CCAR JOURNAL
SPRING 2022

THE REFORM JEWISH QUARTERLY

PUBLISHED BY THE CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF AMERICAN RABBIS

Rabbi Yochanan: Wounded and Wounding Healer

Rabbi Dan Ornstein

One outstanding feature of aggadah, particularly in the Babylonian Talmud, is its often-harsh criticism of the lives of the Rabbinic Sages. The Talmud contains a significant number of tales about Rabbis whose serious flaws and shortcomings provide us with a great deal of moral instruction. These stories were originally intended for members of the Rabbinic community striving to live the ideals of a life immersed in Torah. The editors of the Babylonian Talmud after roughly the fifth century CE (the "Stammaim") often wrote, reworked, and redacted stories of Sages found in the Jerusalem Talmud and other *Eretz Yisrael* sources for members of the Rabbinic academy. They reflected critically upon the adversarial and combative culture of the Babylonian academy, one that could easily degenerate into verbal hostility, public shaming, and even death. Over the centuries, as Talmud study has been popularized and democratized, the Sages' stories have become entirely our stories, reflecting our moral and spiritual dilemmas, and offering us brutally honest insights for struggling toward holiness and wholeness.[1]

Set in the context of ancient Near Eastern biographies, these highly critical tales of the Rabbinic Sages seek truth not in what literally took place but, as Jeffrey Rubenstein explains, in "the eternal truths that the meaning of the life of their subject held for others."[2] As such, at least a part of the biography of the renowned sage, Rabbi Yochanan bar Nappacha (*Eretz Yisrael*, third century CE) is more didactic than historical. My aim is to compare two Babylonian Talmudic stories about Rabbi Yochanan to learn from

RABBI DAN ORNSTEIN is the rabbi of Congregation Ohav Shalom and a writer living with his family in Albany, New York. He is the author of *Cain v Abel: A Jewish Courtroom Drama* (The Jewish Publication Society, 2020). He blogs at the Times of Israel and contributes essays to Northeast Public Radio and the Jerusalem Post.

the contrasting yet overlapping dimensions of his life. The first story, found in BT *B'rachot* 5b, presents Yochanan as an example of what the Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen calls "the wounded healer," however within our distinctive Jewish framework. The second story, found in BT *Bava M'tzia* 84a, contains the story of Yochanan's fatal relationship with Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, also known as Reish Lakish. It presents Yochanan not as the *wounded* healer, but as what I call the *wounding* healer whose dark flaws demand our attention. These "biographical" accounts of Rabbi Yochanan might be fiction. Their tragic lessons for us are not.

Contemporary scholarship reads Talmudic stories in their immediate and more global literary and cultural contexts.[3] Therefore, I will place these two narratives side by side, reading them intertextually. Further, one of Yochanan's most emphatic teachings about the gravity of *onaat d'varim* (wronging someone verbally) and *halbanat p'nei chaver* (public shaming) is found at BT *Bava M'tzia* 58b–59a. Below, I will consider this passage as well, along with the two narratives. I will consider how the three sources echo and inform each other in portraying Yochanan as, simultaneously, the wounded and the wounding healer. Finally, I will attempt to apply what we learn about Yochanan to our lives and work as clergy, as helping professionals, and as human beings.

Who Was Rabbi Yochanan?[4]

Bearing in mind the foregoing questions about the historicity of Rabbinic biographies, we learn from Talmudic and contemporary sources that Rabbi Yochanan was a third-century Palestinian *Amora* renowned for his towering intellect, love of humanity, physical beauty, vanity, and work as a healer. Orphaned at an extremely early age, he was raised by his grandparents. He became a student of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, with whom he studied in the academy at Sepphoris in the Galilee. He gathered around him an important circle of *Eretz Yisrael* rabbis as his students, including Reish Lakish, Rabbi Eleazar ben P'dat, and Rabbi Chiyyah bar Abba, all of whom figure in the stories that I will explore. Tales abound of how Yochanan spurned his inherited wealth and lived in dire poverty to devote himself entirely to Torah study. Rabbinic literature has recorded a fair amount about his personal life in his adult years. He had numerous sons and daughters, though ten of his sons died,

the last one in a particularly gruesome manner.[5] There is also a tradition that he sent an eleventh son, Rabbi Matanah, to the Jewish community in Babylonia to study with the first-generation Babylonian *Amora* Shmuel. The ultimately tragic collegial, familial, and didactic relationship between Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish is well attested, but their paired teachings on specific moral, legal, and spiritual matters can also be found in the Talmud.[6]

