

“‘Look what I’ve found,’ said Kohelette”: Texts that Talk Back to *Kohelet* 7

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Every year on Shabbat Sukkot I participate as a *leiner* (chanter) for our synagogue’s liturgical reading of the Book of *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes). Years ago I was randomly assigned two chapters, and ever since, these have been *my* chapters. One of them, chapter 7, boasts perhaps the most misogynistic verse in the entire Bible, made all the more galling by its pronouncement by a purportedly wise preacher or leader.¹ Because of the years of chanting, I know this verse, 26, with its jarringly lovely cantillation, completely by heart:

כׇּ וּמוֹצָא אֲנִי מֵרַמְמוֹת, אֶת-
 הָאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר-הִיא מְצוּדִים וְחַרְמִים
 לְבָהּ—אֲסוּרִים יְדֶיהָ; טוֹב לִפְנֵי
 הָאֱלֹהִים. יִמְלֹט מִמֶּנָּה, וְחֹטֵא,
 יִלְכָּד בָּהּ.²⁶and I find more bitter than
 death the woman, whose
 heart is snares and nets, and
 her hands are bands; whoever
 pleases God shall escape from
 her; but the sinner shall be
 taken by her.

It is odd and discomfiting, to be sure, as a woman, wife, writer, and professor of feminist studies, to sing—in effect, to trill—these words, to ventriloquize their disdain for my entire community. In a lovely essay about *Kohelet*, writer Daphne Merkin wonders:

What circumstances in his [the author’s] own life led up to this extreme position: Was Koheleth perhaps thrown over by a

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woman he loved for someone less implacably dark-natured? Or was he the son of a dominating mother whose clutches he felt even in old age? One can only guess.²

Whatever may have led to this negative preaching, I have taken, as a way of registering my personal dismay with this verse, to pausing a moment before I *lein* it. Following the pause, however, because I care about this ritual and my role as a *sh'lichat tzibur* (prayer leader), I make sure to sing the verse capably, clearly, and sweetly. I show by example, that though I am a woman, I am hardly more bitter than death and a walking, talking snare; I am fully capable of participating in holy ceremonies and like the preacher of *Kohelet*, am dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom and integrity. In a way, I take some comfort from *Kohelet*'s exaggeratedly negative, "hysterical" note here, as it allows me to take him less seriously. More bitter than death? Really? Until this point in the book, the speaker / preacher has grounded his pessimism and sense of futility in the inescapable fact of human mortality. Death undoes the significance of all purported human achievements or values. Can woman really be more bitter than that?³

Given the exaggerated misogyny of verse 26, one cannot help be surprised by what follows immediately thereafter:

כִּי רָאִיתִי זֶה מָצָאתִי, אֶמְרָה קֹהֶלֶת;
 אֶחַת לְאַחַת, לְמִצָּא חֶשְׁבֹן.
²⁷Look what I have I found,
 said [feminine] Kohelet, adding
 one thing to another, to
 find out the account.

I say surprising because of the feminine conjugation of the verb, *amrah* (she said). To be sure, I am not the first to notice this grammatical anomaly. Most of the classical exegetes attempt to explain it away either by moving the *hei* in *amrah* over to *Kohelet* to make it a definite article—haKohelet—or by inserting before *amrah* an implied feminine noun: *chochmah* (wisdom, Ibn Ezra) *amrah* (said); or *nafshi amrah* (my soul said, Rashi).⁴

Against the grain of these classical commentaries, however, I would like to read this verse as it appears—a surprising interruption of formerly masculine wise speech with feminine counter-speech. I imagine a masculine scholarly *k'hilah* with a *Kohelet* as its leader, talking their old men's-club talk, unselfconsciously

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pronouncing judgment against women, only to be suddenly interrupted and infiltrated by a female scholar—a Kohelette, if you will. This woman may have been sitting quietly and inconspicuously off to one side, trying to soak in the learning, that is, until she hears one insult too many and briefly claims the podium for herself. "Look, what I have found," she says. "I have my own account to share." This measured, feminine preacher's retort, like my own *leining* of these verses, establishes a new reality and compels a new reckoning.

I've come to identify these sudden eruptions of the feminine or of pro-female wise speech within an otherwise androcentric leaderly discourse as "*amrah* Kohelette" moments—textual swerves that serve to undo the confident misogyny of the primary text and to offer a feminist alternative. In calling attention to these moments I am building on the observations and method of biblical scholar Ilana Pardes, in *Countertraditions in the Bible*, whose "readings call for a consideration of the heterogeneity of the Hebrew canon, for an appreciation of the variety of socio-ideological horizons evident in this composite text."⁵ My special focus here is on moments of wise speech that go against the misogynist grain, offering otherwise unexpected models of female preacherly, leaderly, or literary wisdom.

