הנה אני נושא דרשה

Hinei Ani Nosei Drashah

Jewish Readings in the Poetry of Admiel Kosman

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Referee, Professor Stanley Nash

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Thesis Digest

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This thesis comprises three critical essays on the poetry of Admiel Kosman. Kosman's poetry is deeply engaged with Jewish texts, symbols, history, and ultimate questions. Born in Haifa, Israel in 1957, Kosman received an Orthodox education and earned a Ph.D. in Talmud at Bar Ilan University, where he also served on the faculty. He currently holds the rank of professor at the University of Potsdam and serves as academic director of the Abraham Geiger College in Berlin, the first liberal rabbinical seminary in Continental Europe since the Holocaust. Kosman's poetry evinces a unique synthesis of his deep knowledge of traditional Judaism and his continuing engagement with the challenges posed to Judaism by modernity. As a contribution to modern Jewish thought and culture, the poetry of Admiel Kosman is of particular interest to liberal Jews.

The first essay examines Kosman's treatment of the human condition. One of Kosman's recurring themes is the limitation of human beings. In contrast with God and the natural world, human beings are insignificant in scale and power, and human weakness is evidenced by sin and suffering. Kosman uses images of violence and death to dramatize human awareness of mortality. But Kosman also shows how the very humility of man leads to awareness of the divine and relationship with God.

The second essay addresses Kosman's use of eroticism to develop a relational theology. Kosman's poetry frequently employs metaphors of love, desire, and sexuality to explore the relationship of man and God. Further, erotic love and relationships between human beings are seen as a source of religious inspiration and contact with the divine. Kosman develops these themes in the concrete context of marriage and the home.

The final essay examines the role of Jewish texts in Kosman's poetry. There is a long tradition in Modern Hebrew poetry of intertextuality with the Bible, providing both new interpretations of the biblical text and new insight into contemporary events. Kosman extends this method in poems based on numerous genres and periods of Jewish texts: Rabbinic, halakhic, philosophical, mystical, and more. Through readings that are often critical and deconstructive, Kosman develops the meaning and relevance of these texts for modern Jewish life.

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This thesis only exists because of the wisdom and inspiration of Admiel Kosman. Though we have never met, he has become my teacher. I am deeply grateful for his poetry, which has had a profound effect on my spiritual and intellectual life. I look forward to all of his great work that I know is yet to come.

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To Alexandra Harwin—Ali: I had read in Kosman's poetry that loving another person allows us to experience God in this world. But I did not truly understand until I fell in love with you. Thank you for everything.

To my parents, Jeri and Neil, my brothers, Seth and Jonah, and my Grandma Lorry: Words cannot express my gratitude to you and for you. Though this thesis may seem distant from your fields of expertise, your effect on me is written on every page. God bless you.

Introduction

Admiel Kosman is one of the leading figures in a movement in Israeli poetry known as "שירה אמונית" ("faith poetry" or "religious poetry"). Beginning in the late 1970s, a group of young poets emerged who were identified as "religious" Jews, in sharp contrast with the strong, self-consciously secular tendency in the Israeli poetry of the preceding generations. Their poetry was marked by "religious sensibility and an intense dialogue with traditional Jewish texts,"[1] but their vision was not limited to the Jewish piety of earlier religious Modern Hebrew poets, such as Yosef Zvi Rimon and Zelda. Rather, they expressed a postmodern religious outlook, destabilizing ideas and texts and drawing on a wide range of cultural sources, both within and outside of Judaism.[2] In his introduction to *שירה חדשה: שירה אמונית צעירה* (*New Poetry: Young Faith Poetry*), an anthology he co-edited, Kosman signals his unwillingness to identify with the Jewish establishment by avoiding the word "דתי" ("religious"), associated in Israel with Orthodoxy, in favor of "רליגיוזיות" ("religiosity"), a foreign word for a concept mostly foreign to Israeli society. Kosman understands "רליגיוזיות" as an existential experience of life and values, not necessarily related to any formal religious system.[3]

This insistent nonconformity, particularly in the realm of religion, has been a defining characteristic of Admiel Kosman's life and work. Kosman was born in Haifa in

1. Shachar Pinsker. "And Suddenly We Reached God?" (*Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, v. 5, n. 1), 2006.
2. Dror Eidar. "Eloah! gadlu ma'ayenot levavi – va'emas beferurei shirah: Elohim bashirah ha'ivrit (A)." *Haaretz*, 21 May 2004.
3. Admiel Kosman and Miron Izakson, eds. *Shirah Chadashah: Shirah Emunit Tz'irah.* Ramat ha'Sharon: Apiryon, 1997.

1957. His father was a Holocaust survivor, and although his family was Orthodox, he was exposed to secular art and culture from a young age.[4] While he was still in high school, he attended the poetry seminar led by Yehudah Amichai, T. Carmi, and Amir Gilboa at *Beit ha'Sofer* in Jerusalem. Gilboa, in particular, became an advocate for Kosman's work, and it was Gilboa who published Kosman's first collection of poems, ואחרי מוראות מעשה השיר (1980). After serving in the army in a *Hesder yeshivah* unit, Kosman was accepted to the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, where he studied graphic art and ceramics. He left Bezalel after one year and entered the *yeshivah* of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz. In none of these settings did Kosman feel that he "fit in" completely. He was uncomfortable with the hierarchical and competitive atmosphere and the enforcement of a rigid ideal of masculinity. In the *yeshivah* world, his parallel identity as a poet caused him to be viewed as an outsider, an "עוף מוזר."[5]

Kosman's career in academia began at Bar Ilan University, an Orthodox institution, where he earned a Ph.D. in Talmud and served on the faculty. Kosman's academic work is unconventional for an Orthodox scholar. He has written on issues of gender, sexuality, and family in the Talmud. For several years he published a regular column, "אוצר קטן," in the daily newspaper, *Haaretz*, in which he offered primarily postmodern readings of Rabbinic texts. He has served as a visiting professor at the University of California at Berkeley and the Oxford Center for Hebrew and Judaic Studies. In 2003, Kosman emigrated to Germany with his wife and family to take up the

4. My description of Kosman's biography is based on Itamar Yaoz-Kest, "*Sichah im ha'Meshorer Admiel Kosman*," (*Pesifas* 25), 1994, Neri Livneh, "*Manoa Chipus*" *Haaretz*, 3 May 2002, and David C. Jacobson, *Creator, Are You Listening? Israeli Poets on God and Prayer*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007.
5. Yaoz-Kest, "*Sichah im ha'Meshorer Admiel Kosman*," p. 7.

positions of professor at the Cathedra for Rabbinic Studies at Potsdam University and academic director of Abraham Geiger College in Berlin, the first liberal rabbinical seminary in Continental Europe since the Holocaust.

Kosman has published eight books of original poetry: *ואחרי מוראות מעשה השיר* (1980), *בגדי נסיך* (1988), *סמרטוטים רכים* (1990), *מה אני יכול* (1995), *הגענו לאלהים* (1998), *פירוש חדש בס"ד* (2000), *ארבעים שירי אהבה: ושני שירי אהבה נוספים לאלוהים* (2003), and *סידור אלטרנטיבי: לשבעים ואחד שירים חדשים* (2007). Widely regarded as a major figure in contemporary Hebrew poetry, he has won the Bernstein Prize for Poetry (1991), the Prime Minister's Prize (1992), and the Brenner Prize (2000). Nonetheless, Kosman does not approach poetry as a regular occupation. He explains, "יצירת השירה איננה מכוונת, מעולם לא ישבתי לכתוב שירה."[6] He goes through long periods of time when he is not inspired to write poetry. When he does write, it is a quasi-mystical experience: "מעולם לא כתבתי שירים. הם נבעו מאליהם, והיחס בינם לבין החוויות האישיות שלי בעולם-הזה ומאורעותיו אינו מחוור לי כלל."[7] This sense that his poetry originates in a source beyond the self is reflected in Kosman's frequent evocation of transcendent and universal spirituality. But for all of its universalism, aspects of Kosman's poetry are profoundly Jewish.

Discussing his first two books, Kosman claims that he did not intend to use the Hebrew of the Mishnah and Talmud, but because he was immersed in the *yeshivah* world, his poems naturally took that form.[8] However, in his more recent books, beginning with *הגענו לאלהים*, Kosman has increasingly addressed Jewish themes and texts directly. His

6. Ibid., p. 9.
7. "Admiel Kosman." (*Pesifas 61*), 2005. p. 44.
8. Yaoz-Kest, "*Sichah im ha'Meshorer Admiel Kosman*," p. 8.

most recent book, *סידור אלטרנטיבי*, even models its structure on the traditional Jewish prayer book. Although he is deeply knowledgeable about traditional Judaism, the Judaism Kosman espouses is quite different. He refuses to be confined by established categories:

> אני לא חי בדור הכיפות הסרוגות. אינני "ימין" ואינני "שמאל". אינני אדם מפלגתי, אינני "ישראלי" ואני אפילו אינני מרגיש את עצמי "יהודי". היהדות היא אוסף של כלים. יש לי כלים שאיתם אני עובד. יהדות עבורי היא דבר אוניברסלי לגמרי. כלומר, הכלים הללו פתוחים בפני כל העולם. אני לא מרגיש כי אני בן לשבט מסוים.[9]

Kosman understands religion to be a deeply personal experience. He writes, "לחפש את אלוהים בשבילי היה לחפש את המקום שיש בו סוג של אושר של הכרת האחר, או אהבה אמיתית, או לחוש את האחר."[10] Kosman's emphasis on existentialism and human relationship involves a reevaluation of nearly all aspects of Judaism. Even those parts of the tradition that Kosman considers valuable "tools" for achieving religiosity are given new interpretations and meanings. As a result, the vision of Judaism that emerges from Kosman's poetry is highly destabilized; it is not a systematic theology, but rather a shifting field of possibilities for Jewish meaning.

As mentioned above, Kosman objects to the category of "religious poetry," and he would surely object to the designation, "Jewish poetry." I agree with him that "Jewish poetry" is a highly problematic concept. Does "Jewish poetry" include all poetry written by Jews? All poetry written in Hebrew? Should Lord Byron's "Hebrew Melodies" be considered "Jewish poetry?" The difficulties are endless. Instead of "Jewish poetry," I prefer to speak of "Jewish readings." A "Jewish reading" of a poem is an interpretation

9. Ibid., p. 9.
10. Neri Livneh, "*Manoa Chipus*."

that creates meaning within the complex of meanings that constitutes Judaism. Poems that address Jewish texts, history, and ideas lend themselves very well to Jewish readings. But any poem can be given a Jewish reading, as long as the reader's intention is to engage in dialogue with Judaism. The three essays that comprise this thesis are my attempts to create Jewish readings of the poetry of Admiel Kosman.

The first essay examines Kosman's treatment of the human condition. One of Kosman's recurring themes is the limitation of human beings. In contrast with God and the natural world, human beings are insignificant in scale and power, and human weakness is evidenced by sin and suffering. Kosman uses images of violence and death to dramatize human awareness of mortality. But Kosman also shows how the very humility of man leads to awareness of the divine and relationship with God.

The second essay addresses Kosman's use of eroticism to develop a relational theology. Kosman's poetry frequently employs metaphors of love, desire, and sexuality to explore the relationship of man and God. Further, erotic love and relationships between human beings are seen as a source of religious inspiration and contact with the divine. Kosman develops these themes in the concrete context of marriage and the home.

The final essay examines the role of Jewish texts in Kosman's poetry. There is a long tradition in Modern Hebrew poetry of intertextuality with the Bible, providing both new interpretations of the biblical text and new insight into contemporary events. Kosman extends this method in poems based on numerous genres and periods of Jewish texts: Rabbinic, halakhic, philosophical, mystical, and more. Through readings that are often critical and deconstructive, Kosman develops the meaning and relevance of these texts for modern Jewish life.

Underlying these readings is my firm belief that the poetry of Admiel Kosman is tremendously valuable for modern liberal Jews. Poetry is undervalued in our community as a resource for Jewish thought and inspiration. Where poetry does appear—primarily in the prayer book—it tends not to be challenging, and very few modern poets are represented. Admiel Kosman deserves broader consideration in the liberal Jewish community. His unique synthesis of traditional Jewish knowledge and a universal, existential outlook represents a provocative contribution to liberal Judaism.

Chapter One

The Human Condition and the Divine

The poems of Admiel Kosman are populated by a rich diversity of human beings. There are Jews and non-Jews, cab drivers and factory workers, lovers and children, and most prominent and persistent, again and again we encounter the first-person voice of the poet/speaker. But despite the proliferation of potential characters, Kosman's poems contain very little narrative. Instead, they are mostly meditations, speeches that examine and evaluate the very nature of human life. They strive to express human desire and human anxiety over the place of man in the universe. Kosman's poems are deeply personal, conveying the urgency of the drive he feels to examine the nature of his own life. But for the reader—especially the Jewish reader—Kosman's explorations coalesce into a beautiful and nuanced statement on the human condition.

That condition, as Kosman sees it, is to be finite and limited. Human beings are small and weak, especially when compared with the cosmos and the functioning of a transcendent God. The poet's reaction to this condition is varied. In some poems the human being laments his powerlessness; in others, he gives thanks to God for the more conceivable and manageable scale of human life. Throughout, Kosman projects a sense of humility. To be human is to constantly confront the boundaries and limitations of mortal life.

But Kosman goes further. In order to dramatize the limitations of humanity, he returns repeatedly to the image of the human being as fragile and broken. Kosman's speakers are not just weak, but in pain. Their bodies are injured or deformed. Many of

the poems employ a rhetoric of violence to suggest how tenuous, how temporary is the existence of human beings in the world. The brokenness of humanity also extends beyond the physical to the moral realm, where human beings are sinners and easily tempted.

Finally, Kosman highlights the finitude of man by confronting the ultimate boundary faced by human beings, death. Death is one of the most consistent themes throughout Kosman's body of work. Death is not portrayed as a source of fear, nor does the poet express anger at the reality of death. Rather, death is embraced as a necessary aspect of human life. It is even welcomed and celebrated. But death also functions in the poems to highlight man's helplessness. In the poem "לפני שעה קלה קברו אותו," the speaker lies in bed awake as the wind bewails the violent death of a young man.[1] Death is disquieting, belonging not quite to the realm of human beings, but to the eternal realm of the natural world and the divine.

Kosman's insistent focus on man's mortality, the insignificance and fragility of human life does not create a bleak or dismal tone, as one might expect. Rather, his casual, often whimsical, engagement with these themes places man in an almost heroic role: faced with innumerable disabilities, he must make his way in the world. By describing the smallness of human beings, Kosman emphasizes the extent to which human life is contingent on our relationship to greater forces. Often, Kosman uses the natural world to symbolize that higher power, but ultimately—and in many poems, explicitly—the power that contrasts with man's finitude is God. Kosman's view of

1. *בגדי נסיך*, p. 25.

mortality is a key part of his greater project of asserting man's personal and intimate relationship with God.

In this chapter I will explore Kosman's expression of the human condition through readings of a number of representative poems. I will also attempt to show how this view of humanity supports Kosman's general theology and worldview.

In Kosman's formulation, the meagerness of man is an intentional aspect of God's Creation. Man is never intended to be perfect in form or power. Humanity is a humble creation, destined to be limited, even shabby. Man does not become imperfect through an original sin, but is created that way. Kosman dramatizes this modest creation in the poem, "הזמנה למלאכים."

נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם. מִמַּטְלִית מְשֻׁלֶּכֶת נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם. מִשְּׁאֲרִיוֹת
שֶׁל בַּד. נִבְלֹל וּנְכַבֵּד, חָזָק, נִדְחָס וְנַעֲשֶׂה לוֹ פֶּס
שָׂפָם יָפֶה וְחַד לְיָמִין, וּפֶס יָפֶה וְחַד לִשְׂמֹאל, וּשְׁתֵּי יָדַיִם,
סְמַרְטוּטִים, נִגְלָל, יִהְיוּ לוֹ שְׁתֵּי עֵינַיִם כְּמוֹ תְּבַלּוּל,
שֵׂעָר עָל מֵצַח–גַּל, כְּמוֹ סִירָה, וְלֶחִי, מְגֻלְגָּל, חַלּוּל,
וְאָז: סְטִירָה

עַזָּה וּמְצֻלֶּלֶת נַעֲנִיק לוֹ לָאָדָם הַזֶּה לַדֶּרֶךְ, שֶׁיָּקוּם,
שֶׁיִּתְקַיֵּם, שֶׁלֹּא יִבְהֶה. וְנַעֲשֶׂה לוֹ בֶּטֶן אֱנוֹשִׁית,
גְּדוֹלָה, שֶׁל כְּאֵבִים עַזִּים, שֶׁיִּתְפַּתֵּל, שֶׁלֹּא יַחֲלֹם,
מְעִי, קְרָבַיִם, שְׁפִיץ, מֻחְלָקִים דְּחוּסִים שֶׁל צֶמֶר–גֶּפֶן,
שֻׁמָּן, מַיִם, מִיץ, וְנַעֲשֶׂה לוֹ אֵיבַר–מִין יָפֶה לְהוֹלָדָה,

הֶמְשֵׁכִיוֹת. וְדֹפֶן, רֶגֶל, מִצְלָעוֹת שֶׁל מְזֻוָּדָה,
וְנַעֲשֶׂה לוֹ חוּט–שִׁדְרָה חָזָק וְאֹפִי. אִישִׁיוּת, וַהֲבָנָה וְזִכָּרוֹן,
עָמוּם וּמַתְכְּתִי מֻחְתָּכוֹת פַּחִים, וּמֹחַ מְפֻתָּל בְּשַׁקְיוֹת גְּדוֹלוֹת, מָכָל מִינֵי פֵּרוֹת
מְמֻעָכִים. וְלֵב פּוֹעֵם, הוֹלֵם, וְצִנּוֹרוֹת, כְּמוֹ חֲצוֹצְרוֹת–תְּרוּעָה, הַלֵּל לְכָלֵי
הַדָּם. נִקָּרֵא לְכָל הַמַּלְאָכִים: בְּיוֹם
שִׁשִּׁי בַּבֹּקֶר נַעֲשֶׂה

אָדָם.[2]

This poem relates to Genesis 1:26, which introduces the creation of man, "God said, 'Let us make man in our image.'" The use of the first person plural here inspired a Rabbinic tradition that God consulted with the host of angels before creating man.[3] As the title suggests, this poem imagines the content of that consultation. God lays out the physical and other characteristics man is to possess and the materials and process by which he is to be created. In a few cases, God gives justifications for specific aspects of the plan.

From the list of materials, it is clear that man is to be a modest creation. The first item mentioned, a "discarded patch," is doubly humble, since a patch in itself is a poor item, and this one has the additional negative distinction of being "discarded." The "discarded patch" is emphasized in the first line, coming in between the repeated, "Let us make man." It also gains prominence by defying the reader's expectations. The man-made patch is an anachronism before the creation of humanity, a logical conflict used throughout the poem to direct the reader to the symbolic significance of the materials the poet has chosen. The rest of the materials mentioned for man's creation are similarly humble. "Scraps of cloth," "rags," "bunched up bits of cotton," "suitcase ribs"—they are not only of little value, but are specifically old and used. Especially in the biblical context, where the finest materials are used to fashion the most important things—e.g. the Tabernacle, the Temple—the materials used to create man suggest that he is of little importance.

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[2] *מה אני יכול*, p. 71.

[3] B. Sanhedrin 38b, Bereshit Rabbah 8:7, and others.

This image is reinforced by the description of various aspects of man that God gives in the poem. The first part mentioned is a mustache, an insignificant characteristic that trivializes man. The same is true for the depiction of man's hairstyle. The poem is more earnest when it describes a "human belly" as "large, of strong pains, so he'll twist, so he won't dream." The poet hints at a painful and mundane human existence. Man is given "personality," but no real possibility is seen for it to develop, since man's understanding and memory are to be "dim." The only exception to these negative and neutral descriptions are the "pipes," which are compared to "sounding trumpets," a "*hallel* of blood vessels," "*hallel*" being a song of praise to God. Though this is a positive characteristic, it suggests that man offers praise to God simply by virtue of living, not through any personal effort or achievement.

Finally, the process of creation described in the poem expresses man's lowly state. Man is sent into the world with a slap in the face, "so he won't stand gaping." Man's destiny from Creation is to face violence and disillusionment. This slap is also reminiscent of the Rabbinic legend that while still in the womb, every soul is taught the entirety of the Torah, but before birth a slap from an angel causes the soul to forget all that it has learned.[4] This allusion suggests yet another way in which the vindictive angels relegate man to an inferior status. The conclusion of the poem, "Let us call to all the angels: on the sixth / day in the morning let us make / man," through the image of angels as laborers and reference to scheduling, emphasizes further the mundane aspect of man's creation.

[4] B. Niddah 30b.

In the final line of the poem, "*adam*," stands alone as if fully conceived, but the word has been totally transformed from its meaning in the opening words of the poem, taken from the biblical text. Humanity is no longer the pinnacle of creation, the exalted conclusion of the creation story. Rather, man is a poor, makeshift creation, destined for pain and strife in the world. The power of this image is increased by the sharp contrast it makes with the biblical context. Following "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness," Genesis continues, "and he shall rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and the beasts and over all the earth and everything that crawls upon the earth." In the precise place where the Bible gives a clear statement of man's dominance and prominence in creation, Kosman substitutes a deflated account of man's origin.

One aspect of the human reaction to the limited conditions of human existence is expressed in the poem "מזמור."

אָמֵן, שֶׁתַּעֲשֶׂה אוֹתָנוּ קְטַנְטַנִּים כָּאֵלֶּה. קְטַנְטַנִּים
מְאֹד, בְּבַקָּשָׁה, מִתַּחַת לַגָּלַקְסְיוֹת הַגְּדוֹלוֹת שֶׁלְּךָ.
אָמֵן, שֶׁתַּעֲשֶׂה אוֹתָנוּ קְטַנְטַנִּים מְאֹד, בְּגֹדֶל זֶרֶת, מִתַּחַת
לַגָּלַקְסְיוֹת,לַשְּׁמָשׁוֹת, לַשְּׁבִילִים שֶׁל הַחָלָב, הַמַּיִם, וְהָאוֹר הָעַז שֶׁלְּךָ.

אָמֵן, שֶׁתַּעֲשֶׂה אוֹתָנוּ בְּמִדָּה אַחֶרֶת, קְטַנְטַנִּים כָּאֵלֶּה, לֹא נִרְאִים, לֹא מְבִינִים
וְלֹא רוֹאִים בְּכְלָל מַה יֵּשׁ לְךָ מַה אֵין. מָה אִכְפַּת לְךָ? תַּעֲשֶׂה אוֹתָנוּ
פְּצָפוֹנִים, בְּגֹדֶל זֶרֶת, וּנְהַלֶּלְךָ עַל כָּךְ, אָמֵן.[5]

Here, a human being speaks to God, thanking God for making humans small. The first stanza establishes the contrast; humans are "*k'tantanim*," as opposed to the large galaxies. The speaker thanks God for making humans merely a "span" underneath His "galaxies, suns, and milky ways, water, and great light." In this line Kosman integrates

[5] *הגענו לאלהים*, p. 44.

the views of the cosmos given by modern science and traditional Judaism. To the Milky Way, the scientific name for our galaxy, Kosman adds ways of water and light, elements suggested by the cosmology of traditional Jewish texts. This combination implies that the poem's message has relevance not only for the religious worldview, but for the modern person who attempts to integrate religious and scientific understandings.

The reason for the human being's gratitude becomes clear in the second stanza. As a result of their small size, human beings, "are not seen, do not understand / and do not see at all what you do or do not have." Each of the three "advantages" listed is actually a limit to the power or significance of man. Humans are not important enough to attract the attention of God, and they are not capable of understanding or seeing God's functioning (and not incidentally, of determining which view of the cosmos—scientific or religious—is correct). The self-effacement of the speaker is heightened when he refers to humans as "פצפונים," a colloquial diminutive for small things, derived from the Yiddish, "פצעלע." The speaker asks God, "What do you care?" implying that human beings indeed do not matter very much.

If the contrast set up in the poem minimizes the significance of human beings, why does the speaker have such a positive reaction to it? Why does the speaker literally thank God for making human beings so small and limiting their power so severely? Perhaps, the human being is awed at the power and responsibility of God; since humans are insignificant in size and power, the human being is exempt from the unbearable burden of ensuring that the world functions with goodness and fairness. Another reason for the positive outlook of the speaker is suggested by the tone of the poem. The human speaker addresses God casually, referring to "your great big galaxies," asking "What do

you care?" and promising "We'll thank you for it." Precisely because he lacks the grandeur of a sun or galaxy, the speaker is able to approach God personally and with individual character. And of course, human beings cannot be altogether insignificant, since the speaker assumes that God hears his prayer. As we shall see, Kosman presents the smallness of human beings—mortality and limitation—as a key element of their ability to enter into intimate relationship with God.

Of course, the human response to mortality is not limited to gratitude. Kosman also represents the hardship, the frustration experienced by human beings at their powerlessness in relation to the universe and especially to God. In "פיוט למוסף של ראש השנה," the speaker questions God about the process of divine judgment. As justification for his inquiry, he explains:

תִּשְׁמַע, אַתָּה לְבַד אֶחָד שֶׁשָּׁט לְמַעְלָה.
אַתָּה גִּבּוֹר, מַדְהִים, אַדִּיר.
אֲנַחְנוּ צִיץ עוֹבֵר.
אֲנַחְנוּ עֶדֶר צֹאן פּוֹעֶה בַּדִּיר,
אַתָּה מוֹנֶה, סוֹפֵר.
אֲנַחְנוּ קַשׁ נִדָּף, פָּרוּעַ,
עַל גַּרְגִּיר–הָעֲרָמָה.