Henri Nouwen's Idea of the Wounded Healer

Who is a wounded healer? Writing particularly about contemporary Christian clergy, Henri Nouwen implies that people in any relationship, spiritual leaders especially, can only help others confront suffering and loneliness when we first acknowledge the inherently "wounded" condition of loneliness within ourselves, the inevitable result of being born and becoming an individual. Nouwen begins his discussion by pointing out that the possibility of nuclear war in the modern age highlights the ever-present potential for all life to be irreversibly destroyed. Though in the past, humankind could integrate the inevitable fact of our individual mortality into a larger, more hopeful narrative about the overall continuity of life on the planet, "Nuclear Man" no longer takes this reality for granted: "For Nuclear Man the future has become an option . . . For him, the problem is not that the future holds a new danger, such as a nuclear war, but that there might be no future at all."[7]

Nouwen then addresses the role of the Christian minister in providing spiritual leadership in the age of Nuclear Man, an age that greatly exacerbates our normal state of loneliness. Contemporary ministry helps others to articulate how to connect, beyond our loneliness, with God through the spiritual life, by modeling compassion and forgiveness, and by offering contemplative criticism of society. Such a ministry allows people of faith to choose, in partnership with God, how to sow seeds of positive change.[8] All of these clergy roles are vital for spiritual leadership, for the despair of Nuclear Man is merely the most extreme example of the profound existential loneliness into which all people enter the world. The minister's role is not to preach salvation to people, but to offer them the possibility of salvation by walking life's lonely journey with them as an empathic fellow traveler. Nouwen expresses this

aspect of all ministries, Christian or otherwise, using hospitality as a metaphor:

> The minister who has come to terms with his own loneliness and is at home in his own house is a host who offers hospitality to his guests . . . Why is this a healing ministry? It is healing because it takes away the false illusion that wholeness can be given by one to another. It is healing because it does not take away the loneliness and the pain of another but invites him to recognize his loneliness on a level where it can be shared.[9]

By reflecting with compassion upon this inherently wounded human condition of loneliness, the minister as wounded healer is able to offer others the emotional and spiritual space they need to deepen their own compassion and hope in the context of a caring community. Nouwen makes clear that a clergyperson cannot do this successfully without humbly making room for others to explore safely what it means to be fully human in relationship with other people and with God. Interestingly, Nouwen uses the kabbalistic concept of *tzimtzum* (the withdrawal of God's Self from a tiny part of reality to allow for creation to occur) as a potent metaphor for ministerial humility.[10]

Yochanan the Wounded Healer: Reflecting Upon BT *B'rachot* 5b

I will use Nouwen's insights to try to interpret Yochanan's life, with two critical caveats. Nouwen bases his ideas upon the Christian belief that the wounded healer is emulating Jesus, whose wounds and death on the cross brought eternal life to him and bring salvation to faithful Christians who revere him as God's son. The Talmud views Yochanan as a spiritual leader who, like Jesus and other ancient legendary wonderworkers, had the power to heal people's illnesses, particularly through physical touch.[11] However, an authentic Jewish reading of Yochanan's story must of course reject too close an identification of him with Nouwen's Christian model. Further, as I mentioned above, Yochanan is depicted as a literal healer, using prayer and physical contact to make sick people well. Nouwen's idea of clergy-as-healer is a metaphor for the power of shared suffering and dialogue to help our patients and congregants achieve their own sense of wholeness, an "inner healing."

The idea of Yochanan recognizing his own woundedness and loneliness is valuable for understanding how he heals others and is himself healed from illness in BT *B'rachot* 5b. There, a group of three related stories comes at the end of an extensive, highly organized narrative on why bad things happen to good people, what Louis Jacobs called the *sugya* (literary unit) on sufferings.[12] Using Talmudic dialectic and exegesis, the *sugya* distinguishes between *yisurei ahavah*, suffering brought upon us purely as an act of divine love, and suffering which is the result of punishment and moral correction from God. Rashi explains that *yisurei ahavah* are sufferings inflicted by God upon a blameless person in this life to reward them in the next life well beyond what they initially merited.[13] Whether Rashi's interpretation is correct, it seems clear that the Talmud expects righteous people who suffer for no evident reason to take a paradoxical leap of faith that opens them to experience a loving divine presence when they suffer. Critical to our understanding of Yochanan's role in these final three tales of healing is his moral and spiritual development throughout the earlier part of the *sugya*. He moves from mouthing abstract pieties and proof verses to being a rabbi unsure or unwilling to accept that losing children (as we learn he did) could be an experience of suffering as divine love. It is Yochanan's personal narrative—"this is the bone of my tenth son"—that prepares him to truly be a rabbi who is a wounded healer. His understanding of suffering and its absurdity, along with his empathy for others' pain, emerges from his own devastating loss of his children, one of the worst wounds imaginable.