To be sure, the Book of *Kohelet* is shot throughout with assertions and equal and opposite counter-assertions: look, this is a new thing, but there is nothing new under the sun; pursue happiness and yet know that happiness is nothing but vapor and vanity; seek wisdom, but know, that like the fools, you too are doomed to die; work hard, though in the end, you, like your work, will turn to dust. Given this pattern, one might argue, that the "*amrah* Kohelette" moment is just another position to be refuted, as seems to be the case in verse 28:

כח אֲשֶׁר עוֹד-בִּקְשָׁה נַפְשִׁי, וְלֹא
 מִצָּאתִי: אָדָם אֶחָד מֵאֲלֶף,
 מִצָּאתִי-- וְאִשָּׁה בְּכָל-אֶלֶף, לֹא
 מִצָּאתִי.

²⁸that which my soul sought,
 but I yet to find; one man
 among a thousand have I
 found; but a woman among all
 those I haven't found.

According to common interpretation, the (masculine) speaker here is doubling down or intensifying the message of 7:26. For

those who might think that the diatribe in 7:26 is directed only against a particular woman or kind, this verse offers a general denunciation. In every thousand people, the speaker contends, one can find at least one [stand-out] *adam* (man) but no equivalent woman; women aren't *b'nei adam* (human beings) in this sense. The verse resonates with the sensibility of Genesis 3, where Adam is brought low by the *ishah*.

But what if "Kohelette" is still speaking here? What if this verse is a continuation of the previous one, offering a specific objection to the absence of female representation and group leadership? Her soul has been searching for a woman in this group of a thousand, but has found her not; over and over again, she has seen men ascend to the podium and wield positions and words of authority over thousands of men, but never has she seen a deserving woman accorded such voice. It takes interpretive will, to be sure, to tease out this reading. In order to identify the "*amrah* Kohelette" moment, one must be willing to submit to a process of reconsideration, to look beyond surface apprehensions and discern a counter-voice.

Works of modern Hebrew literature that consciously engage and revise biblical materials, serving as sources of modern midrash, often afford such moments. Indeed, two such instances of "*amrah* Kohelette"—texts that allow women to offer counter-cultural pro-female perspectives and wise counsel—can be found in the writings of nineteenth-century Italian Hebrew poet Rachel Luzzatto Morpurgo (1790–1871), the first modern Hebrew woman poet. Morpurgo's biography completely fits the profile ventured above of a Kohelette. Member of the famed Luzzatto family of Trieste and first cousin to the philosopher and maskil Shmuel David Luzzatto, Morpurgo was the only female contributor of Hebrew verse to *Kochavei Yitzchak*, the maskilic journal of her day. Many of her poems express frustration over her exceptional position and the reception accorded her work, which often focused condescendingly or with exaggerated surprise on her aberrant status as a learned woman among men. Two of her late poems express frustration over this gender-based attention through direct engagement with the motifs and message of *Kohelet* 7:

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I Said to Myself

Song of Songs:
 Creator of mountains
 Raised my head
 From labor pains.

I sing a song
 Like a nettle in the pots
 Liberator of the captives
 Raised my head high.⁶

אמרתִי בלבי:

שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים:
 יוֹצֵר הָרִים
 רִאשִׁי הָרִים
 מִצִּירִים

אֲשִׁיר בַּשִּׁירִים
 כְּסִיד בַּסִּירִים
 מִתִּיר אֲסוּרִים
 רִאשִׁי רוֹם הָרִים.

ה'תרכ"ה, 1865

The title of the poem, "*Amarti Belibi*," recalls the many instances in *Kohelet* including 7:27 in which the preacher tests out a particular stance or source of meaning using the verb a-m-r.⁷ But unlike *Kohelet*, who ventures a theory only to immediately contradict it, Morpurgo's poetic speaker confidently asserts that God is on her side, having rescued her from illness. According to rabbi and editor Yitzchak Chaim Castiglioni, in 1865, when Morpurgo was seventy-five, she suffered a stroke; this poem is thus a prayer of thanks, written after her recuperation and on the occasion of her first post-illness attendance at synagogue. Morpurgo's use of the expression *tzir tzirim* with its evocation of uterine contractions⁸ suggests the additional meaning of liberation from a purely biological, feminine definition of her capacities. Along these lines the poem gives thanks to God for enabling her to proffer her own form of Solomonic utterance, referencing both *Shir HaShirim* and *Kohelet*.⁹ In *Kohelet* 7:5–6, the speaker/preacher derides the song of fools, likening it, in domestic terms, to the cracking of thorns under a pot.

טוֹב, לְשִׁמֶּעַ גְּעֵזֶת הַכֶּם--מֵאִישׁ,
 שִׁמֶּעַ שִׁיר כְּסִילִים.

⁵It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools

י כִּי כִקּוֹל הַסִּירִים תִּתֵּחַ הַסִּיד,
 כֵּן שֹׁחַק הַכְּסִיל; וְגַם-זֶה, הַבָּל.

⁶For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool; this also is vanity.

Morpurgo, in contrast, embraces the disruptive sounds of the *sir hasirim* (the crackling of thorns in a pot) as a form of liberatory

speech. If the speaker of *Kohelet* 7:26 denounces woman because *asurim yadeha* (her hands are bands or bonds), this speaker sees God as *matir asurim* (loosening her bonds), reminiscent of the daily *birkot hashachar* (morning blessings), thereby freeing her from illness and potential death. And if Morpurgo's contemporaries repeatedly demean female intellectual capacity, consigning women to the domestic realm of pots and pans, Morpurgo's twofold pronouncement affirms, in accordance with the other rhymed doublings in the poem (*shir hashirim*, *tzir hatzirim*, *sir hashirim*), that God will raise her head and mind high above their dismissive noise.

