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WOMAN AS METAPHOR: *MASHAL* AND EPISTEMIC CONTROL

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I. Introduction

"Illness," writes Susan Sontag in her classic essay *Illness as Metaphor*, "is *not* a metaphor. Yet it is hardly possible to take up one's residence in the kingdom of the ill unprejudiced by the lurid metaphors with which it has been landscaped."[1] Dana Pulver's entry in *Dirshuni* makes a similar claim about women and their position in rabbinic literature. "Women," Pulver might say, "are not metaphors. Yet it is hardly possible to encounter women within the kingdom of the rabbis unprejudiced by the lurid metaphors through which they have been rendered." Pulver's midrash takes as its starting text the coda to God's curse to the first woman, after she and the first man, encouraged by the serpent, in Genesis 3:16, eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge: "And your desire shall be for your man, and he shall rule over you." Noting the shared root of *yimshol*—"he shall rule over"—and *mashal*—metaphor, analogy, or parable—Pulver identifies a mechanism by which this new power disparity was produced

[1] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1978), 3–4.

in the series of metaphors the classical rabbis made of women. To drive the point home, she then curates rabbinic metaphors for women—including those that, on their own, have been read more favorably—such that it is impossible to ignore their power to degrade.

What are we to make of this interpretive move? After all, attention to rabbinic metaphors and the ways they illustrate and reinforce patriarchal power, or at least aspire to do so, is hardly new. Indeed, rabbinic metaphors for women and the range of possible relations to them have proved a rich vein for feminist scholarship. Notable treatments include Charlotte Fonrobert's analysis of the extended "woman as house" metaphor in tractate *Niddah,* Cynthia Baker's further treatment of gendered architectural metaphors, and Gail Labovitz's treatment of the metaphors of acquisition in rabbinic discourse on marriage.[2] Yet Pulver's insight into the shared root of "rule" and "metaphor," I argue, tells us something important—not merely about the *specific* metaphors made of women in the classical rabbinic canon (and, not incidentally, their antecedents in the Prophetic literature), but about the *activity* itself of making metaphors of another.

The shared lexical root of *yimshol* and *mashal* serves to remind us that to make a metaphor of another—whether that particular metaphor itself is derogatory, complimentary, or ostensibly neutral—is to already claim epistemic authority over them. This is not only relevant to rabbinic texts or to Jewish contexts. It has profound implications for any situation where those in power scapegoat a minoritized population or claim that that population is unqualified to define themselves and their experiences. Attending to this kind of claim—whether we find it in classical rabbinic metaphors for women or in present-day metaphors for a range of gender minorities—is key to understanding the work that any given metaphor might actually *do.* Yet Pulver also demonstrates that these power claims

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[2] Charlotte Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); Cynthia Baker, *Rebuilding the House of Israel: Architectures of Gender in Jewish Antiquity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002); Gail Labovitz, *Marriage and Metaphor: Constructions of Gender in Rabbinic Literature* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2009).

can cut in multiple directions. To interrogate them is also to collect tools for taking epistemic power back.

II. What Metaphor Does, and What Midrash Might Do With It

To metaphorize is to exert epistemic power. To make a metaphor of someone or something is to exercise power over it. Metaphors are acts of comparison, acts of association, and acts of naming. More obliquely, yet perhaps more fundamentally, I argue that metaphors are acts of definition, or at least of characterization. To be able to explicate someone or something, and to do so by way of comparison, means that one believes one knows at some basic level who or what that object is. It means one assumes one comprehends—in both the sense of understanding and in the more basic sense of *taking hold of*, grasping—one's object of metaphor enough to explain what it is and how it works by comparing it to something one *also* assumes one grasps well enough toward this end.[3]