רבי חייא בר אבא *חלש*, על לגביה רבי יוחנן. אמר ליה: "חביבין עליך יסורין?" אמר ליה: "לא הן ולא שכרן." אמר ליה: "הב לי ידך!" יהב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה.
רבי יוחנן *חלש*, על לגביה רבי חנינא. אמר ליה: "חביבין עליך יסורין?" אמר ליה: "לא הן ולא שכרן." אמר ליה: "הב לי ידך!" יהב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה. אמאי? לוקים רבי יוחנן לנפשיה!—אמרי: אין חבוש מתיר עצמו מבית האסורים.—
רבי אלעזר *חלש*, על לגביה רבי יוחנן. חזא דהוה קא גני בבית אפל, גלייה לדרעיה ונפל נהורא. חזייה דהוה קא בכי רבי אלעזר. אמר ליה: "אמאי קא בכית? אי משום תורה דלא אפשת—שנינו: אחד המרבה ואחד הממעיט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים! ואי משום מזוני—לא כל אדם זוכה לשתי שלחנות! ואי משום בני—דין גרמא דעשיראה ביר".
אמר ליה: "להאי *שופרא* דבלי בעפרא קא בכינא."

אמר ליה: "על דא ודאי קא בכית," ובכו תרוייהו.
אדהכי והכי, אמר ליה: "חביבין עליך יסורין?" אמר ליה: "לא הן ולא שכרן." אמר ליה: "הב לי ידך," יהב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה.

I.
Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba became ill (*chalash*). Rabbi Yochanan visited him. Rabbi Yochanan asked him, "Do you cherish your sufferings?" Rabbi Chiyya said to him, "I neither cherish them nor their reward." Rabbi Yochanan said to him, "Give me your hand." Rabbi Chiyya gave him his hand and Rabbi Yochanan healed him (*v'okmei*, lit. "he raised him up").

II.
Rabbi Yochanan became ill (*chalash*). Rabbi Chanina visited him. Rabbi Chanina asked him, "Do you cherish your sufferings?" Rabbi Yochanan said to him, "I neither cherish them nor their reward." Rabbi Chanina replied, "Give me your hand." Rabbi Yochanan gave him his hand and Rabbi Chanina healed him.
(The Talmudic editor then asks), "Why did Rabbi Yochanan not heal himself [since he was able to heal Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba]?"
(The answer is that) A prisoner cannot deliver himself from jail.

III.
R. Eleazar became ill (*chalash*). R. Yochanan visited him and saw that he was lying in a dark room. Rabbi Yochanan uncovered his [own] arm and light poured from it.

He saw that Rabbi Eleazar was weeping. He said to him, "Why are you weeping?

"[Are you weeping] because you did not proliferate your study of Torah? We (already) learned, 'One who brings a substantive offering and one who brings a meager offering are all the same [equal in value], as long as one's [sincere] intention [in bringing the offering] is for the sake of Heaven.'[14]

"[Are you weeping] because of [your lack of] financial sustenance? Not every man merits two tables. (You can't expect to be blessed with great Torah wisdom and with great wealth.)

"[Are you weeping] because of your children [who died]? This here is the bone of my tenth child [who died, yet I do not weep]."[15]

Rabbi Eleazar said to him, "I weep for that beauty [of yours, lit. *hai shufra*], which will wither in the earth."

Rabbi Yochanan said to him, "For that you may justly weep," and they both wept together.

After some time, Rabbi Yochanan asked him, "Do you cherish your sufferings?" Rabbi Eleazar said to him, "I cherish neither them nor their reward." Rabbi Yochanan said to him, "Give me your hand." Rabbi Eleazar gave him his hand and Rabbi Yochanan healed him.[16]

In all these sickbed scenes we meet Rabbi Yochanan, the human being who knows real suffering, not merely Rabbi Yochanan, the preacher. After all the preceding arguments bordering on platitudes about suffering, Yochanan's bedside conversations with his disciples shock us, as he and they forcefully repudiate the value of their own doctrine of suffering:

"Do you cherish your suffering(s)?"
"I cherish neither them nor their rewards."

These two statements out of his and his students' mouths provide the scaffolding for their journey of empathy and community, what Nouwen would identify as the sharing of wounded loneliness in a spirit of hospitality. In the first scene, Yochanan performs the mitzvah of *bikur cholim* by visiting his student, Chiyya bar Abba, who is on his sickbed. Chiyya makes clear that he wants nothing to do with his suffering or God's promised reward for it. Yochanan doesn't preach religious doctrine or come up with clever midrash to bolster a theological or polemical argument. Rather, he invites Chiyya into a relationship of healing by asking him to give him his hand. He opens Chiyya to a compassionate connection that allows his divinely granted power of healing to flow to him, so that he literally can raise him up (*v'okmei*).