וְרַק אַתָּה מַשִּׁיב הָרוּחַ,
עַל קְלִפַּת–הָאֲדָמָה.[6]

We see a similar contrast to the one set up in "מזמור," except that instead of being small in relationship to the cosmos, here the human being is minimized in relation to the greatness of God. The theme is developed; man is not only small in size, but limited in other ways. Man is a "passing bud," a metaphor for something fragile and ephemeral.

[6] *סידור אלטרנטיבי*, p. 117.

Humankind is a "bleating flock of sheep," creatures without understanding, with only a rude ability to express themselves. Finally, man is "driven straw, wild," laid over seeds an image of man as having no intrinsic value, of being a poor material put to the most mundane of purposes. It also carries a hint of suffering through its allusion to the complaint of Job, "Will You harass a driven leaf? Will You pursue dried-up straw?" (13:25).

This poem also develops the relationship between the human being and God from that in "מזמור." Again the speaker addresses God in casual language; Kosman's punctuation even suggests indignation ("על איזה תעריף דברת?!" or "ומי ראשון יפל לאש?!"). The conversational tone and speaker's presumptions about God's nature and activities suggest an intimacy with God. But the conclusion of the poem introduces another aspect of the relationship. Man is wind-blown straw, and it is none but God who brings the wind. It is not only man's humble nature, but the active affliction of man by God that contribute to the difficulty of human life. The poet accuses God, who "sails above," an image of carefree and easy existence, of callousness and injustice towards human beings.

"פיוט למוסף של ראש השנה" is complemented by the poem that follows it, "הנני הרש," which shifts from a communal expression of the human condition to the experience of the individual. In its opening line, "הנני הרש, הנני העני מכל" it alludes to the "הנני" prayer recited by the worship leader on the High Holidays, which expresses humility and asks God not to hold the community responsible for the failings of the leader. It also references the Rabbinic prohibition on "לעג לרש," the mocking of a person who is already disadvantaged. The contrast between the all-powerful God and the humble speaker is

stated explicitly: "כה חלש \ ואני. כה חזק, ואתה." What is the implication of the smallness, the poorness of human beings? The speaker declares, "הרי איש נגדך לא יכול!" "לא יכול" does not refer to any particular goal; it is a general expression of limitation. The fundamental condition of human life is to be limited. But note, this condition is experienced "נגדך," man's powerlessness and mortality are experienced as an aspect of man's relationship with God.

This group of poems shows the development of the theme of the humility and limitation of humanity in the poetry of Admiel Kosman. He portrays human beings as poor and weak, a condition implicit in humanity from creation. In relation to God and the universe, human beings experience insignificance and the realization of powerlessness. But though they are powerless, human beings are able to communicate and relate to God both their awe and their frustration. In fact, the experience of the limitations of human life becomes the basis on which human beings enter into relationship with God.

In the poems above, Kosman depicts man as humble by nature, created with little power and on an insignificant scale when compared with the cosmos. But Kosman goes further in asserting the indignity and limitation of human existence. In addition to the inherent limitations of humanity, actual human beings fail to live up to full human potential. They are deficient in various ways: physically, mentally, morally. Kosman highlights the failings and defects of human beings in order to further deflate the exalted, idealist perspective on human life. Violence becomes a powerful metaphor for human

limitation and incompleteness. Like the inherent weaknesses of all humanity, individual failings bring human beings into relationship with God.

"הנה כל הדברים" takes the familiar form of an address to God:

הִנֵּה כָּל הַדְּבָרִים שֶׁלֹּא עוֹלִים יָפֶה. לֹא יְכוֹלִים.
הִנֵּה הַחֲטָאִים, הַכִּשְׁלוֹנוֹת, הָאֲסוֹנוֹת. הִנֵּה הֵם.
קַח אוֹתָם. הֵם מְחַכִּים לְךָ בְּפֶתַח.
בְּנֵע זוֹנוֹת.

הִנֵּה כָּל הַדְּבָרִים שֶׁלֹּא עָלוּ יָפֶה, לֹא יַעֲלוּ,
וּלְעוֹלָם, לֹא יְתֻקָּנוּ.

כָּל הַפְּגוּמִים וְהַפְּסוּלִים וְהַקְּמוּטִים וְהַסּוֹטִים הַהֲמוּמִים
שֶׁמְּלֵדָה! שֶׁלְּעוֹלָם, שֶׁלְּעוֹלָם, לֹא יְתֻקָּנוּ! סְרוּחִים שְׁמוּטֵי נַפַּיִם,
בְּשֶׁל שְׁבִירָה, בְּשֶׁל קְטִיעָה, אוֹ רְצִיצָה, מַכַּת סַכִּין אוֹ מְעִידָה.

אָז קַח אוֹתָם מִכָּאן, אִידְיוֹט!
הֵם מְחַכִּים לְךָ בַּפֶּתַח, סַרְסוּרִים
אַכְזָרִיִּים שֶׁל אֲסוֹנוֹת! הִנֵּה הֵם. מַמְזֵרִים בְּנֵי מַמְזֵרִים בְּנֵי
נוֹאֲפִים וּבְנֵי זוֹנוֹת. הִנֵּה הֵם! כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הַמְעִידִים
בְּרֹב עַרְמוּמְיוּתָם שֶׁלֹּא יוּכְלוּ גַּם בְּעִתִּיד לְהִצְטָרֵף בְּלֵב שָׁלֵם
לַחֲרֵדִים לִדְבַר הַשֵּׁם וּלְהִטַּהֵר מִזֻּהֲמָתָם.

הִנֵּה הֵם. כְּמוֹ כֵּלִים שְׁבוּרִים.
מְצֻיָּרִים בְּתוֹךְ תְּמוּנוֹת. מְמֻרְרִים בִּבְכִי.
בְּנֵה הֵם, מְחַכִּים לְךָ!
הֵם מְחַכִּים לְךָ, אִידְיוֹט!

כְּמוֹ סַרְסוּרִים אַכְזָרִיִּים שֶׁל אֲסוֹנוֹת,
מְנַלְגְּלִים שָׁפָם תּוּרְכִּי מְשֻׁעֲשָׁע הֵם
נִשְׁעָנִים עַל קִיר וּמַבִּיטִים בִּי.
מְעַשְּׁנִים, מְשֻׁעֲמָמִים.

הוֹ אֱלֹהִים, תִּרְאֶה! בָּאִים אֵלַי
הַלַּיְלָה הַפְּסוּלִים וְהַפְּגוּמִים וְהַשְּׁבוּרִים

וְהַקְּמוּטִים וְהַסּוֹטִים וְהַמּוּמִים![7]

The poem opens with a preface. Before addressing all of the damaged human beings—the things that "didn't turn out well"—the speaker places before God sins, failures, and disasters in the abstract—things that "don't turn out well." The poem does not make the explicit assertion that God is the origin of these, but God is expected to take charge of them. The speaker literally lays these negative elements at God's "doorstep." God bears the ultimate responsibility. The closing line of the first stanza, "בני זונות," shows the speaker's anger at these aspects of existence and his attempt to distance himself from them. It also introduces the irreverence or profanity with which the subject addresses himself to God, consistent with the profane people and experiences that are the poem's subject. The literal meaning of the expletive, "sons of whores," is also functional here, since it highlights the negative association attached to such people, who belong to a category of unfortunate humans addressed later in the poem.

The presentation of the damaged human beings takes the form of a list, one of Kosman's most-used poetic devices. The procession of negative identifications makes it seem as though these defects are pervasive, evoking a vast multitude of inferior human beings. Examining the list more closely, though all of its members bear a negative stigma, Kosman groups together very distinct categories of people. The "wrinkled" may be otherwise normal human beings who have suffered the passage of time, while "perverts" may be physically healthy and those with birth defects upright and pious. The conflation of these different categories suggests that the subject here is not a particular kind of human defect, but the limitations of humankind in general.

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[7] *הגענו לאלהים*, p. 28.

Still, Kosman does seem to emphasize damage to the body. He cites those who are bent "בשל שבירה, בשל קטיעה, או רציצה, מכת סכין או מעידה." The suggestion of violence evokes a visceral reaction, intended to disturb the reader. There are also overtones of a religious critique, since according to Jewish law, people with physical disabilities are often excluded from divine service. More generally, Kosman uses the easily conceivable physical space of the body to represent more abstract limitations and boundaries of the human condition. It is a metaphor he finds compelling, and as we shall see, he returns to it often.

One type of human deficiency appears here that we have not previously seen. Kosman cites the "bastards sons of bastards sons of / adulterers and sons of whores." As I commented on the opening stanzas, these are people who may have nothing wrong with them, physically, morally, or otherwise. Their negative identification comes from the circumstances of their birth. In featuring this category so prominently, Kosman is commenting on a sensitive aspect of traditional Jewish law. According to *halakhah*, a *mamzer* (bastard) suffers many disabilities, including disqualification from marrying a Jew who is not a *mamzer*. Though widely recognized as unfair and even cruel, the halakhic system goes only so far in alleviating the plight of the *mamzer*. Kosman comments with bitter irony that these people "will not ever be able to join with a whole heart / those who are zealous for God's word or to be cleansed of their defilement." The critique of *halakhah* is assimilated into Kosman's presentation of the human condition, indicating how deeply embedded Kosman's poetry is in its Jewish context.

In the final stanza, the speaker tries to attract God's attention with increased urgency. The confrontational tone is softened—he uses the name "God," rather than

"Idiot"—to make this a more personal and genuine appeal. The list of various undesirable types of people "come to" the speaker, and though there are plenty of indications of physical places and movement in the poem, the intent here seems to be more to "come to mind," that the speaker is troubled by the injuries, defects, failings, etc. suffered by people in the world. The speaker struggles with the human condition, the debasement of which is seen to be even greater than the limits imposed by man's mortality and relative insignificance in the universe. The speaker blames God, the powerful creator, for all of the seemingly "broken" creations in the world. But as we saw earlier, this same struggle places the human being in contact with God. The basis for communication with God is an understanding of the difficulties and defects of human life.

Elsewhere, Kosman's speaker appears to celebrate these challenges. In a poem addressed to his wife, he calls for rejoicing "over our brokenness, over the missing part," to celebrate with music man's "darkening sight" and "pupil going blind."[8] Man is "crucified and hung" by his questioning intellect. The violent image once again dramatizes the distress man feels at his limitations. As the poem continues, the speaker widens the scope, mentioning in general terms the disabilities that afflict mankind: "folly," "evil," "futility," etc. In the end it becomes increasingly clear that the speaker's joyful acceptance of these aspects of humanity is ironic. In the exaggerated conclusion, his poem is an "axe" he entrusts to his wife to "go out and crush everything." The poem is rooted in anger at God, who the speaker imagines to be content with the imperfect state of human life. Thus, even though this poem is not addressed to God, God is intended to

[8] "סרנדה לאור הירח," *פירוש חדש בס"ד*, p. 18.

overhear, and the question of humanity's defects once again serves to bring man into relationship with God.

Before leaving the discussion of man's vulnerability and imperfection, it is important to take note of the important metaphorical role violence plays in Kosman's whole body of poems. Violence is a persistent theme in Israeli poetry, but usually it represents the real physical threat posed by war or terrorism. The violence that appears in Kosman's poems is different. We have seen several examples where injury to the body symbolizes the fragility of human life and even the non-physical defects to which human beings are subject. The opening poem of Kosman's first book, "כשנהרג האיש ההוא," begins,

כְּשֶׁנֶּהֱרַג הָאִישׁ הַהוּא, שָׁרוּעַ בְּצַד הַכְּבִישׁ
וְרֹאשׁוֹ הַבָּקוּעַ שׁוֹתֵת דָּם,
הָיְתָה לִי הִזְדַּמְּנוּת נְדִירָה
לְהַסְבִּיר לְךָ כַּמָּה מְסוֹדוֹת הַתְּפִילָה.[9]

The violent image of the dead man, sprawled by the road and gushing blood, stands in sharp contrast to the conversational tone of the stanza. The speaker's reaction to the violence is clinical; he sees it as an "opportunity" to make a philosophical point about prayer. The disconnect between the scene and the speaker's reaction alerts the reader that this is not a description of a "real" occurrence. Rather, it is a construct, and the violent death of the man serves as a symbol of the fragility of human life and man's precarious existence. Kosman often uses violent images to create these opportunities to comment on the place of man in the world. Because the violence is not meant to

[9] *אחרי מוראות מעשה השיר*, p. 7.

represent real-world dangers, it is often greatly exaggerated. To a lover, he writes, "ירו בך, אני מקוה. רטשו את פיך החצוף, פגעו \ בך, אני מקוה, שפכו את שתי עיניך הכחלות, פשטו .את עורך הורדרד, אילה, מעליך, אני מקוה"[10] This extreme violence represents the pain and vulnerability caused by love. In another poem, the speaker asks the world to impale him on a skewer and "take a bite of [him]."[11] This absurd violence casts the suffering man as the passive object of the functioning of the world. Physical violence, the violation of the body, symbolizes the weakness and powerlessness of man in relation to his environment. The logical extension of this theme is death, and so we turn now to Kosman's treatment of mortality.

Death and the awareness of death are fundamental aspects of the human condition. Death is the ultimate limitation, distinguishing between human life from the eternal. The awareness of mortality is a source of existential fear, the fear of nonexistence. One role of religion is to alleviate this fear, often by advancing the belief in the continuation of personal existence after death. This is not the religious position taken in the poetry of Admiel Kosman. Death is a constant theme in Kosman's poetry—often personified—intruding on all aspects of human life. But Kosman is not interested in the question of life after death. Kosman's poetry confronts death, embraces the awareness of mortality and the finitude of the human being. Kosman's speakers confront death with humor, confidence, and a casualness meant to reframe death—not a cosmic event, but a personal, intimate experience.

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[10] "ירו בך, אני מקוה," *בגדי נסיך*, p. 75.

[11] "ארבעה מרובעים לסליחות של ימים נוראים," *סידור אלטרנטיבי*, p. 116.

Two consecutive poems from Kosman's 1988 book, *Bigdei Nasich*, function together to portray Kosman's approach to death as an aspect of the human condition. The first is, "עכשיו זה בא המות."

עַכְשָׁו זֶה בָּא: הַמָּוֶת.
אַל תַּעֲמִיד פָּנִים. אֵינְךָ מַחֲוִיר, אֵינְךָ
פּוֹחֵד, אֵינְךָ אֲפִלּוּ מֻפְתָּע. אַתָּה
מֵבִין.

עַכְשָׁו זֶה בָּא: הַמָּוֶת.
שָׁעִיר וְאִלֵּים עוֹמֵר בְּפֶתַח
וְקֵרְדֹּם נָעוּץ בְּאֵזוֹר–חֲלָצָיו.

עַכְשָׁו זֶה בָּא: כָּבֵד אָמְנָם
מְעַט לֹא–נוֹחַ–מָה, קָשֶׁה וְרוֹבֵץ
בְּפִתְחֵי הַנְּשִׁימָה כְּמוֹ חַיָּה מְנַהֶמֶת, שׁוֹלֵחַ
לְעֶבְרְךָ מַבָּטִים זָרִים וּתְמֵהִים, כְּאִלּוּ
מֻפְתָּע מֵאֲדִישׁוּתְךָ.[12]

Already in the first stanza, Kosman distinguishes his view of death from the cultural norm. To an unnamed addressee, the poem observes, "You do not blanch, you're not / afraid, you're not even surprised. You / understand." In these brief lines, Kosman suggests a range of responses to the awareness of death. The expected response is fear. Surprise is a middle position, neither positive nor negative in itself, but reflecting the powerlessness human beings experience in their inability to control the timing of death. But the addressee's response is at the opposite end of the spectrum. He "understands." Though the nature of this understanding is not described, it seems to imply confidence in

[12] *בגדי נסיך*, p. 35.

the face of death. In its religious connotation, this understanding is enlightenment which allows the addressee to face death without fear, to accept his own mortality.

The poem deflates death, describing it as "a little heavy" and "somewhat uncomfortable." This less-than-terrible characterization attempts to bring down the concept of death from the ultimate, existential terms in which it is usually considered to the level of the tangible and personal. As is his general tendency, Kosman is less concerned with death as a philosophical concept than with the relationship of death to the experience of the individual. Here, the individual approaches death with seeming "apathy." This exaggerated calm at the conclusion of the poem emphasizes the extent to which the expected fear has been overcome. It is left to other poems, however, to explore the source and meaning of this calm.

As he does here, Kosman often approaches death by means of personification. In the second stanza, death takes on human form. It is "hairy and violent," hairiness being associated with wildness (e.g. Esau, Nebuchadnezzar) and even evil (in traditions concerning demons). It "stands at the door," symbolizing the constant presence of the possibility of death. The fact that it carries an axe in "the area of its loins" represents the associations of violence and sexuality given meaning by human mortality. In the final stanza, death is personified as a kind of animal, wild and governed by instinct. In this set of symbols, death is not a neutral idea. Death is negative, as it is commonly understood. And so, the addressee's indifference to death must be explained not by a reevaluation of the nature of death, but by a reevaluation of life.

Again, that process is not carried out fully in this poem. But the beginning of Kosman's view can be seen in the structure of the poem. The poem is spoken to an

unnamed, second-person addressee. It is this addressee who confronts death and possesses the understanding to do so without fear. The reader naturally identifies with the addressee, which suggests that the poem's message is personal and individual. Kosman wishes to reduce the problem of death to the experience of the individual, to focus on the real experience of death as a limitation inherent in the human condition.

Kosman elaborates on the actual nature of the human response to death in the poem that follows this one, "המות שועט סוס עור."

א

הַמָּוֶת שׁוֹעֵט סוּס עִוֵּר בְּתוֹךְ חֲדַרֵי הַפְּרוּצִים דּוֹלֵק אַחֲרַי וְאֵינֶנִּי נָס מִפָּנָיו.
אֲנִי שָׁעוּן אֶל הַקִּיר וּמְצַפֶּה לוֹ וְחִבָּה יְתֵרָה אֲנִי נוֹטֶה לוֹ וּמִתּוֹךְ
שֶׁיִּקְרַב אֵלַי אֲסַפֵּר לוֹ

אֶת חֶרְפָּתִי. אֶת עֶלְבּוֹנוֹתַי הַמָּרִים שֶׁהָיוּ לְשֵׁם דָּבָר בָּאָרֶץ וְאֹמַר לוֹ
דְּבָרִים קָשִׁים, דִּבְרֵי פְּרָעָנוּת וְדִבְרֵי יִסּוּרִים עַד שֶׁלִּבּוֹ הֶחָזָק, הַמָּלֵא
קְלִשׁוֹנִים חַדִּים, אַף הוּא לֹא יַעֲמֹד בָּהֶם.

ב

אַל תִּשְׁתַּדֵּל כָּל–כָּךְ בְּנֶחָמָתִי, מַלְאָכִי שֶׁלִּי, דַּי לְךָ.
אֲנִי יוֹדֵעַ הֵיטֵב לְאָן מוּשָׂמִים פְּעָמֵינוּ.[13]

In the first stanza, the speaker displays a similar disposition towards death as was described in the previous poem. The speaker is not afraid of death and "does not flee" from it. Rather, he leans against the wall in a relaxed posture. But while the addressee of the last poem showed indifference toward death, the speaker here welcomes death, extending "exceeding affection." Death is also more active here. Rather than passively

13. *בגדי נסיך*, p. 36.

standing in the doorway, death gallops in dramatically on a horse and pursues the speaker. While in the previous poem, the addressee and death merely observe each other, here there is a confrontation. This allows Kosman to display the speaker's approach to his own mortality.

That approach, as seen in the second stanza, recalls Kosman's presentation of the human condition as a state of limitation and brokenness. The speaker addresses death with his disgrace, and the stanza break in the middle of a sentence makes "my disgrace" a stark, stinging admission. The speaker goes on to tell death about his "bitter affronts," "difficult things," and matters of "trouble" and "suffering." This account of human pains is meant to defend against death; the speaker anticipates that death's "hard heart, full of / sharp pitchforks, even it will not be able to stand them." Here death is personified not only as taking a human form, but as possessing human emotions. The triumph of emotion over death is part of Kosman's reduction of death to the scale of human experience. Here, human experience is so awful, so painful, that the abstract prospect of death holds no terror by comparison.

The final stanza of the poem is set off by Kosman as a separate section. The discourse shifts; the speaker addresses death directly. Apparently, the speaker's strategy in the second stanza has succeeded; death's heart has been overcome by the speaker's troubles, and death has tried to comfort the speaker. The speaker addresses the Angel of Death with affection as "my little angel," and encourages death to leave off his comforting. This models a remarkably different relationship of the human being to death. The human being and death stand in a loving, sympathetic relationship. Death might even be seen as a relief for man from the troubles of life. But the speaker does not wish

for death. Rather, he exhibits a stoic understanding of mortality—"I know well to where our steps are set." The "I know well," like "you understand" in the previous poem, is not fully explained, but suggests an existential confidence. A possible source of that confidence may be hinted at in the rare phrase, "לאן מושמים פעמינו" ("to where our steps are set"), which recalls the last words of Psalm 85, "צדק לפניו יהלך, וישם לדרך פעמיו" ("Righteousness will go before him and set his steps to a path.") Psalm 85 presents a vision of divine salvation Perhaps the calm resolve of the speaker stems from ultimate confidence in God.

This is not to say that the speaker counts on God to rescue him from death. This would not be in keeping with the poet's focus on mortality and the human condition. Rather, the speaker's existential confidence may be an acknowledgement of the integrity of man's place in God's creation. Just as man has a specific place in creation, so does death. Seen this way, death does not rule over or terrorize humanity. Death and humanity function on the same level at God's direction. It is even possible for death to pity humanity for the painful nature of human existence.

While this softer, sympathetic understanding of death appears in several Kosman poems, it never fully overcome's death's common associations with fear and violence. This tension is the theme of the poem, "כי מתוק מתוק המוות."

כִּי מָתוֹק מָתוֹק הַמָּוֶת
וְלֹאַט לֹאַט הַמָּוֶת
אִם יָצָא מִפִּי הַמָּוֶת
וְקָשַׁר אוֹתִי לָעֵץ

כִּי מָתוֹק מָתוֹק הַמָּוֶת
וְרוֹכֵן אֵלַי הַמָּוֶת

מְמַשֵּׁק אוֹתִי הַמָּוֶת
רַק לִבּוֹ לְפִיו חוֹצֵץ

צֵא צֵא מַר מָוֶת
הַחֲזֵק אוֹתִי הַמָּוֶת
בּוֹא וּקְשֹׁר טַבַּעַת מָוֶת
עַל לִבִּי הַמִּשְׁתָּבֵץ

שְׁבֹר הַכֵּה אוֹתִי הַמָּוֶת
הַחֲלֵה אוֹתִי הַמָּוֶת
אָנָּא מוֹט בַּרְזֶל הַמָּוֶת
קַח גֻּלְגֹּלֶת וְרוֹצֵץ[14]

The poem sets up a push-pull dialectic with death. Death is "sweet" and seductive; the poem uses sexual and romantic imagery to describe the mutual attraction—death "leans toward" and "kisses" the speaker. But death's heart is a "divider" between the speaker and death's mouth. Although death's kiss is attractive, death represents something that cannot be fully embraced. In the third stanza, the speaker seems to send death away, but in the very next line requests that death strengthen him. The speaker invites, "Come and bind death's ring / on my shocked heart." Here, also, while the speaker is drawn to "death's ring," a part of the speaker rebels, the "shocked" heart. The speaker in this poem does not display the calm or confidence when confronting death that we saw earlier, but neither is this speaker afraid. Death is still a constant part of the human condition, but it is a force that must be met paradoxically with both acceptance and resistance.

This poem integrates death into Kosman's depiction of the human condition through the association with violence. As we have seen, Kosman uses violence as a

[14] *הגענו לאלהים*, p. 94.

metaphor for the fragility and finitude of human existence. Death is an ultimate symbol of that finitude, which Kosman represents in this poem by connecting death with violence. The first stanza concludes with an image of crucifixion. In the final stanza, the speaker calls on death to break him, beat him, and make him ill. The poem builds up to its final lines, which contain its most violent image: "Please iron bar of death / Take a skull and crush it." The evocation of this violent death emphasizes the connection of man's finitude to the vulnerability of the human body. Here, while the speaker shows resistance, he eventually embraces that finitude as an inescapable aspect of human existence.

"כי מתוק מתוק המוות" is one of Kosman's only poems that adheres to strict pattern of rhyme and meter. The rhyme is mostly accomplished through the repetition of the word "מוות" at the end of the first three lines of each stanza, a repetition which dramatizes the oppressive inevitability of death. The repetition also places the concluding words of each stanza, which rhyme with each other, in sharp contrast. Particularly in the case of "ורוצץ," Kosman creates a tension between the relatively light associations with rhyme evoked by the sound of the word and the terrible image implicit in the word's meaning. This tension is an extension of the seduction-repulsion dialectic with death itself. Even more than the rhyme, the strict meter of the poem creates a singsong effect that is often in tension with the content of the poem. The only exception to the meter is the first line of the third stanza, in which the spondee, "צא צא," effectively disrupts the momentum of the poem, dramatizing a real attempt to resist the attraction and inevitability of death, represented by the metrical regularity.

In this poem, the speaker's confrontation with death leaves him more fully aware of his human weakness. As we have seen in all these poems, death stands as the ultimate extension of man's vulnerability and limitation. But death is more than that. Death is a fact of the human condition, one that need not provoke fear. Death is a possible source of comfort for the troubles of human life. Death is a paradoxical force, simultaneously attracting and repelling humanity. By entering into relationship with death, Kosman's speakers gain access to a broader range of human experience. Kosman's portrait of death is intimate; death is a personal and fundamental aspect of what it means to be human.

