The Particulars of Rapture

REFLECTIONS ON EXODUS

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rather than seen, then his song-prayer will have risings and fallings, minute oscillations that are the very breath of faith.

The Work of "Remusicking"

The Parsha portion that we have been discussing is, on one level, the preamble to the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. Before the Torah, however, comes prayer; which means song; which engages with the problem of inconsistency and the search for inner stability. Confronting the *ayin* of the wilderness, with the gifts of ecstasy sharp in memory, the people must begin to develop the even tone that contains the extremes of high and low. To sing is to enter a fully human world in which these extremes are held in tension.

No longer miracles—but song and prayer. As he models prayer, Moses' hands no longer hold the staff, imperiously outstretched over sky, land, and sea. His hands are empty, they quiver beseechingly with the weight of flesh; they create faith in the hearts of the people.

"Every disease is a musical problem, every cure a musical solution" (Novalis). Oliver Sacks frequently writes of the healing and freeing power of music. In *Awakenings*, for instance, a former music teacher, suffering from Parkinson's disease, is given motion, power, restored personality by music. "As I am unmusicked," she says, "I must be remusicked."[113]

On the way to Mount Sinai, it seems that the Israelites, too, must be remusicked. Their music is to be, like Miriam's well, a continuous accompaniment, rolling through vicissitudes, connecting the disjointed moments of joy. "You are the music/while the music lasts" (T. S. Eliot). The work of Miriam's well is to trace a songline through the forty-year-long indirection that is the wilderness narrative.

God takes the indirect route, says the midrash with a startling simplicity, so that they may traverse the wilderness, eat manna, drink of this well—"and the Torah will settle in their bodies."[114] It is their bodies that are to house the Torah. Day after day, they are to become attuned to the inner music that will allow them to move spontaneously, from a newly powerful center. This is the work of "remusicking": thoughts and questions, fears and fantasies are to be given free play, while the habit of a pure desire takes hold of their bodies. Given world enough and time, the vibrations of a new music may liberate them from the decrees of Egypt.

5 Yithro

"IF A LION ROARS . . ."

[18:1–20:23]

1. *Jethro and the Trauma of Revelation: A Paradigm*

Jethro Joins the Israelites: A New Structure of Identity?

The experience of Revelation is attended by conflicting emotions. For the people standing at Sinai at the highest point of their national history, fear vies with love, repulsion with attraction. In the biblical text, they recoil, yield place to Moses. In the midrashic narratives, the tension of desire and terror becomes central and overwhelming. The nature of this tension is the subject of our exploration: Why do the people recoil, resign their prophetic role to Moses? And how is one to relate to such a retreat?

In a characteristic juxtaposition of narratives from different registers of experience, the Torah prefaces the terror and glory of the giving of the Torah with the story of a family reunion. Moses' father-in-law, Jethro (*Yithro*), arrives in the Israelite camp, bringing Moses' wife and two sons. Chapter 18 tells in a matter-of-fact way of this family reunion, of a meal shared with Aaron and the elders, and of Jethro's suggestions for improving the Israelite legal administrative systems: essentially, he proposes a judicial hierarchy, with Moses dealing only with the problems of greatest complexity.

Although it is narrated before the Israelites' great encounter with God at Mount Sinai, this episode contains elements that lead the rabbinic sages to place it, historically, *after* Sinai. There is, for instance, the reference to Moses' work as "teaching the statutes of God and His laws" (18:16); these, obviously, could only have been administered after the Law was given. Why, then, if it happened after, is the Jethro episode narrated before Sinai?

The midrashic reading opens up thematic analogies between the Jethro narrative and the giving of the Torah. It endows the very first word of the Parsha with profound resonance:

> "And Jethro, priest of Midian, father-in-law of Moses *heard* all that God had done to Moses and to Israel his people, that God had taken Israel out of Egypt" (18:1): What report did Jethro hear that made him come and accept Israel's religion? R. Joshua said: "He heard of the war against Amalek." R. Eliezer said: "He heard of the Giving of the Torah and came . . ." R. Eliezer ben Yaacov said: "He heard of the splitting of the Red Sea and came . . ."[1]