Morpurgo recapitulates and expands upon this poetic "*amrah Kohelette*" retort, in the following poem, published roughly a year later.

Just This Once Shall I Try

Just this once shall I try,
 If I can, to offer song
 I've left the pot
 Behind in fury:

I'm sick of wealth and vanity
 And my feet are ready
 To escape suffering.
 My Rock will bestow upon me:

His blessings will rain down
 Towards the hidden good
 I hope for my lot.

Behold the Creator of mountains,
 Liberator of the captives
 Will free me from all bondage.

And the day of my death shall be my day of delight
 Instead of lament rejoicing and joy
 In place of sackcloth splendid finery
 To forgiveness too I'll surely dance
 For my divorce is my marriage.¹⁰

אנסה אך הפעם

אָנסֶה אַךְ הַפֶּעַם
 אם אוכל לשיר
 מאַצֵּל הַסִּיר
 רַחֲקָתִי מִרֵּב זַעַם:

מֵאַסְתִּי הוֹן וְהַבֵּל
 וְלִצְאָת מִסִּבָּל
 יְכוֹנֵי רַגְלִי
 צוֹרִי יִגְמֹל עָלַי:

בְּרֻכּוֹתָיו יִרְעֲפוּן
 אֶל טוֹב הַצִּפּוֹן
 אֶקְוֶה אֶל הַחֶבֶל.

הִנֵּה יוֹצֵר הָרִים
 מַתִּיר אֲסוּרִים
 יַתִּיר לִי מִכָּל חֶבֶל.

וַיּוֹם מִיָּחֲתִי הוּא יוֹם שְׂמֵחָתִי
 בְּמָקוֹם קִינָה גִּילָה רִנָּה
 לְבִשׁוֹ נָאִים וְתַמְזוּר שָׂקִים
 גַּם אֶל מַחֹל מַחֹל אֲמַחֹל
 כִּי גְרוּשִׁי הֵם נִשׁוּאִי.

The appearance of the word אך in the title of this poem, a word that can be variously translated as "just this once," "right away," and "indeed," emphasizes the notion of context and response, namely, the speaker's frustration, sense of urgency, and angry

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determination just this once to offer an immediate retort to a provocation. Unlike the previous poem, where she seems to embrace an association with pots and pans, here she distances herself once and for all from the vain vapors of cooking and catering, rejecting the gendered association in *Kohelet* 7 of women with domesticity, and foolishness, and trusting in eventual divine vindication. Reminiscent of the male *Kohelet*, who derides woman as more bitter than death, this embittered female speaker embraces her demise as a welcome antidote to her unhappiness, a form of release and joy. Having suffered from the strictures of a disappointing marriage to Jacob Morpurgo—she held out for years in the face of marital disapproval of the match only to discover him to be less than supportive of her intellectual and literary aspirations—Rachel goes out dancing toward death. Playing on the etymology of the Hebrew word for marriage, *nisuim*, she envisions death as a form of spiritual elevation underscored by her identification of God as a *yotzer harim*, the Creator of mountains. The typographical arrangement of the poem, with the first line of the first four stanzas set further to the right and the following lines in each stanza indented, a kind of typographical pregnant belly, creates a sense of eager movement toward a sought after goal, while the two-column structure of the last stanza recalls the famous "*Lakol z'man v'eit*" (For everything there is a time and a season) poem in *Kohelet* 3. *Kohelet* 3 posits a time for each thing and its opposite under the heavens, a time to love and a time to hate, a time to live and a time to die; likewise, Morpurgo's speaker looks forward with anticipation to death as a welcome final antidote to the pains and frustrations of life.¹¹ This unexpected preference in itself underscores the notion of counter-interpretation.¹²

Of course it is not only in women's writing that one can uncover instances of "*amrah Kohelette*," but in the work of great male writers too. Two Sukkot-related stories by Hebrew Nobel Laureate S. Y. Agnon (1887–1970) that depict the buying of an *etrog*, arguably the most femininely evocative of the four species that one is enjoined to acquire to commemorate Sukkot,¹³ each offer, in their own way, a vindication of women and a proper representation of counter-traditional, feminine voice.

"HaEtrog" (The Etrog, first published in *Haaretz*, September 28, 1947), tells of the pious Rav of Teplik, a great Torah scholar who

dedicates himself selflessly to the needs of the poor, and in the case of this particular story, forgoes his own dignity and property for the sake of protecting a young girl. On an Erev Sukkot visit to Meah Shearim to purchase a set of *arbaah minim* (four species—the word *min* in Hebrew denotes species as well as sex/gender), the narrator of the story witnesses the aforementioned rabbi attempting to select his own kosher set of *arbaah minim* with his limited resources. Though the rabbi embraces the notion of *hidur mitzvah* (the beautification of the commandment), he also quietly upbraids the *etrog* salesman for his outrageous prices, insisting that the money one makes selling the four species should also be kosher. The Rav of Teplik thus emerges as an arbiter of ethics and a denouncer of those who would exploit the notion of *hidur mitzvah* for personal gain or self-aggrandizement.

