

Chapter Two: Paradigmatic Relationships

“In the cultural performance of *lernen*¹, men follow prefigured paths where they express and act out Jewish beliefs and ideas suggested in or by the texts they review. They digress with their fellows and in an inter-subjective way cue, echo, and amplify the tradition in new ways while exploring the contemporary in light of the tradition. They reach out and bond themselves to the people in and of the books they study; and as they vitalize the text, they revitalize those ties, making sense of their Judaism.”

(Heilman 1983: 109-110)

The traditional Judaic process of engaging in texts and learning with others is a cyclical one unlike the Western educational paradigm. Instead of an emphasis on gaining credentials and increasing levels of independence, Torah learning offers an approach that deepens, centers, and increases levels of communal involvement and identification. This chapter explores the ways in which textual learning is relational both semiotically and in a performative sense. I will involve the readers in the practice of textual study at the same time that I analyze the symbolic and paradigmatic quality of it.

Before considering the performative aspects of student-teacher or master-disciple relationships among the Breslov Hasidim, I will deepen our sense of the word relationship and explore the paradigmatic processes or “prefigured paths” involved in the learning process. By *relationship*, I mean a process of meaningful interaction between two or more beings within a certain space. The *relation-* has to do with what goes on between the people involved, and the *-ship* has to do with the arena in which that happens. Within the Torah it is possible to find several metaphors for both the *relation-* and the *-ship* that I am talking about. On the *relation* side, you have paradigmatic figures such as Adam and Eve, Joseph and his brothers, the children of Israel and Moses, and Moses and Joshua. On the *ship* side you have such images as the Garden of Eden, Noah’s Ark, Abraham’s tent, the Sanctuary, and the Holy Temple. I include in my definition of relationship a sense of process, and here too a number of paradigms highlight the learning relationships I am dealing with. These include, among others, the process of knowing, sacrificing, healing, centering, exodus, and pilgrimage.

¹ Anthropologist Samuel Heilman uses the Yiddish term *lernen* throughout his ethnography *The People of the Book* to describe the textual study aspect of the learning process I am writing about. He writes, “*Lernen*, a spiritual meditation on and lifelong review of Jewish books, became exchanged for learning, an intellectual acquisition of all knowledge, and for earning, economic and material survival.” (Heilman 1983: 1)

To contextualize what I have outlined above, I will examine two Hasidic teachings which demonstrate what I mean by paradigmatic relationships. The first teaching comes from Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbica (d. 1854), and is a commentary on Genesis 2:18-20 where God sees Adam and decides to split him in half and make Eve. Genesis 2:18 reads: “God said, ‘It is not good for Adam to be alone. *And I shall make him a helper, over and against him ...*’”. Rabbi Mordechai Yoseph comments on the italicized lines:

“We can explain this odd phrase in the following way. The desire of the Creator was that there should spring up for the Adam-man a supporter and a helper who was opposite him, as in the relationship of a master and disciple. And thus we find recorded in *Bava Metzia* 84a, ‘Resh Lakish died and Rabbi Yochanan was plunged into deep grief. Said the rabbis, ‘Who shall go to comfort him?’ ‘Let Rabbi Eleazer ben Pedat go, whose disquisitions are very subtle.’ So he went and sat before him; and on every dictum uttered by Rabbi Yochanan he observed: ‘There is a *baraita* that supports you.’ ‘Are you as the son of Lakisha [Resh Lakish]?’ He complained, ‘When I stated a law, the son of Lakisha used to raise twenty four objections to which I gave twenty four answers, which consequently led to a fuller comprehension of the law; while you say, ‘A *baraita* has been taught that supports you,’ ‘do I not know myself that my dicta are right?’ Thus he went on rending his garments and weeping, ‘Where are you, O son of Lakisha, where are you, O son of Lakisha?’; and he cried thus until his mind was turned. Thereupon the rabbis prayed for him, and he died ... And this is the decree of all creation: specifically, that controversy creates unity.”

One of Rabbi Mordechai Yoseph’s students gives a commentary on the above:

“Our teacher, as in so many other cases, tries to draw meaning from the peculiar construction of the language of our text. What is the meaning of the awkward phrase ‘*over and against*’ him? He reasons that it is not a spouse, a fellow ‘procreator,’ as we might readily assume. Instead, Adam and Adam’s helpmate should reflect the even higher kind of love between master and disciple. They support each other and help each other. Citing a Talmudic text, [our teacher] offers an example of how a student helps and supports his teacher – by pushing him towards full comprehension of God’s way ... But that’s not enough. Our text goes one step further. Such loving argument, our teacher reasons, leads to a better understanding of God’s way, and therefore ultimately brings us closer to ultimate unity.”