As we have seen, in the poetry of Admiel Kosman, the human condition is characterized by weakness and limitation. Human beings are physically vulnerable, insignificant in scale, liable to sin, and ultimately, mortal. But out of this humble state, humans are able to enter into relationship with God. Awareness of finitude facilitates awareness of the divine. Although this human condition is universal, the acknowledgement of human contingency and the effort to engage with the divine in human life is the province of religion. Though Kosman speaks to the human condition, he is particularly interested in the existential state of the Jew in the modern world. It is the Jew who embodies most fully Kosman's vision of weakness leading to relationship with God.

The distinction between the approaches to life of religious and secular people is drawn particularly sharply in the poem, "פורים."

יֵשׁ לָנוּ בְּדִיחָה אַלְטֶרְנָטִיבִית.
כִּי מִן הַהֶבְיוֹן הַדַּל הָרַצְיוֹנָאל, כְּבָר הִשְׁתַּחְרַרְנוּ.
אֲנַחְנוּ – בְּלוֹמַר, אַנְשֵׁי הַדָּת, וּמִי שֶׁהִסְתַּגְּרוּ אִתָּנוּ

אֶמֶת בַּמִּבְתָּצָר הָרָם הַזֶּה.

יֵשׁ לָנוּ בְּדִיחָה אַלְטֶרְנָטִיבִית לַקִּיּוּם הַרֵיק.
אֲנַחְנוּ מַחֲלִיפִים עִם הָנָּשִׁים שֶׁלָּנוּ
שְׂעָרוֹת, פֵּאָה, מִטְפַּחַת וּמַסְרֵק.
גַּם כּוֹבַע, מִצְחִיָּה, וּמַגָּפַיִם,
תַּחְתּוֹנִים וְגוּפִיָּה.

אֲנַחְנוּ לְבוּשִׁים בְּשִׁיא הָרְצִינוּת
בְּוֶסְט רָחָב וְחָזָיָה.
וְהֵן לוֹבְשׁוֹת, בְּדֶרֶךְ לִיצָנוּת, בְּגָדִים
צִבְעוֹנִיִּים. בְּגָדִים שֶׁל פְּעִילוּת וַעֲשִׂיָּה.

אֲבָל הָעִקָּר, הַחִדּוּד וְהַשְּׁנִינוּת הָעֲמֻקִּים,
הֵם בַּפּוֹאֶנְטָה. בַּ"שְׁפִיל לְסִיפָּא" שֶׁל הַטֶּקְסְט.
כְּלוֹמַר, בַּבֶּגֶד הָעֶלְיוֹן.
לָבַשְׁנוּ לָנוּ בִּירִיּוֹת קְטַנּוֹת,
וּלְמַעְלָה עֲטִיפָה, דְּמוּיַת שְׂרִיוֹן,

פָּרַשְׁנוּ עַל הַגּוּף גְּלִימוֹת שְׁחֹרוֹת שֶׁל מָוֶת.

תָּשִׂימוּ לֵב כַּמָּה הַטֶּקְסְט הַזֶּה אוֹמֵר פִּקְחוּת, שְׁנִינוּת. אָמַרְנוּ,
טֶקְסְט אַלְטֶרְנָטִיבִי, קִיּוּמִי, שֶׁכָּל כֻּלּוֹ הוּמוֹר שָׁחֹר וְזָר –
כְּלוֹמַר הַחִלּוֹנִי, שֶׁבַּמִּבְצָר, מָמוּל – לֹא יְבִינוּ.

סָגַרְנוּ אֶת הָעִתּוֹנִים, הַטֶּלֶוִיזְיָה, הַקּוֹלוֹת
נָדַמּוּ, בַּמְּעָרָה הָאַפְלָה שֶׁלָּנוּ שׁוֹרֶרֶת
זֶה כַּמָּה מְאוֹת שָׁנִים דְּמָמָה.

אֲנַחְנוּ מַקְשִׁיבִים לַטֶּקְסְט הַנֶּהְדָּר
שֶׁמְּשַׁדֵּר הַמָּוֶת, בְּנַלִּים, אֶל הַמִּבְצָר:
שׁוֹמְעִים בְּדִירוּת וּצְעָקָה שׁוֹמְעִים, אֵימָה,
שׁוֹמְעִים בִּבְהִירוּת אֵימָה!

הוֹ אֱלֹהִים, כַּמָּה הַטֶּקְסְט הַזֶּה נִפְלָא, שׁוֹבֵב, שָׁנוּן,
מַצְחִיק–כְּדֵי–דְּמָעוֹת, שֶׁזָּר – כְּלוֹמַר,
הַחִלּוֹנִי מִמּוּל, שֶׁבַּמִּבְצָר – הַמְפֻחָד מְאֹד, לֹא יְבִינוּ.

וְכָךְ בְּתוֹר בְּרִיחָה נוֹסֶפֶת, גַּם גִּדַּלְנוּ עַל
לֶחְיֵנוּ רַעְמָה, עֲטֶרֶת שְׂעָרוֹת גְּדוֹלָה,
סִימָן לַמְּצִיאוּת הַמְּדֻמָּה. עַל כָּל הָרֹאשׁ הָעֶרֶף וְהַמֵּצַח.

וּבְסֵמֶל לַהוּמוֹר הַדַּק שֶׁל כָּל הָרַבָּנִים,
וְגַם שֶׁלָּנוּ, כְּלוּמַר, אַנְשֵׁי הַדָּת, הַחַזָּנִים,
הַמְּלַמְּדִים וְהַשּׁוֹעִים וְהַחוֹרִים, כָּל מִי
שֶׁרָקְדוּ בַּהִלּוּלָה–שֶׁל–חַג–פּוּרִים,
פָּתַחְנוּ סֵפֶר שֶׁל תְּפִלּוֹת יָשָׁר בְּאֶמְצַע הַיָּמִים.
עָכְשָׁו אֲנַחְנוּ רוֹעֲשִׁים.
עָכְשָׁו, בַּמַּסֵּכָה, אֲנַחְנוּ הַיְּהוּדִים, שֶׁרוֹעֲמִים וְנוֹהֲמִים.[15]

The poem relates to Purim, the Jewish observance based on the biblical book of *Esther*. In traditional Judaism, Purim is an occasion for raucous celebration, accompanied by drinking and costumes. This poem captures that spirit, but Kosman suggests that something darker underlies the celebration. Though the Jewish community emerges victorious at the end of *Esther*, its victory is achieved only through massive bloodshed—the slaughter of its foes. Despite the farcical humor of the book, it is a story of an attempted genocide. With this background in mind, the poem views the joyousness of Purim as perverse, even inhuman. This is symbolized by the "black cloaks of death," which are layered over all the costumes.

The poem emphasizes the separation between religious and secular world views. The speaker uses the metaphor of physical isolation, claiming that the religious people have "closed themselves up" in a "high stronghold." The secular person is described as a "stranger," living in his own separate stronghold, and unable to understand the black humor of the religious community. In the religious stronghold, "We've closed the newspapers, the television, the voices / have been silenced, our dark cave has been ruled /

[15] *הגענו לאלהים*, p. 64.

for some centuries now by silence." There are no outside influences to mitigate the devotion of the religious community to their "text," the religious tradition. There is also a reference to the secular people in their stronghold being "very scared." It is not clear whether this refers to the kind of existential fear we have encountered previously, or rather, to fear of the religious people themselves. Perhaps employing the military connotations of "מבצר" ("stronghold"), Kosman means to suggest that like the Jews in *Esther* who wreaked violence on their enemies, the religious Jews in the poem frighten their secular observers.

What exactly sets the religious people apart is approached in several ways in the poem. The first line claims it is an "alternative joke." This uniquely religious humor, emphasized throughout the poem, is based on the fact that the religious people have "freed themselves" from meager reason. The abandonment of reason by religious people is often cited as a fault by their secular opponents, and although the religious speaker embraces it here, there is evidence that the poet is not sympathetic. The unique religious humor expresses itself first in the exchange of clothing by men and women. The amusement they find in this seems meant to satire the rigidity of gender roles in traditional Jewish society.

In addition to their unique humor, the religious Jews are also characterized by their adherence to a "text." This "alternative, existential" text exhibits the same black humor, but its darkness is stated more explicitly:

> We listen to the wondrous text
> that broadcasts death, in waves, to the stronghold:
> One hears loneliness and shouting one hears, terror,
> One hears clearly terror!

The stronghold of the religious people is filled with death and terror. The "text" here could refer to the dark conclusion of *Esther*, but it can also refer to the general outlook of religion. As we have seen, engagement with human mortality can be a means of entering into relationship with God. But in this case, the religious people seem to have gone too far. While in many Kosman poems, acceptance of the human condition leads to freedom from fear, here terror is a fundamental aspect of life.

Indeed, Kosman shows how the unique, isolating humor of these religious Jews ultimately devolves into madness. The religious men grow a "mane" of hair not only on their cheeks, but on their heads, necks, and foreheads. In the final stanza, rabbis, cantors, and the learned make animal noises as they participate in "הילולה-של-חג-פורים." The celebration of Purim is compared to a "הילולה," a wild celebration—customary particularly in the Hasidic community—that celebrates the anniversary of the death of a great Jewish figure. This cements the association of the animal celebration with Ultra-Orthodox Judaism, extending to the closing image of the celebrating Jews "roaring and growling."

In "פורים," Kosman shows the extent to which religious life can become entangled in the darkness of the human condition. This is the extreme case, in which the awareness of death and the limitations of humanity leads to an abandonment of the power human beings do have, specifically the power of reason. Kosman criticizes these Jews, who shut themselves off from the influences of the outside world. He prefers a vision of Judaism that engages the reality of death and weakness, but is also committed to the values of life and progress. This vision is expressed most fully in a later poem, "שיר היהודים."

יֵשׁ לָנוּ נְקֻדּוֹת אֲחִיזָה מֻלְחָמוֹת בַּחַיִּים.
וְיֵשׁ לָנוּ נְקֻדּוֹת אֲחִיזָה מֻלְחָמוֹת בַּמָּוֶת.
וְיֵשׁ לָנוּ אַרְבַּע יָדִיּוֹת, פְּרָטִיּוֹת, לְהַלּוֹךְ,

וּמוֹטוֹת אֲחִיזָה אֲרֻכִּים עַד מְאֹד. אָנוּ
מֻלְחָמִים אֲפוֹא לְחַיִּים, וְאָנוּ מֻלְחָמִים
לָאָרוֹן הַכְּלָלִי – שֶׁל מִין הָאָדָם – בְּזִקַּת
מַסְמְרֵי–שִׁיּוּךְ.

רְאֵה אֲדוֹנִי, קַח לְמָשָׁל, אֶצְלִי,
אֶת זִקַּת הַיַּחַס הַחַמָּה,
לַיָּחִיד, לַגּוֹי. נַע בָּהּ,
מְשׁךְ בְּזָנָבָהּ –
אֲבוֹי!

חוּשׁ אֶת זִקַּת הַיַּחַס הַחַמָּה.
אֶת חֹם גּוּפָהּ הָרוֹטֵט שֶׁל
הָאִמָּא. הָאִמָּא–הָאֻמָּה.

מָה, מָה, מָה,
מָה אַתָּה שׁוֹאֵל? הִנֵּה,
רְאֵה גַּם רְאֵה: אַרְבָּעָה מוֹטוֹת אֲחִיזָה יֵשׁ לָנוּ.

וּבָהֶם אָנוּ נוֹשְׂאִים חֲגִינִית
אֶת הַיְרִיעָה הַגְּדוֹלָה
שֶׁל הַמָּוֶת.

עַל מָה אַתָּה תָּמֵהַּ, אֲדוֹנִי:
– אֵימָתַי נִזְדַּקֵּק לְךָ?
וַהֲלֹא אֲנִי תָּמֵהַּ לְעֻמַּת זֶה:
– מָה, מָה, מָה אַתָּה שׁוֹאֵל?!
וְכִי נֵדַע אָנוּ, בְּנֵי תְּמוּתָה, אֵימָתַי?!

לֹא! כִּי, הָאָרוֹן הַגָּדוֹל שֶׁל הַחַיִּים נָע וָנָד, רוֹטֵט
וְנוֹסֵעַ מִיָּד, כְּמוֹ תַּחַת חֻפַּת מַלְאֲכֵי אֵשׁ וְשִׂרְיוֹן.

וְאָנוּ, אַנְשֵׁי חֶבְרָה קַדִּישָׁא מְזַמְּרִים לְיָדוֹ תְּהִלּוֹת עֶלְיוֹן.
וְנוֹשְׂאִים אוֹתוֹ, אִתָּנוּ, בְּמַעֲלֵה מוֹרַד גַּב–הַטְּמִיוֹן.

וְהָאָרוֹן? הָאָרוֹן הַגָּדוֹל שֶׁל הַמָּוֶת, גַּם–כֵּן נָע עַל יָדוֹ.
רוֹטֵט, בְּמַקְבִּיל לָעֶצֶב. וְאָנוּ בְּנֵי הָאֲמָה,
הַבְּחִירִים, וְאַנְשֵׁי
חֶבְרָה קַדִּישָׁא,

הַמְטַפְּלִים, וּקְרוֹבֵי מִשְׁפָּחָה יְשִׁירִים,
מוֹסִיפִים וְעוֹלִים עִם הָאָרוֹן –

הָאָרוֹן הָעַתִּיק!
מִגֶּזַע יְשִׁישָׁא!

אָנוּ נוֹשְׂאִים אֵפוֹא, עִם עוֹד כַּמָּה חַיָּלֵי שְׁרִיוֹן, אֶת הָאָרוֹן
הָאַדִּיר שֶׁל הַהִיסְטוֹרְיָה, בְּמַעֲלֵה הָהָר הֶחָשׁוּף, וְאִתָּנוּ,
אִתָּנוּ בְּעֹז וּבְאוֹן, עוֹבְדֵי חֶבְרָה קַדִּישָׁא.

עוֹבְדִים מְסוּרִים שֶׁל חֵיל הַדְּמְיוֹן.
אֶת כָּל כָּבְדּוֹ שֶׁל הַצַּד הַזֶּה, צַד הָעֶצֶב,
אָנוּ נוֹשְׂאִים עַתָּה בְּגָאוֹן,

כְּשֶׁאָנוּ מִטַּלְטְלִים עִמּוֹ,
עַד הַפִּסְגָּה מַמָּשׁ.
יַחַד, וּבְאוֹתוֹ הַקֶּצֶב.

אֲנָשִׁים פּוֹנְשִׁים אוֹתָנוּ בַּדֶּרֶךְ.
שׁוֹאֲלִים:
שֶׁל מִי הַיֶּלֶד? וּמִי הָאִשָּׁה? מִי
נִפְתָּה בַּסִּפּוּר הַקָּדוּם, זֶה שֶׁהָיָה
בַּקִּבּוּץ, בַּגָּלִיל, עִם
הַתַּפּוּחַ, אָה?!
וּמִי פִּתָּה?
וְלָאָן נָשְׁבָה הָרוּחַ?
וּמִי אָבִיו מוֹלִידוֹ שֶׁל הַיֶּלֶד?
וְכִיצַד פָּרְחָה הַשִּׁטָּה?
וּמֵאַיִן בָּאנוּ? וּמִי אֲנַחְנוּ?
וּמִי הָאָרוֹן הַמְשַׁמֵּשׁ לְכָךְ? וּמִי
הִתְקַפֵּל בְּשִׁעָתוֹ בַּמִּטָּה?
מִי הַיָּשִׁישׁ? וּמִי הַיְשִׁישָׁה?

וּמִי עַל עֶרֶשׁ דְּוַי?
וּמִי בָּאֵשׁ וּמִי בַּמַּיִם?
וּמִי בַּדְּיוֹ, וּמִי לַשִּׁחִיטָה?
מִי מוֹשִׁיט צַוָּאר אָרֹךְ לַסַּכִּין?
כְּמִי שֶׁקָּרוֹב כָּל כָּךְ לְמִיתָה?
וּמֵאַיִן בָּאנוּ?
וּלְאֵיזוֹ פְּנִישָׁה?
וּמִי הָאִישׁ? וּמִי הָאִשָּׁה?
וּמֵהֵיכָן הַצָּוָחָה הַזֹּאת?
הַאִם הַתִּינוֹק? הַאִם, הוֹ,
הוּא, הַתִּינוֹק, שֶׁנִּדְרַס??

וּמַה נַּעֲנֶה לָהֶם??
וַאֲנוּ, עַכְשָׁו, חוֹמַת אֲבָנִים בָּלָה.
אוֹ גָּפָה. אוֹ מְתֻרָּס.

אַךְ, בְּרַם, הוֹאִיל, וְאָנוּ,
אָנוּ אַנְשֵׁי חֶבְרָה אֲדִישָׁא –
אָנוּ מְמַלְּאִים פִּינוּ מַיִם!
אָנוּ אַנְשֵׁי הַחִסָּרוֹן!
בְּשַׁגָּם, כְּמְעַט מִתּוֹךְ עִוָּרוֹן –
סְמָמָה, אָנוּ נוֹעֲצִים עַיִן
אַחַת בּוֹהָה, מְבֹעֶתֶת, וְיָדַיִם –
שֶׁל אַלְפֵּי יוֹצְאֵי שׁוֹאָה –
מְשֻׁתָּרְגוֹת וְנִלְפָּתוֹת
בְּאַרְבַּעַת מוֹטוֹת הַדְּמָמָה.

וּדְמָעוֹת עַל לְחָיֵינוּ.
וְהַמִּלִּים נֶחְנָקוֹת בַּגָּרוֹן.
וְאָנוּ מְרִימִים, אֶל עָל,
אֶת הַתְּשׁוּבָה הַיְחִידָה,
הָעֲצוּבָה, לַחַיִּים,
הַמְּמוּנָה זֶה אַלְפֵּי שָׁנִים,

כְּגוּיָה
מַצְחִינָה
בָּאָרוֹן.[16]

[16] *סידור אלטרנטיבי*, p. 72.

The poem begins with an image of balance: "We have handholds welded to life. / And we have handholds welded to death." Unlike the Jews in the previous poem, the Jews here engage with both the positive and negative aspects of human existence. These Jews also strike a balance between their separate identify and their commonality with the rest of humanity. From the beginning, it is clear that the Jews are separate—their four handles are "private." But they are also "welded to the general ark – of human kind – held / by affinity-nails." Whatever unique perspective the Jews may cultivate, they cannot separate themselves from the human experience and the general welfare.

The central image of the poem is of the Jews as laborers. By means of long poles, they bear several heavy loads. The nature of that load is obscured by the double meaning of the word, "ארון." It can mean "ark," as in "ארון הברית" (the "Ark of the Covenant"), and it can also mean "coffin." Thus, the Jews here are reminiscent of the Israelites in the Bible, bearing the Ark and Tabernacle during the wilderness sojourn, but they are also pictured as pallbearers. This duality is extended by the fact that they bear both "הארון הגדול של החיים" ("the large ark/coffin of life") and "הארון הגדול של המות" ("the large ark/coffin of death"). The Jews are referred to as a "חברא קדישא," a burial society, but their outlook is not dark. They sing "praises of the Highest," and they carry both coffins in an ascent of the "downslope to dissolution." In addition to dealing with life and death, the Jews bear the "mighty coffin of history." Although this burden is closely connected with sadness, the Jews bear it with pride. These existential burdens are related to the limitations on humanity we saw in Kosman's earlier descriptions of the human condition.

Certainly there is an awareness of death and mortality, but there is also an acknowledgement of sadness and weakness. But the Jews are steadfast in their efforts.

The finitude of the human condition is expressed much more clearly in the questions people ask the Jews as they pass by with their load. Some of the questions seem like the likely questions to be asked of pallbearers: "Whose child is this? Who is the woman?" But the questions quickly branch off into various aspects of human existence. "Where did we come from? And who are we?" The questions are particularly focused on human mortality. The people ask, "Who by fire and who by water?" a line taken directly from the "ונתנה תקף" prayer in the Yom Kippur liturgy. One of the dramatic climaxes of the High Holidays, the prayer claims that on Yom Kippur God seals the decision of who shall live and who shall die by what means in the coming year. In the prayer, "מי באש ומי במים" is not a question, but identifies two groups of people. Its appearance as a question in the poem suggests that at least in the opinion of people they encounter, the Jews possess some divine knowledge. At the end of the questions, Kosman returns to the scenario of questions asked to passing pallbearers: "האם, הו, \ הוא, התינוק, שנדרס?!?." The image of the violent death of a child poignantly captures the vulnerability of man and the inscrutability of God, who allows such a tragedy to occur. The evocation of a car accident shifts the discourse from the abstract and symbolic to the realm of everyday life.

But while the Jews may have some access to divine wisdom, that access has not come without a cost. Kosman describes the Jews as a "decayed stone wall." The Jews protest, "We are the people of loss!" Kosman connects this condition to time when "almost out of blindness - / stupor, we cast one / staring eye, horrified." What that eye

witnessed is not specified, but as a result, the hands of "thousands of those who came out of the Shoah" take up the carrying poles, now described as the "four bars of silence." Jewish wisdom and the Jewish connection to life and death, is seen as a result of the experience of the Holocaust. If Jews have a better understanding of mortality and the human condition, this insight was gained at a horrible cost.

This melancholy tone carries on through the end of the poem.

> Tears on our cheeks.
> And words strangled in the throat.
> And we raise up, above,
> the only response,
> sad, to life,
> hidden these thousands of years,
>
> like a corpse
> stinking
> in the coffin.

The conclusion leaves many questions unanswered. What is this response to life that is compared to a corpse? This might seem like an embrace of death, but how can this be reconciled with the songs of praise and pride the Jews displayed earlier in the poem? Is it possible to recover a positive attitude toward life in the wake of the Holocaust? In my reading, the bleakness of the end of this poem does not entirely efface the balance of its beginning. The human condition, the violence and pain that are frequently associated with mortality, can lead the Jews to despair. But they also have a "handhold welded to life." The experience of suffering is a resource, a source of wisdom and connection to life and to God.

In all of these poems, Kosman is concerned with the human "response to life." What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be mortal? How do we approach

human limitations? Human beings are limited in nearly every respect: size, strength, wisdom, goodness, and length of life. But out of that smallness, Kosman sees the possibility for relationship with the divine. When he emphasizes the insignificance of man on the cosmic scale or the destructive power of violence, the reader experiences his own limitations and mortality. Kosman shows that this integrated awareness of the human condition bears with it a receptivity to a higher understanding. Kosman specifically associates Judaism with this attempt to encounter God by embracing the reality of the human condition. Resisting the temptation to despair, Judaism seeks an existential confidence with which to confront the challenge of human life in God's world.

Chapter Two

Eroticism and Relational Theology

One of the most characteristic and certainly the most remarked-upon aspect of Admiel Kosman's poetry is its eroticism. Kosman's poems show unabashed interest in male and female bodies and meditate on diverse aspects of human sexuality. These sexual elements are made even more provocative by their frequent juxtaposition with religious language and symbols. Kosman liberally mixes crude and irreverent images with the language of traditional Judaism with which he is deeply familiar. However, it is not Kosman's primary purpose to shock or outrage the reader. His depiction of sexuality is deeply earnest, true to his understanding of human experience. And to the extent that eroticism and divinity are frequently encountered together in Kosman's poetry, he believes the combination to reflect the reality of the relationship between God and man.

In fact, the poems involving sexuality are only part of a larger project, in which Kosman uses erotic love between people as a metaphor for the relationship between man and God. Again and again, Kosman seeks to show how the intimacy between lovers reflects an essential aspect of the relationship to the divine. The religious language and imagery that surround lovers in Kosman's poems serve as a bridge, translating familiar religious concepts into Kosman's terms of an erotic relationship with God. Thus, not only is the relationship between man and God reimagined as a relationship between lovers, but the relationship between lovers reveals certain aspects of divinity. Lovers in Kosman's poetry are consistently depicted as achieving a measure of transcendence.

As we shall see, while sexuality is an important aspect of Kosman's erotic theology, emotional intimacy is equally important. For Kosman, the husband and wife are the paradigmatic lovers, the model for man's relationship with God. An outgrowth of the intimacy of husband and wife is the home, which serves as a microcosm for all of Creation. The love between husband and wife in the home gives both partners the experience and perspective of intimacy with which to approach God. The lessons of erotic love on the scale of the home reveal truths about the possibility of developing an intimate relationship with God. Kosman's poetry makes a serious and sincere attempt to dramatize those truths.

Frequently in Kosman's poems, God and the lover are both present, and the speaker's relationship with one reflects on and mediates his relationship with the other. This is the strategy Kosman employs in the brief poem, "רגע אחד."

מַזְכִּירִים אוֹתִי כָּעֵת, אִשְׁתִּי,
בְּנִשֵּׁימָה אַחַת, בְּיַחַד עִם הַיּוֹם
וְעִם הַלַּיְלָה. אֲנִי נִזְכָּר בְּיַחַד
עִם הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, הַיָּרֵחַ, צְבָא הַכּוֹכָבִים.
מַזְכִּירִים אוֹתִי כָּעֵת בְּנִשֵּׁימָה אַחַת
עִם הָאֲוִיר הָרַךְ הַמְסַבֵּב אֶת הַיְקוּם.[1]

The three sentences of the poem form a progression, from "day and night" to "sun, moon, and stars" to "the soft air." The first two of these terms follow the order of the biblical account of creation. Day and night, the order of the universe, came into being, followed by the natural world. The third term, "the soft air that turns the

1. *הגענו לאלהים*, p. 13.

universe," refers to God. In the cosmology of Aristotle, the universe consists of a series of concentric spheres, and God is the "Prime Mover," the ultimate cause of the motion of the spheres. This concept was adapted into Judaism by Maimonides. Placing God as the third term subverts the order of the series, since in the order of creation, God appears at the beginning. God appears here at the end of creation, in the place ordinarily occupied by humanity. One could say that the speaker occupies a God-like role, calling the universe into relationship, beginning with the order of creation and concluding with God itself.

