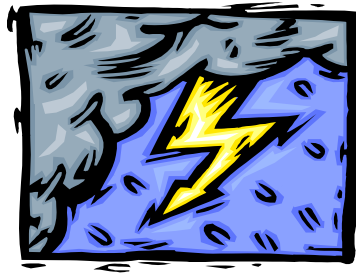


# *Text as Shelter* *from the Storm*



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*Text as Shelter from the Storm*

Since the days of the earliest rabbis, Jews have experienced study of Torah as the central axis around which all else pivots. This idea emerges in diverse ways. In matters of illness and health, we find texts like the following midrashic “prescription” in which Torah is deemed the cure-all par excellence:

If you wish that no harm come to your body, study Torah, for it is a cure for all the body’s ills. For the head, as it is said, “A garland for your head” [Proverbs 4]. For the heart, as it is said, “Write them on the slate of your heart” [Proverbs 3]. For your throat, as it is said, “bind them on your throat” [Proverbs 3]. For your hands, as it is said, “bind them upon your hands” [Deuteronomy 6]. For your navel, as it is said, “it will be a cure for your navel” [Proverbs 3]. For all your bones, as it is said, “a balm for your bones” [Proverbs 3].<sup>1</sup>

Out of context, this *midrash* might seem very odd. First of all, most of us probably find it hard to imagine a literal belief in the Torah’s ability to cure illness. Second, the well known story of Rabbis Yochanan and Eleazar in *Berachot* 5b confirms what we know from personal experience: healing most often resides not in words, ideas and texts, but in the human heart that weeps in empathy, the human hand that takes hold of another.<sup>2</sup>

But just as powerful is the tradition that places text and teacher at the center of the healing relationship. One passage from a series of short texts about the disease *ra’atan* is a good example:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi would associate with those who suffered from *ra’atan* and engage in Torah study with them, saying: The verse in Proverbs (5:19) describes the Torah as “a loving deer and a graceful gazelle,” the latter expression—*ya’alat chen*—having the additional connotation in Hebrew of “arousing grace.” If the Torah bestows grace upon those who learn it, will it not protect them from danger as well?<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the other rabbis mentioned in *Ketubot* 77b, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi visited people afflicted with the dreaded illness *ra’atan*, possibly a skin disease whose

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symptoms included trembling and extreme physical impairment.<sup>4</sup> While his colleagues were preoccupied with finding ways to avoid *ra'atan*, Yehoshua ben Levi immersed himself in studying Torah among the people who suffered from it, and engaged in the most ennobling act of all: he taught them Torah. Somehow, of all the sages, Yehoshua alone felt safe and protected from infection. But how? Perhaps because of his relation to Torah; perhaps because of his *mitzvah* of teaching the sick. Despite our radically different understanding of infectious diseases, it is clear that Yehoshua must have been motivated by one belief that we can share with him: the belief, articulated by Moshe Halbertal, that “God is present in the sacred text and studying it is thus tantamount to meeting God.”<sup>5</sup>

The idea that Torah cures or protects has been a persistent one. For example, “after the birth of any child,” writes Abraham Idelsohn, “the room in which the mother lay used to be hung with placards inscribed with Psalm 121 and with cabalistic formulae against evil spirits.”<sup>6</sup> From Idelsohn’s language, we might imagine that he is describing an exotic, medieval custom; but I have discovered surprising evidence of this practice in my own family, circa 1910, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Torah as protection found new spiritual expression in the creative voice of Hasidic commentary of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Explicating Numbers 35:6 (“The towns that you assign to the Levites shall comprise the six cities of refuge...to which you shall add forty-two towns”), Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel of Opatov wrote that the six cities correspond to the six words, “*Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*”; and the forty-two towns correspond to the passage that concludes “and upon your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:9).<sup>7</sup> Heschel thus teaches that these forty-eight biblical words constitute

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a “place” of refuge: no matter one’s sins, a person of faith finds shelter and protection in these words by loving God and accepting “the yoke of the kingdom of heaven.”

