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Gershon Shaked

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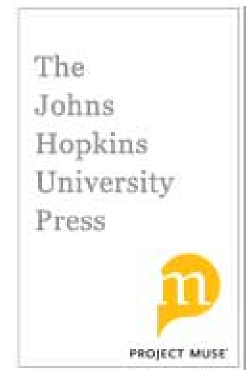

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The Narrative of Persecution

Gershon Shaked
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

I

The touchstone and point of departure of *narratives of persecution*, as of most narratives of catastrophe, is a violated state of equilibrium. Persecution is a disruption of the regular movement of history and the norms and ceremonies of any given social body or state of mind. In a passage from his major post World War I novel *A Guest for the Night* (published 1939), anticipating World War II and the Holocaust, S. Y. Agnon describes this transition from normalcy to the insecure, frightened state of the victim of a historic catastrophe in the following terms:

> I wanted to ask about her children, but I said to myself: I will not ask, in case – heaven forbid – they are dead. Since the war overwhelmed us you do not know whether your friend is alive, and if he is alive whether his life is worth living. The good years have passed when you used to ask about a man and they would tell you: He has had a wedding in his house, he has had a circumcision in his house, his grand-son has celebrated bar mitzvah, his son-in-law is adding a third storey to his house. Thou art righteous, O Lord and Thy judgments are upright. The sufferings Thou hast sent to Israel, Thou alone knowest whether they are for good or for ill. (1968: 231)

Agnon confronts the potentially idyllic normative narrative of bourgeois and Jewish life with the real state of affairs after the catastrophe: the narrative of normalcy is disrupted by the crisis of war and persecution (see also Shaked 1989: 137–46).

In narratives of persecution the time is out of joint and life does not run according to the major stages of human development. The narratives have two permanent actants: the persecutor (singular or plural) as victimizer and the persecuted (singular or plural) as victim.

The struggle between them creates diverse typologies of persecution, but basically it is a conflict between the powerful and the weak. The moral evaluation of the two sides is not uniform: in the pairing of policeman and criminal, the conflict is sometimes presented not as resistance to criminal persecution, but, on the contrary, as cruel and unjustified persecution of an innocent victim (e.g., Jean Valjean in Hugo's *Les Miserables*) by the police. In some instances the same plot could be interpreted by different witnesses in opposite ways. The roles of cat and mouse can be seen as reversed. Obviously, the diversity of staged interpretations of, say, Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, in different times, under different social circumstances, and by different directors is a good example. The archetypes of Cain and Ahasuerus, criminals or victims of their sins and refugees, are reinterpreted positively in Byron's tragedy and in Stephan Heym's novel, respectively. This, however, is only one aspect of the potential diversity in the understanding of the relationship between the persecuted and the persecutor.

II

One major spokesman for the persecuted was, of course, Franz Kafka, who bestowed a metaphysical dimension on the narrative of persecution and immigration. The plots of *The Trial* and *The Castle* are those of uprooting and persecution by the irrational powers of the Uncanny. The persecuted are helpless victims of the demoniac anonymous forces whose possible *real* referents are totalitarian regimes.[1]

Narratives of persecution most often display intertextual connections to a canonical mastertext; they reconstitute the topos of persecution on the basis of patterns, schemes, genres, and myths that are "always already there" (Rimmon-Kenan 15). The present is illuminated by the light of the past: from within the present crisis one discovers a hidden power in the past and its potential for affecting the future.

The ambiguity of the persecution topos emerges in the following

[1] "Unquestionably, Kafka's world is a terrible world. No doubt we know better today than we did twenty years ago that it is more than a nightmare, that, on the contrary, its structure is uncannily equivalent to the reality that we have been forced to experience. The greatness of this art lies in the fact that it can have just as convulsive an effect today as it had then, that it has lost none of its immediacy through the reality of the gas chambers" (Arendt 8).

passage from the 1890 short story "Shem and Japhet on the Train" by one of the major Hebrew and Yiddish authors of the late nineteenth century, Shalom Yakov Abramovits (1838–1917), who wrote under the pen-name of Mendele Mokher Seforim. The story starts with a group of Jews in a train station trying to board the train – a scene suffused with Biblical allusions:

> It is not the voice of them that flee from a fire, neither is it the voice of them that run from armed bandits – it is the noise of Jews [Exodus 32:18: the Golden calf] who congregate upon the train station of Ksalon [Foolstown] that is heard on high [Jeremiah 31:15: Rachel weeping for her children]. There, in haste and confusion, our brethren press on, with bundles of every size and shape in their hands and on their shoulders; women, too, encumbered with pillows and bolsters and wailing infants; all jostling one another with side and with shoulder [Ezekiel, 34:21] as they perilously hoist themselves up the ladder to the third-class compartments, where a fresh battle will be fought with a mighty and outstretched arm [Deuteronomy 4:34] for places in the congested train. And I, Mendele the Bookseller, burdened with my goods and chattels, join manfully in the fray [*mehumah*]: I climb, stoop and jostle [*mitkatesh*] my way through as one of the crowd. Yet, while we Jews hustle and work ourselves into a state of frenzied irritability [*atzbanut*], lest, Heaven forbid, someone should get ahead of us in the crush, and while we gaze beseechingly upon the railway employees, as if the fact that we are traveling at all indicates an unrequited act of grace on their part – all this while, the gentile passengers are strolling up and down the hallway in front of the station with their luggage and waiting until the bell rings for a second or even a third time, when they will mount the train at leisure, and each proceed to his appointed place. (1988: 123)

The mastertext of this passage is the exodus myth – the redemption of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt from one perspective, or their expulsion and rescue from the persecuting Egyptian army from another.

Mendele explores the negative aspect of the ambiguity of this mastertext. He depicts the mind-set of a crowd that behaves like a mass of frightened fugitives even where there is no immediate danger. In this passage, the narrative of persecution reflects a state of mind. It

seems that the positive reading of the mastertext, in terms of freedom and redemption, dominant in the Jewish ceremony of the Passover Seder and accepted as the official reading by nationalistic trends in the interpretative establishment, was understood differently in the Diaspora, at least by one major East-European Jewish writer (see also Shaked 1965: 133—34).

Even if this passage is supposed to be satirical, it alludes to *Angst* and despair as major outcomes of the topos. Later in his account of the train ride, Mendele depicts the cooperation between two apparent enemies – a Jewish tailor and a Polish cobbler who had once persecuted him. The two meet on the train after both have been expelled from Prussia by Bismarck. In the past their relationship had been that of unreasonable hatred: Panie Przezecszwinczicki, the cobbler, had previously confronted the tailor with the claim "'You are tainted with the sin of your nation for they are always robbing and plundering people!'" and did not accept the tailor's counterclaim of being a "workingman" who toils away at his trade "by day and night" (131). The end of the discussion was a mini-pogrom: "My companion's only response to this question was to thrust out his hard fist – and in a flash he had slipped away out of sight" (132).

The situation is grotesquely reversed on the train. The cobbler-persecutor, who has suddenly emerged from a hiding place in the train, has become a persecuted person:

> "What has become of you Panie Przezecszwinczicki?" I asked. "How do you come to be in such a state?" He hung his head, and slowly the answer came, in a still, small voice: "They've issued the same decrees for us Poles as they did for you Jews. So now I have to wander about like you, and beg for my bread." (133)

Later the following conversation takes place between the narrator and the cobbler:

> "Listen," I said to my friend. "Life in exile – this precious gift from God's store – belongs only to the Jews, His chosen people. It is ours alone, for no other nation or race in the world has the strength to take it and to bear its weight. . . . Stay a Christian as you have always been, and keep your religion in your own way, but there is one thing you must do. You must come to master the Jewish art of living, and cleave to that if you are to

> preserve yourself and carry the yoke of exile. At first this will be hard for you, but in the course of time you will learn through suffering – for pain begets endurance." (134–35)

As noted above, this narrative of persecution transforms a historical or social state of affairs into a state of mind. Here, however, the state of mind is not a matter of interpreting one's own experience. The persecuted has to adjust his day to day behavior, his customs and habits, to the challenges of the special Diaspora situation. Whoever cannot adapt, be he a Jew or a Gentile, will not survive.

The survival of refugees, as individuals or as a collective, thus depends on their ability to adapt their state of mind to social circumstances. The relationship between the two actants of the social drama is relative: a change in the balance of power and social conditions can bring about an inversion in the functions of persecutors and their victims.

III

Whatever the motivation for persecution, it is usually the strong party that persecutes the weak one. The most basic form of persecution is hunting: the hungry cat hunting the mouse, the hungry tiger the gazelle, and the cannibal his fellow man. In the course of the history of civilization what I would call *natural persecution* developed into hunting and murder for their own sake, with the other, the enemy, sacrificed to the gods: the gladiators in the arena; Christians on crosses; Jews and heretics by *auto-da-fé*; African-Americans by lynching; and Jews and Gypsies in gas chambers. The climax of the narrative is the final act of persecution: when the hunter captures his prey, the persecution comes to an end; it has achieved its goal.