To metaphorize someone is thus to claim that one knows them well enough to at least partially define them; sometimes, it may even become a claim that one's knowledge of those of whom one makes a metaphor supersedes their own knowledge of themselves. In some cases, to metaphorize is to say to one's object, "It is *my* account of who and what you are, what you are like, what you do, where you fit, and who and what you go along with, that shall be authoritative. And it is *my* account, therefore, that shall shape how others know you." In all cases, to metaphorize is to claim that one grasps one's object well enough to use it, at least in limited circumstances, to one's own epistemic and explanatory ends. And, as Sontag reminds us, to make a metaphor of something or someone can also mean one is pointing to what to *do with* it: writing of modern "master" disease metaphors like those of tuberculosis and cancer, she notes that these are fundamentally polemical and "are used to propose

[3] I read Rafael Rachel Neis' magisterial treatment of rabbinic classification and taxonomy, *When a Human Gives Birth to a Raven: Rabbis and the Reproduction of Species* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2023), after the text of this article was finalized. Had I done so earlier, it would have significantly informed my work here.

new, critical standards of individual health, and to express a sense of dissatisfaction with society as such."[4]

If the act of metaphorization is a claim of power, the work that metaphor does frequently functions to actualize, entrench, and reproduce the power claimed. Metaphors do not merely draw discrete associations for or create discrete definitions of their objects; if they are successful, they go on to shape how a community understands their objects, to the point where the definitions of and associations with their object they posit come to be treated as given and self-evident. This is a function to which feminist rabbinics scholars have attended in detail. Gail Labovitz, drawing on the work of linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, defines metaphor as "an integral part of our conceptual systems, functioning as our means of understanding and structuring our 'everyday' interactions with the world … metaphor is *a broad conceptual mapping of one thing or concept (usually referred to as a 'source') onto another (a 'target')*.[5]

Pulver's midrash goes further, however: it makes clear the inseparability of the *act* of metaphor from claims of power. Lakoff and Johnson treat metaphors as evidence of the conceptual frameworks and power structures that create them. Pulver (and I) claim that *the act* of metaphorizing, even before we get to the *content* of any given metaphor, is in itself a claim of power, and reproduces the structures and frameworks that support that claim. Focusing on the *act* of metaphor itself also allows us to see the power claims of a set of metaphors regardless of whether the uniting theme is the source or the target. In the examples of metaphor Pulver uses (and in the rabbinic genre as a whole), women are the source of the metaphor—a *woman is compared to* a cup, or a foodstuff, or earth, and so on. In Sontag's essay, by contrast, illness is the target—groups of people or political ideologies are *compared to a particular illness*. The pivot point is different, but in both cases, those making the metaphor claim

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[4] Sontag, *Illness*, 92.

[5] Labovitz, *Marriage and Metaphor*, 3 (emphasis mine). Labovitz is, here, drawing on George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

through the metaphor or metaphors to know something key about who or what the source *is*.[6]

Why does it matter that the metaphorizer claims to know something key about their object? Miranda Fricker's work on epistemic injustice, and especially hermeneutic injustice, is helpful here. Hermeneutic injustice, according to Fricker, is "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization"—a marginalization that in the case of systemic injustice is due to "structural identity prejudice."[7] Objects of hermeneutic injustice might have their accounts of their experiences disbelieved, or interpreted as something else entirely. They may be denied the interpretive tools to make full sense of their experiences or to communicate it to others, or their experiences might be ignored all together. And where structural identity prejudice is at work, that hermeneutic injustice is at once informed by and reproductive of judgments about what these objects are *like*—judgments into which, hermeneutical marginalization ensures, the objects themselves have insufficient input. The ultimate harm here, as Fricker puts it, is "prejudicial exclusion from participation in the spread of knowledge."[8]

Pulver demonstrates the power claim inherent in the act of metaphor, drawing our attention to the dual valences of the root *MShL*. In the technical language of the world of midrash, perhaps the readier valence is that of "to represent; to liken," from whence we derive the term *mashal*, or, loosely, parable. In midrash, classically, *mashal* refers to a specific paradigm in which some aspect of the interpretive problem at hand is likened to some concrete situation, rendered in a highly typified narrative

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[6] I'm particularly grateful to Anonymous Reviewer II for clarifying the points in this paragraph.

