

ON THE POWER OF LITERALITY

Dr. Tsivia Frank Wygoda

As long as we are not chased from our words we have nothing to fear. As long as our utterances keep their sound we have a voice. As long as our words keep their sense we have a soul.

Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions* (1963)

SO MUCH OF our prayer belongs to the literary order of metaphor. Indeed, the language of prayer almost always requires a constant operation of translation from literal to figurative language. When we speak of God as our King, ask God to open the gates of Heavens to our prayers, or pray to be written in the Book of Life, we use metaphors that inscribe ineffable realities in human images and imagination.

Think of the opening paragraphs of Unetaneh Tokef,¹ or the *piyyut* that precedes the Vidui on Yom Kippur (כי אנו עמר): from the image of the king to the image of the shepherd, from the betrothed to the guardian of the vineyard, these texts weave together tangible figurations of divine rule and care that echo through the Torah, the Prophets, and the Book of Psalms. These evocative images are vehicles that allow us to grasp the nature of our relationship to the Divine, and support a dynamic conceptualization of God.

This regimen of loose connection between words and their literal meaning has multiple functions. For example, the poetic scaffolding of our prayers stimulates a spiritual state of contemplation and elevation. It also enables us to attach dynamic meanings to static texts, and thus, to sustain our spiritual needs in shifting personal, cultural, and religious landscapes. Last, it allows us to escape the boundaries of the here and now and reframe our own existence within broader historical and theological frameworks of meaning.

Yet the prayers of the Yamim Nora'im contain several passages that strike me as escaping the literary order of metaphor and allegorical language. One of them is a short part of Unetaneh Tokef, made iconic by Leonard Cohen's "Who by Fire?" (1974). Another, much longer passage, known as the Seder Avodah, is the minute description of the ritual performed on Yom Kippur by the High Priest in the Temple of Jerusalem, based on the text of Massekhet Yoma. **Literality**, in each of these texts, operates differently and has distinct functions; yet both escape the traditional metaphorical orientation of prayers; they force us to stop and ponder the literal meaning of our words and their implications.²

This year, as the return of the Yamim Nora'im brings the completion of a year since the attacks of Simḥat

1 Unetaneh Tokef, the poem that introduces the Kedushah of Musaf, is the quintessential piece of Rosh Hashanah liturgy in the Ashkenazi Maḥzor. It migrated to the prayers of Yom Kippur as well; the conflation with the Yom Kippur war in 1973 gave this poem new layers of meaning in Israeli culture.

2 There are, to be sure, other literal moments in the Yamim Nora'im prayers. Kol Nidrei, the opening piece of the Yom Kippur prayers, is arguably the ultimate occurrence of meta-literality in the Maḥzor. If I do not engage with this passage here, it is because of its legalistic origins, fabric, and purpose, which are at odds with the rest of the Yamim Nora'im liturgy.

Torah—a year of immense grief and turmoil, both individual and collective—I approach the literality I find in these texts with a counterintuitive suggestion: that rather than hinder our spiritual journey, literality might augment the emotional, philosophical, and ethical stakes of our prayers.

LOCATING OUR SELF

Returning to Unetaneh Tokef, we find that after a beautiful and deeply moving introduction, underpinned by powerful cultural images, the text shifts away from the metaphorical depictions of God to dwell instead on us, human beings. Leaving the poetic flourishes of the previous part and the allegorical imagery of God as King and Shepherd, it becomes explicit, literal, raw:

ונתנה תוקף

בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה יִפְתְּבוּן, וּבְיוֹם צוֹם כְּפוּר יִחְתְּמוּן.
כָּמָה יַעֲבִירוּ וְכָמָה יִבְרֹאוּ, מִי יִחְיֶה וּמִי יָמוּת,
מִי בִקְצוֹ וּמִי לֹא בִקְצוֹ, מִי בַמֵּים וּמִי בָאֵשׁ,
מִי בַחֲרֵב וּמִי בַחֲיָה, מִי בַרְעֵב וּמִי בַצָּמָא, מִי
בַרְעֵשׁ וּמִי בַמַּגָּפָה, מִי בַחֲנִיקָה וּמִי בַסְקִילָה, מִי
יָנוּחַ וּמִי יָנוּעַ, מִי יִשְׁקֵט וּמִי יִטָּרֵף, מִי יִשְׁלֹוּ וּמִי
יִתְיַסֵּר, מִי יַעֲנִי וּמִי יַעֲשִׂיר, מִי יִשְׁפֹּל וּמִי יָרוּם.
וְתִשׁוּבָה וְתַפְּלָה וְצַדִּיקָה מַעֲבִירִין אֶת רֹעַ הַגְּזֵרָה.

Unetaneh Tokef (Sefaria community translation)

On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed—how many shall pass away and how many shall be born, who shall live and who shall die, who in good time and who by an untimely death, who by water and who by fire, who by sword and who by wild beast, who by famine and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague, who by strangulation and who by lapidation, who shall have rest and who shall wander, who shall be at peace and who pursued, who shall be serene and who tormented, who shall become impoverished and who wealthy, who shall be debased, and who exalted. But repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severity of the decree.

The literal intensity of this passage, with its litany of death possibilities—death by water, death by fire, timely and untimely deaths—is almost unbearable to read. Its lapidary, schematic depiction of our lives leaves little room for poetic indeterminacy. It sums up the human condition with violent, inevitable, brutal clarity.

Soon, the poem returns to analogies and metaphors: human beings are like “dry grass, they shrivel and wither; like a passing shadow and a vanishing cloud, like a breeze that passes, like dust that scatters, like a fleeting dream. But You are the King who lives eternal.” The magic of poetic language operates again; through analogies and metaphors, it sublimates reality, transports us to a metaphysical realm, and softens the human condition by transcending it.