In the second scene, Yochanan is now the suffering patient who is visited by his student, Rabbi Chanina. With breathtaking poignancy, all hierarchies of status are obliterated, as student and teacher reverse roles. In the community of sufferers all are equal, thus Chanina is able to invite Yochanan to give him *his* hand so he can be healed by Chanina's touch. The Talmud insightfully reinforces this point by indicating that Yochanan could not heal himself because "a prisoner cannot deliver himself from jail." Community is about no one walking the path of tribulation alone.

In the third scene, Yochanan once again is a sickbed visitor, this time to his student, Eleazar ben P'dat, who literally and emotionally lies in darkness. Using his legendary beauty—a recurring theme in

the *Bava M'tzia* narrative—Yochanan lights up Eleazar's room with the lustrous skin of his bare arm. Noticing Eleazar weeping on his bed, Yochanan assumes he is contemplating bitterly the wrong turns his life took, as he prepares for death. He even shows him a bone of his tenth son who had died, a bit of grotesquerie for which Yochanan was apparently (in)famous when comforting parents who either never had children or who, like him, lost children. Yet mostly, Yochanan is "back in preacher mode," attempting to dispense wisdom rather than listen empathically. Eleazar's response is a tour-de-force management of his rabbi's ego, which also reminds Yochanan of his lowly, lonely human place in the universe: "Oh, Rabbi, I'm weeping for that beautiful body of yours, which (like all our mortal bodies) will rot away in the earth!" The two Rabbis weep together, as they share the great truth of human mortality, the ultimate loneliness, which will come to us all. Yochanan is truly "healed" of his self-delusions and able to invite Eleazar into their shared human condition. What more powerful way for Yochanan the wounded healer to end this sickbed scene? He hospitably welcomes his fellow traveler in life to give him his hand, touching him, and raising him back into health.

Yochanan the Wounding Healer: Reflecting Upon BT *Bava M'tzia* 84a

Who is a *wounding* healer? Two exaggerative teachings of Rabbi Yochanan about *halbanat p'nei chaver* (humiliating someone in public), point us preliminarily toward a definition:

אמר רבה בר בר חנה אמר רבי יוחנן: נוח לו לאדם שיבוא על
ספק אשת איש ואל ילבין פני חבירו ברבים . . .
אמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי שמעון בן יוחאי: נוח לו לאדם שיפיל
עצמו לכבשן האש ואל ילבין פני חבירו ברבים.

Rabbah bar Bar Channah taught that Rabbi Yochanan taught: "It's better for a person to have sex with a woman of doubtful marital status than to humiliate his friend in public!" Rabbi Yochanan taught in Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's name: "It's better for a person to throw himself into a burning furnace than to humiliate his friend in public![17]

A comparison between the rabbi's teaching and his story below suggests a vast gulf between his preaching and his practice. He

exaggeratively emphasizes the prohibition against humiliating others publicly, even to the point of preferring that a person commit adultery and suicide, rather than shame another person. Yet as we learn below, Yochanan's deep character flaws and raw emotions will lead him during an argument about a matter of Torah to humiliate his colleague, Reish Lakish, publicly. He will refuse to forgive Reish for the shame he subsequently caused Yochanan. The fatal outcome of their falling out is that Yochanan will adamantly refuse to use his healing powers when Reish becomes mortally ill, the result of Yochanan's deep embarrassment and pride.

Preliminarily, we might define the wounding healer as the person who, instead of sharing his or her brokenness and inherent loneliness with others, employs this brokenness to further break them. Rather than "make his wounds into a major source of his healing power,"[18] through empathy and acceptance of shared suffering, the wounding healer *heedlessly* turns those wounds into piercing weapons, even to the point of *spitefully* refusing to reach out to another person in crisis. A close reading of the second story internally and intertextually, will clarify this definition.

אמר רבי יוחנן: "אנא אשתיירי **משפידי** ירושלים" . . . יומא חד הוה קא סחי רבי יוחנן בירדנא, חזייה ריש לקיש ושוור לירדנא אבתריה, אמר ליה: חילך לאורייתא!—אמר ליה: ***שופרך*** לנשי!—אמר ליה: אי הדרת בך—יהיבנא לך אחותי, **דשפירא** מינאי. קביל עליה. בעי למיהדר לאתויי מאניה—ולא מצי הדר. אקרייה ואתנייה, ושוייה גברא רבא.

