

A History of the Talmud in 4 Objects: The Ministering Women's Mirrors (4/4)

Gila Fine

1 “These are the records of the Tabernacle” (Ex. 38:21). You find that when Israel were in harsh labor in Egypt, Pharaoh decreed that they should not sleep at home nor have relations with their wives. Said R. Simeon b. Halaftha: What did the daughters of Israel do? They would go down to draw water from the river. Whereupon the Holy One Blessed be He prepared small fishes for them inside their jars. They would sell some, cook some and buy with the proceeds wine and go out into the fields and give their husbands to eat there, as it is said, “In all the labor in the field” (Ex. 1:14). After they had eaten and drunk they took the mirrors and looked into them with their husbands, and she would say, “I am more beautiful than you,” and he would say, “I am more beautiful than you.” In the course of this, they would accustom themselves to desire, and they were fruitful and multiplied, the Holy One Blessed be He forthwith remembering them (i.e. blessing them with issue), as it is stated, “And the children of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied and became exceedingly mighty” (Ex. 1:7)... Through the merit of those same mirrors which they showed their husbands to accustom them to desire in the midst of the harsh labor, they raised up all the hosts, as it is stated, “All the hosts of the lord went out of the land of Egypt” (Ex. 12:41)...

As soon as the Holy One Blessed be He told Moses to make the Tabernacle, all Israel came along to contribute. Some brought silver, some gold or brass, onyx and stones to be set. They readily brought everything. Whereupon the women said, “What have we to contribute to the offering of the tabernacle?” They came along and brought the mirrors and presented themselves to Moses. When Moses saw the mirrors he was furious with them. He said to Israel, “Take sticks and break the legs of those who brought them. What use are such mirrors?” Said the Holy One Blessed be He to Moses, “Moses! These you despise?! It was these mirror which raised up all these hosts in Egypt! Take them and make out of them the basin and its stand for the priests in which they can purify themselves,” as it is stated, “And he made the basin and its stand of bronze out of the mirrors that raised up hosts [הצובאות]” (Ex. 38:8)—those same mirrors which raised up all these hosts.

Midrash Tanhuma, Pekudei 9

2 He made the basin of bronze and its stand of bronze, from the mirrors of the ministering women who ministered [הצובאות] in the entrance of the tent of meeting.

Exodus 38:8

3 | You shall not bring the hire of a harlot or the price of a dog (a sodomite) into the house of the Lord your God as payment of a vow, for both of these [the gift and the giver] are an abomination to the Lord your God.

Deuteronomy 23:18

4 | We have therefore brought an offering for the Lord, each man of what he has found, of vessels of gold, chains, and bracelets, rings, earrings [עגיל], and tablets [כומז], to reconcile our souls before the Lord.

Numbers 31:50

R. Eleazar said: 'Agil [עגיל] is a cast of female breasts; kumaz [כומז] is a cast of the womb.... Said Rabbah to him, It is implied in the very Writ itself: Kumaz=here [כאן] is the place [מקום] of unchastity [זימה].

Shabbat 64a

5 | According to the midrash, when the women donated their copper mirrors, Moshe was in doubt whether to accept them, because it was possible that they had been used for the women to beautify themselves for immoral purposes. Here, he does not similarly question the golden *kumaz* actually worn on the female organ.... I say the difference is that the copper mirrors were used in their original form, with the mirrors themselves melted down so that the origin of the gold was not evident.

Maharal, *Gur Aryeh*

6 | R. Awira expounded: As the reward for the righteous women who lived in that generation were the Israelites delivered from Egypt.

Sotah 11b

7 | They did not speak above a whisper. Outside the clearing, Julia said, it was better to go quietly. Presently they had reached the edge of the little wood. She stopped him.... He wondered whether after all there was a microphone hidden somewhere near.... Perhaps at the other end of the instrument some small, beetle-like man was listening intently—listening to that. But by degrees... he stopped thinking and merely felt. The girl's waist in the bend of his arm was soft and warm. He pulled her round so that they were breast to breast; her body seemed to melt into his.... Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act.... When you make love you're using up energy; and afterwards you feel happy and don't give a damn for anything. They can't bear you to feel like that.