But what is the relationship to God and the universe that the speaker claims? The precise nature of that relationship depends on what it means to be "mentioned in one breath." The most basic claim is one of similarity. The speaker feels himself to be part of nature and of the created order. The speaker is also similar to God, in that just as God is the ultimate cause of motion in the universe, the speaker is also a cause, acting as a purposeful agent. The speaker is not identical with God or nature, but by participating in their level of being, the human speaker achieves a measure of their transcendence.

It must be noted that this poem is not just the private reflection of the speaker. It is addressed to the speaker's wife, who, though only mentioned once, stands in the background of the entire poem. The invocation of the wife suggests an intimate relationship, and the intimacy of the marriage bond reflects intimacy onto the speaker's relationship with nature and God. The language of the poem is intimate; the repeated mention of "breath" is close to the body, and the linguistic relationship between "breath" and "soul" hints at an even deeper relationship. The description of God as a "soft air" does not accord with the theologies of Aristotle or Maimonides, but it does create another

point of connection between God and the speaker's human breath and life. This intimacy is not merely an intermingling. The model is the relationship between the speaker and the lover, the wife. The poem takes place at a particular moment, "כעת," a moment achieved in the presence of the wife. Perhaps the intimate relationship with the wife is a necessary precondition for the speaker to achieve his intimacy with God. The speaker can only achieve intimacy with God because he is able to report that intimacy to his wife.

What we see, then, in "רגע אחד," is an example where the relationship between the speaker and God is not precisely like the relationship between lovers. However, it does share many of the attributes of human intimacy, and it is conditioned and mediated by the human lover, who is an actual presence in the poem.

In "שבועה" we have an example of the opposite situation. The poem is about the speaker's relationship with a lover. But that relationship is described in terms borrowed from religion, and God is a presence in the poem, mediating the relationship between the human lovers.

וְאֶקָּבַע בְּפִיךְ. כְּמוֹ מְזוּזָה.
גַּם בְּצֵאתִי. גַּם בְּבוֹאִי.
וְאֶקָּבַע בְּפִיךְ. לְלֹא תְזוּזָה.
אֶהְיֶה אִתְּךְ אוֹר לַגּוֹיִם.
וְאֶקָּבַע בְּפִיךְ. עַל לוּחַ זָע.
בֵּין הָעוֹרִים וְהָרוֹאִים.
וְאֶקָּבַע בְּפִיךְ. גְּהַכְרָזָה.
שֶׁקִּדַּשְׁנִי בָךְ לְלֹא תְנָאִים.
וְאֶקָּבַע בְּפִיךְ. בַּאֲחִיזָה.
שֶׁהִבְדִּילָנוּ בָךְ. מִן הַתּוֹעִים.[2]

2. *סידור אלטרנטיבי*, p. 23.

The poem describes a kiss, a physical expression of human intimacy. But this is not an ordinary kiss. The root "to be fixed," קב"ע, the verb used in the traditional blessing for affixing a *mezuzah*, suggests a bond that is both permanent and frequently occurring. The physical intimacy is taken to an absurd extreme. The dramatic intimacy of these kisses is emphasized throughout the poem. The speaker attaches to the lover's lips "without moving," "as a declaration," and finally with "grasping." The exaggerated physical intimacy dramatizes the emotional intimacy between the lovers.

But intimacy here is not understood as a function purely of the interpersonal relationship. Rather, it is mediated and determined by the relationship of the lovers to God. From the first line, the speaker attaches to the lover's mouth like a *mezuzah* to a doorframe, but the speaker also kisses the lover as one kisses a *mezuzah*. The poem glosses this, "Upon going out. Upon coming in," referring to the customary frequency of such kissing of the *mezuzah*. But we must consider what else is implied when a Jew kisses a *mezuzah*. It is a sign of reverence for the words of Torah the *mezuzah* contains. It is also an acknowledgement of God's presence in the space marked by the *mezuzah*. Kissing a lover "like a *mezuzah*" suggests that the lover is the proper object of reverence, perhaps even a vessel for God's Teaching—a theme we will see Kosman take up directly in later poems. Here and throughout this poem, an aspect of the intimacy between the lovers is the intimacy with God that human relationships create.

Despite the religious imagery that fills the poem, God appears most directly in the closing lines, "Who has sanctified me through you." God is the subject here, and the phrase is an adaptation of the traditional blessing formula, "אשר קדשנו במצותיו." In the poem, instead of sanctifying a group, God sanctifies the individual speaker, and this is

achieved not through commandments, but through the lover. In the traditional blessing, this phrase introduces a commandment, "וציונו." In place of a commandment, the speaker claims to have been sanctified "unconditionally." Individual effort replaces communal effort and intimate human relationships replace ritual and commandments as the means to achieve holiness.

The speaker of this poem also wishes to serve as a model, to advocate the achievement of holiness through human intimacy. He swears to the lover that they shall be a "light to the nations." In its biblical usage in Isaiah, this refers to the religious example Israel provides for the other peoples of the world. Here, the speaker hopes that other couples will become "enlightened" and follow the lovers' example. The metaphor of light is extended in that the kiss takes place "between the blind and the seeing." The "seeing" here are those who understand the religious experience of the speaker, but this also refers to God's paradigmatic miracle, bringing sight to the blind. Finding God through intimate human relationship is not only a sign that one is enlightened, but it is also a quasi-mystical experience, a miracle through which one comes into contact with God. This different path to holiness is what is "declared" by the kiss. It is also what separates these two lovers from all others. The final line alludes to a blessing in the Shabbat *minchah* service, which praises God for separating Israel from "those who stray." The couple gives thanks that they do not stray—either through infidelity to their relationship or to their special mode of relationship to the divine.

"שבועה" presents a definitive statement of Kosman's understanding of the relationship between intimacy and the divine. In an intimate human relationship, God is present as a third party, and human intimacy brings both people into a state of holiness

and relationship with God. The title of this poem, "Oath," supports the idea that this theology is a conviction of the poet, not mere speculation. And in fact, it coordinates well with what we saw in "רגע אחד." There too, intimacy with God was mediated through the participation of a lover, the wife. The picture that begins to take shape is that just as all human intimacy involves an aspect of the divine, relationship with God necessarily involves some aspects of human intimacy. In the preceding two poems, God and the human lover both appear, and it possible to describe the relationship the speaker has with each and the mutual influence of those relationships. In poems in which only God or only the lover appear in addition to the speaker, the dynamics of human and divine intimacy can be much more difficult to isolate.

In "חמישה פסוקים קטועים ממגילת המדבר המשוחזרת," Kosman imitates the reconstructions of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which often retain many lacunae and discontinuities. Nevertheless, the repetitiveness of the subject matter allows us to form a clear basic picture of the events described.

א: [...] וְאֵיךְ בִּכְלָל הָיָה אֶפְשָׁר, שֶׁרַק מִכֹּחַ הָרֶקִיק הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר נוֹתַר לִי
בַּכֵּלִים [...] שֶׁאַרְבָּעִים יָמִים שְׁלֵמִים [...]

ב: וְהֲלֹא שָׁנִים [...] וְנָע וָנָד הָיִיתִי [...] הֹלֵךְ בַּמִּדְבָּר [...] וְרַק מִכֹּחַ
הָרֶקִיק [...] אֲשֶׁר יָדֵךְ טָמְנָה לִי [...] בִּמְקוֹם נִסְתָּר [...] שֶׁאַרְבָּעִים
יָמִים חָצִיתִי [...] בַּמִּדְבָּר [...] וְרַק

ג: מִכֹּחַ הָרֶקִיק הַמְצָמָק [...] וְרִיחַ יָד [...] אוֹתָהּ רַכּוֹת [...] בַּגּוּף לַאֲפִיָּה
[...] שֶׁאַרְבָּעִים יָמִים שְׁלֵמִים שָׁהִיתִי

ד: הֹלֵךְ בִּתְעִיָּה [...] וְרַק מִכֹּחַ הָרֶקִיק [...]

ה: שָׂאַתְּ [...] הוֹתַרְתְּ לִי לְמַחְיָה [...][3]

There is good reason to view this poem as dramatizing the relationship between man and God. First, the "desert scrolls" reconstructed in this way are primarily biblical and mythological, and we would expect God to be a prominent character. Other details in the text contribute to the biblical style. The speaker "wanders" ("נע ונד") in the same language used to describe the wandering of Cain in Gen. 4:12 and 4:14. The speaker wanders for 40 days in the wilderness, a trial reminiscent of the use of 40 as a typological number in the Bible. In the story of Noah, it rains for 40 days and 40 nights, and Moses is at the top of Mount Sinai for the same span. The Israelites also share the motif of wandering in the desert, though their 40 is years, not days. Since God is the one who sustains Noah in the ark, Moses on Sinai, and the Israelites in the wilderness, there is an inclination to view the unnamed savior in the poem as God. This impression is strengthened by the seeming miracle of one biscuit sustaining the speaker for 40 days. This is reminiscent of God's providing manna for the Israelites in the wilderness and sustaining Elijah with miraculous cakes—before his own journey of 40 days in the wilderness (I Kings. 19:5-8).

As strong as this identification seems, it is also possible to read the unnamed savior as a human lover. She is addressed in the second person feminine, which is unusual for God in the Bible and traditional texts. A human baker is suggested by the description of the saving food as a "biscuit." Perhaps most telling is the speaker's focus on his benefactor's hand. We read, "that your hand stowed for me," "a hand's scent," and "that same softness." In poems about human intimacy, Kosman often fixates on parts

3. *סידור אלטרנטיבי*, p. 22.

of the lover's body, as we will see. The references to the body and baking (l. 6) strongly suggest human action. It could be argued that the woman referred to by the speaker is as likely a mother figure as a lover, but in the context of Kosman's body of work, the image of a lover is dominant.

Through this intentional conflation of God and the lover, Kosman emphasizes the kinship of the two kinds of relationships. His relationship with God possesses many of the characteristics normally associated with a love relationship: God is caring, personal, protective. Conversely, the relationship with the lover displays elements of mystery, miracle, and sustenance. The poem emphasizes the helplessness of the speaker. *Only* through the intervention of the other is he saved from "wandering astray" (l. 8). Only through these overlapping relationships—the erotic approach to God, the divine approach to the lover—is the speaker's life sustained.

The same blurring of the boundary between God and the lover is at the center of "שיר של לילה." The poem takes the speaker on a magic carpet ride with the other, whose identity is left unclear.

אֲנִי מְבַקֵּשׁ לָטוּם אִתָּךְ הַלַּיְלָה.
אֲנִי מְבַקֵּשׁ לָטוּם אִתָּךְ מֵעַל הָעִיר אֶל תּוֹךְ בַּלַּיְלָה.
אֲנִי מְבַקֵּשׁ לָטוּם אִתָּךְ מֵעַל אַלְפֵי הַנְּצָנוּצִים וְהָאוֹרוֹת.
אֲנִי יוֹדֵעַ לְאָרֵךְ שְׁמֵי הַכּוֹכָבִים שֶׁבְּנַבֵּךְ מְמוּנִים כָּל הַסּוֹדוֹת.

אֲנִי מְבַקֵּשׁ לָטוּם אִתָּךְ הַלַּיְלָה.
אֲנִי מְבַקֵּשׁ לָטוּם אִתָּךְ אִישִׁית עַל הַמִּרְפָּר.
מֵעַל הַמִּסְגָּדִים, בָּתֵּי הַכְּנֶסֶת, עַל צְלָבֵי הַכְּנֵסִיּוֹת.
אֲנִי מְבַקֵּשׁ לָטוּם אִתָּךְ אִישִׁית. אַתְּ וַאֲנִי לְבַד.
אֲנִי יוֹדֵעַ לְאָרֵךְ שְׁמֵי הַכּוֹכָבִים שֶׁבְּנַבֵּךְ מְמוּנִים כָּל הַסּוֹדוֹת.

אֲנִי מְבַקֵּשׁ לָטוּם אִתָּךְ הַלַּיְלָה.

הַמַּלְאָכִים שֶׁלְּךָ יָאִירוּ בְּפָנָם גָּדוֹל אֶת כָּל הַנְּקֻדּוֹת.
אֲנִי מְבַקֵּשׁ לָטוּס אִתְּךָ הַרְחֵק, מִכָּאן וְהָלְאָה.
אֲנִי יוֹדֵעַ לְאַרֵךְ שְׁמֵי הַכּוֹכָבִים שֶׁבְּגַבֵּךְ טְמוּנִים כָּל הַסּוֹדוֹת.[4]

Again, aspects of this poem suggest that it is addressed to a lover. The other is addressed in the feminine. The setting—a private carpet ride through a dark sky over a sea of lights—is intimate and romantic. The image of the angels spotlighting points of interest is reminiscent of a date. Once again the poet singles out a body part, this time his companion's back, for special notice.

But unlike in "חמישה פסוקים," where characteristics of God and the lover are fairly evenly combined in the character of the savior, "שיר של לילה" is primarily about the speaker's relationship to God. It is God's back, pointed with countless stars, in which all secrets are buried. It is God who can properly be said to possess angels. It is God who ultimately possesses the perspective that the speaker of the poem wishes to share.

It is the speaker's desire for a particular relationship, emphasized by the repeated word, "מבקש," that makes this poem such a valuable source for Kosman's erotic theology. He wishes to be with God "personally" on the carpet (l. 6), a direct relationship, without the intermediation of people or texts. This same idea is expressed by the image of the carpet flying "above the mosques, synagogues, and church steeples" (l. 7). The speaker's direct, intimate relationship with God obviates the need for organized religion. The erotic relationship with God is exclusive, "you and me alone" (l. 8). This does not mean that God cannot enter into intimate relationships with multiple people; rather, each of these relationships is unique. The speaker of the poem is

4. *פירוש חדש בס"ד*, p. 11.

suspended between two fields of lights—the "thousands of sparkles and lights" on the ground and the field of stars above. The speaker's intimate relationship with God allows him to dwell among the stars, where he wishes to stay, "from here on" (l. 12). The poem suggests that ultimately, the speaker's intimacy with God may allow him to discover some of the divine secrets.

In exploring the relationship between erotic intimacy and the divine, Kosman does not stop at romantic imagery, a personal relationship with a female divinity, or the religious overtones of human love. In some of his most striking and provocative poems, Kosman applies his understanding of the divine dimension of human intimacy to unsparing descriptions of human sexuality. In the title poem of his sixth collection, "פירוש חדש בס"ד," Kosman draws on a wide vocabulary of Jewish piety in his attention to his lover's breasts.

אֲנִי כוֹתֵב עַתָּה בְּסַ"ד פֵּרוּשׁ חָדָשׁ לַשָּׁדַיִם שֶׁלָּךְ.
חִבּוּר יָקָר וּמְבֹרָךְ, קִבַּצְתִּי בְּעָנְיִי מִפֵּרוּשִׁית שׁוֹנִים,
מִכָּל הַבָּה לְיָגֵ. מִדְרָשׁ נֶחְמָד, יַלְקוּט יוֹרֵךְ, יָדִין וָרָךְ,
בֵּין שְׁתֵּי שִׁכְתַי נִכְרָךְ.

עַל דֶּרֶךְ רֶמֶז, פְּשָׁט, וּדְרָשׁ וְסוֹד.
אֶכְתֹּב עַתָּה פֵּרוּשׁ נוֹעָד לְקַו הָאֶמְצַע.
פֵּרוּשׁ עַל נֵצַח, הוֹד, יְסוֹד.

פֵּרוּשׁ עֶלִים, וְאוֹר בָּהִיר בֵּין עֲנָפִים,
בֵּאוּר זוֹהַר עַל רֹאשׁ הָאֵילָנוֹת.
וּבְדַרְכְּךָ הַפַּרְדֵּס תָּבוֹאִי בּוֹ אִתִּי לָעִיר.
גַּלֵּךְ, עִם כָּל הָאִמָּהוֹת.

אֲנִי הַדַּל כּוֹתֵב עַתָּה פֵּרוּשׁ חָדָשׁ לַדַּד בְּסַ"ד.
פֵּרוּשׁ חָדָשׁ וּמְחֻדָּשׁ מִמֶּנִּי עַל הַשַּׁד.

יַלְקוּט רוֹעִים קָטָן,
וְקוּנְטְרֵס נֶחְמָד.

הִנֵּה, קִבַּצְתִּי בְּעָנְיִי,
אֲנִי צָעִיר וָקָט,
מְפֻרוּשִׁים שׁוֹנִים שֶׁלִּי.
מִכָּל הַבָּא לַיָּד.[5]

The central idea of this poem is that the speaker stands in the same relation to the lover in which one expects a pious Jew to stand in relation to the Torah, God's revelation understood broadly. The Torah—including its interpretation and elaboration in Rabbinic literature—is the traditional subject of Jewish commentary. In this poem the lover replaces the Torah, and Kosman goes further. He draws on his deep familiarity with the forms of Jewish devotional literature to reimagine the entire Jewish religion devoted to the lover. He writes not only a commentary, but a "*chibur,*" "*midrash,*" "*yalkut,*" "*beiur,*" and "*kuntres.*" The invocation and repetition of these different text types implies the broad range of Jewish concerns that the speaker replaces with consideration of the lover. The diversity of Jewish traditions subverted here is implied not only by the kinds of texts mentioned, but also by the interpretive methodologies. The speaker announces that he will proceed according to "*remez,*" "*peshat,*" "*drash,*" and "*sod,*" the four levels of depth in interpretation of the biblical text, represented by the acronym, "*pardes.*" To approach a text—here, the lover—on all four levels, as the speaker claims to do, implies a comprehensive understanding.[6] It is also the activity *par excellence* of Rabbinic Judaism. Two lines later, the speaker broadens his commentary to include

5. *פירוש חדש בס"ד*, p. 12.

6. Note also that Kosman inverts the order of "*peshat*" and "*remez.*" This creates a rhythmic assonance between "*derech*" and "*remez,*" but I think it should also be seen as hinting at the priority the author's approach gives to "*remez,*" the interpretation of a text based on allusion and implication

"*netzach*," "*hod*," and "*yesod*." These are three of the *sefirot*, understood by the tradition of Jewish mysticism to be aspects of God. By claiming to embrace the interpretive methodologies of both Classical Rabbinic Judaism and Jewish mysticism, two widely divergent streams of Jewish thought, the speaker signals his desire for a comprehensive Jewish appreciation of the lover.

Placing the lover in the place of Torah is theologically radical. It implies that the lover is a revelation from God, or that God communicates with the speaker through the lover. The lover is the source of wisdom and truth. The lover is the source of law and ethics. In fact, just as the whole legal system of Orthodox Judaism, the *halakhah*, is ultimately derived from the Torah, the speaker implies here that his own "path," his whole way of life is determined in some way by his relationship with the lover.

It is not the person of the lover in the abstract that the speaker imbues with such tremendous significance. It is specifically the sexual relationship. The poem focuses on the lover's breasts. We have seen in previous poems how Kosman uses a body part (the hand, the back) as a synechdoche for the lover, but here the sexual intention is made explicit at the end of the first stanza, which speaks of them, "soft and gentle," wrapped (literally "bound," like a book) between the speaker's lips. The first stanza also describes the speaker gathering sources from everything "*ha'ba la'yad*," an expression equivalent to the English idiom, "at hand" (available). But the image of the hand here, especially the prominence the phrase is given when it is repeated in the concluding words of the poem, evokes a caress. This elevation of the sexual relationship is transgressive, perhaps even blasphemous. The poem itself is aware of the status of its interpretation as a

"*perush noaz*." This boldness is evidenced in all of Kosman's poetic attempt to advance his erotic theology.

Kosman highlights the boldness of his position here by contrasting it with the vocabularly of Orthodox Judaism. In describing the approaches he will take to the lover, he does not include any reference to liberal Judaism or modern critical methods of Jewish text study. He does not even reference many genres of Jewish text—poetry or philosophy, for example—that are not associated with Orthodoxy. The texts and approaches he does reference come from the Jewish legal and mystical traditions, which offer two advantages. First, they are interpretive traditions, derived ultimately from the Torah, and as we have seen, Kosman wishes to portray the sexuality of the lover as possessing that kind of central significance. Second, though, Orthodoxy is a conservative religious tradition, and it offers a stark contrast with the sexual liberalism of Kosman's approach. In order to heighten this contrast, Kosman invokes a particularly pious version of Orthodoxy. This is signaled by the title and first line, in which he acknowledges his efforts are "*b'siyata dishmaya*" ("with the help of Heaven"), an Aramaic phrase abbreviated "בס"ד." It is a pious custom among Orthodox Jews to place this abbreviation at the top of invitations, correspondence, and other documents. More commonly, the Hebrew abbreviation for "*b'ezrat HaShem*" ("with God's help"), "ב"ה," is used. The use of the Aramaic is a sign of extra piety on the part of Jews who wish to avoid the use of the letter "ה" in the Hebrew acronym—a part of God's name—for profane purposes.[7] Kosman also signals extreme piety through the speaker's continuous self-effacement. The speaker repeatedly protests his humility, using words like "*ani*," "*dal*," "*katan*,"

7. משה פיינשטיין, שו"ת אגרות משה, יורה דעה ח"ב סימן קלח ד"ה

"*tzair*," and "*kat*." This stance of humility on the part of the author is a convention in traditional and Orthodox religious texts. In the context of this pietistic rhetoric, Kosman's erotic theology is revolutionary. Kosman enjoys this tension, and the playfulness of the poem is embodied by his impious rhyming of "בס"ד" with "דד," an immodest word for "breast."

In the third stanza, the center of the poem, Kosman departs from his main theme. A "commentary of leaves, and bright light between branches" does not reference traditional Jewish literature. Here, though, Kosman suggests that his erotic theology is not meant to remain abstract speculation. He and the lover now walk by way of the *"pardes*," the hermeneutic system transformed into a literal orchard. And they come to the city, the locus of modern life. What's more, they travel "with all the mothers," a reference to the matriarchs, the women whose lives are interpreted by and lived in accordance with the traditional pietistic literature. This is also a reference to other contemporary women. The implication is that while the speaker bases his religion on his sexual relationship with his lover, there are other "mothers," other women, each of whom is potentially a source of sexual revelation.

"פירוש חדש בס"ד" represents a significant development in Kosman's erotic interpretation of Judaism. As we saw in earlier poems, the experience of God is mediated by the lover. The continuation of that reliance on the lover is dramatized by the fact that this poem is addressed to her. Here as before, religious experience seems only to be possible in the presence of the lover. In this poem, though, the source of religious inspiration is specifically the sexual relationship. Sexuality is the speaker's Torah,

communication with God and the source of religious meaning. Judaism offers resources for interpreting and understanding the divinity of the sexual relationship.

In later poems, Kosman is even more graphic and provocative in his assertions of the divine aspect of sexuality. In "את התורה שעל הפה שלך אני יונק," the radical association of Torah and sexuality is boldly announced, appearing in the title and first line.

מזכרת לקורח: סיר זה ים לקרוח לך ורק כמלגוריה!

אֶת הַתּוֹרָה שֶׁעַל הַפֶּה שֶׁלָּךְ אֲנִי יוֹנֵק
בִּמְצִיצוֹת קְטַנּוֹת. אֶת הַתּוֹרָה הַמְּתוּקָה
שֶׁעַל הַפֶּה שֶׁלָּךְ, מִדְּבַשׁ הַדָּת, אֲנִי
יוֹנֵק, מִשְּׁפָט, לְאַט
לְאַט בַּהֲוָיוֹת.

אֲנִי יוֹנֵק אֶת הַתּוֹרָה הַמְּתוּקָה שֶׁעַל הַפֶּה שֶׁלָּךְ
לְאַט לְאַט, זָהִיר מְאֹד, בַּחֲשָׁשׁוֹת. אַךְ רַק מִתּוֹרָתֵךְ
שֶׁלָּךְ אִינַק, לְאַט לְאַט, בִּמְצִיצוֹת
קְטַנּוֹת, כְּדֶרֶךְ
הַמְּתוּקִים.

אֶת הַתּוֹרָה הָעֲדִינָה שֶׁלָּךְ,
בִּדְבַר הָאֱלֹקִים, אֶת מַה
שֶּׁעַל הַשָּׂד, וְעַל
הַבֹּהֶן, עַל הַיָּד,

אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, בַּמָּסוֹרָה,
אֶת הַתּוֹרָה שֶׁבַּחֻקִּים,
כְּעוֹלָלִים זַכִּים, מוֹסָר
וְלֶקַח טוֹב כָּלָם
מִמֵּךְ יוֹנְקִים,

כִּי אַתְּ מוֹרָה וּמַדְרִיכָה, לְאַט
לְאַט, מִשַּׁד הַדָּת, תּוֹרַת אֱמֶת,
תּוֹרַת מִשְׁפָּט, וְצַו, וַהֲלָכָה,
בַּהֲוָיוֹת

וּבַחֻקִּים. וּבְנַרְגְּרֵי הָעוֹר שֶׁלָּךְ,
בַּנְּקֻבּוּבִים הָעֲמֻקִּים. אֲנִי, כָּזֶה

פָּעוֹט, אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, בִּדְבַר הַשֵּׁם, אֲנִי
נוֹשֵׁם, אֲנִי תִּינוֹק חַכִּים, אֲנִי
עוֹלָל,

וְכָל דִּבְרֵי הָעוֹר וְהַבָּשָׂר
שֶׁלָּךְ,
הִנָּם הֲרֵי אִתִּי מָשָׁל,

כְּיַצַּד נִתָּן לִחְיוֹת.
בְּאוֹר הַדַּק שֶׁל הַנִּמְשָׁל,
הַנָּח בְּלֵב הַהֲוָיוֹת.[8]

This poem displays many of the elements we have seen previously. The speaker presents himself in a lowly, subordinate position to the lover. He is an infant, an extreme degree of helplessness and dependence. The lover is the exclusive source of revelation—"רק מתורתך \ שלך אינק." Again, Kosman draws on the vocabulary of traditional Judaism to create dramatic contrast with his transgressive approach, but also to appropriate the vocabulary, to reinterpret it according to his understanding of revelation. Thus, receiving Torah "במסורה" might not mean according to the meticulous textual traditions of early medieval Masoretes, but rather, with a degree of precision and stability not ordinarily associated with non-verbal forms of revelation. Similar transformations could be proposed for "מוסר," "לקח טוב," "צו," "הלכה," etc.