[7] Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 158, 155. My thanks to Chumie Juni for suggesting I engage Fricker here.

[8] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 162.

form, complete with stock characters, e.g., "The matter may be compared to a king who had two daughters…"[9]

Yet the valence of "to represent; to liken" also allows for a looser sense that can include a number of comparative devices beyond this discrete midrashic technique. This valence of *MShL*, depending on its verb stem, contains within it the possibilities of comparison, of analogy, of parable, and, yes, of metaphor. It is a root concerned with *linking*, with the making of associations, and with using those associations as a way to understand, to comprehend, to *grasp* those things we have made to associate with each other. We might even say that this ability of metaphor to describe, define, and generate ongoing reality is illustrated in the name of the biblical book of Proverbs, that is, *Mishlei. MShL* means "to liken," but as a noun it can also refer to parables, as well as sayings or aphorisms meant to communicate and illustrate extant truths about the world. Metaphors build realities, and they move from comparisons to aphorisms in their own right—to claims about the world and one's place in it that are meant to be taken as they come to us.

Pulver reminds us that *MShL* has yet another valence, and one which is, arguably, primary to the others. In Genesis 3:16, in the aftermath of the first humans' illicit taste of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, the culmination of God's specific curse to the woman decrees that "your desire (*tishuktech*) will be for your man, and he will rule (*yimshol*) over you." "Rule," *yimshol*, has the same *MShL* root as *mashal*, or parable, and in this double meaning, Pulver reads both the sentence—to be ruled over—and the means by which it is to be carried out:

> What is the meaning of *he will rule over you (vehu yimshol bakh)*?
>
> Eve was cursed through none other than the parables (*meshalim*) made of her by men.

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[9] For more on *mashal* as a discrete midrashic form, see, among others, Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of the Midrash* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 80–92, and David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 39–54.

Having established the lexical link between subjugation and metaphor, Pulver goes on to list several examples of rabbinic metaphors for women:

> Our rabbis, of blessed memory, compared women to everything in the world.
>
> When they wanted to compare them to a cup, they did.
>
> When they longed to say they were the same as meat, they did.
>
> When they sought to analogize them to bread, they did.
>
> When they felt like describing them as earth, they did.
>
> Women were in their eyes like a dish, like a sheep, like geese, like a human body; and like a goatskin full of one thing or the other, and a sexual provocation.[10]

Each comparison Pulver lists, as Biala spells out in the commentary to this midrash, corresponds to a specific source in the rabbinic canon.[11] The cup analogy, for example, comes from b. Nedarim 20, as does the meat metaphor; both have to do with sexual comportment. In b. Pesachim 112a and b. Yoma 18b, the comparisons of women's sexual status with food and vessels for it continues with the dish and the bread, respectively. Women's assumed sexual passivity is illustrated through an analogy to earth or soil in b. Sanhedrin 74b. Aspects of women's behavior draw comparisons to sheep and geese in b. Ketubot 63a and b. Berakhot 24a. In that latter text, a woman is also provocation personified, such that even a handsbreadth of exposed flesh amounts to nakedness. And in b. Shabbat 152a, a *baraita* quite literally refers to women as sacks of shit (with blood-filled mouths, no less).[12]

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[10] Dana Pulver, "And He Will Rule Over You," in Biala, *Dirshuni,* 12.

[11] It is also worth noting that the English translation here, at least, reflects the multivalence and slipperiness of the root at the center of this midrash by rendering each instance of it in the list with a different synonym: "compare," "say they were the same as," "analogize," "[describe] them as."