This midrash makes a radical assumption: Jethro's "coming" is no longer a simple family affair, but rather it represents a spiritual crisis in his life, a recognition of the power of God and a desire to unite his fate, in some sense, with that of the Israelites. Read in this way, the first part of the chapter culminates in an actual ritual of proselytization. Jethro proclaims: "Now I know that God is greater than all the gods . . ." (18:11), and then: "Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took a burnt offering and sacrifices for God, and Aaron and all the elders of Israel came to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law in the presence of God" (18:12). These are the sacrifices of the proselyte, of the one who commits himself to a full acceptance of the Torah. Indeed, they parallel the sacrifices that the Israelites bring in token of their commitment to the Covenant (24:5).[2]

In this midrashic reading, the central question, therefore, is "What did Jethro hear that made him commit himself to God and His Torah?" The word *va-yishma*—"he heard"—becomes vital: what one hears has power to move one to heroic transformations. However, the question that the Rabbis ask—and answer in three different ways—is already plainly answered in the text: "Jethro . . . heard *all that God had done* to Moses and to Israel, his people, that God had taken Israel out of Egypt." The Rabbis' discussion therefore seems redundant: Jethro heard the whole story of redemption and was inspired to join the people who experienced such wonders.

But the Rabbis are, it seems, asking a more acute question: What was the *specific* narrative that had such power to move Jethro? Behind this compelling question lies a radical understanding of the power of narrative to address the privacies of individual experience. The story that has generative power is more than a chronicle of events: it is a way of rendering a moment, a drama, that seems to resonate with the listener's inner idiom. Registering such a narrative, Jethro is drawn to hear more.

This kind of hearing, therefore, is not passive. According to Rashi, a report of one among the many miracles of the Exodus draws Jethro away from the substantial realities of his world, into the desert:[3]

> *Into the desert* (18:5): We also know that this happened in the desert! But the text sings Jethro's praise: that he was settled in the honor of the world, when his heart prompted him to go out to the wilderness, a place of emptiness, in order to hear words of Torah.

Jethro chooses desert nothingness over the "honor of the world." His choice is, on the face of it, absurd: that is the thrust of the midrashic reading of the words, "into the desert." The high seriousness of Jethro's intent emerges from that absurdity. Only in the wilderness can he "hear words of Torah," only a "place of nothingness" can yield him his desire.

Connecting this comment by Rashi (based on the Mechilta) with the opening of the Parsha, therefore, we decipher the core-narrative of Jethro: "He heard a story that moved him to leave all the honor of the world . . . in order to hear words of Torah." *Hearing* the story generates in him a desire to *hear* words of Torah. Clearly a different genre, "words of Torah" are made accessible to him, desirable to him, by means of a narrative.

The words "the honor of the world" (*kevodo shel olam*) bear a resonance that I would like to explore. If Jethro is presented in Rashi's version of the text as a hero of spiritual curiosity, inflamed by a story to leave all the glory of the world, then we seem to have a paradigm for the situation of the whole people of Israel, receiving the Torah in the wilderness. If such an analogy exists, indeed, it seems to be to the advantage of Jethro: unlike the Israelites, he has everything to lose in this venture. What he has to lose is crystallized in Rashi's expression, "the honor of the world." The word *kavod*—"honor"—suggests *weight* (*kaved*), a sense of position in the world, of substantial being. This he abandons in his desire to hear. And, as we read on in Rashi's commentary, we discover a continuing use of the word *kavod*, "honor," in relation to Jethro. A theme emerges that will raise questions

about the inner world of one who approaches Sinai. In this extended narrative, the word *kavod* becomes a key to the paradoxes of the Sinai experience.

In rabbinic typology, Jethro is characterized as the *pethi*—the naïf, the seeker after truth, who is open to all forms of worship.[4] When, for instance, he makes his declaration: "Now I know that God is greater than all the gods" (18:11), Rashi comments:

> This teaches that he was acquainted with all the idols in the world, for there was not one that he had not worshipped.

This kind of uncalculating openness, the readiness to worship, is expressed by the word *pethi*, perhaps best translated, "gullible, seducible." In Rashi's text, Jethro's willingness to worship is conveyed in terms of his relation to *kavod*. If, for instance, he is immediately described as "father-in-law of Moses," Rashi comments (18:1):

> Here, Jethro defined his honour as being in relation to Moses—"I am father-in-law of the king!" Previously, Moses had seen his father-in-law as the source of prestige, as it is said, "He returned to Jether, his father-in-law" (4:18).