יומא חד הוו מפלגי בי מדרשא: הסייף והסכין והפגיון והרומח ומגל יד ומגל קציר מאימתי מקבלין טומאה—משעת גמר מלאכתן, ומאימתי גמר מלאכתן? רבי יוחנן אומר: משיצרפם בכבשן, ריש לקיש אמר: משיצחצחן במים.—אמר ליה: לסטאה בלסטיותיה ידעי!—אמר ליה: ומאי אהנת ליך? התם רבי קרו לי, הכא רבי קרו לי. אמר ליה: אהנאי לך דאקרבינך תחת כנפי השכינה.

חלש דעתיה דרבי יוחנן, ***חלש*** ריש לקיש. אתאי אחתיה קא בכיא, אמרה ליה: עשה בשביל בניי! אמר לה: עזבה יתמיך אני אחיה.—עשה בשביל אלמנותיי!—אמר לה: ואלמנותיך עלי תבטחו.

נח נפשיה דרבי שמעון בן לקיש, והוה קא מצטער רבי יוחנן בתריה טובא . . .

Rabbi Yochanan said, "I alone remain among the beautiful people [*shapirei*] of Jerusalem" . . .

One day, Rabbi Yochanan was swimming in the Jordan River. Reish Lakish saw him and thought he was a woman. He crossed the Jordan after him (by sticking his spear in the Jordan and

vaulting to the other side of the Jordan). When Rabbi Yochanan saw Reish Lakish he said to him, "Your strength should be used for Torah study." Reish Lakish said to him, "Your beauty should be reserved for women [*shufrach l'nashei*]." Rabbi Yochanan responded, "If you return [repent] I will give you my sister, who is more beautiful than I am [*d'shapira mina-i*]." Reish Lakish consented and tried to return (by vaulting back to the other side) to bring his clothing, but he was not able. Rabbi Yochanan taught him scripture and Mishnah and made him a great man.

One day they disagreed (over a matter of law) in the academy:

"When are the sword, the knife, the dagger, the saw, and the spear subject to ritual impurity [*tum'ah*]? When their manufacture is complete." And when is their manufacture complete? Rabbi Yochanan said, "When they temper these tools in an oven." Reish Lakish said, "When they polish them in water."

Rabbi Yochanan said to him, "A thug knows his business of thuggery!" Reish Lakish said to him, "So how did you benefit me? There [when I was a brigand leader] they called me 'Master [*rabi*].' Here [in the house of study] they call me 'Master [*rabi*]'" Rabbi Yochanan said to him, "I benefited you by bringing you under the wings of the Divine Presence." Rabbi Yochanan felt insulted (*chalish daatei*, lit. "his mind sickened"). Reish Lakish became ill (*chalish*) (as punishment for causing R. Yochanan to feel hurt).[19]

Rabbi Yochanan's sister (Reish Lakish's wife) came and wept before him. She said to him, "Do it [pray on my husband's behalf] for the sake of my children." He said to her, "Leave your orphans with Me, I will bring them life" (Jer. 49:11). She said to him, "Do it to prevent my widowhood." He said to her, "Let your widows rely on Me" (Jer. 49:11).

Reish Lakish died and R. Yochanan grieved for him greatly.

The story then concludes with the aftermath of Reish's death, in which a deeply depressed Yochanan cannot find solace in the absence of his intellectual equal in dialectical argument. This ultimately drives him to such mental distress that he too dies. Significantly, the wounding healer's deepest regret in this part of the story seems not to be for his own bad behavior but for the lack of his intellectual sparring partner, a "fate worse than death" in the Babylonian Talmudic academy.

At its most basic level, this is a cautionary tale about what happens when the verbal thrust and parry between scholars engaged in Torah study becomes personal and degenerates into insults.

The ensuing verbal violence literally kills people. The subject matter that touches off the fatal fight between Yochanan and Reish Lakish—when weaponry becomes subject to *tum'ah* (ritual impurity)—exposes an ugly moral impurity. It contaminates Torah teachers, who should know better, causing them to murder each other with verbal weaponry.

The story is brimming with symbolism and moral implications, about which scholars such as Daniel Boyarin have written extensively; they are beyond the scope of this essay.[20] My *chidush* (innovative reading) is to examine how the recurring Aramaic words *chalash/chalish* ("sick/become sick") and *shufra* ("beauty"), which the Talmud used in *B'rachot*, serve to consciously connect and contrast that text with our text here, where these words are used as well. This comparative reading paints a far more nuanced picture of Yochanan.