Later on in the story, on the holiday itself, the narrator runs into the same Rav at synagogue, where they both are attending a circumcision ceremony (another gender-defined moment). At this bris, the Rav asks the narrator for permission to borrow his *etrog* and *lulav* so he can say the required blessing. The narrator grants this request, but asks the Rav about the set of four species he had seen him buy on the eve of the festival. The Rav of Teplik relates the following story to explain what happened to his *etrog*:

בעל בית אחד דר בשכונותי — אדם קשה, כעסן ורגזן אבל מהדר במצוות. לקח לו אתרוג בחצי לא"י ואולי ביותר, מתנאה בו לפני שכניו שאין בו הדר שבהדר, אינו יודע עד כמה הדרו. מכל מקום אין אדם בשכונה זו שיש בידו כדי ליקח אתרוג בחצי לא"י.

In my neighborhood there resides a certain householder. A tough, angry, irritable man, but careful about mitzvot. He bought an *etrog* for a half lira, maybe more. He bragged about it in front of his neighbors, that there was none finer. I'm not sure how beautiful it really was, but there's no one in this neighborhood who can afford to buy an *etrog* for a half lira.¹⁴

Recall *Kohelet* 7:28, where the speaker posits the presence of an *adam* among every one thousand men and no such woman. Here is an *adam kasheh* (a tough or difficult man), who clings to a sense of superiority, grounded in his ability to spend more than his peers for the sake of supposed *hidur mitzvah*. Insofar as,

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halachically, it is men who are obligated in the time-bound commandment to take the four species, while women are exempt,¹⁵ the purchase of an extremely expensive *etrog* becomes a means of elevating himself over others in the community including his family. The description of this particular, difficult man as *dar* (dwelling) in the rabbi's neighborhood subtly plays on the word *hadar* but without the *hei* of splendor or of God (*HaShem*).¹⁶ This lack of godliness, together with his angry, furious temperament, point to ethical inferiority rather than one in a thousand superiority; his vain obsession with superficial appearances is underscored by the lavish repetitions of the word *hadar* in the passage quoted above.

So we know what kind of man we're dealing with here: When the rabbi hears the wailing of a little girl from next door, he asks his own wife if she knows what happened to the girl to make her wail. The rabbi's wife—a conduit of important, ethical information—explains that the little girl had been playing with her stepfather's *etrog*, had accidentally broken it, and had received an anticipatory beating from her mother. The rabbi asks his wife about the man's whereabouts and learns that the man is said to have walked over to the home of R. Shlomo of Zvhil to watch this other rabbi wave his *lulav* according to the particular tradition of his ancestors dating back to the Magid of Zlochov.¹⁷ The mention of a Chasidic master named Shlomo and his family's distinctive *lulav*-waving practices, calls to mind the Solomon of *Kohelet* and the sense of a masculine ritual/learning community. Countering all of this is the "*amrah* Kohelette" moment exemplified by the Rav of Teplik and his concerned wife. Eager to save the little girl from another beating, the Rav of Teplik relinquishes his own *etrog* and hands it to the girl and tells her to give it to her mother, so as to protect her from further beating at the hands of her stepfather upon his return from the sukkah of R. Shlomo of Zvhil. And if her stepfather notices that it is not the same *etrog*, he instructs the girl to tell her stepfather that the Rav had been over for a visit, had seen the *etrog*, said it wasn't kosher, and thus, gave them this one instead. In handing the *etrog* over to the girl to give to her mother as a replacement for the stepfather's ruined *etrog*, the rabbi indirectly enlists the girl and mother into the realm of the mitzvah and also safeguards their bodies and dignity, modeling an ethic of protection and care.

The second story, “Etrogo shel Oto Tzaddik” (That Tzaddik’s Etrog, *Haaretz*, October 17, 1948) offers a very different rabbinical portrait, closer to the perspective adduced in *Kohelet* 7:26. The story is introduced and authenticated as part of a chain of (wise masculine) oral teachings,¹⁸ a tale passed from a Chasid to the son of a Chasid, from Shlomo the Tzaddik of Zvhil—the same figure singled out in the previous story for his distinctive *lulav*-waving tradition and a seventh-generation descendant of Michel, the Magid of Zlochov, the source of this *lulav* tradition and the protagonist of the story.¹⁹ R. Michel is described like the Rav of Teplik as remarkably ascetic, pious, and poor, given, despite his own poverty, to stashing a piece of bread in his hat to reserve for the poor.

But R. Michel’s piety and disdain for worldly matters have a darker side, which emerges indirectly in the descriptions of R. Michel’s wife. According to Michal Oron, some prior Chasidic versions of this story depict R. Michel’s wife as evil and vengeful, but not so in Agnon’s version.²⁰ Indeed, it is in this first description of the tzaddik’s wife that one begins to discern the “*amrah Kohlelette*” aspect of this story:

היתה אשתו של אותו צדיק יודעת נפש בעלה הצדיק. עשתה מה
 שעשתה בלבד שלא יצערו לא יתבטל מעבודתו הקדושה. לא כדרך
 רב הנשים שאם כלה השאור מן העריבה העריבה מריבה מקשקשת
 ובאה.