Jacob Wassermann (1873–1934) describes the victory of the bloodthirsty hunters in his 1928 novel *The Maurizius Case*. Here the scene of the lynching of a black man alludes also to the destiny of Jews in Eastern Europe:

> There was nothing of the human being left about them – beasts? Why, every beast has the soul of a Quaker compared to theirs. They were people to whom robbing and murder was a business, they were people who silence you by a blow in the face and think less of it than others of breaking a window; Acherontic figures,

> the two-legged beasts of the suburbs; we haven't that kind in this country, the most depraved here reminds one that a mother has borne him; their most infamous trick consists in devising crimes which they then ascribe to the negroes; this, of course, proceeds from some intellectual centre – *as formerly in Russia, when the Jews were massacred – and is called lynch law.* No, not if I get to be as old as Methuselah, shall I ever forget my Joshua fleeing before those howling brutes, with the swiftness of a ghost, the stream of blood running over his innocent black face and his arms stretched out in front of him. I never saw him again. I never heard of him again. God knows where his carcass is rotting. (1964: 273–74; translation in Shaked 1987: 34–35; italics added)

Wasserman depicts the "two-legged beasts of the suburb" as hunters carrying out *lynch law*. They resemble the murderers of Jews in Russia (see also Shaked 1992: 108–10). "Joshua fleeing before those howling brutes, with the swiftness of a ghost, blood streaming down his innocent face, and his arms stretched out in front of him," is a symbol of the victim, a black Christ, a fugitive without refuge. His story has a beginning and an end; but its symbolic significance situates it in a permanent cycle of persecutions.

IV

A different schema of the narrative of persecution is provided by the topos of the eternal wanderer, escaping from real and imaginary persecutors and ending in a blind alley of loneliness, frustration and misery. This topos is apparent in the very title of the 1927 novel *Flucht ohne Ende* (*Flight without End*) by the Austrian-Jewish writer Joseph Roth (1894–1939).

The protagonist, Tunda, a half-Jew, fights in World War I and, following his capture by the Russians, escapes across various landscapes and ideologies. He leaves his cosseted Viennese bourgeois home (and his conventional fiancée) to travel through Soviet Russia (with his Communist mistress), arrives with a Western woman in postwar Germany, and goes from there to cosmopolitan Paris. Uprooted, he seems to be at home everywhere and nowhere – wherever he finds himself, he is always marginal, exceptional, and to be expelled. The novel closes with the following cityscape:

> It was August 27th, 1926, at four in the afternoon. The shops were full, women crowded the department stores, models gyrated in the fashion salons, idlers gossiped in the confectioners, the wheels spun in the factories, beggars deloused themselves on the banks of the Seine, loving coulpes embraced in the Bois de Boulogne, children played on the roundabouts in the public gardens. It was at this hour that my friend Tunda, thirty-two years of age, healthy and vigorous, a strong young man of diverse talents, stood on the Place de la Madeleine, in the center of the capital of the world, without any idea what to do. He had no occupation, no desire, no hope, no ambition, and not even any self-love.
>
> No one in the whole world was as superfluous as he. (1977: 143–44)

Endless flight is the story of a lonely victim persecuted by history itself. His deadlock is caused by alien ideologies and social environments and by his own psychological inability to find a safe haven anywhere (see Shaked 2006: 190–92). The dead end of his story is associated with his absolute internalization of the course of history, a transformation of the spatial blockade into a mental siege.

V

Jewish and Christian master-narratives strive for coherence and continuity. The goal is the end of exile and collective and personal redemption by the revelation or reappearance of the Messiah.

This concept is linear and has a positive future-oriented vector, yet the recurrent disappointment of Messianic hopes causes disruptions in it. Since the destruction of the Second Temple, Jewish experience has been perceived as unfolding in the wake of and in anticipation of recurring destructions. Historical events – the destruction of the First and the Second Temples and the ensuing expulsions – have become foundational myths with their own holy book (Lamentations) and Memorial Day (the Ninth of Av). The interpretation of most historical disasters or catastrophes is molded by the master-text myth of persecution, destruction, and expulsion. Not only the Holocaust but also attacks by Arab marauders are interpreted as recurrences of the same pattern.