Yochanan's extraordinary beauty (*shufra* in Aramaic) is one of his chief conceits, an exaggerated point of vanity that *Bava M'tzia* lavishly describes just before his encounter with Reish Lakish:

> האי מאן דבעי מחזי *שופריה* דרבי יוחנן, נייתי כסא דכספא מבי סלקי, ונמלייה פרצידיא דרומנא סומקא, ונהדר ליה כלילא דוורדא סומקא לפומיה, ונותביה בין שמשא לטולא, ההוא זהרורי— מעין *שופריה* דרבי יוחנן.
>
> One who wishes to see something resembling the beauty (*shufrei*) of Rabbi Yochanan should bring a new, shiny silver goblet from the smithy and fill it with red pomegranate seeds, place a diadem of red roses upon the lip of the goblet and position it between the sunlight and shade. That luster is a semblance of Rabbi Yochanan's beauty (*shufrei*).[21]

Variants of the word for beauty, *shufra*, are used in the story that follows three more times. As an echoing lead word, it demands of us that, from within the story itself, we contrast Yochanan's physical beauty with his actual moral and relational "ugliness." As a brigand, Reish Lakish is so captivated by Yochanan's feminine beauty that he mistakes him for a woman bathing naked in the Jordan. He later makes clear that Yochanan has not benefited him in the least. He sees that he has "mistaken" Yochanan for a friend, colleague, and teacher, after Yochanan demeans him in the *beit midrash* by derisively recalling his past. When Reish Lakish

falls ill after the confrontation, Yochanan's even more beautiful sister (*d'shapira mina-i*), pleads desperately with Yochanan to use his healing powers to make Reish well. However, an enraged and insulted Yochanan commits the ultimate ugly act of spitefully refusing to heal his own family member, student-colleague, and friend. He insists callously that his sister and her children can rely upon him to care for them after Reish dies.[22]

This pointed contrast around the word *shufra* is even more explicit when we compare *Bava M'tzia* to *B'rachot*. There, Eleazar ben P'dat's implicit teasing aside, Yochanan is reminded that his beauty is not so beautiful, for it too will rot in the earth someday. This truth gives him the capacity to attend to Eleazar with deeper humility and compassion and to heal him. In the text before us, Yochanan's petulance and self-preoccupation, exemplified in part by his vanity over his good looks, only adds to his refusal to relent of his prideful anger at Reish Lakish even as the man lays dying. Unable to come to terms with the broken, unhealed parts of himself, Yochanan becomes a *wounding* healer with fatal results. In this regard, it is noteworthy that in *B'rachot*, Eleazar is the student who is able to deepen Yochanan's appreciation for the mortality they both share. Yet in the final part of the *Bava M'tzia* story that I summarized but did not quote, once Yochanan's stubborn withholding of his healing power causes Reish Lakish to languish and die, not even Eleazar can satisfy Yochanan's craving for companionship with an intellectual equal like Reish Lakish. Yochanan as a wounded healer learns wisdom from his student. As a wounding healer, Yochanan cannot acknowledge Eleazar's value.

The contrasting use of *chalash/chalish* ("sick"/"became sick") within *Bava M'tzia* and between the two stories also underscores Yochanan as a wounding healer. In *B'rachot*, sickness frames each scene of Yochanan's encounters with his students. Already capable of empathy with others because of his bereavement as a parent, he grows more empathic precisely because he knows from both sides of the sickbed the terror of being ill. In *Bava M'tzia*, Yochanan's ad hominem attack on Reish Lakish's character and background leads to both men's degeneration into sickness: Yochanan's mind becomes "ill." He is sickened with insult by Reish Lakish's harsh response to his mean-spirited comment: "Really, Yochanan, maybe it would have been better if I had remained a thug rather than follow you!" Reish Lakish literally becomes ill. Jeffrey Rubenstein's

interpolated comment in the above translation explains that he becomes ill as punishment for having insulted Yochanan. I suggest that he also becomes ill because Yochanan has mortally wounded him with words, specifically by reminding him of his thuggish past before he did *t'shuvah*. This is a severe form of *onaat d'varim* (verbal abuse) and public humiliation, which Yochanan decries in his teaching.[23] Even the strictures of halachah, of which Yochanan is a master-scholar, are insufficient to prevent him from projecting and inflicting his woundedness on his colleague.

Contrasting Images of Yochanan, Mirrors for Us

As I noted above, at first glance, Yochanan and Reish Lakish's tragic tale is a cautionary one about the dark wages of public humiliation. It is difficult to look more closely at Yochanan's life as a wounded and wounding healer because, beyond that obvious moral, his story presents such a marginal case: that of an actual healer whose personality and personal torments lead him to give and withhold his healing powers from others in need. No one literally has his kind of power, so his complex personality and motives get lost in the legend of his healing abilities. This also allows us to hold him at a defensive arm's length. We might convince ourselves that because we lack his power to literally heal and kill, we never could or would behave with such spite or in any way that would have such dire consequences.