This tzaddik’s wife knew the soul of her righteous husband. She did all she could to keep aggravation away from him and to protect him against all distractions from his holy work, unlike most women who, when the cupboard is bare, come knocking and nattering.²¹

The opening line of the above passage alludes directly to a description of a pious man in Proverbs 12:10:

יֹדֵעַ צָדִיק, נֶפֶשׁ בְּהֵמָתוֹ; וְרַחֲמֵי רָשָׁעִים, אֶכְזָרִי.¹⁰ A righteous man knows the soul of his beast; but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.

According to Rashi’s commentary on Proverbs 12:10, this characteristic of the righteous man extends not just to the needs of his animals but his entire household. In describing the wife’s relationship

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and attitude by way of an allusion to this verse, however, Agnon's narrator upends traditional hierarchies and associations. In typical Agnonian irony, here the tzaddik is the object rather than the subject of [his wife's] knowing, associated, by implication with beastliness! As implied by the second part of the verse, his "mercies"—his stashing of the bread in his hat to give to the poor while doing nothing to provide for his family—lends him a cruel aspect. All of this is made clear at the end of the quoted passage, by way of the dismissive, misogynistic description of the regular run of women, who tend to mutter and natter when the cupboard is bare. This description, however, like the opening line of the paragraph, refers to a Talmudic passage from BT *Bava M'tzia* 59a, a series of Rabbinic pronouncements about how one should ensure there is enough wheat or barley in one's house in order to fend off familial strife and how one should take care to honor one's wife:

אמר רב יהודה לעולם יהא אדם זהיר בתבואה בתוך ביתו שאין מריבה מצויה בתוך ביתו של אדם אלא על עסקי תבואה שנאמר "השם גבולך שלום חלב חטים ישיביעך." (תהילים קמ"ז) אמר רב פפא היינו דאמרי אנשי כמשלם שערי מכדא נקיש ואתי תיגרא בביתא ואמר רב חנינא בר פפא לעולם יהא אדם זהיר בתבואה בתוך ביתו שלא נקראו ישראל דלים אלא על עסקי תבואה שנאמר "והיה אם זרע ישראל" (שופטים ו'ג') וגו' וכתב "וחנו עליהם" וגו' (שופטים ו'ד') וכתב "וידל ישראל מאד מפני מדין" (שופטים ו'ו') (וא"ר) חלבו לעולם יהא אדם זהיר בכבוד אשתו שאין ברכה מצויה בתוך ביתו של אדם אלא בשביל אשתו שנאמר "ולאברם הטיב בעבורה" והיינו דאמר להו רבא לבני מחווא אוקירו לנשיכו כי היכי דתתעתרו.

Rav Yehuda says: A person must always be careful about ensuring that there is grain inside his house, as discord is found in a person's house only over matters of grain, as it is stated: "He makes your borders peace; He gives you plenty with the finest wheat" (*Ps. 147:14*). If there is the finest wheat in your house, there will be peace there. Rav Pappa said: This is in accordance with the adage that people say: When the **barley** is emptied from the jug, **quarrel knocks and comes into the house**. And Rav Chinnana bar Pappa says: A person must always be careful about ensuring that there is grain inside his house, as the Jewish people were characterized as poor only over matters of grain, as it is stated: "And it was, if Israel sowed, and Midian and the

children of the east ascended" (*Judg.* 6:3); and it is written: "And they encamped against them and they destroyed the crops of the land" (*Judg.* 6:4); and it is further written: "And Israel was greatly impoverished due to Midian" (*Judg.* 6:6). And Rabbi Chelbo says: A person must always be careful about sustaining the honor of his wife, as blessing is found in a person's house only because of his wife, as it is stated in allusion to this: "And he dealt well with Abram for her sake, and he had sheep and oxen" (*Gen.* 12:16). And that is what Rava said to the residents of Mechoza, where he lived: Honor your wives, so that you will become rich.²²

The emboldened words in the Hebrew/Aramaic original directly correspond with the description above of "most women"—their supposed superficiality, materialism, and quarrelsomeness. The Talmudic intertext, however, incriminates the tzaddik for not following the recommendations of the Rabbis to provide for one's family and honor one's wife.

