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## Lot's Daughters: The Ethics of Reading in the Present

There never was any more inception than there is now  
Nor any more youth or age than there is now  
And will never be any more perfection than there is now  
Nor any more Heaven nor Hell than there is now  
--Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

To the Jew, Torah is twofold in accordance with her twofold attitude. We have an intuitive sense for these attitudes: *p'shat* and *d'rash*, outside and inside, closed and open. The central question, I think, concerns time. Is the text a coherent whole before my reading, chronologically, and thus ontologically, prior to me? or is the text written at the moment of my reading it, even as I am being written by it? I'll leave the distinction vague and undefended for a moment, and try to make things clearer through a Midrash.

Consider the following story:

And Lot went up from Zoar, and dwelt on the mountain, and his two daughters with him; for he feared to dwell in Zoar; and he dwelt in a cave, he and his two daughters. And the first-born (B'chirah) said to the younger (Tz'irah): "Our father is old, and there is not a man in the earth to come in unto us after the manner of all the earth. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father." And they made their father drink wine that night. And the first-born went in, and lay with her father; and he knew not when she lay down, nor when she arose. And it came to pass on the morrow, that the first-born said to the younger: "Behold, I lay yesterday with my father. Let us make him drink wine this night also; and go thou in, and lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father." And they made their father drink wine that night also. And the younger arose, and lay with him; and he knew not when she lay down, nor when she arose. Thus were both the daughters of Lot with child by their father. And the first-born bore a son, and called his name Moab—the same is the father of the Moabite unto this day. And the younger, she also bore a son, and called his name Ben-ammi—the same is the father of the children of Ammon unto this day (Bereishit 19:30-38, 1917 JPS translation).

I might read this story as a palimpsest, a fiction that displaces the agency for—and thus the shame of—rape. After all, especially given the rest of Bereishit 19, is it really likely that Lot's daughters raped their father? No more likely than the misogynist fiction that women who dress in a certain way "provoke" rape, or the story that many abusive parents tell children, that the children are responsible for their own victimization. These narratives legitimate oppression by reassigning responsibility to the victims.

The hallmark of such stories is the implausibility of their plots--because they are fantasies meant to obscure reality, they always seem vaguely absurd. The Rabbis see this implausibility easily and locate skillfully the sharpest absurdity:

It was taught in the name of Rabbi Yose bar Rav Chuni: Why is there a dot above the vav [in the word] "Uv'kumah" (And her rising) of the B'chira? to say that in her lying down, he [Lot] did not know, but in her rising, he knew. And what was there for him to do? What was done was done. The point of this is that he should not have drunk wine the other time [i.e. the second night]. (Nazir 23a)

It is odd enough to say that Lot was unaware the first time--but to suggest that the *second* night he was also the passive victim of rape is really too much.

Actually, the reading of this story as misogynist myth cannot easily explain the doubling of the daughters. By necessity, such myths require of the male character an unlikely victimization, but there is certainly no need to multiply the improbability. The passage from Nazir uses this weakness to moderate the displacement of agency, giving Lot back some control over his situation and easing the tension of the story.

But one can also use this liability to reinforce and extend my initial reading:

Rabbi Chiya bar Abba said that Rabbi Yochanan said: The Holy One, Blessed be He does not withhold reward from any one of his creations, even the reward for refined speech (sichah naeh), that even in the case of [Lot's] *B'chirah*, who said "Moab," (from father), The Holy One blessed be He said to Moshe: "Do not harass Moav or incite war against them" (D'varim 2:9). No war--but a tax may be done on them. [Concerning] the *Tz'irah*, who said "Ben-Ami" (son of my people), the kadosh baruch hu said to Moshe: "And when you approach the Ammonites, don't incite them and don't harass them or incite them [at all]"--this is inclusive, that you may not even tax them (Bava Kamma 38b, my translation).

Here, the two daughters represent two responses to the palimpsest, the rewriting of abuse.

The *B'chirah* confronts injustice openly, and the *Tz'irah* collaborates in euphemism. The Midrash thus accounts for the doubling as a morality play: it is praiseworthy to extend the cloak of pretty fiction over ugly truth, and unwise to openly declare what has happened.

The daughters here are like rape victims who are told: "If you keep silent, well and good; but if you insist upon dragging this shameful affair into the public light, do not blame us

if societal stigma falls upon you.” The midrash, under this reading, uses the doubling to extend the euphemistic covering of Lot's abuse even to the daughter's themselves.