[12] As Fonrobert (*Menstrual Purity*, 40–42), among others, notes, the rabbis were hardly the only ones, even in the ancient and late antique Mediterranean worlds, to have extensively metaphorized women's bodies. See, for example, Paige DuBois, *Sowing the Body:*

The way Pulver lists and curates rabbinic metaphors for women foregrounds the ways in which they are explicitly and obviously degrading. However, in other contexts—both in their immediate textual contexts and their subsequent receptions, this aspect of their character may not be so obvious. Indeed, within my own field of Jewish sexual ethics, the meat metaphor, which constitutes a rabbi's response to a woman asking whether the oral and/or anal sex her husband performed with (on?) her is permitted, has been notably ripe for elision and revision, in an attempt to reclaim the story as a whole as somehow "sex positive."[13] Of course, as a reader of an earlier draft astutely noted, people reread and repurpose texts toward ritual and legal ends that make it very difficult not to elide their misogyny or other ethically dissonant aspects. Whether or not we *should* make these elisions in general is a matter for a different essay (though for what it's worth, I think we should at least try not to). But in cases such as this one, where the metaphor is the *foundation* of the legal claim, I think it's especially important to attend to the work the metaphor is doing.

If the tool by which women are unjustly ruled over is that of metaphor—something that is deeply tangled and rooted in our ways of speaking and understanding—what, then, the reader might ask, is to be

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Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) for an extensive treatment of ancient Greek metaphors of women's bodies.

[13] See, for example, Daniel B. Kohn, *Sex, Drugs, and Violence in the Jewish Tradition: Moral Perspectives* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 2004), 207; Jay Michaelson, *God in Your Body: Kabbalah, Mindfulness, and Embodied Spiritual Practice* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007:

> The Talmud is not prudish; it recommends foods for good sex (Eruvin 28a and Kiddushin 2b), discusses multiple orgasm (Niddah 13a) and the length of time required for sexual intercourse (Sotah 4a), frowns upon wearing clothes during sex (Ketubot 48a), and explicitly permits oral sex (Nedarim 20a-b). (66)

See also as this source sheet, meant to accompany an episode of the *Joy of Text* podcast with Rabbi Dov Linzer and Dr. Bat Sheva Marcus (much of which has been scrubbed from relevant web hosts in the wake of sexual harassment allegations against Marcus): https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/159811?lang=bi.

done? Pulver concludes her litany with a promise of Divine redemption, holding out the hope that in the world to come this metaphorization will be stopped:

> In the future to come there will be fulfilled: *I will put an end to this parable (hamashal hazeh) and it will not be used (yimshelu lo) anymore in Israel* (Ezek 12:23)[14]

In this coda, Pulver introduces a verse in which we see the *MShL* root employed two ways—both as a noun, denoting the specific parable God promises to end, and as a verb, denoting the activity of metaphorization that will no longer be done and will therefore no longer produce the preceding noun form.

In several important ways, Pulver's interpretive methodology here is deeply traditional. Her key insight starts with a question about an ambiguous phrase—"what is the meaning of 'he shall rule over you'?" and answers the question using a classic lexical comparison—the dual valences of the root *MShL*. She then elaborates, offering a list of thematically linked examples presented in a repetitive format that also serves as a mnemonic device. These formal features and interpretive mechanics should be familiar to anyone with more than a passing familiarity with midrashic technique—as should, not incidentally, the equally classic midrashic technique of *mashal*, parable or analogy, or, metaphor.

Pulver, however, demonstrates that these apparently deeply traditional techniques that do the work of grasping, can themselves be grasped. They can be used to pick apart and understand their own reproduction of power disparities. Indeed, this sense of subversion is at play in other ways. There's a rather delightful irony in Pulver's derivation of the hope of divine redemption from this parable from Ezekiel—the site of perhaps one of the most violent extended metaphors in the entire canon. Ezekiel 16 and 23 compare the wayward and idolatrous Israel variously to a foundling daughter, sexually promiscuous young women, an

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[14] Pulver, "And He Will Rule Over You," in Biala, *Dirshuni,* 12.

adulterous wife and an infanticidal mother, and ultimately, as deserving objects of physical and sexual violence, juxtaposing lurid and exaggerated sexual imagery with depictions of filth and gore. While here Israel is equated *to* women (rather than women being the ones so equated), the degradation of, and outright assertion of power over, women is brazenly present here in ways that, if anything, outstrip many of the examples of rabbinic metaphors for women that Pulver lists.