I include this teaching and its exegesis in its entirety to demonstrate a shared Hasidic understanding of the paradigmatic value of the relationships that appear in the Torah.

Based on this understanding of Adam and his partner, it is useful to reflect on what goes on between them. I am referring to Genesis 4:1, “*V’ha-Adam ya’da et-Chava ishto.*” “And the man knew Eve his wife.” The biblical use of the verb *to know* refers to sexual intercourse, but could also refer to a process of knowing between student and teacher. Thus we can see the learning relationship as an intimate, human exchange, a fluid exchange of knowledge, or *Daat*. This indicated by Ben Zoma’s statement in the Talmud: “Who is wise? One who learns from all: ‘From all my teachers I gained insight (Psalms 119: 99).’ (Pirke Avot 4:1). Yet this learning relationship is not without distinction or hierarchy, as Rabbi Yose ben Judah said, “Those who learn from beginners

– to what can they be compared? To those who eat unripe grapes and drink fresh wine. Whose who learn from masters – to what can they be compared? To those who eat ripe grapes and drink vintage wine. (ibid. 4:26).” Clearly the learning relationship is not static. There is an exchange between who is giving and who is receiving. Who is Adam and who is Eve in a given moment is relative to the moment of the learning encounter. Yet there is a hierarchy; there is a teacher knowing his students and there is a master impregnating his disciples.

Another important paradigmatic relationship is that between Moses and Joshua. I will focus on the Breslov commentaries on Lesson 6 in *Likutei Moharan* [The Collected Teachings of Our Teacher, Rebbe Nachman] to extend and locate this idea of paradigm within the Breslov Hasidic shared understanding of student/teacher relationships. Rebbe Nachman begins his *Torah Vav* [Lesson #6] with a passage from Deuteronomy 31:14, “Then God said to Moshe, ‘The time is coming for you to die. *Kra et Yehoshua* [summon Joshua] and present yourselves in the Tent of Meeting, where I will appoint him.’” Moses passed on his leadership to Joshua because he was about to pass away before he could enter the Promised Land, and Joshua received the Torah of Moses in order to carry on the leadership of the Children of Israel.

The commentaries on this Lesson #6, which deal with the relationship between Moses and Joshua, are rich examples of how Breslov Hasidim understand what I have been trying to explain. They read as follows:

1) “Reb Noson writes: After giving this lesson Rebbe Nachman said, ‘Whenever a teacher and a disciple come together, the aspect of Moshe, Yehoshua, and the Tent of Meeting exists.’”

2) “The *Parapot Le Chochmah* concludes his commentary to this lesson with an interesting piece about the relationship between Rebbe Nachman and Reb Noson. As we have seen (nn.1,121) any meeting between a teacher and a disciple corresponds to the meeting between Moshe and Yehoshua. Anyone who studies Reb Noson’s life in detail will see that the Rebbe’s main legacy was left with him. Indeed, Reb Noson became the Rebbe’s “Yehoshua,” the disciple who “did not depart from the tent.”... And though it is known that Rebbe Nachman favored Reb Noson at the helm of the Breslover Chassidim after his passing, nowhere is it recorded that the Rebbe said so specifically. This, too, was no different than the way Moshe’s leadership was transferred to Yehoshua. As quoted above in our lesson, God said, ‘where I will appoint him’ – i.e., God and not Moshe would do the appointing. Thus, Reb Noson was left to decide for himself how best to hand over the Rebbe’s teachings. He had no one to ask for guidance other than God Himself.”

3) “Moshe is the prototypical teacher and Yehoshua the prototypical disciple. As we shall see, nowhere do we find a disciple so devoted to his teacher as Yehoshua was to Moshe ... Rebbe Nachman’s mention of Moshe and Yehoshua was intended as more than just a hint to Reb Noson’s future role as the Rebbe’s main follower. When one examines Reb Noson’s lifetime, one finds more than just a few similarities between Reb Noson’s devotion to the Rebbe and Yehoshua’s devotion to Moshe Rabbeinu (see *Through Fire and Water: The Life of Reb Noson of Breslov, passim*).”

These three passages appeared in the commentaries of Lesson Six in the Breslov Research Institutes English translation of Likutey Moharan, published in 1995. The commentaries show a stable, shared understanding of the paradigmatic value of these Torah relationships. In the case of the Adam and Eve paradigm, the dimension of knowledge through dialectic process between teacher and student was emphasized, while in the case of Moses and Joshua, the aspect of respectful reception and devotion are emphasized. However, another aspect of my model for understanding these learning relationships is present in the latter case; that is the aspect of the *ship*.