I have aggressively read this set of texts as art of an alarming discourse of male hegemony; now I want to read the midrash another way. There are two daughters and two attitudes in reading texts. You may read a text as if it has already been written—in that case, you must acknowledge the ugliness and immorality of these stories. You must also name your son "*Moav*"; the past cannot be changed. The incest precedes the name, the text its interpretation. But you may also name your son "*Ben Ami*"; there the naming rewrites the incest. The interpretation rewrites the text. No-one lies, and yet the *Tz'irah* rescues her son from the curse of incest.

Crucially, both practices are good; both merit a protection in *D'varim*. The *Tz'irah* merits a more expansive prohibition, because her naming was more expansive. "*Sichah naeh*" refers less to euphemism than the sort of verbal trickery the Rabbis love. But both the literal recounting of past oppression and the present rewriting thereof merit reward.<sup>1</sup>

The theme of time is not just my conceit; it is the midrash's concern. Incest, after all, is the ugliest symbol available for regression. In Jane Austen novels, endogamy represents conservation of the old social order, exogamy the breaking of these bonds (think of Elizabeth Bennett, in *Pride and Prejudice*, rejecting her cousin Mr. Collins, and all that decision entails). Incest ruptures those rhythms, binding future generations to the past. The curse of the Oedipus complex, and the reason for its centrality to Freudian

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<sup>1</sup> This is crucially different from the following, from the Midrash Tanhuma: "*and lay with her father*: But in the case of the younger, it says: "and she lay with him." Since the younger one was not the initiator of the illicit relations, but rather her sister taught it to her, Scripture covers up for her and does not explicitly tell of her disgrace. But [concerning] the elder, who initiated the illicit relations, Scripture publicizes her explicitly." The midrash from Tanhuma extends the threat of public shaming; when read in conjunction with the Bava Kamma midrash, it connects the daughters' euphemisms with the response of the community. But both daughters are rewarded in Bava Kamma; the euphemistic reading fails.

psychoanalysis, is that the old familial trauma poisons present relationships—the taint of incest alludes to the compulsion of repetition.

Incest, then, is the ugly shadow of heredity—and of patriarchy. Heredity, whether biological or economic, is the societally approved demand of the past upon the present; incest is the unacceptable absolute version of those demands. It is the subordination of the young to the old, the endless repetition of "like begetting like" that Adam, desiring a female partner and bemoaning an all-male humanity, imagines in Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

...Man by number is to manifest  
His single imperfection, and beget  
Like of his like, his Image multipl'd,  
In unitie defective, which requires  
Collateral love, and dearest amitie. (VIII.422-6)

Patriarchy, in its absolute form, stifles change and rejects difference. Discussing Lot, we find the following insightful and scary Midrash:

Rabbi Nachman bar Chanina said: always the man who begins by lusting after forbidden things, in the end they will feed him from his own flesh. (*Bereishit Rabba* 51:11)

The endpoint of incest is Chronos consuming his children—eros turned upon itself.

The B'chirah collapses under the weight of the past. The B'chirah in *Bereishit* cannot imagine a world without men—for her the end of the *derech kol haaretz*, the end of the dominant paradigm of gender relations, is the end of the world. Her son will become "Avi b'nei moav." Like Pip in *Great Expectations*, he is subject to the palindromic constant return—his future is his past. The phrase anticipates the *avi-av hatumah*. As Rabbi Levi intuits, incest leads to the static, the redundant, the corpse. The Tz'irah's son becomes "Avi b'nei ammon"; the term widens from beginning to end (culminating in the coed people, while "avi b'nei moav" never escapes the male), growing out of the past rather than back to it. The euphemism decenters the name of the father, as

John Harmon's pseudonym destabilizes inheritance in *Our Mutual Friend*. Here, the name change elides the father and the past.

I like this Midrash because even as it represents two approaches for troubling texts, it performs those readings itself. The reading of the *B'chirah* uncovers the Biblical story—and the Bava Kamma *midrash* itself—in all its shame. But just as the *Tz'irah* rescues her son from the trauma of incest, so too the Midrash rescues the daughters from the misogynist myth in which they seem to be trapped. By choosing the moment of naming, the Midrash emphasizes the daughters' performative speech. Because the Torah severely limits women's ability to make vows, performative speech is a rare power for women. Naming individuates the sisters. If I draw a sad portrait of the *B'chirah*, it is at least the portrait of a character and not a caricature. Further, the naming is the one event in the story that cannot originate in the misogynist narrative. In all probability, the names *preceded* the story, which comes as an origin myth for them. The names are thus fixed points outside the plot, making them ideal points from which to subvert the story.