But the religious experience described here is not identical with the one in the previous poem. In "פירוש חדש בס"ד," the lover herself, or the sexual relationship with the

8. *סידור אלטרנטיבי*, p. 21.

lover, is the Torah, the subject of religious devotion. In this poem, the lover is "מורה ומדריכה," a teacher and guide who transmits Torah to the speaker. She is also a mother figure, providing the suckling infant with the nourishment of Torah. The speaker's contact with all aspects of Torah—"תורת משפט," "תורת אמת," "התורה שבחוקים," etc.—depends on the mediation of the lover. This difference is a significant one, and it is characteristic of the fact that Kosman is not the author of a systematic theological treatise. These are poems, and while they are rich in Jewish ideas and meaning, their mode of expression is subtle and diffuse. Kosman's erotic theology is expressed in different ways in different poems, which taken together form an impression of a theological position.

Interestingly, the prefatory note to this poem seems to preempt a theologically radical interpretation of its content. The note itself reflects the structure of the book, *Siddur Alternativi* ("An Alternative *Siddur*"), which is modeled in part on the *siddur*, the Jewish prayer book. The note appears in Rashi script, the font in which notes and instructions to the worshiper are often printed in the *siddur*. But in fact, the note implies the exact opposite of what it says. It contributes to the context of traditional Jewish piety against which the contents of the poem seem most radical.[9] Its very presence and emphatic exclamation point "protest too much." In a traditional Jewish context, a poem like this could only be read as an allegory. The rich history of these allegorical interpretations stretches back to the reception of the biblical *Song of Songs*. The fact that this poem's preface insists it be read as an allegory naturally leads the reader to consider the implications of a literal interpretation of the poem.

9. The same is true of Kosman's use of "אלקים" as a pious substitution for "אלהים."

The mention of allegory in the prefatory note also directs the reader to the final stanzas of the poem, which deal directly with allegory and which constitute a beautifully concise statement of the divine aspect of the sexual relationship. "And all the matters of your skin and flesh / Lo, they are a *mashal* to me, // of how one must live. / In the thin light of the *nimshal*, / That lies at the heart of experience." Though Kosman asserts in many poems that religious knowledge and inspiration derive from sexuality, this statement proposes a mechanism for that interaction. It is not the poem that is an allegory (*mashal*), but the sexual relationship itself. The *nimshal*, the reality to which aspects of the *mashal* correspond, is "how one must live." The conduct of life is a central religious concern, lying, as the poem contends, "in the heart of experience." But the word translated "experience" ("הויות") also refers to technical debates in the Talmud over matters of law. Appearing at the beginning, middle, and end of this poem, the word embodies how the rhetoric of *halakhah* and "real" life are inextricably bound in traditional Judaism. Kosman's use of this word suggests an intimate link between "matters of skin and flesh" and the "thin light" of the world of experience. The sexual relationship, rather than any revealed text, is the means by which an individual learns the truths of religion.

In the poems we have seen, Kosman expresses the theological significance of intimate human relationships in the abstract. The lovers are anonymous; their relationships lack context. But Kosman also explores the theological significance of a very specific relationship, marriage. The anonymous lover is identified in many poems as the speaker's wife. In these marriage poems, the lovers do not exist in a vacuum.

Instead, they appear in a home, a typical house, and Kosman pays detailed attention to the depiction of domestic space. Whether bedroom, dining room, or kitchen, the poems are filled with the implements of everyday life. But what occurs within the context of the married couple and the home goes far beyond the ordinary. The couple's relationship, as we have seen, leads to an experience of God, and the home stands as a microcosm of all Creation.

In *Higanu l'Elohim,* the title poem serves as a kind of preface, but the body of the book begins with "עמוד קטן של אש," a mysterious poem that sets the devotional and meditative tone for the entire book.

הַבַּיִת נִמְלָא מֶרְכָּבוֹת שֶׁל אֵשׁ.
הִגִּיעוּ סוּסִים חֲדָשִׁים שֶׁל אֵשׁ.
עַל הַשֻּׁלְחָן מְטִיל עָנָק שֶׁל אֵשׁ.
וּמֵעָלֵינוּ הֵפִיחוּ עֲנָנִים לְבָנִים,
רַכִּים, צַמְרִיִּים, כְּרִית קְטַנָּה, לַהֶבֶת אֵשׁ.

רַק אָז הִתְמָרָה מֵעָלֵינוּ צַמֶּרֶת.
גַּל עָנָק, עָנָן לָבָן, נָקִי, צַח כְּסָדִין, שֶׁל אֵשׁ.
אַחַר כָּךְ יָשַׁבְנוּ, אִשְׁתִּי, לִסְעוּדָה שֶׁל אֵשׁ.
עַל הַצַּלַּחַת, כְּמוֹ הָאָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן וְאִשְׁתּוֹ,
הִצַּתְנוּ, בְּיַחַד, נִרְגָּשִׁים מְאֹד,
עַמּוּד קָטָן, עָדִין, שֶׁל אֵשׁ.[10]

The poem begins with "the house," the definite article suggesting a known, specific place. The house, the home, is more than the setting of the poem. It is the context within which the images must be understood. The "chariots of fire" and the "new horses" threaten destruction because they are placed within the house. And despite the dramatic images of the poem, the house is identifiably ordinary, a place of normal human

10. *הגענו לאלהים*, p. 9.

activity. This is conveyed by the numerous domestic items referenced by the poem: "rug," "pillow," "sheet," "plate." These concrete home goods anchor the poem to the worldly life of the married couple. The divine drama that plays out in their home is not a violent break from the ordinary, but a hidden aspect of their ordinary lives. The home becomes a microcosm of Creation; the divine encounter exists alongside and is contextualized by quotidian details.

The identification of the home as a microcosm of Creation is strengthened by the poem's comparison of the married couple to Adam and Eve. Just as Adam and Eve are the archetypal humans, symbols of all humanity, the house in this poem is an Eden, a self-contained space representing the whole world. The identification with Adam and Eve also contributes to the characterization of the couple. They are innocent and tentative. Their encounter with God is natural and full of wonder. As in other poems we have seen, this poem is addressed by the speaker to his wife. The poem itself is intimate, between husband and wife. The divine dimension of the ordinary life of the house can only be apprehended by virtue of the relationship between husband and wife. Here the relationship is not one of sexual intimacy, but the intimacy of marriage.

The actual encounter with God here is symbolized by fire and cloud, common biblical symbols for God. The "מרכבות של אש" recall the "רכב אש" of II Ki. 6:17, a show of God's power. The scene is threatening; the "bar of fire" on the rug could be an image of the house's destruction. But like the burning bush, this is not a consuming fire. It is a sign of God's presence. The introduction of clouds in l. 4 points to the Israelites in their Exodus from Egypt, guided and guarded by God's presence in the form of a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud. But even the cloud here is a cloud "of fire." The encounter with

God is dangerous. The canopy of the fire that opens the second stanza evokes the spread of a house fire, consuming the ceiling. Finally, though, the encounter with the divine is brought under control in the context of the relationship. Together, the husband and wife are able to kindle a "small, gentle pillar of fire." They literally "domesticate" God. In the context of the marital home, God becomes approachable and reliable. The home itself is sanctified as the site and context of revelation.

These same motifs form the basis of "בתוך שני הכוסות," though the form of the revelation described is quite different.

כְּאִלּוּ שֶׁאֲהוּבָתִי מַזְלֵג, אֲהוּבָתִי כַּפִּית,
אֲהוּבָתִי סַכִּין, אֲהוּבָתִי סִירִים, אֲהוּבָתִי
קְדֵרָה, אֲהוּבָתִי אִלְפָּס, וַהֲפְרִיחָה
שֶׁבֶּחָצֵר, שֶׁל הַצְּבָעִים, שֶׁל הָרֵיחוֹת,
וְהַשְּׁקִיעָה הַמַּלְאָכִית, הָעֲנָקִית, מִן הַזָּוִית,
שֶׁל רְסִיסִים, מִן הַיְּשׁוּת הָעֶלְיוֹנָה,
שֶׁנִּתְחַבְּטָה,
עַל הַזְּכוּכִית,
עַל הַתִּקְרָה,
בְּאוֹר הָאֱלוֹהִי,
הֶחָג סָבִיב,
מֵעַל הַפַּס,
כְּמוֹ מַנְגִּינָה,
וְנָח, לְאַט,
כְּמוֹ כָּנָף
אַחַת,
בְּלֵבַד,

שֶׁל הַשְּׁכִינָה.

בְּתוֹךְ אֲנִנִי
שְׁנֵי הַכּוֹסוֹת.[11]

11. *ארבעים שירי אהבה*, p. 22.

As in the previous poem, Kosman thematizes domestic space by filling the poem with references to common household objects. The strategy is intensified here, as the lover is compared to a litany of objects, whose sole purpose seems to be the evocation of a kitchen, a household, a shared home. When the poem looks outside of the house, it is only to the "חצר," an exterior space defined by its relationship to the home, and even that courtyard is separated from the action of the poem by a pane of glass. The poem takes place within a domestic space that is entirely contained. In fact, this space is not even an entire house, but only the kitchen, whose associations with domestic tasks and family life Kosman relies on for an implied characterization of married life. But once again, although the poem occurs within a limited space, its subject is much larger. Flowers, the sunset, and eventually even God's Presence are experienced from the perspective of the kitchen. The confined, everyday space becomes the context for the full experience of the world and the divine.

Of course, another necessary condition for that experience is the presence of the lover. Here, the lover is not identified as the speaker's wife, but the domestic setting strongly suggests a marriage. As we have seen, the speaker experiences the divine through his relationship to the lover. The entire poem is a contemplation of the lover, comparing her to various vibrant aspects of the world and even to the wing of the *Shechina*. Kosman emphasizes in the final image that this revelation can only be achieved in relationship. The final two lines, separated from the rest of the poem, picture two cups, his and hers, in which the divine light appears. It is only in this couplehood, situated in its domestic context, that this revelation is possible.

From the first word of the poem, Kosman signals that its theology is radical. "כאלו" ("as if") is used as a hedge in Rabbinic texts, an indication that the following statement conflicts with normative Rabbinic doctrine and thus must not be taken literally. Here, "כאלו" refers not to the immediately following metaphor, "My lover is a fork," but to the entire progression of images in the poem. The progression compares the lover to objects of increasing significance. It begins with the mundane, kitchen implements. Next comes the natural world—plants, colors, smells. The lover is compared to the cosmic sunset. Finally, Kosman signals the end of the progression by explicitly naming the "highest being" (l. 6), shards of which bang against the glass and the ceiling. The comparisons slow in pace as the lines get shorter, as there is not much greater left to use for comparison. But finally, in a line separated by spaces from the rest of the poem, the sequence climaxes with the lover being compared to the greatest possible term, the *Shechinah*. Kosman creates a continuum of existence, in which pots and pans, nature, and ultimately God are united in the person of the lover. Knowledge of the lover, relationship with the lover, therefore, serves the speaker as a revelatory experience and relationship with Creation. This notion is certainly beyond the bounds of Rabbinic theology, but it is doubtful that the "כאלו" here is meant to dissuade us from a radical interpretation. Rather, it is a self-conscious indication of the transgressive theology of the poem. Kosman gives the reader an interpretive outlet to defuse the blasphemy, but as we have seen elsewhere, the poet is comfortable outside the boundaries of traditional Jewish theology.

Perhaps the most elaborate expression of the idea that revelation occurs through the mediation of a lover in the context of a contained domestic space is in the poem, "על רז האושר שבחדרי-חדרים."

אִם אַתָּה שׁוֹאֵל אוֹתָנוּ מָה אֲנַחְנוּ עוֹשִׂים כְּזוּג בְּחַדְרֵי–הַחֲדָרִים, אָז כָּכָה:
בְּאִישׁוֹן לַיְלָה, בְּתוֹךְ סְבַךְ–הָאֲפֵלָה הֶעָמֹק שֶׁל הַהֲוָיָה, אֲנַחְנוּ צוֹפִים
מִלְמַעְלָה, שְׁנֵינוּ, עַל גַּרְעִין הַסּוֹד; עַל הָרָז הֶעָמֹק; זֶה הַטָּמוּן מִזֶּה
אַלְפֵי שָׁנִים,
בְּעִמְקֵי חַדְרֵי–הַחֲדָרִים.

זֶה מַה שֶּׁאֲנַחְנוּ עוֹשִׂים כָּרֶגַע, כְּזוּג, לְאַחַר
כָּל כָּךְ הַרְבֵּה שָׁנִים,
בְּתוֹךְ הַחַדְרֵי–חֲדָרִים:

שׁוֹכְבִים וּמַקְשִׁיבִים לְקוֹל הַנַּעֲנוּעַ.
אִם לֹא הַפַּעַם – אָז מָחָר, בְּעוֹד שָׁבוּעַ.
אוֹ בַּחַיִּים הָאֲחֵרִים.

בְּשָׁעָה שְׁתַּיִם בְּעֶרֶךְ, כְּשֶׁאִישׁ מֵאִתָּנוּ אֵינֶנּוּ נִרְדָּם, הָרָז מִתְקַלֵּף עִם הַטִּיחַ.
מַשֶּׁהוּ נוֹפֵל. מַשֶּׁהוּ פּוֹקֵעַ, מִתְקַלֵּף הַקִּיר, נִפְתָּח חַלּוֹן וָזָן בְּרִיחַ. הָרִצְפָּה
כֻּלָּהּ נָעָה. נִבְעָה, בַּדִּיסְק שֶׁל הָרָקִיעַ, פֶּתַח צַר, זָעִיר. וּכְמוֹ נִדְמָה לְרֶגַע כִּי
הָרֶקַע הַמְצֻפֶּה מוּכָן, כִּמְעַט,
לְהִתְנַגְּלוּת–שֶׁבְּאֲוִיר!

וְאָז, כְּמוֹ שֶׁטֶף אַז, אַדִּיר,
שֶׁל בֵּית–בְּלִיעָה,
כְּמוֹ קִיא פְּנִימִי, מָהִיר,
מוּטָח בְּשָׁעָטָה
מִן הַתִּקְרָה, אֶל תּוֹךְ הַחֶדֶר:
עֵדֶר שֶׁל עִזִּים קְטַנּוֹת וַחֲצוּפוֹת.

עֵדֶר הָעִזִּים הַזֶּה, עֵדֶר הָעִזִּים–הַפְּנִימִיּוֹת, מְזַנֵּק וּמְדַלֵּג לוֹ בְּזְרִיזוּת וּבְבִטְחָה,
דּוֹרֵךְ עַל הַשְּׁמִיכוֹת שֶׁלָּנוּ כְּמוֹ הָיוּ צוּקֵי הָרִים, נִתְלֶה בַּחֲצִיפוּת מֵעַל זִיזֵי
הַחֶדֶר. כָּכָה זֶה כְּשֶׁאַתָּה אֶחָד לְבַד, בּוֹדֵד, בְּעֵדֶר.
כָּכָה זֶה כְּשֶׁבְּפָנִים הַכֹּל הָפוּךְ לְךָ,
וּבַחַיִּים שֶׁלְּךָ אֵין סֵדֶר.

אַחַר כָּךְ מַתְחִילִים לְהַעֲרֵם עַל הַשֻּׁלְחָן,
כְּמוֹ מִשְׁטָחִים גְּדוֹלִים שֶׁל אֲדָמָה וְדֶשֶׁא,
כָּל יְפִי הַבְּרִיאָה נִתְלֶה עַל קָצֶה שֶׁל זִיז,
קָטָן מְאֹד, כְּמוֹ עַל שַׂעֲרָה
מֵהַשָּׂפָם–שֶׁל–אֱלֹהִים.

וְצָצָה לָהּ
פְּלוּמָה קְטַנָּה שֶׁל עֶשֶׂב;

וּתְלוּלִיּוֹת תּוֹפְחוֹת עַל הָרְצָפוֹת שֶׁלְּפָנֵינוּ; וְכָל מִקְוֵי הַמַּיִם נִפְתָּחִים;
וַעֲמָקִים תְּהוֹמִיִּים שֶׁל פַּחַד–בְּרֵאשִׁיתִי הוֹלְכִים וְנִפְעָרִים בַּמַּדְפִּים שֶׁל הָאָרוֹן
(יֵשׁ רְחָבִים וְקָשִׁים וּכְבֵדִים, כְּאִלּוּ שֶׁנִּשְׁקָפִים מִמַּבָּט–הַצִּפּוֹר כְּקַנְיוֹנֵי–אֵימָה;
וְיֵשׁ שֶׁמִּשְׁתַּפְּלִים בְּאִטִּיּוּת כְּבֵדָה מֵרוֹם שָׁמַיִם עַד לִקְצֵה הָאֹפֶק; וְיֵשׁ
שֶׁמִּתְעָרְסְלִים, מִתְעַרְפְּלִים, בִּקְצוֹתֵיהֶם הַחֲדוּדִים בִּכְמִין סִלְסוּל, כְּאִלּוּ
הִשְׁתַּיְּפוּ חָמְמֵיהֶם בְּאוֹר הַדִּמְדּוּמִים הָרַךְ שֶׁל הַשְּׁקִיעָה).

אֲנַחְנוּ גַּם רוֹאִים הֵיטֵב, מִלְמַעְלָה,
כְּשֶׁאֲנַחְנוּ תְּלוּיִים בְּיַחַד,
כְּמוֹ שְׁנֵי עֲטַלֵּפִים, זֶה עַל גַּבֵּי זֶה,
מֵעַל אֲהִיל נוּרָה חִוֵּר אֶחָד,
אֶת הַזָּהָב הַכָּחֹל–עָמֹק
שֶׁל הַיָּם הָאֱלֹהִי.

כֵּן, כֵּן, כֵּן – זֶה הַיָּם!
זֶה הַיָּם שֶׁאֱלֹהִים בָּרָא,

שֶׁאֱלֹהִים בָּרָא כָּחֹל
כָּל כָּךְ בְּיוֹם שֵׁנִי!

וְזֶה הַיָּם אֲשֶׁר מַבִּיט אֵלֵינוּ,
שְׁנֵינוּ, כְּמוֹ בָּבַת,

בָּאִישׁוֹן הָאֶפֶל שֶׁלּוֹ,
הַמְאַיֵּם –
שׁוֹרֵץ חַיּוֹת לְמִינֵיהֶן –

מִן הַחַלּוֹן הַזֶּה –

הַחַלּוֹן הַמְּעָוֶת!

אֲנַחְנוּ גַּם שׁוֹמְעִים מִכָּאן,
כְּמְדֻיָּק, אֶת הֶמְיַת
הַגַּלִּים שֶׁלּוֹ, אֵלּוּ
שֶׁיּוֹרְדִים, כְּמוֹ מַיִם,

כִּי כְּבַר עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה אֲצִלֵּנוּ
הֵם נוֹטְפִים הֶמְיָה,
יָשָׁר מִן הַפֶּיָּה,
הַזְּהֻבָּה, שֶׁבָּאַמְבָּט.

וְאָנוּ גַּם שׁוֹמְעִים הֵיטֵב,
לַמְּרוֹת נְחִירוֹת
הַשְּׁכֵנִים הָרָמוֹת,

אֶת הַמִּלְמוּלִים הַמְּעֻמְעָמִים
שֶׁל אֱלֹהִים,
שֶׁל אֱלֹהִים הַטּוֹב,
שֶׁל אֱלֹהִים הַטּוֹב כָּל כָּךְ,
שֶׁל אֱלֹהִים הַטּוֹב כָּל כָּךְ
שֶׁלֹּא נִרְדָּם.
שֶׁלֹּא נִרְדָּם מִצַּעַר–הָעוֹלָם.

וַהֲרֵי לֹא נִתָּן הָיָה לְהַסְתִּיר אוֹתוֹ, כְּלוֹמַר, אֶת הַיָּם,
מִכָּאן, מִנְּקֻדַּת הַמַּבָּט הַזֹּאת שֶׁל חַיֵּי הַנִּשּׁוּאִין –
לֹא נִתָּן הָיָה לְהַסְתִּיר
אֶת הַבָּחֹל הֶעָמֹק שֶׁל הַיָּם! –

כְּפִי שֶׁאִי אֶפְשָׁר יוֹתֵר לְהַשְׁקִיט אֶת הַגַּעֲגוּעַ,
לְהַחְבִּיא אֶת הַיְּסוּרִים,
לַעֲצֹר בְּמַטְלִית קְטַנָּה שֶׁל מִלִּים
אֶת כָּל הַכְּאֵב שֶׁבָּא יַחַד עִם שֶׁטֶף הַדָּם.

אָז עַכְשָׁו אֲנַחְנוּ עוֹקְבִים, שְׁנֵינוּ, בְּיַחַד, בְּדְרִיכוּת,
אַחַר דְּלוּג הָעִזִּים הַפְּנִימִיּוֹת עַל הֶהָרִים.
אַחַר לַבְנוּנִית הַקֶּצֶף הַגְּדוֹלָה.
זוֹ הַמּוּטָחַת לְבַסּוֹף אֶל חוֹף–הַחַדְרֵי–חֲדָרִים;

מִתְנַפֶּלֶת עַל צוּקֵי הַלֵּב, נוֹגַעַת–לֹא–נוֹגַעַת לָנוּ
בְּלִבָּבוֹת–שֶׁלָּנוּ–הַשְּׁבוּרִים;

הַלִּבָּבוֹת שֶׁלָּנוּ,
הַלִּבָּבוֹת הַחֲדוּרִים,

הַלִּבָּבוֹת הַחֲדוּרִים,
אֲשֶׁר הוּטְלוּ אֶל הַמַּקְפִּיא
שֶׁל הָעֶשְׂרִים–שָׁנָה–
שֶׁבְּחַדְרֵי–הַחֲדָרִים;

וְלַבְּנוֹנִית הַקֶּצֶף מִתְנַפֶּלֶת לָהּ בִּכְמוֹ יֵאוּשׁ;
וּמְלַחֶכֶת מַשֶּׁהוּ מִקְצוֹת רַגְלֵי הַמִּטָּה שֶׁלָּנוּ,
שֶׁבְּחַדְרֵי–הַחֲדָרִים;

וְחוֹלֶפֶת לָהּ, בְּרַחֲמִים וְנַעֲנוּעַ,
כְּמוֹ טִיסָה רַכָּה שֶׁל צִפֳּרִים,
עַל הַבְּהוֹנוֹת שֶׁלָּנוּ,
שֶׁבְּחַדְרֵי–הַחֲדָרִים;

וְשׁוּב חוֹזֶרֶת, בְּעִקְשׁוּת,
אֶל הַבְּהוֹנוֹת שֶׁלָּנוּ,
וּמְלַחֶכֶת לָהּ,
אֶת הַסּוֹדוֹת. גַּם
מִתַּחַת לַבְּהוֹנוֹת
שֶׁלָּנוּ, שֶׁבְּחַדְרֵי–
הַחֲדָרִים;

אֲבָל שָׁם זֶה מִסְתַּיֵּם:
בְּסוֹף חַדְרֵי–
הַחֲדָרִים.

בֵּן, שָׁם זֶה מִסְתַּיֵּם.
מִתַּחַת לַבְּהוֹנוֹת שֶׁלָּנוּ.
מַמָּשׁ מִתַּחַת לַבְּהוֹנוֹת–שֶׁלָּנוּ.

הַבְּהוֹנוֹת–שֶׁלָּנוּ.

הַקְּרִים.[12]

Although a much more complex poem, the basic idea is the same as in "עמוד קטן של אש" and "בתוך שני הכוסות." Again, Kosman locates the poem in a domestic space, which will be the site of a cosmic and divine drama far beyond its imagined limits. In this case, the space is a bedroom, and the peeling plaster, blankets, and lampshade replace kitchen utensils as the characteristic mundane details. The contrast between the seeming ordinariness of these surroundings and their actual significance is brilliantly captured by Kosman's locution, "חדרי חדרים," the "rooms of all rooms," which also suggests innermost and most private of rooms. The grammatical construction alludes to "קדש קדשים," the "holy of holies," the ultimate example of a physical space that takes on theological significance. But the bedroom is still a mere "room," unprepossessing, whose significance is only unlocked by the interaction of the couple that inhabits it. Towards the beginning of the poem, Kosman raises the possibility that the revelation might occur outside of the room, in the sky viewed through the bedroom window (l. 14-16). Immediately, though, that possibility is discarded, as the portentous flock of goats descends from the ceiling of the room itself. There is no need to look outside. All mysteries and experiences are contained within the room itself.