It is worth noting that Pulver's list of rabbinic metaphors for women is not exhaustive. Notably missing, for example, are the architectural metaphors for women that some of the most pivotal feminist rabbinic scholarship has focused upon. Charlotte Fonrobert, foundationally, explicates the extended rabbinic metaphor of women's reproductive tracts as a multi-chambered house in tractate *Niddah*, in which the "rooms" serve as ways of locating the source of a given episode of bleeding and thereby determining its impurity status.[15] As she notes, discussions of menstruation are far from the only place in the canon one finds such architectural metaphors, either. One example she highlights is the gruesome treatment, in b. Bekhorot 45a, of the remains of an executed sex worker by Rabbi Yishma'el's students, who boil her so that they can count her bones. When their count comes out four parts higher than what is expected, their teacher chalks up the discrepancy to her femaleness, characterizing her extra bits as "doors" and "hinges."[16] Nor does the list include some of the more explicit and extensive agricultural metaphors, such as that of a woman who was betrothed as a virgin and subsequently raped as a "flooded field" in M. Ketubot 1:6, or yet other food and tableware metaphors, such as in b. Berakhot 62a when Rav Kahana, from his vantage from under Rav's bed, refers to the latter's wife (who is only present in the scene by inference) as a dish from which Rav is sipping all too eagerly.[17]

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[15] Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 40–67.

[16] Though Fonrobert (*Menstrual Purity*, 57) reminds us that the wording of this passage leaves open the possibility that R. Yishma'el's students might not have merely taken possession of and boiled the woman's corpse, but might have actually been her executioners.

[17] For more extensive treatments of some of these metaphors, see also, for example, Labovitz, "Is Rav's Wife 'a Dish'? Food and Eating Metaphors in Rabbinic Discourse of Sexuality and

So why does Pulver choose the examples she does, especially given that her selection excludes some of the cases a present-day reader might find *especially* outrageous, including those that are explicitly, unambiguously violent? I suspect that part of the reason why is that she wishes to highlight a range of metaphors, from the blatantly degrading to the subtle, in order to show us that regardless of whether a given comparison is obviously insulting, the same logic undergirds the whole range of them.

Within this undergirding logic, the rabbis might even have metaphorized a woman, or women, as something wholly complimentary—but even so, the fact that they were in a position (or at least understood themselves to be in a position) to do so authoritatively, taken along with the pervasive trend of metaphorizing women, betrays the inequities of power and authority that any one of these metaphors stands upon. The tyranny of the metaphor may be brutal or it may be benevolent in any given instance, but it remains tyranny regardless.[18]

This tyranny, further, is grounded in and enforced by claims about knowledge, definition, and understanding. The dual valences of *MShL*, "to liken," and "to rule over," for Pulver, tell us that, at root, the rule that the man will have over the woman is epistemic. Just as the man was given authority to name all the other creations in the garden, including woman herself, now the man will exert power over the woman by determining what she shall be likened to in any given circumstance. In doing this, the man will control the understanding of who and what the woman is, what

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Gender Relations," *Studies in Jewish Civilization* 18: *Love—Ideal and Real—in the Jewish Tradition* (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 2008), 147–170; Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1995); and Natan Margalit, "Not By Her Mouth Do We Live," *Prooftexts* 20:1–2 (2000): 61–86.

[18] It's worth noting that here I disagree with Fricker, who holds that some stereotypes (whose function is comparable to the metaphors discussed in this essay) in some circumstances can be neutral or even complimentary. I'd rebut thus: metaphors may be derogatory, or complimentary, or just plain confusing—but they are never neutral (see Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 30–31).

she does and how she does it, how she is to be treated, and where her proper sphere might be.

