wasn’t even aware that it was a contest.

Because he complained too much, the referee silenced him. So, having accepted this decision, in silence, he defeated his opponent without even realizing it. Therefore his health was restored, he was given sons and daughters – new ones, of course – and his grief for the first children was taken away.

We might imagine that this retribution was the most terrible thing of all. We might imagine that the most terrible thing was Job’s ignorance: not understanding whom he had defeated, or even that he had won. But in fact, the most terrible thing of all is that Job never existed and was just a parable.

[Translation: Stephen Mitchell, from: *The Selected Poetry of Dan Pagis*]

Several points are worth highlighting. First, Job’s unawareness of the bet between God and Satan at the end of the first stanza, and his silencing at the beginning of the second stanza, are highly interconnected. If we go back to the biblical text, the first words God directs to Job are: “Who is this who darkens counsel?” (Job 38:2). This is a perplexing and highly troubling statement. Is God unaware of himself? We, the readers, certainly think we know who darkened counsel, and who remained faithful throughout. Carl Gustav Jung, in his highly controversial book of 1952, *An Answer to Job*, discusses this point, and suggests that it is Job, through his suffering, that attained a higher understanding of God, higher perhaps than God’s understanding of himself. Paradoxically,

says Jung, omnipotent God lacks self-awareness *exactly* because he lacks any flaws that help turn our gaze inwards. God senses this change in his relationship with man, and his reaction is to overwhelm and silence Job.

Second, Pagis argues that “the most terrible thing of all is that Job never existed and was just a parable.” This is a direct quote from an anonymous Talmudic scholar, whose opinion is quickly dismissed in the Talmud, but gains credit in the late medieval period, most notably by Maimonides and Zerahiah of Barcelona.

Here is a quote from Maimonides’ Guide for the Perplexed (1191):

The strange and wonderful Book of Job ... its basis is a fiction, conceived for the purpose of explaining the different opinions which people hold on Divine Providence. You know that some of our Sages clearly stated Job has never existed, and has never been created, and that he is a poetic fiction. Those who assume that he has existed, and that the book is historical, are unable to determine when and where Job lived. ... According to both theories, the introduction to the book is certainly a fiction; I mean the portion which relates to the words of the adversary, the words of God to the former, and the handing over of Job to him.

[Translation: Friedländer 1904; Book 3, Chapter 22].

Zerahiah of Barcelona, a Maimonides scholar who lived a century later, is even more blunt in his biblical commentary (1291):

What you must know first is that this entire book serves as an allegory. Its primary intention, indeed, was to make known religious and non-religious motives and various beliefs by which men at large of different stripes are distinguished. As you know, the sages also held this opinion of the book ... Even a fool must realize that God cannot be seduced by Satan or any other creature ... That alone should be enough to quash a fool’s inclination to believe that Job ever existed or was created in any shape or form ... Thus anyone familiar with books and the science of language must acknowledge that Job is stylistically uniform from beginning to end, and that a single author composed and invented it.

R. Zerahiah’s observations combine philological arguments with claims about the nature of prophecy. He also misattributes to the Sages a *consensus* about the allegorical nature of Job. One cannot help wonder what other books in the Bible would also succumb to R. Zerahiah’s analysis, was it aimed at them.

But back to Pagis. What, indeed, can be more terrible than the complete denial that suffering has, indeed, taken place? Going back to both Job and the Talmud, there are other ways, beyond denial, that can silence Job. Job’s three friends are a clear example. R. Zerahiah says of them: “... his friends added to his vexation by arguing with him and contradicting him. Even if his misfortunes were on account of sins and crimes ... they should have greeted him with consolation ...”. In the Talmud, in tractate Bava Batra, we encounter two Talmudic scholars, Rav and Rava, who respond to a series of quotes from Job with the exclamation: “Dust should be put in the mouth of Job for saying this!” So the silencing of Job takes on two very different forms: denial of his actual existence, or a wish to shut him up, especially when he seems to be calling God out. The Talmud, of course, contains many other voices, and I would like to mention R. Yoḥanan, of whom the following is said:

**When Rabbi Yoḥanan reached this verse, he cried**, as God said to the Satan about Job: **“Although you did incite Me against him, to destroy him without cause”** (Job 2:3). Rabbi Yoḥanan said: With regard to **a slave whose master** is one whom others **incite** to act harshly against the slave **and** the master **is incited** to do so, **is there a remedy for** the slave? [Tractate Chagigah 5a]