After introducing these two characters, the story moves to Sukkot eve, the rebbetzin stepping into R. Michel's private sanctum to tell him that the holiday is approaching, yet she has nothing with which to prepare the festive meals. R. Michel obtusely retorts that while his wife is preoccupied with material needs, he himself is concerned with the need to acquire a set of *arbaah minim* for the holiday. In order to fulfill his (masculine) obligation, the rebbe alights upon the remarkably short-sighted idea of selling his *t'fillin*, given that it is not customary to lay *t'fillin* on Sukkot. With the gold dinar that he receives for his *t'fillin*, the rebbe immediately buys a set of *arbaah minim*. Reason would dictate that the rabbi would receive a considerable amount of change with this purchase. Under no circumstances should an *etrog* and *lulav*, even an exceptional set, cost the same amount as a set of *t'fillin*! But the rebbe, so splendidly unconcerned about money, doesn't bother to inquire about such mundane matters; as the narrator ironically notes:

צדיק אמיתי כשהוא לוקח חפץ של מצוה אינו עומד על המקח,
 כל שכן לגבי אתרוג, שנאמר ולקחת בו "ולקחתם לכם וגו'
 ושמחתם לפני ה' אלוהיכם."²³

Now a truly righteous man, when he buys an object for performing a Divine precept, doesn't bargain. All the more so when it comes to an *etrog*, about which it is written, "And on the first

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day [of Sukkot] you shall take a fruit of the beautiful tree . . . and rejoice before the Lord your God" (Lev. 23:40).²⁴

Recall, of course, the stance of the hero of the previous story, the Tzaddik of Teplik, who had bargained with the *etrog* salesman, contending that not just the *arbaah minim* have to be kosher but their price too. Read in light of the previous story, which featured a "tzaddik amiti," a real tzaddik who had indeed expressed an opinion about the *etrog* salesman's prices, and a furious, abusive *ba'al habayit/adam* who had paid an astronomical sum on an *etrog*, R. Michel, the Magid of Zlochov of this second story becomes associated not with righteousness, but with obtuseness and a lack of concern for his family. His tendency to wall himself off from the concerns of his wife and children, to isolate himself in the name of Torah and ritual from "feminine" materiality, suggest a preoccupation with ritual to the exclusion of basic decency.

The rebbetzin hears that her husband has been to market; when she sees his great joy, she commonsensically assumes that he has somehow managed to purchase the necessities for the holiday. In response to his wife's inquiries, *higbiah atzmo hatzaddik*—the rebbe lifts himself up from his chair, and by implication, above everyone in his household; he places his hand over his eyes, bespeaking a willingness to blind himself to the needs of his family, and praises God for providing all of his needs. By "his needs," of course, he means that God has provided his needed *etrog* and *lulav*. When R. Michel explains that he sold his *t'fillin* for the sake of this purchase, the rebbetzin asks for the change so she herself can provide what the family requires to celebrate the holiday. The magid responds impassively that he received no such change. The magid's wife, previously described as always going out of her way to spare her husband any pain or distraction, now claims her "*amrah* Kohelette" moment:

הבליעה הרבנית את דמעתה ואמרה: רוצה אני לראות מה
 מציאה מצאת.²⁵

The rebbetzin swallowed her tears and said, "I want to see this great find that you found."

Note the appearance here of the word *amrah* as well as the repetition of the word *מצא*, both features of *Kohelet* 7:27. R. Michel's *etrog*

is described as *תאוה לעיניים ונחמד לברכה* (“a delight to the eyes, and desirable for the blessing”), terminology evocative of the description of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge in Genesis 3:6 (“It was a delight to the eyes, and fitting make one wise”). Except that here, the one who takes and “sins” first with the fruit is not the wife but the husband, the supposed *tzaddik* בו ואסתכל! *אמרה האשה*: תן ואסתכל!—again, *amrah*—the woman (the rebbe’s wife) says: Give it [the *etrog*] to me; let me take a look. Stretching out her hands, the *rebbetzin* takes (נטלה) the *etrog*, the verb choice evoking the blessing over the four species. In taking the *etrog*, however, the woman is jogged out of the rarified realm of ritual observance and reminded of *צער ביתה וצער בניה שאין להם מה שיאכלו* (the pain of her household and the pain of her children who have nothing to eat), the very opposite of the story of Eden, where the woman eats of the fruit and then gives it to her husband. The *rebbetzin* is so overcome by sorrow that the *etrog* drops out of her hand and is rendered ritually unfit, the *pitam* having broken off, as in the first *etrog* story.²⁶ The rebbe lifts his arms up in the air in desperation over what he has lost; because of his wife, he now has neither *t’fillin* nor *etrog*. Nothing is left him other than his anger, “But I shall not be angry,” he cries out, “I shall not be angry.” R. Michel, in contrast to the *adam ka’asan* (the angry man) of the first story, attempts to hold back his anger, even as he cries out in despair before his wife. While the *rebbetzin* is repeatedly associated in the story with *tza’ar*—throughout she attempts to shield from her husband from any pain, even as he thoughtlessly inflicts it on her—R. Michel, like the *ba’al habayit* in the previous story, is associated with anger, his desire to overcome it notwithstanding.²⁷ Whereas his wife had managed previously to swallow down her tears, R. Michel’s repeated insistence that he will not be angry indicates a failure to swallow down his rage.

What follows this climactic moment is another account of narrative transmission, closing the envelope structure of the story. But this second account deviates from the one at the story’s opening in one significant way. The narrator seeks to authenticate the story of R. Michel’s *etrog* with the Chasid who relayed it to him, who not only confirms its authenticity but also relates that the daughter-in-law of the magid, the wife of Yosef of Yampol, told her in-law, Baruch of Mezhibuzh, the same story, saying that she had been in the house of R. Michel and his wife when the events related actually took place.