Like domestic spaces we have already seen, this "room of all rooms" becomes a microcosm for all creation. Here, though, the metaphorical extent of the room is described quite directly. The transformation of the room begins with a single blade of grass (l. 33), but then "hillocks sprout from the floor" and "all the water stores are

12. *סידור אלטרנטיבי*, p. 103.

opened" (l. 35). The room becomes a landscape—not a replica of any particular location, but a pastiche of natural features that express God's power and relationship to the created world. "Gaping valleys of In-the-beginning-fear open up among the dresser drawers" (l. 36). The climax of these natural images is the "the divine sea." The poem turns when it begins to describe the sea; the lines and stanzas shorten, and the relationship between the couple and God is addressed more directly. This primordial sea symbolizes Creation, God's power, and the grandeur of the natural world. All of this is contained within the mundane domestic space of the bedroom and its adjoining bathroom, from whose faucet the murmur of the sea's waves has emanated for decades (l. 62-65).

In this poem, too, the encounter with God is only made possible by the relationship between the speaker and his wife. However, unlike in previous poems we have seen, "...על רז האושר" is not addressed to the wife, nor is the wife the subject of the poem. Instead, the speaker of the poem speaks on behalf of the wife, in the first person plural. In this experience of revelation, the perspective of the husband and wife cannot be separated, as Kosman highlights by his repeated invocation of "our hearts," "our big toes," etc. In this case it is significant that the speaker is paired with his wife, as opposed to a more ambiguous lover. Kosman emphasizes the length and unique character of the marital relationship as essential to the couple's spiritual experience. "Surely it would be impossible to hide it, that is, the sea / from here, from this point of view of married life" (l. 76-77). According to Kosman, married life entails a unique point of view, a point of view that provides access to "secrets," as well as the presence of God within ordinary space. Achieving this point of view comes at a cost. The hearts of the couple are "broken" and "pierced," and the poem describes twenty years spent in the "room of all

rooms" as a freezer in which the couple's hearts are placed. But even if it is painful, the cultivation of this relationship and perspective is necessary. "So now we follow, we two, together, tensely, / the skipping of the internal goats on the hills" (l. 84-85). The repetition of "we follow, we two, together" emphasizes that only in the context of the relationship is the experience of God possible.

And what is the "seed of the secret," the "deep mystery" spoken of in the opening stanza? The theological experience of the couple is deeper than any we have seen in previous poems. It is an experience of perspective; the couple witnesses a divine landscape hidden within the confines of their ordinary domestic space. This awareness is accompanied by awe; it is also an ecstatic experience, as the speaker exclaims, "Yes, yes, yes – this is the sea!" In addition to the naturalistic images, the couple experiences a direct revelation; they hear God murmuring. Not only does the couple hear God, but they are aware that God is unable to sleep, due to "the sorrow of the world." The couple achieves a kind of moral identification with God, as they too are pained by the world's suffering. At the end of the poem, though, the divine secrets of marital life are not revealed. The frothy waves of God's sea lick at the toes of the couple, but they go no farther. The couple has only been the smallest bit immersed in God. The experience leaves their toes—like their hearts—cold. This ambivalent ending suggests that awe and exaltation are not the only possible responses to the experience of God. Just as the longtime marriage portrayed here is a complex relationship, the encounter with God facilitated by that relationship is complex.

The theological ideas advanced in the poems of Admiel Kosman do not add up to a fully elaborated theological system. But certain themes occur again and again, and insofar as their poetic expression is moving, they must be considered a serious statement about the relationship between God and humanity. In Kosman's poetry, human beings become aware of God's presence in the beauty and power of nature. God's presence suffuses everyday life, but it is hidden and must be discovered through religious attention. Man's relationship with God can be intimate; Kosman applies the metaphor of a lover. Man can be devoted to God in body as well as mind and soul.

Above all, the most salient aspect of Kosman's theology is that experience of God is achieved through relationship with another human being. In this he is clearly influenced by the relational theology of Martin Buber. In Buber's terms, when human beings enter into an I-Thou relationship, they also enter into relationship with the eternal Thou, God. Kosman replaces the abstract other with a real person, a lover. And rather than an I-Thou relationship based on contemplation or abstract appreciation, Kosman explores the theological ramifications of the sexual relationship. For Kosman, sexual intimacy with another human being fosters receptivity to a relationship with God. In fact, the erotic relationship can be so central as to eclipse all other sources of religious inspiration. Kosman's interest in the real world implications of this idea is evident in his application of his erotic theology to the marriage relationship. He goes to great lengths to show how married life—in all of its everyday regularity—becomes the context for a profound experience of God. The house, the mundane domestic space with its representative objects, becomes the site of spectacular revelations. All of this is achieved only through the intimate relationship of two human beings. Kosman's eroticism is

self-consciously transgressive; his explicit engagement with human sexuality is mostly taboo in religious discourse. But Kosman's poetry seeks to elevate and exalt human relationships. Only through engaging in profound, intimate relationships with one another can human beings access the possibility of a relationship with God.

Chapter Three

Jewish Intertextuality

The language of Hebrew poetry throughout its history stands in dialogue with the language of the Hebrew Bible. The *piyyut* tradition in Palestine made liberal use of biblical Hebrew, creating and adapting many new forms and grammatical structures. The Golden Age of Hebrew poetry in Spain was characterized by the return to pure biblical style. Competition with Arabic culture led the Spanish poets to assert the superiority and even theological significance of the Hebrew of the Bible, and advances in the scientific study of the Hebrew language allowed them to employ that language with greater and greater authenticity. Similar forces of classicism and nationalism led the Hebrew poets of the *Haskalah* to value "*melitzah*," a style that directly reflected the elevated vocabulary and structure of the Bible. It was only in the writing of Chaim Nachman Bialik that the Biblical style of Modern Hebrew was tempered by other strains of the Hebrew language. Bialik's *nusach* incorporated vocabulary and structures from Rabbinic Hebrew, creating a more flexible, versatile Hebrew, capable of addressing the range of modern issues faced by Hebrew poets in the 20th century and beyond. Since Bialik, schools of Hebrew poetry have defined themselves by their embrace of or distancing from the Hebrew of the Bible. Some poets have tried to reject Biblical Hebrew altogether, seeking to capture the colloquial, secular Hebrew of the Israeli street. But given the central, generative role the Bible plays in the history of the Hebrew language, it is doubtful that this effort can ever be entirely successful.

The Bible has exercised influence over Hebrew poetry not only in its style, but also in its content. In all periods, poets have made the stories and motifs of the Bible the subject of poetic exploration. Even when the Bible is not the explicit subject of a poem, often the poet uses the reader's knowledge of the Bible to give the poem meaning. For example, the Golden Age poets pioneered "הסגנון השיבוצי" (the "patchwork style"), in which quotations from the Bible are taken out of context and arranged to address the subject of the poet's choosing. The humorous or surprising effect is created by the tension between the subject of the poem and the meaning of the biblical passages in context. In Modern Hebrew poetry as well, the Bible is a common subject for religious and secular poets alike. Sometimes the poems function as midrash, commenting on and expanding the biblical narratives. For example, Modern Hebrew poets have portrayed the binding of Isaac, many of their depictions influenced by the Jewish people's experience of violence in the 20th century. Other poems use elements of the Bible to interpret and illuminate the modern world. An excellent example is the well-known poem by Dan Pagis, "כתוב בעפרון בקרון החתום:"

כָּאן בַּמִּשְׁלוֹחַ הַזֶּה
אֲנִי חַוָּה
עִם הֶבֶל בְּנִי
אִם תִּרְאוּ אֶת בְּנִי הַגָּדוֹל
קַיִן בֶּן אָדָם
תַּגִּידוּ לוֹ שֶׁאֲנִי[1]

The setting of the poem is not ancient Israel, but modern Europe. The characters from the Bible are transported, in order to map their relationships and significance onto the

1. *כל השירים*. ירושלים: הקיבוץ המאוחד, 1991, עמ' 135.

inexplicable events of the Holocaust. We might understand Cain to be a perpetrator, whose violence is directed against his own family. We might read Cain here as a bystander, a "*ben adam*" whose communication with the victims is forever cut off. Whatever our interpretation, Pagis uses our knowledge of the biblical story to add meaning to his depiction of modern events.

The place of the Bible in Modern Hebrew poetry is unique. No other text, no other stratum of Hebrew or Jewish literature is explicitly or implicitly addressed with even near the same frequency. This may be due to the unique status the Bible plays in the State of Israel. The Bible is considered part of the cultural heritage of all Israeli Jews; it is taught in the public schools and frequently invoked in popular culture and public discourse. Thus, even secular Israeli poets make use of the Bible, and there is wide competency among Modern Hebrew readers to receive meaning that depends on knowledge of the Bible.

Though deeply informed by religious Jewish readings, Admiel Kosman's use of the Bible is not so different from that of other Modern Hebrew poets. He has poems that retell biblical stories and poems that map biblical scenes onto the modern world. His poems frequently make use of biblical images and phrases, and like the poets of the Golden Age in Spain, he often reads biblical passages against their context for ironic effect. What makes Admiel Kosman so notable is that the intertextuality in his poetry is not limited to the Hebrew Bible. As a scholar of Jewish texts, Kosman is deeply familiar with the whole literary tradition of Judaism, and many of his poems stand in dialogue with texts and genres that are almost entirely absent from Modern Hebrew poetry.

And so, Kosman gives us poems that stand in dialogue with the Talmud and midrash. His poems make use of mystical literature, philosophical literature, *halakhic* literature, and the literature of the prayer book. Kosman's subjects these sources to the same poetic treatment usually reserved for the Bible. His poems offer new interpretations and insights into the texts themselves. The poems use the texts to comment on and find meaning in the modern world. For Jewish readers, especially liberal Jewish readers, this poetic approach to text is extremely valuable. Kosman gives us access and develops modern meaning in genres of Jewish literature that are much less familiar to us. For Modern Hebrew poetry as a whole, Kosman's incorporation of these texts can be compared to Bialik's incorporation of Rabbinic Hebrew into his *nusach.* Kosman has begun to open the vast resources of post-biblical Hebrew and Jewish literature to poetic exploration. Though his efforts in this area are still relatively limited, they represent tremendous creative potential for both Hebrew poetry and Jewish thought.

Kosman's poetic dialogue with Jewish texts begins, as one would expect, with the Bible. In his first published collection, the speaker of "מצעי נותר ריק" contrasts his position with that of Jacob, on the night during which he received the vision at Beit El.

מַצָּעִי נוֹתַר רֵיק
וְסַלְעִי וְכוֹאֵב.
כִּי מֵעוֹלָם לֹא רָבוּ
הָאֲבָנִים לְמַרַאֲשׁוֹתַי עַל רֹאשִׁי.
הֵן הִתְפַּזְּרוּ תָּמִיד בְּשֶׁקֶט מִתַּחַת לְכָל אֵיבָרַי,
וּמַלְאָכִים רַק הוּקְעוּ
לַסֻּלָּמוֹת בְּאִבֵּי כַּנְפֵיהֶם.[2]

2. *אחרי מוראות מעשה השיר*, p. 55.

The poem assumes that the reader is familiar with the biblical story: "Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran. He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place ("אבני המקום"), he put it under his head ("למראשתיו") and lay down in that place. He had a dream; a ladder ("סלם") was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God ("מלאכי אלהים") were going up and down on it" (Gen. 28:10-12). Kosman links the poem to the biblical text by using several key words from the biblical story. The use of the rare word "למראשתי" makes the reference particularly direct. But what does the poet gain through his invocation of the Jacob story? The speaker draws an ironic contrast between Jacob, who slept comfortably and soundly on the ground, and himself, whose bed is "rocky and painful." Jacob placed a stone as a headrest for him to sleep on; the speaker finds that the stones spread out under his body, disturbing his rest. Finally, Jacob's vision of the angels ascending and descending the ladder is a preface to a covenantal promise from God. In the speaker's vision, the angels are "pinned to the ladders." There is no dynamism in the speaker's vision of the future. The violent, even gruesome image of the pinned angels with the comforting promise of protection God gives to Jacob. At every point, the description of the speaker's condition is heightened by the contrast with the biblical story. The very use of this kind of allusion to a biblical story gives the poem a mythic character, and the troubles of the speaker take on theological significance.

Kosman demonstrates a different kind of intertextuality between the poem and the Bible in "אשת פוטיפר."

לֹא יָשַׁר הָיָה הַשֶּׁקֶר, וְלֹא לְטַעְמִי.
מֻשְׁחָל בִּבְרִידוּתוֹ עַל צַד הַתֶּפֶר, רַךְ נִימוֹס

וְגִנּוּנִים. מִדֵּי עָבְרוֹ אֲנִי שׁוֹאֶלֶת, מִנַּיִן לוֹ, לְזֶה
הַדֶּקֶר, קַו יָשָׁר כָּל כָּךְ וְהֶגְיוֹנִי. כָּךְ? לֹא
לִפְגֹּעַ לְעוֹלָם בַּדֶּלֶת? לְהָצִיץ לְצַד שֵׁנִי?

יָשָׁר? אֲנִי שׁוֹאֶלֶת,
הֲלֹא רָצִיתִי לְעַבֵּר
בְּאַהֲבָתִי בַּעֲבוּרוֹ אֶת כָּל הַבֶּגֶד, וְרַוְקָא
כָּכָה. בְּאוֹנִי. מְשֻׁנִּים דַּרְכֵי הָעֶבֶד,
יוֹם נָתַתִּי בּוֹ מַבָּט, וּכְבָר הֶחֱוִיר, הָפַךְ
שַׁרְווּל בִּגְדוֹ וְנָם, מַשְׁאִיר לַיָּד הַמְשׁוֹטֶטֶת
לִסְפֹּג לְבַד אֶת עֶלְבּוֹנִי.

לֹא יָשָׁר הָיָה הַשֶּׁקֶר. שָׁפָל
חֲסַר דִּמְיוֹן וְנַכְלוֹלִי.
מִנְהַג הָעֶבֶד הָעִבְרִי הָיָה הַפַּעַם
חֻטְאָ חָמוּר לְמַעְמִי.
יוֹם לְיוֹם עָבְרָה רוּחוֹ אֶת הַמִּפְתָּן, מוֹדֶדֶת
בְּמַבָּט רָחוֹק וְקַר אֶת יְגוֹנִי.

אֲבָל רָאִיתִי גֶּדֶם. יָד רוֹעֶדֶת. כִּמְשָׁתָּק.
וּבְעָצֶם, לְרָצוֹנוֹ אוֹ לְרָצוֹנִי,
הֲלֹא מְמַהוּתוֹ הָיָה יוֹסֵף כָּל כָּךְ פְּנִימִי, וְרוּחַ דַּק,
הָיָה עָלָיו לִנְהֹג אַחֶרֶת.

אַךְ הוּא פָּנָה פִּתְאֹם.
שִׁנָּה אֶת טַעְמוֹ,
סָטָה נִתַּק וְנָם. אַנָּס, צָעַקְתִּי
לְעֶבְרוֹ, אַנָּס, מָתַי תָּבוֹא?

וְכָל זַעֲקוֹתַי, קְרִיאוֹת הַשֶּׁבֶר,
רַק קָרְאוּ וּבָאוּ, מֵרָחוֹק
הִגִּיעוּ עֲבָדִים רַבִּים.[3]

This is a midrashic poem, a kind of biblical interpretation that expands the Bible's often-sparse narrative. This form is common in Modern Hebrew poetry and his been

3. *מה אני יכול*, p. 32.

used particularly by Jewish feminism to fill in the stories and perspectives of women in the Bible, which rarely appear in the original. Such is the case with this poem, and the story in question is that of the wife of Potiphar, who fails to seduce Joseph, her husband's Hebrew slave, and later accuses him of impropriety, an accusation that sends him to prison (Gen. 39). In addition to presenting the perspective of Potiphar's wife, which is totally absent from the Bible, the poem highlights the emotional dynamics of this scene. This is another important function of midrashic poetry, since the biblical narrative addresses the emotions of characters only infrequently. The first line of this poem answers a question the biblical narrative does not ask—"How does Potiphar's wife feel about her deception concerning Joseph?" The answer unfolds slowly in the poem. Potiphar's wife describes the lie as "not to my taste." In the third stanza, she adds that it was "base, unimaginative, and deceitful." Looking back, she seems to regret her conduct with Joseph, an impression that is strengthened by the repetition of her self-judgment. The poem also gives us a sense of the curiosity she felt toward Joseph. The first stanza concludes with four questions about him, and the second stanza references his "strange ways." The strongest emotions that Kosman attributes to Potiphar's wife are occasioned by Joseph's rejection of her advances. After the encounter in which she tears off Joseph's sleeve, she claims that Joseph "leaves it to the trembling hand / alone to soak up my shame." The image of Potiphar's wife using the sleeve of Joseph to blot her tears of embarrassment and frustration is touching. Kosman evokes sympathy for the speaker here and at the end of the third stanza, in which she describes Joseph "measuring / my anguish with a cold and distant gaze." The emotions Kosman describes invite a

reevaluation of Potiphar's wife. While in the biblical narrative she appears cruel and vindictive, Kosman's view is considerably more complex.

In addition to Potiphar's wife, the poem attempts to fill in Joseph's emotional involvement in this story. Like hers, Joseph's hand is described as "shaking." Potiphar's wife speculates that some part of Joseph would prefer to "act differently," to succumb to her advances. It is only at the last minute that Joseph "changed his mind." These signs of conflict in Joseph are absent from the biblical text, which views Joseph as entirely innocent in the exchange. Interestingly, Kosman's interpretation is in keeping with one found in classical midrash. The Rabbis interpret the phrase, "[Joseph] came into the house to do his work" (Gen. 39:11) to mean that he intended to give in to temptation and have relations with Potiphar's wife. It is only after a vision of his father Jacob appears to him that his resolve is strengthened and he rejects her.[4] Kosman is certainly aware of the midrash, but his poetic presentation of the interpretation is more dramatic and more human.

Another advantage of this kind of poetic midrash is that it enriches the symbolism of the biblical text. This poem takes Joseph's garment, an element which possesses little symbolic meaning in Genesis, and makes it a central metaphor for the relationship between Joseph and Potiphar's wife. They are separated like the torn sleeve and the body of the garment, fixed on their respective sides of a seam. As we saw earlier, once the sleeve is in Potiphar's wife's possession, it becomes a symbol of her sorrow and rejection. The most important role that the garment plays in the biblical story—proof for Potiphar of Joseph's advances—does not even appear in the poem. This use would

4. Genesis Rabbah 87:7 and parallels.

detract from the meaning Kosman wishes to ascribe to the garment as the focal point of the relationship between Joseph and Potiphar's wife.

Finally, Kosman makes use in this poem of the midrashic potential of poetic form. Most of the poem has a lilting rhythm, and the rhyming repetition of the first person singular possessive ending ("לטעמי," "עלבוני," "יגוני," etc.) gives the poem a mythic, almost playful feeling, like the rhymed quatrains of an English ballad. In the final line of the poem, the rhythm and rhyme disappear. The spell is broken. The sound of the poem dramatically represents the emotional and narrative turning point, as the intrigue of the relationship between Joseph and Potiphar's wife gives way to the staid progression of events of the biblical narrative.

One of the most meaningful formal elements of the poem is Kosman's use of segolates—"שקר," "תפר," "דקר," "דלת," "בגד," "עבד," "גדם," "עצם," and "שבר." Along with several similar-sounding forms ("מודדת," "אחרת," etc.), these contribute a great deal to the extensive rhyme and assonance in the poem. But they also bring to the fore the two segolates that actually appear in the biblical text, "עבד" and "בגד." Highlighting these words contributes to Kosman's interpretive goals. In the case of "עבד," the poem wishes to problematize the relationship between Joseph and Potiphar's wife; perhaps he was not as helpless or blameless in this situation as the biblical account would seem to suggest. As for "בגד," we have already seen how the poem turns Joseph's garment into a potent symbol for this relationship. The abundance of segolates also facilitates a powerful play on words in the final stanza. Potiphar's wife describes her screams as "cries of brokenness" ("קריאות השבר"), which cause many servants to come to her aid.

"קריאות השבר" calls to mind the rhyming "קריאות הגבר"—the cock's crows—a symbol of awakening and the start of a new day, which further characterizes the transition represented by this moment in the story.

Kosman makes implicit use of a classical midrash in the poem above, but sometimes he addresses a specific midrash directly. A clear example is "הזמנה למלאכים,"[5] in which God addresses the angels concerning the creation of man. The poem is based on an interpretation of Gen. 1:26, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." In order to explain why God speaks here in the first person plural, Rashi writes, "Since man is in the image of the angels and they would be jealous of him, [God] consulted them."[6] Kosman dramatizes this consultation much in the same way he would approach a story in the Bible itself. He creates an interpretive elaboration of God's instructions to the angels. And while this midrash is relatively well-known, the body of midrashic literature is immense, including many ideas and stories that would make fascinating source material for poetry.

Where Kosman really departs from the standard models of Modern Hebrew poetry is in his use of Rabbinic texts. The poem "מצוות הנשרפין" is based on a text from the Mishnah and stands in dialogue with the rhetorical style of both the Mishnah and Gemara.

– מַה הִיא אִם כֵּן מִצְוַת הַנִּשְׂרָפִין?
–כֵּן, כֵּן, מַה הִיא מִצְוַת הַנִּשְׂרָפִין?
– שֶׁמְּשַׁקְּעִין אוֹתָם בַּזֶּבֶל
עַד אַרְכֻּבּוֹתֵיהֶם,
וְשָׁנוֹתְנִים סוּדָר קָשֶׁה

5. *מה אני יכול*, p. 71. See Chapter 1.
6. Rashi expresses the tradition of B. Sanhedrin 38b, Genesis Rabbah 8:7, and parallels.

לִכְרֹךְ עַל צַוָּארָן,
וְזֶה שֶׁמְּיַמִּין מוֹשֵׁךְ אֶצְלוֹ
וְזֶה שֶׁבָּא מִשְּׂמֹאל
מוֹשֵׁךְ אֶצְלוֹ גַּם כֵּן,
הֵיטֵב הֵיטֵב
מוֹשֵׁךְ אֶצְלוֹ
אֶת הַפּוּדְרָה,
– וְעַד שֶׁפִּיו נִפְעָר בְּכֹחַ רַב
הַנֶּעֱמָד לוֹ לִימִינוֹ
מַבְעִיר אֶת הַפִּתִּילָה.
– אֲבָל קָשֶׁה, מַמָּה נַפְשֶׁךָ:
שָׁנִינוּ, מְטִילִין אוֹתָהּ שְׁנֵיהֶם
יַחְדָּו, וְלָמָּה? לָמָּה?? רַק
לְפִי שֶׁכָּךְ שָׁנִינוּ: שְׁנֵי שְׁלוּחִין
הֵן – הַמְּטִילִין אוֹתָהּ אֶל פֶּתַח
פִּיו – דְּהַיְנוּ, מְטִילִין אוֹתָהּ יַחְדָּו.
וְכָךְ, דַּוְקָא בְּפֶתַח פִּיו – הָא לָמָּה
לָךְ?? מַמָּה נַפְשָׁךְ: אִם הוּא, הַפֶּה,
נוֹתֵר פָּעוּר – וְהֵיא – דְּהַיְנוּ
הַפִּתִּילָה – יוֹרֶדֶת אֶל מֵעָיו,
וְהֵיא חוֹמֶרֶת, כָּךְ כָּתוּב, חוֹמֶרֶת,
וְקוֹרַעַת וּמְרַטֶּשֶׁת בְּנֵי מֵעָיו,
– אַף הוּא – אָמְרוּ, הֲרֵי,
אִם מֵת הוּא בְּיָדָם – יָפֶה. יָפֶה.
מוּבָן. וְלָמָּה לֹא? הֲרֵי
אִם לָאו – חָלִילָה, לֹא הָיוּ
עוֹד מְקַיְּמִין בּוֹ
אֶת מִצְוַת הַנִּשְׂרָפִין!
– וְלָמָּה? לָמָּה??
כָּךְ אָמְרוּ:
פּוֹתְחִין אֶת פִּיו בְּצָבָת,
– וְדוֹק: שֶׁלֹּא בְּטוֹבָתוֹ פּוֹתְחִין
אֶת פִּיו בְּצָבָת. וְזֶה שֶׁמְּיַמִּין
מַבְעִיר אֶת הַפִּתִּילָה,
וְזֶה שֶׁבָּא מִשְּׂמֹאל
זוֹרְקָהּ אֶל פִּיו.
וְהֵיא יוֹרֶדֶת וְחוֹמֶרֶת
בְּנֵי מֵעָיו.

– אֲבָל אַמַּאי?
אַמַּאי?? אַמַּאי??
– וַהֲלֹא מַעֲשֶׂה הָיָה
בְּקֵיסָרִין בְּבַת יַמַּאי
אֲשֶׁר זְנְתָה וְהִקִּיפוּהָ
חֲבִילֵי זְמוֹרוֹת,
וְהֶעֱלוּהָ בַּמּוֹקֵד.
– אַךְ לָמָּה? לָמָּה? לָמָּה??
– מִמָּה נַפְשָׁךְ, מֵעִקָּרָא
סְבָרָא קָשָׁה הִיא בַּגְּמָרָא,
וּבְלֵית בְּרֵרָה אוּלַי
נִפְתַּר דָּבָר קָשֶׁה כָּל כָּךְ בְּחוּט
הַשַּׁעֲרָה, כְּלוֹמַר, בְּבַת כֹּהֵן
גְּמוּרָה אֲשֶׁר זְנְתָה בַּשּׁוּק
וְהִיא הָרָה עַתָּה מִכָּל
אוֹתָהּ הַחֲבוּרָה?
– הוֹ לֹא! לֹא! לֹא!
הָיָה זֶה לִכְאוֹרָה, מִפְּנֵי
שֶׁכָּךְ אִתְּרַע, שֶׁלֹּא
הָיָה הַדִּין מֻכְרָע
אוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה
בְּבְנֵי–תוֹרָה.

