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*Dvar Torah for Parshat Vayera*

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# A Not-so-Incise Metaphor: Cutting the Circumcision Out of Circumcision

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Where does  
your metaphor end and  
my reality begin?

It begins, as all things  
do, with exegesis.  
Arguing that the  
command to circumcise  
is meant  
metaphorically, the  
Church Father Origen  
cleverly turns to Exodus  
4:10, that part of the  
story in which Moses  
says he cannot speak  
to Pharaoh because of  
his speech difficulties.  
Origen notes that,  
unlike the Christian  
Greek Bible, the Jewish  
Hebrew Bible applies  
the phrase

“uncircumcised of lips” to Moses’s speechlessness. This turn of phrase delights  
Origen:<sup>[1]</sup>

“Behold you have a circumcision of lips according to your copies [i.e. the Hebrew version of the Bible], which you say to be more accurate. If, therefore, according to you Moses still says that he is unworthy because he has not been circumcised in his lips, he certainly indicates this, that he would be worthier and holier who is circumcised in his lips. Therefore, apply the pruning-hook also to your lips and cut off the covering of your mouth since indeed such an understanding pleases you in the divine letters.”

If you Jews want to claim that genital circumcision in the Bible is literal, be consistent and also apply that claim to oral circumcision in the Bible. Origen seems a little confused here, since the Hebrew verse that he quotes actually doesn't use the phrase "circumcision of lips." He seems to have mixed it up with verses from this week's Torah portion, Exodus 6:12 and 6:30, in which indeed the phrase "circumcised of lips" appears in the Hebrew version but not in the Septuagint translation.<sup>[2]</sup>

Although his citations may be flawed, Origen's call for metaphor consistency is attractive. The misreaderly conduct of polemical writers like Origen bids us to follow Origen's ad absurdum to absurdity and beyond, to a world in which metaphor does not bleed into reality, in which nothing hinges on anything since hinges belong on doors, in which slippery slopes actually slip or never do, in which the literal and the figurative never cross paths..

While our lips may be a trifle circumcised in this alternative world, the difficulties of expression could be a worthwhile payback for the dangers we've escaped, the dangers of **language that denotes but takes no responsibility for what it denotes**. Speaking through the deep hidden substructures of a metaphor, an author can build cases and claims that she never explicitly states and does not need to back, constructing edifices of associations and meanings that meander duplicitously beneath the surface with the concealed, unassailable power of a guerilla warrior. You read a poem whose ideology you do not accept. Line after line of washed-out claims begin to puddle about, collecting undercurrents that rise and rise and rise until you are drowning in a flood of imagery that you never bought, an arsenal of symbols for which you never bargained. Figurative language is the last legal bastion for false advertising.

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My politics major friend and I are supposed to be studying the German accusative case, a project that he has turned into a lecture on the state of German media and let me tell you about pockets of anti-Israel sentiment in Germany today and did you know there are some Germans who have said that Israel is the new Nazi state.

There's a pause while I try to remember how to decline *die Kartoffel* in the accusative plural and the latest Jon Stewart episode and the likelihood that

orangutans descend from raisins and anything, anything to change the subject.

“I mean, in some ways they’re sort of right,” my friend continues. He watches the friendly Jew, waiting for something. A protest. Guilt. An impassioned appeal on behalf of the Zionist Organization of America’s fundraising committee. An elongation of the nose.

Not even Jon Stewart is going to cut this silence.

“What do you think?” He’s prodding, trying to get that diversity experience we’re supposed to get in college in which we go around the table and say where we come from and what funny foods our parents cooked for us and pat ourselves on the back and go home.

“About what?” Back off, man. My mother doesn’t even like gefilte fish.

He doesn’t take the hint. “Is Israel the new Nazi Germany?”

My vocal cords flap around in forty different directions and then curl up to die, wondering whodunit. Are you saying that Bibi built a new chain of gas chambers in Ramallah? That there are abuses of power going on? That it’s awful to be a Palestinian in Israel? That both Israel and Nazi Germany have armies? That they’re both on the other side of the Atlantic?

Dear metaphorizing politics major, what are you saying?

We could rehash the benefits of hazy, watery, unearned metaphor, this ability to speak when you don’t know what you’re talking about, when there’s no other way to talk. Let’s not. Let’s go back to Exodus 7:1, where God is busy responding to the uncircumcised lips of Moses measure for measure: with another metaphor.

*“Behold I have placed you as a God over Pharaoh and Aharon your brother shall be your prophet,”* says the Lord, thereby presenting Moses’s mute power in Divine terms.

While I assure you in the name of Aslan the Lion and many an absent watchmaker that God is no stranger to metaphor, we usually use metaphors to describe God, rather than using God to feed our metaphors. Here, God’s jump from its accustomed role of signified to the role of signifier illustrates the circularity of metaphor logic, the way we must constantly grapple for more metaphor in order to explain the explainers of our metaphors just like (in a metaphorical sense) (or maybe just a true sense) language constantly fails to supply anything but words to

01/07/16

explain more words, words, words.

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[1] Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1981), 96.

[2] According to the Alfred Rahlfs edition of the Septuagint, “ἄλογός” (“speechless”) appears in 6:12 and “ἰσχνόφωνός” (“feeble of voice”) appears in 6:30.

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