Yet, we forego that deeper dive into Yochanan's character at our own peril. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was correct when, paraphrasing the Baal Shem Tov, he declared, "If a man has beheld evil, he may know that it was shown to him in order that he learn his own guilt and repent, *for what is shown to him is also within him.*"[24] Far from being merely a narrative about verbal abuse and humiliation, Yochanan's story is also a complex pastoral mirror for us, if we are willing to see ourselves reflected in it.

Each of these Talmudic stories speaks to the other. Reading them diachronically, we witness Yochanan at one point in his life allowing his brokenness to open him up as a more compassionate and empathic man; at another point, allowing his brokenness to make him mean and spiteful. Reading them synchronically, we encounter him as a healer who possesses simultaneous wounding and wounded tendencies. Both readings demand that we look at

ourselves to discover those tendencies within ourselves. *Mai nafka mina*? Given these exegetical possibilities, what deeper wisdom might the Talmud be trying to convey to the members of its Rabbinic circle, and by extension, to us? I suggest the following:

An immense power to heal others rests with the people dedicated to the healing and helping vocations. Health care workers—literal healers—might come closest to the model reflected in Yochanan's work as narrated by the Talmud. However, his career as a wounded healer—a person who "does not take away the loneliness and the pain of another but invites him to recognize his loneliness on a level where it can be shared"—is also well represented in these stories. Yochanan may or may not have filled the role of physician in his day, but I readily imagine the Talmud's description of his healing work approximating that of a psychologist, chaplain, clergyperson, or social worker. Attending to the sick or to others in crisis, we professionals, at our best, welcome others into relationships of listening, dialogue, and support that reassure them that they are not alone in their suffering. We do this ideally from a place of genuine empathy, not by rationalizing away or deflecting their pain and fear, but by recognizing the ephemerality and mortality—sources of our woundedness—that we all share as God's creations.[25]

An immense power to hurt or destroy others emotionally and spiritually—if not necessarily physically—also rests with us in our healing and helping work. Often, we do not wound others out of vindictive spite, as did Yochanan. More likely, we fail to truly be present to others because we lack awareness of what is driving us emotionally in the moment of encounter, or of our complex emotional histories that we bring to that moment. For example, in the first week of my current pulpit, nearly three decades ago, I was called to help a family in the congregation whose chronically ill ten-year-old child suddenly died. I handled that crisis and the family's subsequent needs poorly not because I lacked the will or compassion to do so adequately, but because I refused to be in touch with my own emotions and fears that arose as a result of the boy's death. Splitting my professional self from my "broken human self" I responded to the family's grief robotically. It took me and this family two years to reach a place of genuine reconciliation through a long and difficult journey of dialogue, *t'shuvah*, and forgiveness.[26]

At some point, we healing-and-helping professionals have all—or will all—use our imperfect and broken selves as vehicles for wounding the ones we are supposed to support, whether out of spite, anger, insecurity, exhaustion, burnout, or just mere inexperience and immaturity. Like Yochanan, we might be wounded healers one day, wounding healers the next, or both at one and the same time. Read side by side, Yochanan's stories remind us that being wounded *and* being a wounder is the human condition of even the greatest spiritual leaders; as such, we need to forgive ourselves, even as we ask forgiveness of the ones we hurt. As God's partners, we aren't called to perfection but to perceptiveness.

That perceptiveness comprises a deep self-awareness of our motives and emotions that we bring to our pastoral encounters, as well as our memories and past traumas that others may evoke and provoke in us. Read side by side, Yochanan's stories also remind us that, our "mixed bag" identities notwithstanding, we must struggle tirelessly to learn from Yochanan-the-wounding so that we more readily emulate Yochanan-the-wounded. They warn us that our best work with others' woundedness cannot be done until we have located the woundedness within ourselves: our character defects, brokenness, and deep traumas that can so easily blind us to who we really are and what the suffering person before us really needs. Ultimately, these two precious literary gems of our Rabbinic tradition help us in our sacred work by posing one question to us. We can be wounded healers, wounding healers, or both. What and how will we choose?

Notes

1. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 268–82.
2. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 5.
3. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, chap. 1 and 254–55.
4. See Mordechai Margoliot, ed., *Entziklopedia L'Chachmei Ha-Talmud*, vol. 2 (Hebrew) (Y. Orenstein and Yavneh Publishing House, 1981), 481–94.
5. In addition to Margoliot (n. 4 above) see especially the commentary of R. Nissim Gaon to BT *B'rachot* 5b, which can be found on that page of the Vilna edition of the Talmud as well as at https://www.sefaria.org/Rav_Nissim_Gaon_on_*Berakhot*.