As cited above, Rebbe Nachman states, “Whenever a teacher and a disciple come together, the aspect of Moshe, Yehoshua, and the Tent of Meeting exists.” I take the existence of the Tent of Meeting to be the *ship* of Moses and Joshua’s *relation*. The sanctuary, the space, the ark, and the Tent of Meeting allow the learning encounter to take place. Indeed, the imagery of Noah’s Ark effectively captures the process of building a relationship that will allow for intimate and reciprocal exchange. This notion of the intimacy or sensitivity of learning relationships was made clear to me through conversations I had with various Breslov Hasidim. While walking home from one Shabbat experience, I was talking to a Breslov Hasid. He had offered to learn with me, and I told him I was overwhelmed because I had been approached by so many people who were willing to teach me, but I didn’t know what I wanted to learn or who I wanted to learn with. He stopped me and said, “You are going to be sharing with whoever you learn with what is very sensitive to your soul, and he will be sharing with you what is very sensitive to Yiddishkeit [the Jewish soul]. So take your time – *l’at, l’at*, slowly, slowly.”

This Hasid let me know that the *ship* has to be built carefully and mutually; it would take time before I could experience the shelter from the “flood” that was overwhelming me. Understanding the relationships with the people I learned with, as unfolding within a certain space that has a certain pedagogical quality and a certain ancient source helps me to verbally articulate the learning process.

I am not stepping out of reflexive anthropological or traditional Judaic lines to admit that I experienced a process of opening, submission, and devotion in building my relationship with Baruch [my teacher] and with Rebbe Nachman [his Rebbe]. I am

certainly not comparing myself to Moses' closest disciple Joshua or to Rebbe Nachman's closest disciple Reb Noson, nor am I comparing Baruch to Moses or Rebbe Nachman. The Moses/Joshua and R. Nachman/R. Noson relationships were ones between the true *tzaddik* of the generation [*tzaddik ha-dor*] and disciple. Nevertheless, these are strong paradigms, and aspects of the reality of these relationships do exist, as Rebbe Nachman puts it, "whenever a teacher and a disciple come together."

Anthropologically, I am trying to get at the meaning of these relationships in the context of Breslov culture. Personally, I am trying to give readers a taste of a lived reality that extended beyond metaphorical structure among these Hasidim. As Clifford Geertz explains:

"As we are to deal with meaning, let us begin with a paradigm: viz., that sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos – the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood – and their world view – the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order. In religious belief and practice a group's ethos is rendered intellectually reasonable by being shown to represent a way of life ideally adapted to the actual state of affairs the world view describes, while the world view is rendered emotionally convincing by being presented as an image of an actual state of affairs peculiarly well-arranged to accommodate such a way of life. This confrontation and mutual confirmation has two fundamental effects. On the one hand, it objectivizes more and aesthetic preferences by depicting them as imposed conditions of life implicit in a world with a particular structure, as mere common sense given the unalterable shape of reality. On the other, it supports these received beliefs about the world's body by invoking deeply felt moral and aesthetic sentiments as experiential evidence for their truth. Religious symbols formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific (if, most often, implicit) metaphysic, and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other." (Geertz 1973: 89-90)

Geertz catches what I am trying to get at in looking at paradigmatic relationships. In addition to being ancestors for the Jewish people, Adam and Eve, and Moses and Joshua are sacred symbols. The relationships that form within the cultural processes of Breslov social reality are affirmative experiences of their sacred power, of the Torah's sacred power, and the power of *Derech HaShem*, the Way of God.

I realize the difficulty in beginning with textual sources, when ultimately I want to come to a better understanding of living human relationships. The point is that there are certain founding paradigmatic exemplary relationships which provide a model for present life. I would also argue that for the person engaged in *tshuvah*, learning texts and relating with people is a dialectical process. For this reason it is helpful, in considering the learning process of *tshuvah*, to keep in mind biblical scholar Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg's notion of learning Torah as a process of seeking for what one has lost, or remembering what one has forgotten. She writes:

“Knowing one’s incompleteness, narrating the history of an absence, generates the desire to find, to fill the emptiness ... The same dynamic of losing and finding informs the famous midrash that tells of the moment of birth as a moment of forgetting. The embryo in the womb knew the whole Torah and forgets it as it emerges into the world. Implicitly, the whole life is a process of recovery, of restoring the loss, of filling the vacancy ... When for example, Moses speaks of the people coming to him ‘to seek God,’ this can be understood as a psychotherapeutic [and paradigmatic] encounter in which the leader helps his followers to ‘recognize what they have lost.’ There is no finding without that sense of loss. The leader-teacher helps the seeker to identify the hollowness, the absence, that will move him to a passion of quest. A primal ‘forgetting’ (the neo-Platonic notion of *anamnesis*) leads to a process of approximate reconstructions, of ‘makings and matchings,’ to which the teacher-tzaddik can hold up therapeutic mirrors – but only, as R. Nachman says, if the seeker is genuinely the loser, if there is no inauthenticity in the search. Such a genuine awareness of loss is the only basis for hope of recovery. (Zornberg 1995: 296-297)