Jethro abandons all the honor of the world, the sense of a substantial identity, and now finds prestige in his relation to his son-in-law, Moses. In the next verse, indeed, he is described *only* as "father-in-law of Moses," his personal honorific, "priest of Midian," being dropped. And in 18:17, even his name, Jethro, is omitted: his identity is now totally absorbed into his relation with Moses.

The honor that Jethro has left behind has been replaced, therefore, by a new structure of identity. The vital importance to Jethro of such a structure emerges in Rashi's reading of his opening message to Moses:

> *"I, your father-in-law, Jethro, am coming to you . . ."* (18:6): "If you don't come out to greet me for my own sake, come out for the sake of your wife; and if not for her, come for the sake of her two children."

Jethro's plea here is for a demonstration of *kavod*: that the prestige in which he is held be staged by Moses. He asks for formal recognition. And indeed, "Moses went out to greet his father-in-law" (18:7):

> Great honor was done to Jethro at that time: since Moses went out to greet him, Aaron came out too with Nadav and Avihu—and who could see these leaders come out to greet him without coming out too?

This demonstration of honor for Jethro expresses a sensitivity to the situation of one who has abandoned his past, his social identity. The subtle indication in the text, however, is that Jethro actively lays claim to such validation. Rashi's commentary makes this quite clear; and produces a complex portrait of a genuine spiritual enthusiast, who hears an inspiring story that makes him abandon all the honor of the world; but who at the same time expresses a naïve concern with his *kavod*, his social prestige, even in the "place of nothingness."

Rashi's text continues:

> *"And Moses narrated to his father-in-law everything that God had done"*: in order to attract his heart, to bring him close to the Torah (18:8).

The narrative that Moses tells is one of suffering and salvation: its aim is to "attract his heart," to involve him emotionally in the Israelite adventure. The rhetoric of Moses' story subtly flatters Jethro, giving him a sense of his own importance. On the face of it, indeed, his reaction is naïvely wholehearted: "Jethro rejoiced at all the goodness that God had done for Israel, in saving them from the hand of Egypt" (18:9):

> *"Jethro rejoiced . . ." (va-yichad)*—that is the plain reading. But the midrash reads: "his flesh became *chidudin chidudin*—pins and needles [a play on the word *va-yichad*—"he rejoiced"/*chad*—"sharp"], for he was pained by the destruction of Egypt—as in the popular saying, "Even to the tenth generation, do not denigrate the proselyte's people of origin."

In this midrashic comment, Rashi intimates the complexity of Jethro's situation. On the one hand, he is drawn to the Israelite faith, he responds joyfully to the history of God's love for His people; on the other, the weight of the past still hangs heavy upon him. His involuntary nervous reaction betrays his visceral loyalties. Against his conscious intent, which has led him to abandon those loyalties, his flesh expresses his involvement with that "honor of the world," which had till now constituted his sense of specific gravity within it. Rashi may even be punning on the word *meitzar—mitzrayim*: "Jethro was *pained* by the destruction of *Egypt*": his pain is an Egyptian pain and arises out of Jethro's Egyptian past.[5]

In this portrait, Jethro carries the imprint of past identity, even as he is drawn to strip himself of that *kavod* and engage with the "nothingness" of Sinai. The pressure of his history makes his skin prickle; joy and pain coexist within him.

It is out of a sensitivity to the position of the one who has sacrificed his past to the demands of a future dominated by Sinai that Moses gives Jethro every compensatory sign of honor. In Rashi's narrative, Moses personally waits on Jethro at the festive meal he eats with the Israelite leaders "in the presence of God" (18:12).