– שֹׁדְדִין הָיוּ.
שֹׁדְדִין יְהוּדָאִין.
מִסְטָרָא–אָחֳרָא.[7]

The poem begins with a question, "What, then, is *mitzvat ha'nisrafin* [the procedure for execution by burning]?" as it might be posed by a student of Jewish law. The question is seconded, suggesting the context of a group of learners. But this also places the poem in direct relationship with Mishnah Sanhedrin 7:2, where the procedure is described in detail. The condemned man is immobilized in refuse up to his knees. A cloth is wrapped around his neck and held on either side by the two witnesses against

7. *סידור אלטרנטיבי*, p. 76.

him. The witnesses pull on the cloth until his mouth opens, at which point one of them throws a burning substance down his throat, which burns his insides, causing death. The students challenge this answer: Since both witnesses must serve as executioners, don't they both need to administer the burning substance together? This leads to the further question: What happens if the condemned dies by strangling before the burning is carried out? The poem gives the solution provided by the Mishnah; death by strangling does not fulfill the requirements of execution by burning. Rather, if the condemned man will not open his mouth, they open it by force with tongs, and the burning substance is administered. Finally, the students raise the case of a sailor's daughter who sinned and was burned to death on the spot, without the elaborate procedure. It is suggested that those who carried out that execution might have found some precedent in the Mishnah, which records an incident of a priest's daughter who was similarly executed. But that possibility is rejected, since the Mishnah also disapproves of that case and concludes that the judges there were not sufficiently expert in the law.

The poetic ingenuity here lies in the way Kosman manipulates the language and structure of a Talmudic debate. The idiom of the poem is decidedly Rabbinic, taking much of its vocabulary directly from the Mishnah. Kosman also incorporates Aramaic and technical terms from the discourse of the Talmud ("ממה נפשך," "הא למה לך," etc.) He uses these subtleties of language and discourse for poetic effect. As the execution procedure is being described, a voice twice interjects, "למה? למה??" ("Why? Why??"). The third time, after the description of the use of tongs to open the condemned man's mouth, the voice asks, "אבל אמאי? \ אמאי?? אמאי??" (But why? / Why?? Why??). The switch to Aramaic represents that the speaker is fully within the language of discourse of

the *halakhah*. At the same time, the urgency of the question implies objection to the tradition as presented. The language thus suggests a conflict within the speaker, who is both within and opposed to the Rabbinic discourse. It is reasonable to posit a relationship between this conflict and the biography of the poet, an Orthodox-educated Talmudic scholar who has left both Israel and Orthodoxy and writes critically about Rabbinic texts.

The critique of the Rabbinic tradition in this poem is not limited to Kosman's use of language. The technical, dispassionate discussion of such a gruesome and violent subject is steeped in irony. The Mishnah says, "Furthermore, if he dies at their hands [by strangling], they have not fulfilled the commandment of burning." In the poem, Kosman renders this line, "— Furthermore — they said, surely, / if he dies at their hands — good. Good." The flippant repetition of "good" shows the speaker's lack of empathy with the human being potentially involved in such a situation. There is certainly nothing "good," or more literally, "pretty," about a death in this manner. But in the *pilpul* tradition of halakhic discourse, the reasoning and the discourse itself take on primary importance, and the realia underlying any particular law are secondary. By giving us such an exaggerated example, Kosman is making a moral critique of this kind of discourse. For the poet, there is something obscene about focusing on technical, rhetorical details when discussing something as morally significant as an execution.

Kosman's critique of this kind of halakhic discourse reaches its peak at the end of the poem. The Mishnah says, "Rabbi Eleazar ben Zaddok said: There once was a priest's daughter who sinned [sexually]. They surrounded her with bunches of sticks and burned her. They said to him: This was because the *beit din* at that time was not expert [in the law." In the poem, when the case of the priest's daughter is raised, the poet follows the

Mishnah in saying that the case does not serve as a precedent because those who decided it were not "בני תורה," used as an equivalent for "experts in the law" for the purpose of rhyme. But while this is where the discussion ends in the Mishnah, Kosman's poem goes further. Another voice adds, "— They were demons. / Jewish demons. / From the dark side." The concepts of demons and an evil "other side" are well-attested in Jewish mystical literature, but they are completely foreign to the Mishnah. Kosman uses them here as a kind of reductio ad absurdum. When the Mishnah does not like the way the law was carried out in a particular instance, it declares only on that basis that the judges who decided it were not experts in the law. Kosman argues that one might as well say that the judges were demons, since there is as much proof of that (i.e., none) as that they were not experts. Kosman appropriates the Rabbinic discourse in order to satirize and undermine the authority of that discourse.

A much more complex example, both linguistically and in theme, is Kosman's long poem, "פירוש למסכת שבת פרק במה אשה יוצאה לחכם אשכנזי קדמון לא נודע שמו."

וּמֻתָּר לְחַנֵּק בְּשַׁבָּת,
לְמָשָׁל, כִּי מִי שֶׁחָשׁ בִּכְרֵסוֹ
אוֹחֲזִין אוֹתוֹ
בְּעִקְבֵי וְרִידִין שֶׁלּוֹ,
לְמַעְלָה מִכַּתֵּפָיו,
בְּעִקְרֵי צַוָּארוֹ,
וְכוֹבְשִׁין אוֹתוֹ בְּאַחַת,
עַד שֶׁיִּבָּלְטוּ עֵינָיו,
וְיִתָּלְשׁוּ רִיסֵי עֵינָיו,
וְיִבָּטְלוּ מִמֶּנּוּ כָּל אוֹתָם חַיֵּי שָׁעָה,
וְדוֹמֶה, הֲרֵי הוּא מוּטָל לְפָנֵינוּ חָנוּק.

וּמֻתָּר, מֻתָּר בְּהֶחְלֵט לְחַנֵּק אוֹתוֹ בְּשַׁבָּת.
כִּי מִי שֶׁיֵּשׁ לוֹ כְּאֵב בְּרֹאשׁוֹ,

אוֹחֲזִין אוֹתוֹ בַּעֲקֵבוֹ,
וְהוֹפְכִין לוֹרִידִין שֶׁלּוֹ,
וְדוֹמֶה עָלֵינוּ, בִּבְהִילוּתוֹ כְּמִי
שֶׁנָּפְלוּ בּוֹ פָּנָיו וְנִפְחֲסָה נַבַּחְתּוֹ,
וְנֶהֱפְכוּ עָלָיו שְׁתֵּי עֵינָיו כִּשְׁלֵיָה.
עַל כֵּן מֻתָּר,
מֻתָּר בְּהֶחְלֵט לְחַנְּקוֹ בְּשַׁבָּת.
כִּי מֻתָּר לְחַנֵּק אוֹתוֹ בְּשַׁבָּת,
לָמָּה לֹא? שֶׁכֵּן מִי שֶׁיֵּשׁ לוֹ אִישְׁתָּא צְמִירְתָּא
וְהִיא אֵשׁ שֶׁל עֲצָמוֹת שֶׁאוֹחֶזֶת בּוֹ,
וְאֵין חַמָּתָהּ יוֹצֵאת, אוֹ נִרְאֵית הֵיטֵב לַחוּץ,
אִם הִיא בַּהֶרֶת אוֹ סַפַּחַת, אוֹ מִחְיָה אוֹ מִכְוָה,
וְהִיא קָשָׁה בּוֹ הַרְבֵּה הַרְבֵּה,
וּמִתְיָרְאִין הֵימֶנָּה מְאֹד כָּל אוֹתוֹ הָעָם שֶׁבַּשָּׁדוֹת,
כִּדְקָא אָמְרִינָן בְּשַׁבָּת פֶּרֶק בַּמֶּה בְּהֵמָה,
הָאי אִישְׁתָּא צְמִירְתָּא
פַּרְוָנְקָא דְּמַלְאַךְ הַמָּוֶת הִיא,
כְּלוֹמַר, שְׁלוּחוֹ שֶׁל מַלְאַךְ הַמָּוֶת הוּא.

וְנוֹטְלִין סַכִּין שֶׁבָּלָהּ בַּרְזֶל,
וְהוֹלְכִין לְמָקוֹם שֶׁיֵּשׁ בּוֹ סְנָה,
וְחוֹתְכִין בּוֹ מְעַט,
וּמוֹסִיפִין וְחוֹתְכִין בּוֹ עוֹד מְעַט,
וּמוֹסִיפִין וְחוֹתְכִין בּוֹ עוֹד וְעוֹד מְעַט,
עַד שֶׁיָּזוּב בּוֹ הַכֹּל, וְיֵצֵא הַכֹּל מִבִּפְנִים,
כָּל אֵלּוּ מִינֵי הַיַּרְקֵי הַמָּרִים,
וּמִינֵי הַצַּעַר, וּמִינֵי הַמַּרְעִין בִּישִׁין.

וּמֻתָּר לְחַנֵּק אוֹתוֹ בְּשַׁבָּת.
לָמָּה לֹא? כִּי מִי שֶׁיֵּשׁ לוֹ אִישְׁתָּא צְמִירְתָּא,
חַמָּה שֶׁאוֹחֶזֶת בּוֹ בָּאָדָם ג׳ יָמִים רְצוּפִין,
וְאֵינָהּ נֶחְלֶצֶת לוֹ מִן הַבֵּיצִים,
וְקָשָׁה הִיא בּוֹ הַרְבֵּה הַרְבֵּה,
עַד שֶׁנּוֹטְלִין סַכִּין שֶׁבָּלָהּ בַּרְזֶל,
וְהוֹלְכִין לְמָקוֹם שֶׁיֵּשׁ בּוֹ סְנָה,
וְנוֹתְנִין לְמַטָּה מִכָּל הַחֲדָקִים,
לַחְתֹּךְ בּוֹ פְּסוֹת דַּקּוֹת,
מִכְּרֵסוֹ וְעַד רַגְלָיו,

וּכְתַרְגּוּמוֹ לְפוּפִי לְפוּפִי,
דְּהַיְנוּ, לְפוּפִי שֶׁל צַעַר,
וּלְפוּפִי שֶׁל כְּאֵב,
וְאוֹתָן הַחֲתִיכוֹת
שֶׁחֲתוּכִין אֶצְלוֹ
מֻנָּחִין אֶצְלוֹ קָרוֹב קָרוֹב,
עַל יַד הַלֵּב שֶׁשָּׁתַ. עַל כֵּן
מֻתָּר בְּהֶחְלֵט לְחַנְּקוֹ בְּשַׁבָּת.

שֶׁהִנֵּה, הִנֵּה, אִשָּׁה יוֹצֵאת מִשָּׁם, מִמַּסֶּכֶת שַׁבָּת,
וּבְיָדָהּ מַחַט נְקוּבָה, וְאִישׁ יוֹצֵא אַחֲרֶיהָ מִשָּׁם,
מִמַּסֶּכֶת שַׁבָּת, וְהוּא לָבוּשׁ בְּפוּזְמָקִי,
וּפְרוּשׁ פּוּזְמָקִי מִנְעָלִים שֶׁל נְחֹשֶׁת אוֹ מִנְעָלִים
שֶׁל בַּרְזֶל שֶׁנּוֹתְנִין אֲנָשִׁי מִלְחָמָה עַל שׁוֹקֵיהֶן,
שֶׁכְּשֶׁיְּרוֹצוּ לֹא יִנָּנְפוּ כְּלָל. וְתִינוֹק
יוֹצֵא אַחֲרֵיהֶם מִמַּסֶּכֶת שַׁבָּת דַּף סָמֶךְ וָו עַמּוּד בֵּית,
וּמְצַעֵק וּמְצַעֵק, מִבֵּין שְׁנֵיהֶם, לְפוּפִי לְפוּפִי יַנּוּקָא,
וּפְרוּשׁ לְפוּפִי יַנּוּקָא שֶׁתִּינוֹק שֶׁיָּצְאוּ לוֹ צַלְעוֹתָיו וְנָטוּ
מִמְּקוֹמָן אוֹ שֶׁזָּרוּ אֵיבָרָיו וְעָפוּ מֵהַמְּכוֹנִית לְכָל הַכִּוּוּנִים,
מְטַלְטְלִין אוֹתוֹ הוֹרָיו אַחַר כָּךְ בְּסָדִין מְלֻקָּט.
וּמֻתָּר, מֻתָּר בְּהֶחְלֵט לְחַנְּקוֹ בְּשַׁבָּת.

כִּי מֻתָּר לְחַנֵּק אוֹתוֹ בְּשַׁבָּת
אִם הוּא תִּינוֹק זָכָר. וְהָרַשְׁבָּ"א
בְּחִדּוּשָׁיו הִתִּיר אַף בִּנְקֵבָה.
שְׁמִי שֶׁיֵּשׁ לוֹ שְׁנֵי עֲצָמוֹת שֶׁנְּעוּצִין בְּצַוָּארוֹ, וַעֲקוּמִין
הֵן, וּשְׁנֵי צִדֵּי רָאשֵׁיהֶן עָלָיו דַּקִּין, אִם חַס וְשָׁלוֹם
נִכְנַס אֶל לִבּוֹ חֹד זֶה הַצַּעַר הָאַיֹּם
הֲרֵי הוּא נוֹפֵל מִיָּד וּבִלְעוֹ בְּפִיו,
וְאֵינוֹ יָכוֹל, מֵחֲמַת אוֹתָהּ הַיִּרְאָה,
מִפְּנֵי אוֹתָהּ הַחַיָּה הַקְּרוּיָה שְׁנָאָה, לִשְׁלֹחַ
יָדוֹ וְלֶאֱחֹז בְּשִׁמְלַת אִמּוֹ, אוֹ לְהוֹשִׁיט לָהּ יָד.
עַל כֵּן מֻתָּר בְּהֶחְלֵט לְחַנְּקוֹ בְּשַׁבָּת.

וְחָלְיוֹ הַיָּדוּעַ, כַּמְבֹאָר בִּדְבְרֵי הָרַ"ן שָׁם, אִם הוּא
יַנּוּקָא, הוּא בַּקָּנֶה אוֹ בַּוּשֶׁט, וּמִי יוֹשִׁיעוֹ, וַהֲרֵי אֵינוֹ
נִמְשָׁךְ זֶה הַתִּינוֹק כְּלָל לַחוּץ, וְזֶרְעוֹ וֶרֶק וּבִלְעוֹ, וְאוֹתָן
הָאֲכָלִין שֶׁבָּאוּ בְּכִיב הַקֵּבָה וּבָאִיצְטוּמָכָא,

כָּל זֶה נִתְקַע לוֹ בָּכָה, בָּאֶמְצַע, בַּמִּטְבָּח –
רַק בְּגַלַל עַקְמוּמִית–הָאַחְיָזָה שֶׁל אִמּוֹ בַּמַּחֲבַת.
עַל כֵּן מֻתָּר, מֻתָּר בְּהֶחְלֵט לְחַנְּקוֹ בְּשַׁבָּת.

כִּי הִנֵּה, עַכְשָׁו, אִמּוֹ הֻרָּה יוֹצֵאת
אַחֲרָיו בְּשַׁבָּת וּמְצַוַּחַת, בַּמַּחַט.
וּפְרוּשׁ מַחַט שֶׁעוֹשִׁין הַיִּשְׁמְעֵאלִים בִּדֵי לְנַקֵּב, כִּדְאָמְרִינָן
בְּפֶרֶק בַּמֶּה בְּהֵמָה. וְאָבִיו יוֹצֵא אַחֲרָיו וּמְצַעֵק בַּצַּלַּחַת.
כְּאִלּוּ מְכַוֵּן אֶת הָאֹכֶל שֶׁלּוֹ אֶל פִּי הַלֵּב,
וּמְחָרְרוֹ אַחַר כָּךְ כִּכְבָרָה, וּמְצַעֵק בְּנִי
בְּנִי, וּמְטִילוֹ לְפָנָיו לְפוּפֵי לְפוּפֵי בַּסָּדִין הַלָּבָן,
בְּנִי, בְּנִי, כְּמוֹ בְּגִוִיל, וּכְתוּבָה שָׁם גַּם לְמַעְלָה שְׁאֵלַת
תָּם. שֶׁשְּׁאֵלַת תָּם הִיא זוֹ הַמְּפֻנֶּיֶת לָחָכָם.
אֲבָל הֶחָכָם – זֶה שֶׁהָיָה פֹּה – נִמְלַט.
עַל כֵּן מֻתָּר בְּהֶחְלֵט לְחַנְּקוֹ בְּשַׁבָּת.

הוֹ מִי שֶׁעָנָה לְשָׂרָה וְרִבְקָה וְרָחֵל וְלֵאָה –
בַּמֶּה אִם כֵּן עַתָּה אִמּוֹ יוֹצְאָה?
וּמִי שֶׁעָנָה לַחֲנַנְיָה וּלְמִישָׁאֵל וְלַעֲזַרְיָה –

בַּמֶּה עַתָּה אָבִיו יוֹצֵא?
וּמִי שֶׁעָנָה אֶת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ – הֵיאַךְ
יַעֲנֶה אוֹתָנוּ עַתָּה? מַסְפִּיק לוֹ. תִּרְאֶה, אִם
אוֹתוֹ יַנּוּקָא, כְּשֶׁאֵלָה עֲטוּפָה
לוֹ, בְּגִוִיל, לְפוּפֵי לְפוּפֵי,
וְהַכֹּל נַעֲשָׂה שָׁם
כָּרָאוּי, לְפִי כְּלָלֵי הַדָּת,
הֲלֹא מֻתָּר לְחַנְּקוֹ בְּשַׁבָּת!

דָּא עָקָא, כֵּיצַד בִּכְלָל מְחַנְּקִין אוֹתוֹ? אִם הוּא
לְמָשָׁל תִּינוֹק יְהוּדִי בְּשַׁבָּת? שֶׁזֶּה נוֹטֵל מִכָּאן
וְזֶה נוֹטֵל מִכָּאן וְהַתִּינוֹק נָתוּן בֵּינֵיהֶם, כְּלוֹמַר בָּרֶוַח
בֵּין אָבִיו לְאִמּוֹ, בֵּין שָׁמַיִם לָאָרֶץ, בֵּין חֹל לְקֹדֶשׁ, בֵּין
יִשְׂרָאֵל לָעַמִּים, וְהוּא, כְּלוֹמַר, הַתִּינוֹק הָרַךְ, הָיָה בַּמְּכוֹנִית
נֹאמַר, רַק בֶּן ג׳ יָמִים, וְהוּא כְּמָנָח לְבַדּוֹ בְּקֻפְסָה, כְּמָן בַּסַּל –
וְהוּא הַפַּת. עַל כֵּן מֻתָּר בְּהֶחְלֵט לְחַנְּקוֹ בְּשַׁבָּת.

וְכָךְ, מָנָח הַיַּנּוּקָא שֶׁלָּנוּ, לְפוּפֵי לְפוּפֵי

לְפוּפִי, בְּסָדִין, וְהוּא רַךְ וּמְטֻלְטָל, וְנָע בְּעוֹדוֹ
בְּאוֹתָהּ עֲגָלָה, כְּשֶׁכּוֹבְרִין אוֹתוֹ הַחַיִּים,
הַחַיִּים הַקְּדוֹשִׁים, בִּכְבָרָה, וְעוֹטְפִין אוֹתוֹ,
כְּמוֹ בְּסֵפֶר תּוֹרָה, וּמְטַלְטְלִין אוֹתוֹ,

כְּמוֹ סִימָן שְׁאֵלָה, לְנַשֵּׁק וּלְנַשֵּׁק,
עַד שֶׁיֵּצְאוּ מִמֶּנּוּ כָּל אוֹתָן
הַיְרָקֵי הַמָּרִים,
וְכָל אוֹתָן הַמַּרְעִין בִּישִׁין,
וְיִתְהַפְּכוּ בּוֹ בְּנֵי מֵעָיו,

וְאָז הֲרֵי מֻתָּר – מִסְבָּרָא פְּשׁוּטָה:
אִם הוּא בֵּן, יַעֲטְפוּהוּ שׁוּב בְּסָדִין מְקֻשָּׁט,
וּלְפִי הָרַשְׁבָּ"א גַּם אִם הוּא בַּת – הֲרֵי מֻתָּר.
מֻתָּר לְכֻלָּם לְחַנְּקוֹ בְּשַׁבָּת.[8]

The title of this poem claims it is a commentary on a chapter of the Talmud. In fact, it is much more than that; Kosman engages in an extended ironic meditation on several Talmudic passages. The absurdity of these meditations raises questions about the authority of the Talmud itself and the authenticity of the institution of Jewish law in the modern world. The poem begins, as indicated in the title, by quoting a *baraita* from B. Shabbat, "מותר לחנק בשבת," "It is permissible to *l'chanek* on Shabbat" (Shabbat 66b). The meaning of "*l'chanek*" is not immediately clear. In context, it refers to a medical procedure, but as Kosman explains in a footnote, Talmudic commentators differed on the exact nature of the medical procedure intended. Rashi believed it involved hanging someone by his or her head in order to fix a problem with the vertebrae of the neck. The Tosafot understood it as the application of pressure to the veins of the neck for the

8. *סידור אלטרנטיבי*, p. 66.

purpose of healing. But in normal usage, "*l'chanek*" means "to strangle," and the irony of strangling serving as a medical procedure is central to the poem.

Kosman provides a number of cases of people whom it is permitted to strangle on Shabbat. In each case it is not clear whether the strangling serves as a treatment, a mercy killing, or a violent attack. A case that Kosman treats at length is that of the person suffering from "אישתא צמירתא," an inflammation or fever discussed several times in the Talmud. B. Shabbat 67a describes the procedure for treating this affliction:

> R. Johanan said: For an inflammatory fever ["אישתא צמירתא"] let one take an all-iron knife, go whither thorn-hedges are to be found, and tie a white twisted thread thereto. On the first day he must slightly notch it, and say, "and the angel of the Lord appeared unto him, etc." (Ex. 3:2). On the following day he [again] makes a small notch and says, "And Moses said, I will turn aside now, and see, etc." (Ex. 3:3). The next day he makes [another] small notch and says, "And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see" (Ex. 3:4).... And when he has recited his verses he pulls [the bush] down and says thus: "O thorn, O thorn, not because thou art higher than all other trees did the Holy One, blessed be He, cause His Shechinah to rest upon thee, but because thou art lower than all other trees did He cause His Shechinah to rest upon thee. And even as thou sawest the fire [kindled] for Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah and didst flee from before them, so look upon the fire [i.e., fever.] of So-and-so and flee from him."

The meanings of the iron knife, the white thread, and the notches are obscure. But the relationship of אישתא צמירתא to the burning bush of Ex. 3 and the three young men of Dan. 3 is clear. In Ex. 3, the burning bush is not consumed by God's fire. In Dan. 3, when the three young men are cast into the fiery furnace by Nebuchadnezzar, they are unharmed. Here, the sufferer hopes that God will miraculously protect him from the fire that burns within him. Kosman poetic treatment of this procedure is somewhat different:

> And he takes an all-iron knife,
> And he goes to a place where there is a bush,
> And he cuts it a little,

> And he goes on and cuts it a little more,
> And he goes on and cuts it a little more and more,
> Until everything oozes out, and everything emerges from inside,
> All those kinds of bitter greens,
> And kinds of sorrow, and kinds of plagues.
>
> And it is permissible to strangle him on Shabbat
> ...

Kosman's treatment of the Talmudic ritual removes the biblical references. In the poem, the only indication that the bush is meant to represent the burning bush of Ex. 3 is the use of the relatively rare word, "סנה." Instead, Kosman focuses on the violent cutting of the plant. The cutting is a kind of bloodletting, allowing all of the evil and negativity to "ooze" out. The "אישתא צמירתא" takes on larger significance than a medical condition affecting an individual. It represents all of the evils afflicting humanity; as Kosman relates in the previous stanza, it is the "emissary of the Angel of Death." The poem asks implicitly whether the Talmud and the Rabbinic discourse provide sufficient means to address this kind of affliction. The answer is equivocal: "strangling," the cure that may also kill.

Despite the fact that the poem is framed as the commentary of an "ancient Ashkenazic sage," at several points Kosman transgresses the boundaries of the text. In a characteristically postmodern turn, he allows characters from the Talmud to step out of their context and into the modern world.

> ...And a baby
> Comes out after them from Tractate Shabbat page *samech vav* side *bet,*
> And cries and cries, from between those two, *l'fufei l'fufei l'fufei yanuka,*
> And the meaning of *l'fufei yanuka* is that a baby whose ribs have come out and shifted
> From their places or whose limbs have scattered and flown from the car in all directions
> Afterwards his parents wrap him in a gathered sheet.

And it is permissible, of course permissible to strangle him on Shabbat.

The source for this part of the poem is another *baraita* from Shabbat 66b, which states that another of the medical procedures that may be performed on Shabbat is "לפופי ינוקא." The nature of this treatment is generally understood as the wrapping of an infant in cloth (swaddling) in order to prevent or correct the dislocation of his or her developing organs. Kosman imagines a more terrible modern meaning, a baby ejected from a car in an accident, whose severed limbs are gathered and bound in a sheet. As he does with "strangling," Kosman translates the medical procedure in the Talmud into a ritual action that provides no healing. The procedure of the Talmud is rhetorical and mystical but lacks any connection to the real-life needs of the people Kosman describes. Kosman also takes this opportunity to highlight the sexism of the Talmud. While the Talmud allows a baby boy to be swaddled on Shabbat, it is only as an afterthought that a later commentator (Kosman identifies him as Rashba, Rabbi Solomon ben Adret of 13th c. Spain) extends this permission to baby girls. Kosman emphasizes this point by repeating it in the penultimate line of the poem, and it is consistent with his academic interest in gender issues in the Talmud. And here, once again, "strangling" on Shabbat is used as a refrain, a leniency whose meaning and efficacy are in considerable doubt.