III. Why Understanding *This* Metaphor Still Matters

On the question of *which* diseases are most prone to pervasive metaphorization, Sontag observes that "it is diseases thought to be multi-determined (that is, mysterious) that have the widest possibilities as metaphors for what is felt to be socially or morally wrong."[19] In other words, the more mysterious an object is—the harder it is to trace and grasp—the more we reach for comparisons, analogies, and associations to help us bring it within the reach of our understanding and, therefore, our control.

Fonrobert and Chaya Halberstam, among others, have argued that rabbinic systems of describing women's reproductive organs and classifying the colors and sources of blood and subsequently of bloodstains is part of a project aimed at establishing and reifying rabbinic expertise over women's, and indeed all Jews', ritual status.[20] But where Fonrobert focuses on the legibility of the bloodstain as a vehicle for establishing the rabbis' epistemic power over a process that was heretofore internal to women's flesh and therefore troublingly mysterious, Halberstam argues that, at least for the *tannaim*, it is actually the *disqualification* of the bloodstain in key cases that recreates a realm of mystery and uncertainty—and that it is in this space of uncertainty that the rabbis' epistemic power finds its most fertile ground:

> Uncertainty about impurity, which would seem to create fear or helplessness, instead creates a space for rabbinic legal creativity and authority. For if seeing a bloodstain does not necessarily mean that one

[19] Sontag, *Illness*, 61.

[20] Women as such are far from the only class of people over whom the rabbis seek to establish authority through expertise. See, among other studies, Balberg, *Purity, Body, and Self*; Berkowitz, *Execution and Invention*; Neis, *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture*; Wasserman, *Jews, Gentiles, and Other Animals*. Authority as established through expertise, both over Jews as a whole and over particular sub-classes among them, is a fairly significant through-line within rabbinic culture, to put it mildly.

> is ritually impure, simple observations are rejected as a means to ascertaining truth, and legal reasoning is upheld. And thus a legal fiction—that a bloodstain cannot be evidence of menstrual bleeding within biblical law—supersedes the judgment and experience of ordinary people.[21]

Here, Halberstam argues that the legal hermeneutic of skepticism actually enforces rabbinic epistemic authority, even beyond discretely legible artifacts. The more ambiguous and slippery the acceptable evidence is, and the greater the complexity of reasoning required to navigate it, the more its proper definition and categorization requires specific expertise.

Mutivalence and uncertainty are at work, too, in the metaphors themselves. Above, I've noted that the range of metaphors Pulver lists includes examples that, in isolation, run the gamut from seemingly innocuous to outright insulting. This range of mood and reception among the metaphors in question, rather than diluting their impact, actually serves to illustrate the strength and pervasiveness of their claims to power. Indeed, as Sontag notes, multiplicities of meaning often indicate a metaphor's power and success. "Like all really successful metaphors," she writes, noting the ways that, in the nineteenth century, tuberculosis could signify both desirability and rot, "the metaphor of TB was rich enough to provide for two contradictory applications."[22] And these contradictions and uncertainties provide ample opportunity to claim epistemic authority. As Halberstam puts it with regard to who is the ultimate arbiter of whether a given bloodstain is evidence of ritual impurity, "the rabbis … establish legal authority by asserting their own constructions of legal truth over and against a person's intimate knowledge of his or her own body."[23] We can extend this to cover "intimate knowledge of one's own self or situation" more broadly, and we can also observe that versions of this dynamic—what we might call, in some cases, mansplaining, or even

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[21] Chaya Halberstam, *Law and Truth in Biblical and Rabbinic Literature* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 39.

[22] Sontag, *Illness*, 25.