The Midrash's redemption of Lot's daughter occurs simultaneously with its elucidation of the hermeneutic by which it does so—it uses the *Tz'irah's* method to generate the *Tz'irah's* method, in the process rewriting the *Tz'irah* herself. The naming is significant because it exemplifies the Midrashic instinct for the eternal, the place that precedes the story and that allows a rewriting that is not revisionary, but rather simultaneous with the composition of the story itself. Further, by teaching us to read Bereishit differently, the Midrash rewrites us too. I insist on the importance of time—all this is only neat because it is all happening at the same moment, in the same writing. As Derrida says, “One must then, in a single gesture, but doubled, read and write.” This is

the Jewish creation myth—not *creatio ex nihilo*, but the spontaneous reorganization of *tohu vavohu* into order.

What does it mean for us to be written with the text—is that merely a careless zeugma on my part? Part of the feeling is that, as Derrida wrote, *il n'y pas hors-texte*: there is no "outside the text." It is not insolent to compare incest to a text, for our lives and stories are also texts. "The distortion of a text," Freud wrote, "is not unlike a murder." This comparison is, again, about time: our lives interpenetrate with text precisely to the extent that we read and write ourselves even as we do so for the texts.

The best way to understand this is to compare the Midrash's reading with another possible revisionist reading. Perhaps my talking of "misogynist palimpsest" presumes a natural precursor text about male power and aggression, female victimhood, and the male prerogative to initiate sex. Without that assumption of a biological "real," my notion of a palimpsest, a covering-over, collapses, and the text stands as a story about female transgression, power, and sexual agency. This is a superficially appealing reading, which seems to rescue the daughters without any Midrashic tomfoolery, any hermeneutic shell games. In short, who needs Midrash? The story only seems misogynist because of my problematic assumptions about the immutability of gender.

Actually, I got this reading from a character in a Michael Crichton novel. In *Disclosure*, a female boss tries to seduce a male subordinate; when he does not reciprocate, she accuses him publicly of sexually harassing *her*. Take my word for it: *Disclosure* is a misogynist myth, full of plotting absurdities, sexist stereotypes, and indifference to injustice. But at one moment, a lawyer suggests we read the story as a treatise in gender equality. One character expresses doubts that a female boss sexually

harassed a male subordinate and then pretended to be the aggrieved party. “So you think women are unpredictable in their contractual relationships,” the lawyer asks, “but stereotypical in their sexual arrangements?” As noticed before, the issue for the immoral fantasy is always plausibility, and here the idea is to use the reader’s moral intuitions about equality to buttress a plainly nonsensical story.

The lawyer’s attack on the reader’s doubts might as well be the revisionist’s attack on my initial discomfort with the Biblical story. My condemnation of *Disclosure* seems to depend on a natural script about power and gender. But that’s not right; I take gender roles not as a biological but a textual ‘real.’ Giving the daughters “power” cannot change the plot, which ends in incest and the absolutism of the patriarchy. It cannot respond to the difficulty of the doubling, nor to Lot’s absurd passivity. It cannot reconcile this incident with Lot’s behavior in the rest of Bereishit 19. This reading cannot distinguish the complex, canonical text of Genesis from Crichton’s repellant allegory. *Midrash* is a powerful tool because it creates new plots while preserving the integrity of the original; the rereading leaves the discrete words and letters of the text unaltered.

Earlier, I ignored the possibility that the reader might approach the text assuming *her* chronological priority to *it*; I think Crichton’s revisionist reading requires that mentality. Like early Freudian or Marxist critics, whose essays now seem stale and formulaic, the revisionary reader approaches the text with a system and a theory. That is, she starts with a whole sense of what her personal text is, and makes the text she reads in her image. She may understand the text’s “deep meaning,” but she loses its surface, the confusing welter of signifiers that inflexibly resists pre-arranged systems. The “writing of self” I mean happens, oddly, not in the depths of my mind or in the allegorical depths of

the text, but in the relational interplay between my surface and the text's. True creation requires universal *tohu vavohu*. To occlude that interplay and that creation by seeing oneself as already written is ultimately not much different from the opposite occlusion, that of the *B'chirah*. I-Thou reading happens only in the present.