Towards the end of the poem, the address changes from explication to an apostrophe to God.

> O He who answered Sarah and Rebecca and Rachel and Leah –
> In what then shall his mother go forth now?
> And He who answered Hananiah and Mishael and Azariah –
> In what shall his father go forth now?
> And He who answered our Fathers – How
> Will He answer us now? He's had enough. Look, if
> This infant, as if a question wrapped around

Him, in parchment, *l'fufei l'fufei*,
And everything is done there
Appropriately, according to the rules of religion,
Is it not permissible to strangle him on Shabbat!

The question, "In what then shall his mother go forth now?" is a reference to the name of the chapter of Tractate Shabbat also referenced in the title. In the Talmud, the question concerns what it is permissible to wear on Shabbat, without transgressing the prohibition on carrying. Here, the question is generic, symbolizing all of the dilemmas posed by modern life. The poem addresses God as the one who answered the prayers of the Matriarchs, since the prayers of the Matriarchs were primarily for offspring, and the care of children is central to the poem. It addresses God as the one who answered Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah because, as we have seen, the Talmud associates their miraculous survival in the fiery furnace to recovery from אישתא צמירתא, the burning ailment. The poem asks the question, "How will He answer us now?" In the cases of those mentioned, God answered prayers through miracles. After miracles ceased, Jews were left to determine proper conduct through the interpretation of revelatory texts. If this is so, the poem argues, then as long as appropriate halakhic procedures are followed, the conclusion can be relied upon—in this case, that the infant can be "strangled" on Shabbat.

But this conclusion casts into question the stability of the entire system. "Strangling" on Shabbat is a procedure with multiple and contradictory meanings, and it is not at all clear that its permissibility is a positive conclusion. Thus, the hermeneutic system really does not provide reliable divine guidance in answer to modern questions. This seems to be the underlying theme of the poem. The Talmudic/halakhic discourse

produces results that are ineffective, absurd, or grotesque. The repeated images of strangling and of injured babies symbolize the violence done to humanity by strict allegiance to the textual tradition. Another voice, a moral voice, is required to assure that the results of the legal tradition are in accord with the dignity due to humanity.

Kosman's use of Talmud texts in this poem is rich and provocative. As in his academic work, he exposes some of the assumptions that function underneath the surface of the legal discourse. He also models a non-Orthodox approach to halakhic texts. He is engaged and interested in the ideas of the Talmud for what they say about the human condition and the human relationship with God. He embraces the ambiguity of the tradition, but he also offers critique where the tradition diverges from his values.

As in many of his poems that make extensive use of Jewish texts as source material, Kosman provides footnotes to this poem that identify some of the sources and explain obscure terms that are essential to understanding the poem. (Here he explains the phrase "לפופי ינוקא," which would be unintelligible to the average speaker of Modern Hebrew.) Interestingly, there are numerous references to Jewish texts and ideas that Kosman does not include in his footnotes and are thus inaccessible to a large majority of readers. Kosman gives the reader some access to his world of ideas, but not complete access. His obvious expertise in these sources serves as validation of his perspectives on the tradition. His critiques of tradition draw authenticity from Kosman's rare command of Jewish texts.

In his use of Jewish texts as source material for his poetry, Kosman also looks beyond the Talmud to later genres of Jewish literature. In "שלושה סעיפים חדשים לשולחן הערוך," Kosman builds a poem on the structure and idiom of halakhic literature.

סעיף א

הִנֵּה, מִדִּין מַסְרֵק עֲדַיִן לֹא יָצָאתְ,
מִדִּין הַשַּׁעֲרָה, מִדִּין קֶלָּא, מִדִּין חֲמָרָא,
מִדִּין בִּטּוּל, מִדִּין חָדָשׁ, מִדִּין הַקַּשׁ, מִדִּין גְּבָבָה,
וּמֵאִסּוּר פְּלִיטָה בְּחֹם הַסִּיר, וּבִקְרֵרַת הַתַּאֲוָה.
כִּי שׁוּם דָּבָר מַמָּשׁ
עֲדַיִן לֹא יָצָא מִמְּךָ.

סעיף ב

וּמֵאִסּוּר הָרְתִיחָה, וְהָרְצִיחָה, מִדִּין הַשַּׁעֲרָה בַּפֶּה, בַּיָּד,
מִדִּין הַבָּלָנָן, מִדִּין כּוּתִי וַעֲרָבִי וְגוֹי וַאֲסוּפִי, סוּמָא, לַבְקָן, גַּמָּד.
מִדִּין הָרֹק–בַּלַּב, מִדִּין הַגַּעְגּוּעַ, מִדִּין הַזֶּרַע שֶׁבַּבִּים,

סעיף ג

עַל מִי אַתָּה עוֹבֵד? צֵא צֵא מַר בְּלִיַּעַל, בֶּן חָצוּף –
בְּיָד אֶחָד גּוֹמֵר – וּבַשְּׁנִיָּה מַכְנִיס! הַכֹּל נִשְׁפָּךְ לְךָ,
מִדִּין קֶלָּא, מִדִּין חֲמָרָא – מֵעוֹר הַגְּבֵלוֹת שֶׁבּוֹ בְּשַׁלְתָּ,

מִדִּין סוֹרֵר, מִדִּין מוֹרֵד, מִדִּין הַגַּעַל–נָפֶשׁ–בַּפְּרָצוּף.
מִדִּין קְדֵרָה. וְטַעַם רַע.
מִכְּלַל אָדָם בּוֹרֵד עֲדַיִן לֹא יָצָאתְ.[9]

The intertextuality in this poem is different from that in the previous poems; this poem is not based on any specific passage in the *Shulchan Aruch*. Rather, Kosman uses the meaning inherent in the genre and characteristic language of the *Shulchan Aruch* as the context for the poem. Like the *Shulchan Aruch*, the poem is divided into brief, discrete sections, and it seems to describe legal categories. It incorporates the vocabulary of halakhic literature: "דין," "יצא," "קלא," "חמרא," "אסור." Kosman relies on the reader's

9. *פירוש חדש בס"ד*, p. 55.

familiarity with the conventions of this genre and ability to recognize when the poet subverts them. While halakhic literature uses an impersonal third person, the poem is a second person address, speaking to the reader directly in a way halakhic literature cannot. Alongside phrases like "דין סורר" and "דין מורד," which could appear in a traditional texts, Kosman imagines "דין הגעגוע" and "דין הבלגן," phrases that carry implicit tension. In the case of "דין הגעגוע," the tension is between the expected subject of law—facts and actions—and the expansive emotional valences of "longing." In the case of "דין הבלגן," the tension arises from the phrase itself, since "בלגן" is a recent slang word, obviously out of context in a *Shulchan Aruch*-style legal text.

The best example of Kosman juxtaposing his source material with a modern idiom is in his use of the verb, "לצאת." In traditional legal usage, "לצאת" means to discharge a duty. Thus, the opening line of the poem, "הנה, מדין מסרק עדין לא יצאת" means "Look, you still have not fulfilled (לא יצאת) the comb jurisprudence." Putting aside for a moment the strangeness of that statement, its use of "לצאת" is consistent with what is expected in a legal text. This contrasts with the closing lines of the stanza, "כי שום דבר ממש \ עדין לא יצא ממך" ("Because nothing much / has come out of you yet.") Here, "לצאת" is used in the colloquial expression, "יצא ממך," which means to be productive or successful. Why is the addressee of the poem unable to meet the requirements of the various types of laws listed in the first stanza? It is because he has not made anything of himself, a link the poet suggests through the repetition of the verb. "לצאת" appears again in the final line of the poem in yet a different construction. "מכלל אדם בודד עדין לא יצאת," "From the lonely man category you still have not emerged."

Here, "לצאת" has its standard meaning, "to exit," but since what is being exited is a "כלל," a category, it is reminiscent of the phrase, "יוצא מן הכלל," meaning "extraordinary." With that phrase in mind, the line could even be read, "Lonely man, you are still not extraordinary." The line is equivocal, depending on whether "כלל" and "לצאת" are read with their traditional halakhic meanings or their modern connotations. This is not just word play. Kosman demonstrates for us that our understanding of ourselves and the world is based on our ability to read meaning in context. The outlook of the poem is negative; the addressee is unable to fulfill the requirements of this unique halakhic discourse, and as a result, remains an isolated individual. But there is also an element of hope. In each of these key lines utilizing "לצאת," it is paired with "עדין," "not yet." The poem imagines the possibility that these difficulties—and the integration of the traditional and modern discourses—may be accomplished in the future.

All of this is apprehensible without dissecting most of the phrases of the poem, which are quite obscure. What are "דין קלא," "דין חמרא," "דין חדש," "דין הקש," etc.? One need not posit a meaning for each of these in order to grasp the poem's main themes. Kosman's phrases represent a melding of the traditional halakhic discourse with modern language and concerns. In the second stanza, for example, Kosman's evocation of the blind man, the albino, and the dwarf—all operative categories in halakhic discourse—is symbolic of the poet's concern for diversity and an enlightened reappraisal of the Jewish traditions concerning different types of people.

The integration of the halakhic discourse and modern values is not easily accomplished. The difficulty is expressed at the beginning of the third stanza: "Who are

you fooling? Go, Go, Mr. Belial, you insolent." Belial (בליעל) is a name for an evil demon, but it literally means "useless" ("בלי יעל"). A part of the speaker feels that it is futile and insolent to attempt the kind of integration that the poem tries to enact. And as the poem concludes, the integration has not been achieved. The addressee remains a "man alone," perhaps unable to participate fully in either the traditional or the modern discourse. This is the condition that Kosman's poetry attempts to alleviate. In this poem, as in the others we have seen, Kosman reads traditional texts in the full light of his modern perspective. He does not wish to abandon the traditional texts, but rather to achieve a poetic synthesis, in which the meaning of the traditional text is preserved and transformed.

Some of Kosman's most elusive poems arise out of his interaction with the texts and ideas of Jewish mysticism. In "בגן שלך," Kosman uses a selection from *Sefer Yetzirah*, a mystical discourse on cosmology and cosmogony from the Rabbinic period, to reflect on the relationships between Adam, Eve, and God in the Garden of Eden. Kosman uses the mystical doctrine of God's unity in distinct emanations ("*sefirot*") to explore his familiar themes of the distinctness and unity of lovers and the ability of lovers to achieve unity with God. Kosman's most complex dialogue with Jewish mysticism, however, is found in the poem, "סוד נשיקת יעקב לרחל."

הִנֵּה סוֹד נְשִׁיקַת רָחֵל, הֵן
תֵּדְעִי, מנצפ"ך שֶׁלָּךְ נוֹלָד אֶצְלִי בְּסוֹד מַלְכוּת.
אָמְנָם שָׁרְשָׁם, אֲהוּבָתִי, לְמַעְלָה, הַרְחֵק, בְּעוֹלְמוֹת אבי"ע,
וְהוּא יוֹרֵד לְאַטּוֹ מִשָּׁם אֶל יְסוֹד הֵא אָבְּבָּעוֹת,
דַּקִּיקוֹת וַעֲדִינוֹת שֶׁלָּךְ –

עַתָּה, הַסְכַּתִּי הֵיטֵב, רָחֵל, וְאֶגַּל לָךְ סוֹדִי:

שֹׁרֶשׁ הַנְּשִׁיקָה מִן הַפֶּה הָעֶלְיוֹן,
(כַּטַּעַם הָרָמוּז בְּ"וַיָּבֹא יַעֲקֹב בֵּית–אֵל").

וְלַפֶּה הָעֶלְיוֹן נֶחֱנוּ
חֲמִשָּׁה מוֹצָאוֹת: רְאִי, שְׁלֹשָׁה מֵהֶם
חֲלוּקִים בְּאוֹתִיּוֹת אַרְבָּעָה,
וּשְׁנַיִם חֲלוּקִים בְּאוֹתִיּוֹת
חָמֵשׁ חָמֵשׁ,
(וְסִימָנָם אחה"ע בומ"ף
גיכ"ק דטלנ"ת זסשר"ץ).

כָּעֵת אַתְּ יְכוֹלָה לִרְאוֹת מִן הַחַלּוֹן
בְּאוֹר הַלַּיְלָה, בְּעֵינַיִךְ הָעֲצוּמוֹת,
אֶת יִפְעַת הָעֲטָרָה שֶׁל הָעֵץ,
אֶת הָעַלְוָה, אֶת הָאוֹר הָאֱלֹהִי
הַמַּשְׁפִּיעַ טוּב רַב כָּל–כָּךְ עַל
כָּל הַיְקוּם,

עַלְוַת הָאוֹר – שֶׁהִיא, כַּיָּדוּעַ לַמְּבִינִים,
מְשֹׁרֶשׁ הֵא מוֹצָאוֹת הַפֶּה – הַפֶּה הַהוֹלֵךְ
לְאִטּוֹ וּמִתְרוֹקֵן, בְּסוֹד
סִיהֲרָא, בְּסוֹד מַלְכוּת,
שֶׁהוּא בְּחִינַת דְּלִית לֵיהּ
מִנַּרְמֵיהּ
כְּלוּם.

הוֹ! הָאוֹר הַהוּא, הָאוֹר הַנִּזְכָּר,
הַבָּא לְמַתֵּק אֶת חָזְקָם
וְקָשְׁיָם שֶׁל דִּינֵינוּ,
וְהַכֹּל כֹּה עָדִין וָרָךְ,
וְשָׁרוּי בְּנַנַּהּ מַלְכוּת, רָחֵל,
וְעָטוּף מִלְּבַד וּמִלְּגַו
בְּסוֹד הַמַּיִם, הָאֲוִיר,
הָאֵשׁ, הֶעָפָר.

כִּי כָּעֵת בְּבֹא קֵץ הַגָּלוּת, רָחֵל,
עִם תִּגְבְּרֶת סְבַךְ הֶסְתֵּר הַפָּנִים הַמַּר,

עַת נִתַּק מִשָּׁרְשׁוֹ הַסָּמָ"ךְ מֵ"ם,
וּבָא לְכַלּוֹת וּלְהַדְיחַ,
וְנִגְנַז מֵעוֹלְמוֹת אבי"ע
טַעַם הַזִּוּוּג הַשָּׁלֵם –

הֲרֵי לֹא תוּכַל רַק תִּפְאֶרֶת שֶׁלְּךָ
לְהִזָּדֵוֵג בִּשְׁלֵמוּת גְּמוּרָה
עִם יְסוֹד מַלְכוּת שֶׁבִּי –

לְכָךְ אֵין לִתְמֹהַּ
כְּשֶׁמִּן הָאֲמָה עַד הַזְּרוֹעַ,
עָלַיִךְ עַתָּה לְבַד לְהַמְתִּיק אֶת דִּינִי,
עַכְשָׁו, עַכְשָׁו, כְּשֶׁהִיא יָד חֲמָה וְתַמָּה,
וְאַתְּ כָּל–כָּךְ עִמִּי,
עִמִּי, עִמִּי – הֵן אַתְּ לְבַד, בְּסוֹד
בְּרִית–נְשָׁמָה, וְאַתְּ
יָפָה כָּל–כָּךְ עַתָּה, לְאַחַר
שְׁנוֹת הַשָּׁבַע, הִנֵּה,
הִנֵּה אַתְּ עוֹלָה וְנוֹאָה,

בְּסוֹד מַיִם נוֹקְבִין, וּפֹה
בְּחָרָן, אַתְּ אֲפֵלָה, וְאַתְּ
הַנְּקֻבָּה, וַאֲנִי בּוֹהֵק כְּגָבַע,

בְּסוֹד הַדָּלֶת וְהַגִּימֶל וְהַהֵא
הַמִּשְׁתּוֹקְקִים מִמֶּנִּי אֵלַיִךְ, וְאוֹת
הַחֵית – הַחַיִת,
זוֹ הָעוֹמֶדֶת
כְּשֶׁכְּלָה רוֹעֶדֶת,

וּכְנֶם אֱלֹהֵי בּוֹעֶרֶת,

שֶׁצָּרִיךְ גַּם אֲנִי אֲלֵיהֶם לְעִתִּים –
כַּיָּדוּעַ הֵיטֵב הֵיטֵב לַמְּבִינִים:
בְּסוֹד שְׁנַיִם טְמִירִין,
וּבְסוֹד הַתְּנוּעָה הַחוֹזֶרֶת,
וְאוּלָם, בִּהְיוֹת כֶּתֶר
מַלְכוּת שֶׁלְּךָ לְמַעְלָה,

בּוֹהֵק וְזוֹהֵר וְיָפֶה לְהַלֵּל,

וּבִהְיוֹת הַבִּינָה שֶׁלָּךְ
שְׁלֵמָה וְזַכָּה, לְמַטָּה,
בְּסוֹד יַעֲקֹב, הַפְּצָלוֹת, הַצֹּאן,
הַמַּקֵּל –

הִנֵּה, אֲנִי, אֲנִי בְּאַהֲבָתִי
הַשְּׁלֵמָה, אֲנִי, בְּאַהֲבָתִי
אֵלַיִךְ, אֲנִי,
יַעֲקֹב–יִשְׂרָאֵל,

יוֹרֵד וּבָא אֵלַיִךְ,
וְכָנָף שֶׁלִּי בְּכָנָף שֶׁלָּךְ
נוֹגַעַת, רָחֵל,

וְהַכֹּל, הַכֹּל,
עַל דֶּרֶךְ הַתִּקּוּן –

זֶה הַתִּקּוּן
הַנִּרְמָז לְעֵיל.[10]

[See *40 Love Poems*, p. 56]

This poem takes the form of a mystical commentary on Gen. 35, in which Jacob and his family leave Haran to return to Canaan. Although Kosman mentions in a footnote that ideas for the poem originate in an obscure book by a 16th-17th ninaem lluf eht taht esnes evisavrep eht msicitsym htiw serahs tI .secruos esrevid morf saedi dna slobmys lacitsym htiw desufni si meop eht ,rehtaR .yltcerid txet lacitsym yna sserdda ton seod meop eht ,citsym nailatI yrutnec-סוד ב ב יפולז פמוונ פ .פודד ופיד במ י נו פטו ז "—the secret, mystical interpretation of the biblical text, in the four-part Rabbinic hermeneutic represented by the acronym, "פרדס." Twice the poem punctuates an assertion with the

10. *ארבעים שירי אהבה*, p. 56.

statement, "כידוע למבינים" ("as is known to those who understand"). The special role of "those who understand" is characteristic of the mystical tradition, whose secrets were traditionally handed down from teacher to student and protected from general dissemination. Kosman's adoption of mysticism's rhetoric of secrecy and mystery allows him to treat the relationship between the lovers—Jacob and Rachel—as possessing a significance beyond normal human comprehension. As we have seen, this is consistent with his reverent attitude toward love relationships throughout his poetry.

Kosman's borrowing from mysticism is not limited to esotericism. He also incorporates several examples of letter mysticism, the idea that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and their combinations possess cosmic power. The poem begins,

> Here is the secret of Rachel's kiss, so
> know, your *M'NaTZPaCH* was born with me through the secret of *Malchut*.
> Indeed, their root, my love, is above, distant, in the worlds of *AVIA*,
> and it descends from there slowly to the *Yesod* of five fingers,
> slim and gentle of yours –

Kosman's provides footnotes that partially explain his use of obscure terms. "מנצפ"ך" ("*M'NaTZPaCH*") is a word formed by combining all of the letters in the Hebrew alphabet that have a special form when they appear at the end of the word. Kosman does not elaborate on the significance Jewish mystics attributed to these letters. "אבי"ע" ("*AVIA*") is an acronym for "אצילות," "בריאה," "יצירה," "עשייה," four levels of existence, each emanating from the previous level, a cosmology described in the Zohar. In addition to these, the stanza refers to two mystical *sefirot*, emanations that represent attributes of God, "*Malchut*" and "*Yesod*." The *sefirot* have been interpreted in numerous ways, but it is relevant to note that "*Malchut*" (also known as "*Shechinah*") is often associated with

the feminine aspect of God, while "*Yesod*" is often associated with the phallus and God's masculinity. The mystical significance of letters is emphasized by Kosman's use of the letter "הא" in place of the normal word for "five." It seems unlikely that this stanza is meant to express a coherent doctrine. Rather, it sets the tone of mystical speculation, and it establishes the relationship between the lovers and the relationship of both to God. The lovers are bound by the mystical "מנצפ"ך" which descends from the realm of the *sefirot* down to the sensuous hand of Rachel. The double meaning of "יסוד" as a *sefirah* and as merely the "base" of the fingers represents how the world of the lovers is infused with cosmic meaning.

The secret of Jacob's kiss of Rachel is revealed in the second stanza: "The source of the kiss is the heavenly mouth." The poem finds this interpretation hidden in Gen. 35:6: "Jacob came to *Beit Eil*." According to this interpretation, "*Beit Eil*" does not merely refer to God's presence in the place, but to God's directly involvement in what takes place there. Jacob and Rachel are not independent entities, but rather parts of a divine system, and the relationship between them mirrors and perpetuates relationships between aspects of God and the cosmos.

From here, the poem introduces the mystical idea of a divine light that infuses creation. Rachel is able to see this light "with [her] closed eyes," a light that "affects so very much good on / the whole universe." This divine light stands in opposition to the legalistic norms of the mainstream Jewish tradition. Its purpose is "למתק את חזקם \ וקשים של דינינו," "to sweeten the strength / and harshness of our rulings." This suggests a source of mitigating truth that is not captured by the halakhic tradition. The existence of such a

truth that is directly accessible to lovers is theme that appears in many of Kosman's poems.

The poem repeatedly expresses the cosmic significance of the connection between Jacob and Rachel. They represent *sefirot* whose unity is essential to the existence of God and the creation of the universe. The poem is also full of "secrets," obscure phrases and passages that are difficult to assimilate to a rational reading. At the end of the poem, however, the discourse changes dramatically. The language is direct and comprehensible:

> Behold, I, I in my complete
> love, I, in my love
> of you, I,
> Jacob-Israel,
>
> come down to you,
> and my wing touches your
> wing, Rachel,
>
> and everything, everything,
> is by way of *tikkun* –
>
> The same *tikkun*
> hinted at above.

The image of Jacob and Rachel with wings might stem from their connection with the *Shechinah*, which is often described as having wings. In Jacob's total love of Rachel, not only does Jacob become representative of the whole nation as "Jacob-Israel," both Jacob and Rachel participate in divinity. All of this is "by way of *tikkun*." Unlike most of the obscure mysticism of the poem, "*tikkun*" is a fairly well-known doctrine. In Lurianic kabbalah, following the creation of the world, the vessels that contained the divine light shattered, scattering the light throughout the created world. "*Tikkun*" refers to the

process of uncovering and gathering the light, which will return the cosmos to a state of wholeness. By ending the poem with the reference to *tikkun*, Kosman clearly expresses the cosmic significance of the relationship between Jacob and Rachel. Their kiss—their intimate relationship—is part of the mystical relationship between aspects of God, between God and creation, and the ongoing process of perfecting the world. As he does in so many poem, Kosman elevates the romantic relationship to a transcendent experience of divinity.

Through his deep engagement with such a broad spectrum of Jewish texts, Kosman opens up a rich avenue for the development of Modern Hebrew poetry. He demonstrates the possibility of a dialogue with numerous Jewish texts similar to the long and fruitful dialogue Hebrew poetry has had with the Hebrew Bible. In particular, Kosman shows that the Mishnah, Talmud, and other halakhic texts associated with Orthodox Judaism can be used as sources for non-Orthodox Jewish poetry. In addition, Kosman models a number of ways that poems can make use of a source text. As in "אשת פוטיפר," poems can offer interpretation and elaboration of the text. Often characters and texts are transposed into the modern world, the juxtaposition serving as a commentary on both the text and the modern setting. In poems such as "מצוות הנשרפין" and "פירוש למסכת שבת..," Kosman adopts the discourse of Rabbinic texts, and he manipulates that discourse for poetic effect and to make a statement about his source texts. The poet can also find meaning in the genre of a text, as Kosman does with "שלושה סעיפים חדשים לשולחן הערוך," which does not actually reference in significant part any specific source text from the *Shulchan Aruch*. Finally, the poet may draw vocabulary and images from a wide body of

Jewish literature, as Kosman does with his poems that are infused with Jewish mysticism. While they do not refer to any particular text, these poems are clearly intertextual, commenting on and utilizing a universe of concepts unique to a particular strand of Jewish thought and literature.

The use of Jewish texts in the poetry of Admiel Kosman adds to the richness of Modern Hebrew poetry, but it has perhaps even greater potential to contribute to modern Jewish thought. Kosman does not merely use Jewish texts to create poetry; his poems are a sophisticated conversation with the source texts. He interprets texts, translates their ideas into the modern context, and engages in ethical criticism. This is particularly valuable in the case of Rabbinic texts. In modern Judaism, engagement with Rabbinic texts—particularly the Talmud and halakhic texts—is nearly the exclusive province of the Orthodox. Kosman's poems represent engagement with these texts outside the ideological framework of Orthodoxy. For non-Orthodox Jews, Kosman's poems are an authentic and complex means of engagement with this indispensable part of Jewish intellectual and literary history. Kosman's expertise in Rabbinic texts and Rabbinic discourse, combined with his modern sensibility and poetic talent, allow him to find meaning and create meaning in Jewish texts that have attracted little serious interest among non-Orthodox Jews. In this way, Kosman is not only a masterful poet, but an insightful teacher of Judaism.

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