I started with a passage from Agnon depicting the disruption of the regular narratives of human life by war and persecution. I shall end with works that engage the outcome of this disjunction of time. Agnon's 1951 story "At the Outset of the Day" was written after the Holocaust and has at its background the flight of the Agnon family from their home in the Talpioth neighborhood after an attack by Arab marauders. The day of their flight is not the Ninth of Av, the fast day in memory of the destruction of the Temple, but the Day of Atonement, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar:

> After the enemy destroyed my home I took my little daughter in my arms and fled with her into the city. Gripped with terror, I fled in frenzied haste a night and a day until I arrived at the courtyard of the Great Synagogue one hour before nightfall on the eve of the Day of Atonement. The hills and the mountains that had accompanied us departed and the child entered into the courtyard. . . . This was the house of prayer and these Houses of Torah that I had kept in my mind's eye all my life. If I chanced to forget them during the day, they would stir themselves and come to me at night in my dreams, even as during my waking hours. Now that the enemy has destroyed my home, *I and my little daughter sought refuge* in these places; it seemed that my child recognized them, so often had she heard about them. (1995: 370; my italics)

The major image in this passage is the father and his little daughter on the run, pursued by the memory of the destruction of their home and trying to find refuge and shelter. The image of the refugee, one of the dominant figures of the last two centuries and intensely relevant to this very day, is set in a chronotope that contrasts the Days of Awe and the day of persecution and destruction. This ironic contradiction is the crux of the episode: in this instance the victims in the narrative of persecution make an attempt to find refuge under the auspices of religion. The religious urge does not change the basic situation of the persecuted, homeless refugee; nor does it matter whether or not the plot refers to real historical events. The situation is a reprise of the myth of persecution, destruction, and the quest of the homeless refugee for religious consolation. The story suggests that the way out of the distress and perplexity of the narrative of persecution could be a return to religion on the Day of Atonement; a reaching out to God from the depth of despair.

By contrast, another of Agnon's narratives of persecution, his post-

Holocaust story "The Covering of Blood," included in the posthumously published *Within the Wall* (1975), ends in gloom. This story may be regarded as a social survey of those who survived the Via Dolorosa of the persecution of the Jews in the twentieth century. Three Holocaust survivors have made their way to America and to the Land of Israel: an old refugee from a destroyed shtetl, now living in America; Hillel, a refugee who has wandered from Europe to America and ended up in Israel, serving there in the army; and Adolf, a Jewish sergeant in World War I (the name is ironic) who has also arrived (with a circus) in the Land of Israel from Europe. The only heir of the three is Adolf's nephew, a refugee who arrived in the Land of Israel and served there in the army:

> I do not recall whether I mentioned Adolf's sister's son. Adolf told me he was from a certain city, all of whose Jewish inhabitants to the last man were killed by Hitler, and of those who went to the Land of Israel, some died of hunger during the First World War and others were killed by Arab shells during the conquest of the land. Adolf had one sister whose second marriage was to a Hebrew teacher, and she had a son by him. The boy's father, his sister's husband, died, leaving her nothing. She raised the son in poverty, by dint of hard work, and every penny she saved she spent on his education. When he got older he joined the Youth Movement, and in the end he settled in the Land of Israel and promised his mother he would bring her. He arrived in the Land of Israel close to the time of the war between the Jews and the Arabs. He took part in the war, was wounded and recovered. After the war he went to a kibbutz and became a tractor driver. One day the Syrians crossed the border, seized him and took him prisoner. Since that time no one has heard anything of him. (1975: 95; my translation)

The fate of Adolf's nephew, the last remnant of a family and a village annihilated in the Holocaust, remains obscure. Hillel is waiting for the young man, who might not be alive. If he is alive, his life may be not worth living: the inheritance left him by his uncle Adolf, the symbols of Gypsy life – the hurdy-gurdy, the monkey, and the parrot – are portents of his future (if there is one) as an eternal wandering Gypsy-Jew. The predicted agonies will not purify; this is exile without redemption. The symbols of the beggar, wanderer, and Gypsy suggest that permanent exile and wandering (Ahasuerus) is the destiny of anyone condemned

to live permanently the narrative of persecution, without a messianic end or redemption for himself and his offspring.

Thus, the paradigm of narratives of persecution which I have attempted to outline is a paradigm of variations on the schemata of the master-text, effected through character portrayal, literary and historical allusions, symbolism, and thematic reversals.

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