The simple revision can redeem only the text in front of it; like the *B'chirah*, it sees problems in isolation. Midrash, through its intuitive movement across surfaces, revises far more deeply the *torat b'nei ami*. Why does the story speak of a *b'chirah* and a *tz'irah*? By doing so it accesses the larger narrative typology of Bereishit, in which the younger child supplants the older. Isaac and Jacob get their father's *nachala* at the expense of Ishmael and Esau; the *Tz'irah* receives extra protection instead of the *B'chirah*. Compare this Midrash with its corollary:

Chiya bar Abba said that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha said: Always a person should be first in the matter of a *mitzvah*, because for the one night that the *B'chira* preceded the *Tz'irah*, she preceded [her sister] four generations [in coming] to Israel. Oved, Yishai, David, and Solomon [came from Ruth,] but the *Tz'irah* [waited] until Rechabom, as it is written, "And the name of his mother was Naamah the Ammonite."

The corollary is thin and unremarkable, partially because it lacks the unconscious backbone of the traditional younger-child plotline, in which our Midrash flourishes like a tree planted by streams of water.

Naturally, as our Midrash draws upon this tradition, it radicalizes it. To tell the story of the younger child with women disturbs the foundations of that story. Previously, the inheritance saga was rooted in the patriarchal transmission of property. In Bereishit, women do not inherit land; the *B'chirah* and the *Tz'irah* unmoor the story from what seemed a necessary patriarchal premise. Yet the narrative the Midrash rewrites is itself a revisionary narrative. The preference for the younger child constantly rewrites the text of birth-order, subverting the workings of patriarchy. As Leslie Brisman writes, in the Bible,



“revisionism seems to be there all along.” The *midrash* thus changes and does not change the preexisting narrative, simultaneously transforming and fulfilling the text.

Literary theorists call these rewritings "canon formation"—the process by which new works respond to older texts and collectively form a distinct but coherent whole.

T.S. Eliot understands the centrality of time, and of "simultaneous rewriting," to this process:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of æsthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new (TS Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent").

Genius acts retroactively. The strong poet seems to have been anticipated by his precursors. He fills a gap in their work, a gap he also creates. He must see the tradition as *tohu vavohu*, still unmade, and not just to create a single text but to recreate everything that came before.

Eliot and I glorify this process only because we focus on the tradition from the outside. Imagine a finely cut jewel, without flaws, symmetrical from every angle. It seems not of this world, but rather, like Shabbat, *m'ein olam haba*, an image of the world to come. Cut gemstones, as a rule, do not expand. Any new growth would appear cancerous, deforming all that came before. And yet it does expand, maintaining its perfect proportions.

For the Jewish thinker contemplating her tradition from the inside, however, the jewel must seem a prison. To say the tradition is *m'ein olam haba* is, curiously given the

verb, to say that it has already been written. The very miracle of the process of change frightens the person attempting such a change. If Eliot understands tradition from their outside, Harold Bloom sees what from the inside is its fearful symmetry:

Poetic influence, to many critics, is just something that happens, a transmission of ideas and images, and whether or not influence causes anxiety in the later poet is regarded as a problem of temperament or circumstance. But the epebe cannot be Adam early in the morning. There have been too many Adams, and they have named everything. The burden of unnamng prompts the true wars fought under the banner of poetic influence, wars waged by the perversity of the spirit against the wealth accumulated by the spirit, the wealth of tradition (Harold Bloom, *Yeats*).

The midrashist anxiously contemplates the Tanach: is there space for her? Is the text part of *olam hazeh*, is it confused, imperfect, and malleable? Or is it perfect, removed, already written? What is constantly implied but never explicitly stated in Bloom is that the reader of the canon has the terrible feeling that some part of her remains unwritten, unspoken, and nameless. Language cannot signify all, for even just the self, the image of God, is too large for it. Yet the unwritten seems to fit nowhere in the perfectly ordered text.