Can these kinds of beliefs mean something to us today, or are they relics of the pre-modern mind? Listen to the words of a modern writer, the Holocaust diarist Etty Hillesum: “Sometimes I want to flee with everything I possess into a few words, seek refuge in them. But there are still no words to shelter me...I am in search of a haven, yet I must first build it for myself, stone by stone. Everyone seeks a home, a refuge. And I am always in search of a few words.”<sup>8</sup>

Worlds apart theologically, Hillesum and Heschel are joined in spirit by the idea that words and text possess real substance and thus can provide a home or haven, a “city of refuge,” as it were. In their own distinct ways, they are spiritual descendants of Yehoshua ben Levi, whose faith in the Torah’s ability to shelter those who study it enabled him to comfort the isolated sick of his time.

Text as shelter strikes me as a quintessentially Jewish idea. Samuel Heilman quotes from Lucy Dawidowicz’s *War against the Jews* to describe the kind of protection that 20<sup>th</sup> century Jews in Europe found in the fellowship of Torah study:

In the *khavruse* [fellowship study group]...one can escape feelings of isolation and share instead familiarity, fellowship, and community...In the face of persecution and derision, in the midst of pogrom and holocaust, the *khavruse* offered the Jew “shelter from the storm outside, warmth and love instead of rejection and hostility, simultaneously strengthening self-esteem.”<sup>9</sup>

Dawidowicz describes *khavruse* as an instrument of “pastoral care” on a communal level. In a similar way, Simon Rawidowicz observed that learning “kept the heart and mind of the Jew alive, free, open” in historical periods of narrowness, hostility, persecution and isolation.<sup>10</sup> Through text study and teaching we too can offer “shelter

from the storm... warmth and love” to those individuals whose well-being is threatened by personal enemies: illness, stress, difficult relationships and grief.

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<sup>1</sup> Midrash Tanhuma, Yitro 8.

<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 5b:

R. Eleazar fell ill and R. Yochanan went in to visit him. He noticed that he was lying in a dark room, and he bared his arm and light radiated from it. Thereupon he noticed that R. Eleazar was weeping, and he said to him: Why do you weep? Is it because you did not study enough Torah? Surely we learnt: The one who sacrifices much and the one who sacrifices little have the same merit, provided that the heart is directed to heaven. Is it perhaps lack of sustenance? Not everybody has the privilege to enjoy two tables. Is it perhaps because of [the lack of] children? This is the bone of my tenth son! He replied to him: I am weeping on account of this beauty that is going to rot in the earth. He said to him: On that account you surely have a reason to weep; and they both wept. In the meanwhile he said to him: Are your sufferings welcome to you? He replied: Neither they nor their reward. He said to him: Give me your hand, and he gave him his hand and he raised him.

<sup>3</sup> Adin Steinsaltz, *The Talmud: The Steinsaltz Edition*, Volume XI, Part V, Tractate Ketubot (New York: Random House, 1996), p. 77b.

<sup>4</sup> Fred Rosner, *Encyclopedia of Medicine in the Bible and the Talmud* (Northvale, NJ/Jerusalem: Jason Aronson, 2000), pp. 265-7.

<sup>5</sup> Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge, MA/London, England: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Abraham Z. Idelsohn, *The Ceremonies of Judaism* (Cincinnati: National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods, 1930), p. 124.

<sup>7</sup> The source of Heschel's commentary, *Ohev Yisrael*, is: Alexander Zusia Friedman, *Wellsprings of Torah* (New York: The Judaica Press, 1980), p. 353.

<sup>8</sup> Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1985).

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Heilman, *The People of the Book: Drama, Fellowship and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 225.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Rawidowicz, "On Jewish Learning": Address delivered at the opening convocation of The College of Jewish Studies, Chicago, September 1948.