The issue of honor is, then, close to the heart of Jethro's concerns. In Rashi's reading, even in his advice to Moses about the necessity for a hierarchical system to deal with the people's legal questions, Jethro's concern is focused on the honor problem:

> *"Moses was seated to judge the people, while the people stood from morning to evening"*: Moses sat like a king, while they all stood. This was hard for Jethro, that Moses was taking the *honor* of the people lightly. So he rebuked him, as it is said: "Why are you alone seated, while they are all standing?" (18:14)

Rashi interprets the text to say that Jethro is perturbed at the offense to the *kavod*, the dignity of the people. In the Torah text, however, it seems at least as plausible to read his concern as being for Moses, worn out by the overwhelming demands of the people. Before he makes his administrative proposals for a pyramid structure of small-claims courts, he specifically warns Moses: "You will wither up, as will this people who are with you . . ." (18:18). Nevertheless, Rashi, obeying a profound intuition about Jethro, places the question of *kavod* at the center. Even the idiom for Moses' exhaustion expresses the sense of weight: ". . . for the thing is too heavy (kaved) for you . . ." Rashi's comment is: "Its weight is too great for your strength." By insisting on the palpable experience of strength taxed by a burden, Rashi conveys Jethro's anxiety about *overloading*, about the possibility that a human identity may be fractured, disintegrated, eroded. His warning, "You will wither up," too, tells of erosion of the fibers of being. His concern is obviously for Moses' health, but his imagery remains preoccupied with the hazards of identity.

Jethro's advice, therefore, is to delegate the work of legal administration, as a way of lightening his burden, which others will now bear with him (18:22). The ultimate effect of this reform will be, "You will be able to stand, and all this people too will come to its place in peace" (18:23). These expressions will resound with new power, when we come to read of the people's "standing at Sinai." In paradigm form, Jethro is staging the essential problem of the Sinai experience: Can one hold one's standing-ground there? Can one bear the burden without implosion? Can one's *kavod*, one's recognizable identity, remain intact in the encounter with the transcendent God who speaks from the wilderness? In abandoning the honor of the world, Jethro's urgent need is for the reaffirmation of the human measure.

The Trauma of Sinai: The Therapeutic Narrative

Jethro's case is the more interesting in that, according to the midrashic view, he has not personally experienced the revelation at Sinai: he comes, we remember, *after* the giving of the Torah. That is, the overwhelming scene of thunder and lightning, the endless *crescendo* of the ram's horn, and the smoking mountain have been registered by him merely in the form of a narrative. But, even in that form, it has had the power to draw him out of his *kavod* and into a place of nothingness. The power of words, of imagination, is both prodigious and unnerving. And Jethro's anxiety, revealed even in his pragmatic advice, hovers around a core awareness of the problem of *kavod*, of continued being in a recognizable self.

In this midrashic perspective, therefore, the Sinai experience is communicated to the reader *first* through the medium of one who was not there, one who came *after*. By indirection, the reader has a first intimation of the potentially destructive or humiliating power of the moment of Sinai. To some extent, indeed, the Revelation can be called a trauma. We shall consider this dimension of the Israelite experience at some length. In Jethro's case, however, the transformation that threatens to undermine his familiar reality is mediated by words, by reports ("Jethro heard . . ."); and is made bearable to him, I suggest, by the therapeutic narrative told him by Moses.

We have noticed Rashi's comment that Moses' intention was to "attract his heart, to bring him close to the Torah." One implication of this is that if Jethro is to be brought close, his emotional condition *requires* words of sweetness and meaning. His situation is volatile, with repulsion and attraction in tension with one another. Therefore, Moses tells a salvation story, which addresses the most basic anxieties and desires of the listener: "And Jethro rejoiced at all the goodness that God had done for Israel . . ." (18:9).

The therapeutic narrative, however, has larger and more penetrating

places him at the Egyptian court, silently accepting Pharaoh's anti-Israelite policy. See Shemoth Rabba 1:12 and 12:3.

71. Shemoth Rabba 23:8.

72. James, *Varieties*, 477.

73. There are many similar passages of what becomes a conventional surprise in the jostlings of angelic and human in the presence of God.

74. Rosenzweig, *Star*, 156.

75. See Clement, chapter 4, "The Girls Who Leap into Space," *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*.

76. See R. Hutner, *Pachad Yitzhak, Pesach* (New York: Gur Aryeh, 1988), 1:11–12.

77. VaYikra Rabba 11:9.

78. See Song of Songs, 1:3: "Therefore, young girls love you . . ."

79. See Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, chapter 8, for a brilliant discussion of this and related texts.