[23] Halberstam, *Law and Truth*, 18.

gaslighting—remain with us today. Then, and now, this dynamic, which maps well onto Fricker's concept of hermeneutic injustice, remains destabilizing and self-reinforcing. As Fricker puts it: "When you find yourself in a situation in which you seem to be the only one to feel the dissonance between received understanding and your own intimated sense of a given experience, it tends to knock your faith in your own ability to make sense of the world."[24]

I've mentioned above that the story in which the meat analogy appears is not infrequently invoked as a relatively "sex-positive" text, and this invocation also offers a case study in how the dissonance Fricker mentions might play out. Here is a particularly egregious example:

> Marital sex can be enjoyed in any position or manner that the couple wants. Like kosher meat, both of them are able to enjoy the 'meal' together. Although directed at men, this sexual freedom applies to both husbands and wives together. Far from being anti-women, this passage is actually sexually liberating, enjoining a married couple to engage in whatever sexual positions or acts that they may so desire.[25]

Here I want us to note specifically that the (male) author of this passage briefly *acknowledges* the misogyny of the meat metaphor and then dismisses it. He acknowledges that the metaphor might contain more meanings than the one he is offering, perhaps meanings that seem relatively clear and acute to those whom they affect most directly, and then goes on to tell the reader that this other perceived meaning is erroneous. (In fact, he also makes a version of this move when he assures us that even though the passage might *seem* to be only addressed to men, it *really* addresses women too, and—one can almost hear—any perceived exclusion must be all in our heads). Thus, even when these metaphors present in relatively more innocuous ways, their basic claim of epistemic

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[24] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 163.

[25] Daniel B. Kohn, *Sex, Drugs, and Violence in the Jewish Tradition: Moral Perspectives* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 2004), 207.

power over their objects remains and, in fact, reproduces and amplifies itself over subsequent generations of the epistemic hierarchy it serves.

It's important to note that just because metaphors are claims of power and, obliquely, acts of definition, it doesn't follow that all such instances are by definition violent or oppressive. Take the case of endearments—pet names which frequently liken their bearer to other entities or qualities, and so function quite similarly, in many cases, to metaphors. When I call my wife "sweetheart," I am, it is true, making a claim about some aspect of her nature, but I am doing it in a context of ongoing consent and negotiation. The power asymmetries inherent in naming and defining don't go away, but they are fluid, and both of us have the ability to tweak and renegotiate them. If I use an endearment that isn't consonant with her own sense of self—or that she simply doesn't like—she can tell me not to use it anymore, and vice versa. And yet, precisely the same act of naming by a different person, in a different context, can be quite belittling and oppressive indeed. It's a different matter entirely for my wife or a dear friend to call me "sweetheart" than it is for, say, a senior scholar to address me by that same epithet. One seeks consensual intimacy; the other is a fairly clear act of condescension, not to mention an implicit claim that the one addressing me *obviously* occupies a position of greater knowledge, which he (and it is usually "he") will perhaps deign to impart to me as if he were a parent and I a child.

In fact, the example of naming, and its frequently analogical quality, is an on-the-ground illustration of the real power of this broad genre of associative and interpretive activity. We see how naming works to reproduce power hierarchies both in the classical canon—note the paucity of named women throughout, and the substitution in many cases of analogy, relation, or function for a name—and in the present day. It is not accidental that one common mechanism by which anti-trans activists, commentators, and lawmakers seek to delegitimize transgender people and their own self-accounting is by refusing to address or refer to them by their chosen names and pronouns; in doing so, they also claim the right to control the terms and categories that refer to and characterize others.

In the United States, at least, our current political moment should remind us all too well of the stakes of overriding someone else's self-accounting, and of the terrible power of making metaphors out of real people. As a terrifyingly rapid procession of state legislatures, now emboldened by a brazenly eliminationist federal government, move to ban gender-affirming care and public access for transgender youth—and increasingly, transgender adults—it is noteworthy that one of the key claims through which lawmakers and advocates justify their actions is that of epistemic control. Disease metaphors are rampant here: the "woke mind virus," the "epidemic" of "gender ideology," the "social contagion" of queer culture and queer and trans adults bent on "grooming" and preying upon youth. Such language absolutely has the same genocidal function that Sontag identifies in, for example, Nazi cancer metaphors: "To describe a phenomenon as a cancer is an incitement to violence. The use of cancer in political discourse encourages fatalism and justifies 'severe' measures—as well as strongly reinforcing the widespread notion that the disease is necessarily fatal."[26] But it also points to a deeper claim about whose categories, associations, expertise, and self-knowledge can be trusted.