Yet the short paragraph of pure, raw literality remains, haunting our thoughts. And it is not an aberration, not a slippage, nor a wavering of the poet’s hand.

This literality is a portal to the self: our reality, our present, our emotional and spiritual state. These few sentences are where we pour out the story of our year and our life; where we stop to grieve the unusual deaths of so many beloved people, those we knew and those we never met; those from our communities, and those strangers with whom we share the human fate. This is where, this year, we will pour out our anguish, cry over our loss, grieve individually and collectively. The open-ended referentiality of the text (“who?”) meets the definite, concrete, unavoidable meaning that each of us reads into it. The literality of this passage functions as a referential anchor, a grounding of the prayer in the subject that utters it. It brings the prayer home.

But literality is not only a blank canvas on which our souls may inscribe themselves in prayer. It carries existential implications. The bare literality of this passage exposes the frailty, the limits, the very essence of human existence: we are left to face our humanity, yet unmediated by the abstractions and remote beauty of poetic language and images. This is a moment when prayer hits rock bottom; this moment of unraveling vulnerability foregrounds the meaning of the Kedushah that follows.

THE LITERAL GOAT

Another passage of the Yom Kippur liturgy in which literal referentiality plays a crucial role is the Seder Avodah: a lengthy description of the sacrificial rituals

performed on Yom Kippur at the Temple. Every Musaf includes a list of the sacrifices brought on the special occasion, but on Yom Kippur—instead of the short, generic naming of that day's sacrifices recited in the silent Amidah—the repetition minutely describes the many steps and movements of the High Priest, his changes of clothes and the order of his ablutions, the exact gestures he would make while spilling the sacrificial blood over the altar, the particulars of the ritual of the scapegoat, the Torah reading, and the three prayers of atonement. The intricacy and the repetitive quality of the detail are so unusual and emphatic that they have acquired their own liturgical power: the counting of the aspersions, and its various melodies, exemplify how a hyper-literal moment (וכך היה מונה) can become itself hauntingly poetic.

Against the backdrop of the liturgy of the Yamim Nora'im, in which the primary textual modes are metaphor and allegory, the Seder Avodah is strikingly devoid of metaphors: it is, to the contrary, very literal in its representation of the materiality, the physical reality, of the sacrificial ritual. From the end of the introductory poem (in its two versions: אותה כוננת / אמיץ כוח), which sets the cosmic dimension of the Temple, to the *piyyut* (מראה כהן) which concludes it in a symphony of analogies—helping us imagine the particular splendor of the High Priest at the end of these moments of awe—the text rarely strays away from the technicality of the ritual operations.

For our Sages, who placed the memory of the Temple prominently in the Mishnah, the text and its recitation were an act of nostalgic remembrance; for further generations they were, and still are, an act of religious imagination, representation, even reenactment. But they are also an invitation to ponder the meaning and value of the literality of the ritual, as a strand coursing beneath the metaphorical scaffolding of the language of prayer. The pure materiality of the Seder Avodah forces us to confront the way in which literal and metaphorical interact in our spiritual life. It forces us to acknowledge the very realities that are the basis upon which we construct ideas and ideals.

In the service of Yom Kippur, the sending of the scapegoat described in the Seder Avodah is precisely the moment where the articulation of the literal to the metaphorical—or rather the anchoring of the metaphorical to the literal—occurs. When the goat falls,

the vision of its body thrown upon the rocks rendered in minute detail, the priest who performs the ritual says: “כִּךְ יִמְחוּ עֲוֹנוֹת עַמְּךָ בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל - Thus may your sins, Israel, be forgotten.” “כִּךְ—Thus,” means both “through this ritual,” and “exactly like this.”³ The ritual of expiation is essentially a metaphorical transference, in which the goat stands for us; but the animal that dies in the wilderness, and the one that dies on the altar, are literal, before they become a metaphor.

Running against the temptation to go (entirely) metaphorical, to let our prayer soar in abstraction, the Seder Avodah reminds us that the recourse to metaphor promises meaning and spiritual elevation but comes with a risk: it habituates us to forget and forgo the literal for the figural. We should be wary of symbolic operations in which the literal collapses under the weight of metaphors: our ethics as a society lay on our ability to acknowledge human reality in its complexity, and to act on it with clear-sightedness and compassion.

CONCLUSION

On the day of Simḥat Torah 5784, so much of our language lost its usual metaphorical signification. Torn from their connotations of joy, peace, and harmony, words suddenly acquired a new literality. The red anemone that has for years been a metonymy of the beautiful winter bloom in the Western Negev region suddenly became a grim symbol for the massacre, along with the words “Darom Adom” (Red South)—the name of the yearly anemone festival. “Shelters” meant traps. “Doors” did not distinguish between open and closed, but between life and death. Dawn, a synonym for hope; Shabbat, a day of peace; Simḥat Torah, a time of joy—each lost their meaning in the desperation and helplessness of that day.

In the wake of that terrible day, psalms, poems, and prayers received tangible, urgent, rock-bottom literality in ways they never had before. Since then, amidst our grief and anguish, amidst the constant turmoil that plagues us, we have tried to ponder this new literality, the literality of suffering and death and war, and let its urgency resonate in our language.

As we reconstruct our lives, reaffirm our values, and fight for our future, it is also important not to lose sight of the literal: what is lost and cannot be recovered;

3 Note here that the text of the Maḥzor strays from the Mishnah (see Yoma, ch. 6), where no words are uttered as the animal falls down the cliff.

what is destroyed and cannot be rebuilt. Perhaps this work may begin first and foremost in our prayers over these Yamim Nora'im.

May the anchoring literality of our prayers this year propel us to places where perhaps metaphor alone could not, and may that experience somehow help us to ground our selves, comfort our souls, and bring clarity. ♦