80. See Nehemia Polen, "Miriam's Dance: Radical Egalitarianism in Hassidic Thought," in *Modern Judaism* 12, 1 (1992): 1–21.

81. Cavell, *Pitch*, 146.

82. See B. Eruvin 54b: "From here we learn that everywhere it says *va'ed*—for ever—eternally, there will be no discontinuity."

83. See Ramban to 15:18.

84. This midrash appears in B. Pesachim 118b. Rashi's version, on 14:31, begins: "So that the Israelites *should not say*, 'Just as we have emerged . . .' " God engages in preemptive activity, to *prevent* the expected counter-narrative from developing. Cf. Rashi on Ps 106:7—the proof-text for the midrash: "There were some people of little faith who said . . ." A compromise solution?

85. Cavell, *Pitch*, 144.

86. It is interesting to note that Miriam's son, Hur, is one of the men who support Moses' hands at Rephidim, in the battle against Amalek (17:10). Yet again, Miriam is associated with the problem of "rising and falling" (Moses' hands) and with the sense of faith as constancy.

87. See B. Ta'anit 9a; Tanchuma Bamidbar 2.

88. See Num 20:1–2.

89. William Wordsworth, "Essay upon Epitaphs," *The Prose Works*, vol. 2, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Wothington Smyser (Oxford University Press/Clarendon Press, 1974), 53.

90. Tanchuma Beshallach 24.

91. Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1993), 68–69.

92. Ibid., 74.

93. Ibid., 73.

94. Ibid., 72.

95. Ten tests, according to the midrash (Arachin 15a), based on Num 14:22.

96. *On Kissing*, 75.

97. B. Sanhedrin 56b.

98. John Keats, *Letters*, February 19, 1818.

99. The word for "song" (*shira*) can be associated with *shura*—"a straight line."

100. See, e.g., Chatwin, *Songlines*. The songlines are the "labyrinth of invisible pathways which meander all over Australia and are known to Europeans as 'Dreaming-tracks' or 'Songlines'; to the Aboriginals as the 'Footprints of the Ancestors' or the 'Way of the Law' " (p. 2). The Ancestors, who sang the world into existence, were poets "in the original sense of *poesis*, meaning 'creation': 'Providing you knew the song, you could always find your way across country' " (pp. 15–16).

101. A play on the words *riv* ("dispute")/*rav* ("master").

102. A play on the words *riv* ("dispute")/*ribui* ("bounty").

103. Shemoth Rabba 26:2.

104. See note 95.

105. Num 21:17–18.

106. Maharal, *Gevuroth Hashem*, chapter 7. It is significant that the blow to the rock is a reversion, even a regression, to Moses' original modality—*hitting* the Egyptian overseer (2:12), threatening with sticks the Israelite women who have offered mirrors to the Tabernacle. (See chapter 1).

107. See Ha-amek Davar to Numbers 20:8.

108. *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage, 1982), 231.

109. To Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe, November 17, 1912.

110. Likkutei Moharan 1, 282.

111. Exod 17:11–12.

112. Mechilta Beshallach 1:11.

113. *Awakenings*, 60, note 45.

114. Tanchuma Beshallach 1. Here, of course, the forty-year desert journey is given as God's primary intention, not as the punishment for the sin of the Spies. Perhaps sin and punishment are only a human notation for the destinies of human beings; underlying these comprehensible models is the mystery of God's knowledge.

Yithro: "If a lion roars . . ."

1. B. Zevachim 116a. Rashi includes two of these views in his commentary on this verse.

2. See Ramban to 18:12; and his source in the Zohar VaYikra (9:1).

3. Jethro's world is, of course, the world of the nomadic shepherd and, as such, it is set in the wilderness. Before the intrusion of the Israelite rumor, however, it, like all worlds, displays the contours and stabilities of a constructed culture.

4. See Shemoth Rabba 27:5.

5. There is a midrashic tradition that places Jethro in Egypt as one of Pharaoh's advisers, at the beginning of the persecution. See, e.g., Shemoth Rabba 1:31.

6. See James Hillman, *Healing Fiction* (Spring Publications, 1983), chapter 1.

7. B. Baba Bathra 16a.