Not only does he respond empathically to Job’s fate, he even hints that if there is a voice that cannot be heard, it is the one of God:

**Rabbi Yoḥanan says: Were it not explicitly written in the verse, it would be impossible to say this**, as it would be insulting to God’s honor. The verse states: “You moved Me against him,” **like a person whom others persuade and** allows himself to be **persuaded**, as if God had not wanted to do anything, but allowed Himself to be persuaded to bring harm to Job. [Bava Batra 16a]

The Talmudic scholar Dr Hananel Mack argues that R. Yoḥanan's empathy towards Job stems from his own experience with grief and the loss of his son, and unfortunately, I will not have time to expand on this interesting idea. I will add to it that attitudes towards Job, who is mostly regarded by the sages as a gentile, might be partially explained also by the attitude of different scholars to gentiles at large.

A different ironic take on the silencing of Job can be seen in a poem by Yehuda Amichai:

I've filtered out of the Book of Esther the residue  
of vulgar joy and out of the Book of Jeremiah  
the howl of pain in the guts. And out of the  
Song of Songs the endless search for love,  
and out of the Book of Genesis, the dreams  
and Cain and out of Ecclesiastes  
the despair and out of the Book of Job—Job.  
And from what was left over I pasted for myself a new Bible.  
Now I live censored and pasted and limited and in peace.

[Yehuda Amichai, translated by the poet, from *Time: Poems*, 1979]

My suggestion is that the Book of Job acts upon *all* of us very strongly, as it creates an immense ethical unease within us. The ethical ambiguity of the story requires us to take sides and respond. For some, the response would be aversion. As we have seen, the aversion can assume two forms, either a denial of the factual basis of the book, or a silencing and rebuke of Job's claims. The parallels with the ways different people respond to contemporary atrocities cannot be overstated.

Looking more broadly, I think that we can discern an interesting phenomenon. The imperfect world of Job, through the unease it creates, generates unrest and creativity. Thus we see Job peeking at us from Joseph Roth and Hanoeh Levin, Nathan Zach and Jung, Amichai and Rachel Blubstein, Paul Celan and Sholem Aleichem, Neil Simon and Elizabeth Brewster, Alfred Döblin and Kafka. Goethe took 30 years to realise that the proper way to open Faust I, by then already fully published in parts, would be to add the Prologue in Heaven at the very beginning of the book, a direct imitation of Job 1-2. Imagine a reader of Faust in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, suddenly reading of the bet between Satan and God as a *precursor* to Mephistopheles' appearance in Faust's study, after having finished reading the entire book over decades! Moral ambiguity, I argue, is a huge literary force.

It is time we return to the Book of Ruth, which has little continuation in world literature. One exception are the love poems of Elsa Lasker-Schüler to Gottfried Benn, casting herself as Ruth and him as Boaz. Why has Ruth inspired so little literature? I would like to argue that the Book of Ruth is so self-contained, so complete, that it provides the reader-writer with little inspiration for "fixing". Reading Ruth with the eyes of a 21<sup>st</sup> century reader, though, one gets uneasy with some aspects of gender, sexuality and patriarchy in Ruth that were perhaps overlooked in previous generations. Is the era of Ruth-inspired literature yet to come?

How should we sum up the different approaches to ethics promoted by the two books? The Book of Job suggests that the moral character of man can be judged coldly by philosophical dialogue. Acts and personality traits are almost completely abstracted, and actions – and even more so, speech – are judged by first principles, devoid of psychological, cultural, social, and familial context. Man is judged directly by God, but God's engagement with man is strange, violent and man seems to completely lack agency. God himself, in a true *deus ex machina* moment, artificially restores material goods and family to Job. In the Book of Ruth, grief-ridden memories do not fade nor is anything artificially introduced. It is a story of God abiding men and women, with human

weaknesses from the very onset. They immigrate, inter-marry, fall into despair, but they re-establish their lives not by winning an argument, but rather by re-affirming their community and family ties, by being generous, by asserting their own agency, albeit within the limiting and flawed rules that govern them. Compassion and even eros are bound by the detailed laws of levirate marriage, land inheritance and harvest gleaning (*Leket*, see Leviticus 19:9). But even within these confines, there is enough wiggle room to express benevolence, courage, independence, and love. Naomi's lost sons do not make a surprise entrance at the end, but she is given a grand-child through her daughter-in-law, Ruth, and her relative, Boaz, through a chain of human actions.