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Baruch of Mezhibuzh's in-law had seen all of it with her own eyes (וּרְאִתָּה אֶת הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינֶיךָ), a formulation resonant both of what the woman in Genesis 3 beholds with her eyes, and of *Kohelet* 7:27, where the female speaker says, "Look (*r'eih*) what I've found!"

In response to hearing the story, Baruch of Mezhibuzh insists that she tell him the story a second time. Why? What is it about this story that merits a second telling? On the most basic level, one might have thought, given the title of the story, and its place of this story in actual Chasidic lore, that R. Michel's pious effort to withhold his anger in the face of such a distressing, costly mishap would be the story's primary focus. The request for a second telling, however, points to the need for reinterpretation against the grain of initial expectations. Indeed, the true meaning of the story depends on a second, more attentive reading. Baruch of Mezhibuzh's request for a retelling also hints at the fact that for Agnon this story is itself a second telling, the second of two *etrog* stories published only a year apart.²⁸ A full and proper reading of "Etrogo shel Oto Tzaddik" hinges on it being understood in light of "HaEtrog," which makes explicit the errant ways of those who would elevate the performance of a ritual commandment over common decency and care and who would ignore the cries of women and children. It is for this reason, I would argue, that the second transmission account that closes the second story features not just men but also a woman: As in "HaEtrog," where the wife of the Rav of Teplik serves as a conduit of important information about the plight of the little girl next door, the wife of R. Yosef of Yampol, the female relative of so many esteemed rabbis, serves as the primary agent of narrative transmission and meaning-making. As Michal Oron notes, once one realizes that the story comes originally from a woman, one is prompted to re-read again with special attention to the woman's point of view. In this second reading, other aspects of the Reb Michel's personality become more clear.²⁹ *Amrah kalato shel ha-magid hakadosh*—the daughter-in-law of the holy magid (the teller) said: it is she who helps Baruch of Mezhibuzh uncover a deeper understanding, which he then passes on down through the generations, thereby widening the community of learning and lending crucial access to female sources of wisdom.

In 2000, then HUC-JIR Dean Aaron Panken flew me out from Hong Kong, where I was living and teaching at the time, to interview for the

position that I now occupy in *Modern Jewish Literature and Feminist Studies*. The same year I was hired, three other full-time female faculty hires were made at the New York school. Until that point, there had only been one other female professor on the full-time tenure-track faculty of the New York campus. Aaron helped usher in an entirely new age at the College-Institute, fully incorporating female faculty into the teaching and learning community, broadening and deepening's HUC-JIR's commitment to the cause of "amrah Kohelette." I will forever be in his debt for inviting me to undertake this meaningful and spiritually gratifying career. He is sorely missed, deeply mourned, and enduringly appreciated.

Notes

1. According to Michael V. Fox, *Kohelet* 26–28 is "irreparably misogynistic," and 9:9, which enjoins the (male) reader to enjoy his life with the wife he loves all the days of his breath, "does not ameliorate the sourness of the passage." See Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 237–38. Likewise, according to Leonard Swidler, this verse "would seem to fulfill the definition of misogyny. The author then raises misogyny to the level of religious virtue," by concluding that He who is pleasing to God "escapes her." See Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Women* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 11. For a summary of the various critical approaches to understanding Kohelet's attitudes toward women, see George M. Schwab, "Woman as the Object of Qohelet's Search," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 73–84, and Madipoane Masenya, "Sitting around the Fireplace at Wisdom's House: A Review of Feminist Studies on Proverbs, Job and Qoheleth," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect*, ed. Susanne Scholz (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2017), 245–47.
2. Daphne Merkin, "Ecclesiastes: A Reading Out-of-Season," *Congregation*, ed. David Rosenberg (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 403. Merkin's reading corresponds with that of Frank Zimmerman, who identifies Kohelet as "a sexually frustrated sage who speaks of his own embittered experience." See Frank Zimmerman, *The Inner World of Qoheleth* (New York: KTAV, 1973), 152. Others try to limit the relevance of this statement to a particular kind of dangerous, foreign woman, but not to women in general, based on a textual relationship between *Kohelet* and *Proverbs*. See Kathleen Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good? A Commentary on the Book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 179.
3. For a Talmudic source that deals with the question of whether anything could be more bitter than death, see BT *Y'vamot* 63a.