In his discussion of the relational context of the learning process, anthropologist Samuel Heilman borrows Erving Goffman’s term “tie-signs.” He describes an example of this through an account of one of his encounters with the Breslov Hasidim. I include it here in full in order to get at the performative quality of the ritual practice of textual study:

“Of all the tie-signs I witnessed during the several weeks of my observations, none was more striking than one I saw at a *shiur* [lesson] I attended in which the participants were all members of the Bratzlav sect of Hasidim. This group, unlike other Hasidim, has no living “rebbe” or charismatic leader. When their rebbe, Nachman, died in 1810, they, unlike other Hasidim, did not crown another with his authority. Instead they maintained that Reb Nachman was still their spiritual leader and could guide them by means of the epistles and lessons which he left behind in a written record and which had been collected in several volumes entitled *Likutey MoHaRaN* (the Gleanings from Reb Nachman), and *Sippurey Ma’asiyot* (tales). These they considered part of Jewish sacred literature in which could be discovered answers for all questions of all times. Like Torah, the writings of Reb Nachman were to be reviewed and studied.

One might suppose that the absence of a living rebbe instilled among Bratzlaver Hasidim a more intensive group consciousness than that normally associated with Hasidic life. Somewhat like orphaned sons, the followers of Reb Nachman might have been drawn closer by their common situation as survivors. Without considering others, it is hard to determine if such is the case. Nevertheless, simple observation reveals among Bratzlavers a plethora of activities that stress group ties. One of these I discovered was associated with *lernen*.

Like other Orthodox Jews, these Hasidim customarily sat down to *lern* together between the afternoon and evening prayers. In their one-room synagogue, which served as both house of prayer and study, the volumes of *Likutey MoHaRaN* were more prominently displayed than the Talmud. While there were only two sets of the Talmud, there were nearly a dozen of *Likutey MoHaRaN*, and these appeared far more worn and used. This was no surprise since the Bratzlavers reviewed the writings of Reb Nachman faithfully each evening.

After *mincha* [afternoon] prayers, those who were not members of Bratzlav but who had nonetheless joined in worship in the synagogue left. One or two of the non-Hasidim might sit in isolated corners of the room reviewing some large tome on their own. The Bratzlavers, however, sat down at the old table in the southwest corner of the room and opened up their *Likutey MoHaRaN*. As in a Talmud class, one man would recite the text and translate or comment upon it while the others followed along in their books or asked questions, echoed, cued, made comments, and so on. As with Talmud study, there were digressions stimulated both by the text and by the explications of it. Since much of the substance of the writing is metaphor, homily, and ethics, there is a great deal of room for discussion. The conversation ranged from simple reminiscences about life in Warsaw to the more ethereal discussions of theodicy and response to the Holocaust. Charity was passed around to the mendicants who periodically came into the room but who were not members of the study circle. Yet it was only at the end that I saw the elaborate tie-sign that so captured my imagination.

Reaching the end of the chapter of study for the evening, the leader closed his book. The others followed his example. Then he stood up and left the table; the others again followed. Forming a circle in front of their study table, the men then clasped hands and began to dance and sing. Slowly at first, with a regular rhythm, they gradually increased their tempo and moved more and more quickly. It was, I thought, a metaphor as well as a literal expression of the circle of belief, fellowship, and study in which they were tied. And although I had sat in on the class, I felt no claim to the dancing circle. I stood outside of it because I was outside. Had I wanted to join in the dance, I could have – for on another occasion I did. But on that first night, before I felt a closeness or sense of fellowship with them that would enable me to see things as they did, I felt incapable of breaking into the circle of dance. I could not signify a tie that did not yet fully exist.” (Heilman 1983: 222-224)

Thus the practice of an outsider turning to the texts, is a process of participating in an ongoing dance of learning and turning toward a communal Thou that one is estranged from. In *The Text as Thou*, Steven Kepnes explains, “Because the I-Thou relationship is usually represented by a meeting between persons, and the word I-Thou is paradigmatically cast in terms of the spoken word between humans, it may not readily occur to readers of Buber that a work of art [or a sacred text] can be viewed as Thou and that an individual can have an I-Thou relationship with it. However, we will see that this is possible, indeed, it is required by Buber’s dialogical thought. (Kepnes 1992: 22).”

As I turn in the following chapters to the “works of art” of story telling, song, prayer, and pilgrimage, this dialogical model of paradigmatic I-Thou relationships should be kept in mind. I hope, through the work I have presented here and in the following chapters, the prime importance of relationships in *tshuvah*, of relating with one’s texts, people, God, and self as Thou becomes apparent.