I want to end with the suggestion that the author of the Book of Ruth was aware of the Book of Job, and that he pays homage to it. While at the end of Job the bible tells us that: "He [Job] also had seven sons and three daughters" (Job 42:13), the womenfolk in Ruth embrace Naomi and tell her: "Blessed be the Lord ...! ... for your daughter-in-law who loves you, *who is more to you than seven sons*, has borne him." (Ruth 4:14-15). How, asks us Ruth's author, should one envision redemption? A realistic depiction of a single, devoted daughter-in-law and her newborn son, achieved through small deeds of love and care, or an artificial, otherworldly restoration of material goods and progeny?

Thank you for listening, and I hope this leads to some interesting thoughts and discussions.

## Appendix: The poems in Hebrew

### 1. Dan Pagis

#### דרשה

כָּבֵר מְרַאשׁ לֹא הָיוּ הַכַּחוֹת שְׁקוּלִים: הַשְּׁטָן שָׁר גְּדוֹל בְּמָרוֹם, וְאִיּוֹב בְּשָׂר וָדָם. גַּם מְלֻבֵּד זֶה לֹא הָיְתָה הַתַּחֲרוּת הוֹגֵנֶת. אִיּוֹב שְׁקַפַּח אֶת עַשְׂרוֹ וְשָׁכַל אֶת בְּנָיו וּבְנוֹתָיו וְהִכָּה בְּשַׁחִין לֹא יָדַע כָּלֵל שֶׁזֶה תַּחֲרוּת.

כִּיּוֹן שֶׁהִתְלוֹנֵן יוֹתֵר מִדִּי, הַשְּׁתִּיק אוֹתוֹ הַשׁוֹפֵט. וְהִנֵּה, כִּיּוֹן שֶׁהוֹדָה וְשָׁתַק, נֶצַח, בְּלֹא שְׂיָדַע, אֶת יָרִיבוֹ. וּבְכֵן הוֹשֵׁב לוֹ עַשְׂרוֹ וְנִתְּנוּ לוֹ בָּנִים וּבָנוֹת – חֲדָשִׁים, כְּמוֹבָן – וְנִטַּל מִמֶּנּוּ אָבְלוּ עַל הָרֵאשׁוֹנִים.

יְכַלְנוּ לַחֲשֹׁב שֶׁהַפְּצוּי הַזֶּה הוּא הַנּוֹרָא מְכַל; יְכַלְנוּ לַחֲשֹׁב שֶׁהַנּוֹרָא מְכַל הוּא חֶסֶד וְדַעַתוֹ שֶׁל אִיּוֹב, שֶׁלֹּא הִבִּין שֶׁנֶּצַח, וְאֵת מִי. אָבֵל הַנּוֹרָא מְכַל הוּא בְּזָה, שֶׁאִיּוֹב לֹא הָיָה וְלֹא נִבְרָא, אֶלֶּא מְשָׁל הָיָה.

### 2. Yehuda Amichai

סִנְנֵתִי מִתּוֹךְ מַגְלַת אֶסְתֵּר אֶת מִשְׁקַע  
הַשְּׁמִיחָה הַגִּסָּה וּמִתּוֹךְ סֵפֶר יְרֵמְיָהוּ  
אֶת יְלִלַת הַבָּאֵב בְּמַעֲיָם. וּמִתּוֹךְ  
שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים אֶת הַחִיפּוּשׁ הָאֵין סוֹפִי  
אֲחֵר הָאֶהְבָּה וּמִסֵּפֶר בְּרֵאשִׁית אֶת  
הַחֲלוּמוֹת וְאֵת קוֹן וּמִתּוֹךְ קֹהֶלֶת אֶת  
הַיֵּאוּשׁ וּמִתּוֹךְ סֵפֶר אִיּוֹב אֶת אִיּוֹב.  
וְהַדְּבַקְתִּי לִי מִן הַשְּׂאֲרִיּוֹת סֵפֶר תַּנְ"ךְ חֲדָשׁ.  
אֲנִי חִי מְצַנֵּד וּמְדַבֵּק וּמְגַבֵּל וּבְשִׁלּוֹה...

Supported by:

EVANGELISCH-LUTHERISCHE  
LANDESKIRCHE HANNOVERS