Transgender youth, so the claim goes, cannot possibly be trusted to know who they really are, on account of their youth, or on account of disability (much of this rhetoric, noting the real phenomenon of significant overlap between gender and sexual variance and autism and other neurodivergences, assumes that such disabilities clearly preclude sufficient self-knowledge or agency), or simply because gender nonconformity is taken as evidence in and of itself of incapacity. And, if their agency and self-accounting cannot be trusted, their claims must have been coerced by nefarious forces and agents: the so-called "groomers," whose real threat is not putative sexual violence, but rather their supposed ability to wrest epistemic control of youth away from its "proper" keepers.

[26] Sontag, *Illness*, 82–84.

IV. Conclusion: An End To—Or Perhaps a Muddling Of—This Metaphor

What, then, are we to do with this understanding? After all, it's hardly plausible to ask us all to *avoid* using metaphor; to do so would wreck our language, and, perhaps more to the point, it would also deprive us of countless forms of expression that, in context, are innocuous or even possess their own liberatory potential. Sontag, in her own act of associative linking, offers the scaffold of a progression from understanding to action. "It is toward an elucidation of those metaphors, and a liberation from them," she writes, "that I dedicate this inquiry."[27] Pulver's ends are similar, though the methods she uses diverge sharply. For Pulver, the hope of liberation ultimately resides in Divine eschatological redemption, drawing yet again on the possibilities: "In the future to come there will be fulfilled: *I will put an end to this parable (hamashal hazeh) and it will not be used (yimshelu lo) anymore in Israel* (Ezek 12:23)"[28]

Both Sontag's and Pulver's formulae are specific: they call for liberation from *those* metaphors, or prophesy "an end to *this* parable (*hamashal hazeh*)." Yet I think each also recognizes that the promise of liberation, or of eschatological redemption, will not be fulfilled solely through specific excisions. There seems, in addition, to be something foundational called for, if the work of specific understanding and curation, necessary as it is, is not to become a futile game of whack-a-mole.

Does grasping the tools of metaphor for ourselves lead to a clean "end" to the parable, or might it work in messier ways? Max Strassfeld, in an incisive reflection on the role of metaphor in both Talmudic and present-day constructions of gender, considers Talmudic metaphors of women as furniture in light of Talia Mae Bettcher's use of the metaphor of a table to deconstruct philosophical arguments that trans women do not (or should not), properly, exist. When Bettcher "links trans women and

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[27] Sontag, *Illness*, 4.

[28] Pulver, "And He Will Rule Over You," in Biala, *Dirshuni,* 12.

[battered] tables," Strassfeld notes, "tables develop both animacy and affect, they 'show up' and 'become upset.'" Similarly, for Strassfeld, Talmudic metaphors of women as furniture "[are] vivid materialization[s] of relations of power, but [they] also transgress the boundary between animate and inanimate objects."[29]

To make a metaphor of someone or something is to claim epistemic authority to define it. It is, in other words, a way to reify the categories imposed upon the objects of metaphor, both source and target. Yet it reifies these categories precisely by strategically puncturing the boundaries between them, and in doing so perhaps provides openings for yet more boundary-breaching. What happens to carefully protected categories when "tables show up and start philosophizing?"[30] When fields, houses, and furniture talk back? When women midrashists, among midrashists of all genders, grasp the multivalent power play in the act of likening one thing to another, and use it to grasp back? To pick apart and blur these categories is to expose their seams, expose the patterns by which they were built, and to reveal the possibilities for making better, more just epistemic frameworks.

[29] Max Strassfeld, *Trans Talmud: Eunuchs and Androgynes in Rabbinic Literature* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022), 77–78.

[30] Talia Mae Bettcher, "When Tables Speak," quoted in Strassfeld, *Trans Talmud*, 78.