That is the *B'chirah's* problem: the text has already been written, the names already given. The challenge of the *Tz'irah*, what Nietzsche calls a "metamorphosis of the spirit," in which the "holy nay" of the *B'chirah*, who names and rejects the ugly past, gives way to the "innocence [that] is the child, and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a self-rolling wheel, a first movement, a holy Yea, [needed] for the game of creating." The *Tz'irah* must accept what both forget the past and accept it, making it part of the present writing. In Bloom's language, she must misread. Mordechai Kaplan wrote about unconscious transvaluation and conscious revaluation, and believed that while every generation transformed what came before, the modern Jew was unique in her *consciousness* of that transformation. Yet actually, what distinguishes the *Tz'irah* is her

willed unconsciousness of transformation. The strong misreading endures because it seems natural, while the obviously conscious reworking fades in its gracelessness.

But this approach to tradition is very hard, as the following Mishnah illustrates:

On that same day (bo bayom), Judah, an Ammonite ger (proselyte, stranger) came and stood before them in the house of study. He said to them, "What am I to come into the community?" Rabban Gamliel said to him "you are forbidden. R. Yehoshua said to him: "you are permitted." Rabban Gamliel said to him: "The scripture says, 'An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the community of God even to the tenth generation, etc.' (D'varim 23:4)." R. Yehoshua said to him: "And then are the Ammonites and Moabites in their places? Already Senaharib, King of Assyria, ascended and mixed up all the nations, as it says, 'I have removed the bounds of the nations, and robbed their treasures, and as a mighty one have brought down their inhabitants' (Isaiah 10:13)." Rabban Gamliel said to him, "the scripture says, 'And afterward I will return the exile of the children of Ammon' (Jeremiah 49:6) and they are already returned." R. Yehoshua said to him, "The scripture says, 'I will return the exile of my people Israel and Judah,' (Jeremiah 30, 3) and still they have not returned." And they permitted him to enter the community (Yadayim 4:4).

The problem is the patriarchy, the old order. How is it to be integrated into the new *b'nei yisrael*? The Moabite and Ammonite women have long been allowed into the congregation. Because of that strong Rabbinic misreading of the many source-texts of Tanach as a coherent legal whole, the prohibition in Deuteronomy has been reconciled with Ruth the Moabite's conversion and marriage to Boaz. But how will masculinity survive this Rabbinic transformation?

The dispute, of course, is over time. Rabban Gamliel believes that we are already living in Messianic time. The prophecies have been fulfilled, Moab and Ammon returned to their homes. The texts are complete. The stories of Moab and Ammon are composed, ordered—already finished. They may not enter. A jewel cannot be augmented. For Rabbi Yehoshua, we are still in this world, in *olam hazeh*; the text is not yet written, Moab and Ammon are mixed up. The world is *tohu vavohu*, ripe for the game of creation to begin anew. Rabbi Yehoshua is grappling with paternity in exile, when Jewish fathers have no *nachalah* to bestow to their sons. To make room for the new, Rabbi Yehoshua must admit the tragically incomplete state of the world: he must accept upon himself exile to which

Rabban Gamliel is immune. Rabban Gamliel, in this encounter, does not fear his own rewriting—which, if we are honest with ourselves, is the central anxiety of influence. Only after this dispute, in the larger deposition-story in which this is placed, does Rabban Gamliel realize the need for t'shuvah. Rabbi Yehoshua, to allow the Moabite in, accepts upon himself the vulnerability to revision that is implied by exile.

The words "Bo Bayom" are telling. The editor in B'rachot later anchors this dangerous phrase to the deposition of Rabban Gamliel, blunting the words with a historical referent, a definite past. Yet "bo bayom" alludes ultimately to a far great deposition of earthly power, "bayom hahu" on which God will finally be one and his name one (Zechariah 14:9). Messianic time is an ongoing process; paradoxically, only by rejecting the finished article before us, the text already written, the m'ein olam haba, do we move towards the final tikkun. Thank God, the finished work is not weighing upon us yet; the very rejection of messianicity generates the promise of messianism, the "bayom hahu" that will include *all*—the Ammonite and Moabite too—in the naming of God.

A final irony. Glossing the B'chirah's declaration that "avi zakein," (my father is old) Rashi writes, quoting Hillel, "v'im lo achshav, aimatai?" (If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am only for myself, what am I? *And if not now, when?*) A tragic, cruel, gloss! The *B'chirah* means, "If we do not bend to incest now, our father will die. The world as we know it will end. The past is so weak, so old, and it must be fortified by repetition." But Hillel's dictum also implies the opposite, the message just beyond the B'chirah's imagination: if we cannot read and write our sacred texts in an eternal present, there is no time left for us. The world as we know it must end in every reading, so that it may be create anew. If not now, when?