6. See, for instance, BT *Yoma* 86b, which places in close proximity both Sages' praise for the great merit of *t'shuvah*.
7. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 7.
8. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, 25–47.
9. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, 92.
10. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, 90–91.
11. See Samuel Tobias Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament* (Hoboken, NJ: The Ktav Publishing House, 1987), 62.
12. Louis Jacobs, "The *Sugya* on Sufferings in BT *B'rachot*, 5a–b" in *Studies in Aggadah, Targum, and Jewish Liturgy in Memory of Joseph Heinemann*, ed. J. Petuchowski and E. Fleischer (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press and Hebrew Union College Press, 1981), 32–44.
13. Rashi to BT *B'rachot* 5a, s.v., *yisurin shel ahavah*. See also *Sifrei Deuteronomy* 32 to Deut. 6:5, which seems to be the source of Rashi's interpretation.
14. *Mishnah M'nachot* 11:13. The offering mentioned here refers to Torah study, not an actual offering. What counts is Eleazar's sincerity in Torah study, not the quantity of what he learned.
15. Both *sugya* translations, with my modifications, are taken from Jeffrey Rubenstein, *The Classics of Western Spirituality: Rabbinic Stories* (New York; Paulist Press, 2002), 114–17 and 213–15. Since both stories mostly use impersonal pronouns to refer to each Sage, I have inserted the name of each one where appropriate to make the translation clearer.
16. A parallel *Eretz Yisrael* version of this story is found in *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 2:16. There, Yochanan and Chanina visit each other during their respective illnesses. They use language similar to that of BT *B'rachot* 5b. However, the main point of this earlier version of our story is that God demonstrates love for the righteous by testing their superior strength through suffering. The version in BT *B'rachot* can be seen as a protest against this traditional piety.
17. BT *Bava M'tzia*, 58b–59a.
18. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, 83.
19. This dire outcome of shaming a colleague—a major preoccupation of the Babylonian Talmud—is well attested in another story about Yochanan as wounding healer, BT *Bava Kama* 117a–b. There Yochanan becomes insulted because he thinks that Rav Kahana is smirking at him during an argument in the academy. Kahana becomes ill and dies, but in that story Yochanan raises him from the dead. Aramaic lead-words such as *okmei* and *chalish daatei*, which appear in the above *sugyot*, figure in this story as well.
20. Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 197–219.

21. BT *Bava M'tzia* 84a.
22. Yochanan's use of Jer. 49:11 is significant in this context. The verse quotes the Edomites, Israel's sworn cousin-enemies, pathetically assuring their own people that their widows and orphans will be protected, just as God is wreaking utter havoc upon Edom. Yochanan is so filled with spite he implies that his grieving sister, her children, and even he himself, are all identified with their despised enemies.
23. See *Mishnah Bava M'tzia* 4:10 and the Gemara that follows.
24. Abraham Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays Edited by Susannah Heschel* (New York: The Noonday Press—Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1996), 209.
25. Certainly, maintaining professional distance in pastoral situations is critical. However, we are still called upon as wounded healers to balance that self-distance with empathy that allows us to listen and respond to others in crisis.
26. Rena Halpern Kieval and Dan Ornstein, "A Story of Brokenness and Healing: The Relationship of Rabbi and Congregant," in *Jewish Relational Care A–Z*, ed. Rabbi Jack H. Bloom (New York: The Hayworth Press, 2006), 221–40.

A Religious Approach to Sexual Behavior for Our Liberal Communities from a Dialogical Jewish Perspective: *Mitzvah, R'shut, Isur*—A Proposal

Admiel Kosman

1.

Slavoj Žižek notes in his discussion of the way the Song of Songs is commonly read that when traditional commentators—both Jewish and Christian ones—read this apparently erotic text, they insist that it must be read only allegorically. To this, he asks the following question:

> If sexuality is just a metaphor, why do we need this problematic detour in the first place? Why do we [the common readers] not convey the true spiritual content directly?[1]

And then, he goes on to ask:

> What, however, if the Song of Songs is to be read not as an allegory but, much more literally, as the description of purely sensual erotic play? What if the "deeper" spiritual dimension is already operative in the passionate sexual interaction itself?[2]

ADMIEL KOSMAN, an Israeli poet, is professor for Jewish Studies at Potsdam University as well as the academic director of Geiger College, a training school for liberal rabbis. He is the author of several books and many articles in the field of Talmudic research and of collections of Hebrew verse, and he also writes regularly articles in Israeli newspapers in which he interprets current events in light of the traditional sources. His latest academic book in English is *Gender and Dialogue in the Rabbinic Prism* (de Gruyter, 2012) and in Hebrew *Masechet Shalom* (Tractate Peace: The Arab-Israeli Conflict in Light of Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources), and his most recent collection of poetry is *So Many Things Are Yours*, trans. Lisa Katz (English) (Zephyr Press, in press).