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4. For these and other interpretations of *amrah kohelet*, see <http://tora.us.fm/tkn1/ktuv/mgilot/qh-07-27.html>, and Ya'akov Michael, *Da'at Mikra* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1973), מו.
5. Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 3.
6. All translations in this paper are mine unless otherwise noted. This poem was first published in a posthumous collection of her poems entitled *Ugav Rachel*, ed. Yitzchak Chaim Castiglioni (Cra-cow: Yosef Fisher, 1890), 91. The collection was reprinted in Tel Aviv by Machberot Sifrut in 1943, with a new preface by editor Y. Zemorah. For a critical edition of Morpurgo's work with extensive biographical information and commentary, see Tova Cohen, *Ugav ne'elam: chayeha veyetsiratah shel hameshoreret ha'ivriyah—italkiyah Rachel Morpurgo* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2016). The poem is also avail-able digitally through Project Ben Yehuda, <https://benyehuda.org/morpurgo/morp40.html>.
7. "Va'amarti ani belibi": See *Kohelet* 2:15, 3:17. "Amarti echkamah" (7:23); "amarti shegam zeh hevel," (8:14); "amarti ani" (9:27).
8. See Isa.13:8.
9. See *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 1, which asserts in the name of R. Chiya, Raba, and R. Yonatan that Solomon authored Song of Songs, Prov-erbs, and Ecclesiastes and offers different theories as to Solomon's stage of life at the moment he composed each of these works.
10. For other English versions see, Peter Cole's translation in *The Defi-ant Muse: Hebrew Feminist Poems*, ed. Galit Hassan Rokem, Shirley Kaufman, and Tamar Hess (New York: The Feminist Press, 1999), 81; and Wendy Zierler, *And Rachel Stole the Idols: The Emergence of Modern Hebrew Women's Writing* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 255–56.
11. Tova Cohen reads the reference to dancing toward death and don-ning finery instead of sackcloth in death as a reversal of Psalms 30:12:

<p>ב הפכת מספדי, למחול לי: פתחת שקי, ותאזוני שמחה.</p>	<p>¹²You turned my mourning into dancing for me; You loos- ened my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness.</p>
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See Tova Cohen, *Ugav Ne'elam*, 513.

12. For other interpretations of this poem see Wendy Zierler, *And Ra-chel Stole the Idols*, 256–60, and Tova Cohen, *Ugav Ne'elam*, 514–15.
13. According to *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols*, "The *etrog* is shaped like a woman's uterus and cervix. Accordingly, the *etrog* is a symbol of female fertility and generativity." See Ellen Frankel and Betsy Platkin Teutsch, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1992), 50.

14. S. Y. Agnon, "HaEtrog," *He'esh vеха'eitsim* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1966), רע"ה. Translation by Jeffrey Saks, as "The Etrog" in *The Outcast & Other Tales* (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2017), 96–103.
15. The source for women's exemption from timebound commandments including the four species is *Mishnah Kiddushin* 1:7. For a critical-historical study of this exemption, see Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, *Gender and Timebound Commandments in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
16. Earlier the rabbi himself had been described by the *etrog* salesman to the narrator as deserving of living in splendor and finery. Nevertheless, "*hu dar bishechunah aniyah bedirah shefeilah*"—he lives in a poor neighborhood in a meager dwelling, spending most of his salary on supporting orphans and widows. "HaEtrog," רע"ה. In contrast to the arrogant "*ba'al bayit echad dar*," the rabbi is thus presented as ethically "*mehudar*" (beautiful or splendid).
17. This was an actual historical figure, Rabbi Shlomo "Shlomke" Goldman of Zvhil-Jerusalem (d. 1945).
18. For a discussion of Agnon's use of this kind of prefatory chain transmission material in his recounting of Chasidic lore, see Shmuel Werses, *Shai Agnon kifshuto* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2000), 18–19.
19. For a sampling of versions of the Chasidic folktale see the appendix to Michal Oron, "Ha'ishah kemesapperet bisippur chassidi: tachsish sifruti or shimurah shel masoret? Iyyun besippurim shel Shai Agnon, 'Etrogo shel Oto Tzaddik'" in *Mivilna liyrushalayim* (2002): 513–29.
20. Ibid., 518.
21. S. Y. Agnon, *Ha'eish vеха'eitsim*, קט"ו. Translation by Shira Leibowitz and Moshe Kohn, "That Tzaddik's Etrog" in *A Book That Was Lost* (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2008), 195–99.
22. Translation adapted from Sefaria, https://www.sefaria.org/Bava_Metzia.59a?lang=bi.
23. Agnon, *Ha'eish vеха'eitsim*, קט"ו.
24. Translation by Shira Leibowitz and Moshe Kohn, see <http://www.thejewishreview.org/articles/?id=166>.
25. Agnon, *Ha'eish vеха'eitsim*, קי"ו.
26. In the original Chasidic folktale versions of the story, the wife bites off the *pitam* of the *etrog* in spite and revenge. See Oron, "Ha'ishah," 518. As part of his extended close reading of the story, S. Yizhar notes the use in the description of the *etrog* mishap in this story of only passive verbs, making clear that the rebbetzin does not intend for this to happen. It just happens. See S. Yizhar, "Etrogo shel Oto Tzaddik leShai Agnon," *Pirkei Chaim Lezecher Chaim*

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Avital z'l, ed. Yosef Evron (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University/Keren Chaim Avital, 1980), 27–44, esp. 42.

27. Thanks to Ron Daitz, student in my Literature of the Holidays course, for noticing the repeated association of R. Michel with "ka'as" and of the rebbetzin with "tza'ar."
28. For an excellent explication of both stories and the ways in which the second story is elucidated by the first, see Jeffrey Saks's Midrash Agnon lecture on the stories, <https://youtu.be/ABtnSMegNqU>, and commentary to "The Etrog" in *The Outcast*, 206–9.
29. Oron, "Ha'ishah," 523.