George Orwell, 1984

8

The typical ancient Egyptian mirror was essentially flat (a few were convex or concave), polished on both sides, and slightly elliptical (wider than high) with a sharp metal tang at the bottom that fit into a handle made of wood, stone, ivory, horn, metal, or clay.... Generally made of copper until around 2100 BCE, then of bronze—and sometimes of gold or silver—Egyptian mirrors were both secular and religious objects. They were often used for such familiar purposes as applying makeup.... It is clear from paintings and carvings that Egyptian men and particularly women spent a great deal of time working on their appearance, applying makeup of tallow, green, black, and red.



Mark Pendergrast, *Mirror, Mirror: A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection*

9

If one had a candle that was hidden... inside a mirror... he should not say a blessing until he [can] see the flame and use its light.

PT Berkhof 8:6

10



Narcissus, Caravaggio

11

She was a beautiful woman, but she was proud and arrogant, and she could not stand it if anyone might surpass her in beauty. She had a magic mirror. Every morning she stood before it, looked at herself, and said: “Mirror, mirror, on the wall, Who in this land is fairest of all?” To this the mirror answered: “You, my queen, are fairest of all.” Then she was satisfied.

The Brothers Grimm, “Little Snow-White”

12

Men have wasted away before [the Mirror of Erised], entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible.

J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*

13

The child... recognize[s] as such his own image in the mirror.... The term “primary narcissism”... [explains] the connection between the narcissistic libido and the alienating function of the *I*, the aggressivity it releases in any relation to the other.

Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the *I*”

Narcissus had reached his sixteenth year and might seem either boy or man. Many youths and many maidens sought his love; but in that slender form was pride so cold that no youth, no maiden touched his heart. Once as he was driving the frightened deer into his nets, a certain nymph of strange speech beheld him, resounding Echo, who... merely repeats the concluding phrases of a speech and returns the words she hears. Now when she saw Narcissus wandering through the fields, she was inflamed with love and followed him by stealth; and the more she followed, the more she burned by a nearer flame.... By chance the boy, separated from his faithful companions, had cried: "Is anyone Here?" and "Here!" cried Echo back. Amazed, he looks around in all directions and with loud voice cries "Come!"; and "Come!" she calls.... "Here let us meet," he cries. Echo, never to answer other sound more gladly, cries: "Let us meet"; and to help her own words she comes forth from the woods that she may throw her arms around the neck she longs to clasp. But he flees at her approach and, fleeing, says: "Hands off! Embrace me not! May I die before I give you power o'er me!" "I give you power o'er me!" she says, and nothing more. Thus spurned she lurks in the woods... her love remains and grows on in grief; her sleepless cares waste away her wretched form; she becomes gaunt and wrinkled and all moisture fades from her body into the air. Only her voice and her bones remain: then, only voice.... She hides in woods and is seen no more upon the mountain-sides; but all may hear her, for voice, and voice alone, still lives in her.

[...]

Thus had Narcissus mocked her, thus had he mocked other nymphs of the waves or mountains; thus had he mocked the companies of men. At last one of these scorned youth, lifting up his hands to heaven, prayed: "So may he himself love, and not gain the thing he loves!" The goddess, Nemesis, heard his righteous prayer. There was a clear pool with silvery bright water.... Grass grew all around its edge, fed by the water near, and a coppice that would never suffer the sun to warm the spot. Here the youth, worn by the chase and the heat, lies down... and while he drinks, he is smitten by the sight of the beautiful form he sees. He loves an unsubstantial hope and thinks that substance which is only shadow. He looks in speechless wonder at himself and hangs there motionless in the same expression.... Unwittingly he desires himself; he praises, and is himself what he praises; and while he seeks, is sought; equally he kindles love and burns with love. How often did he offer vain kisses on the elusive pool? How often did he plunge his arms into the water seeking to clasp the neck he sees there, but did not clasp himself in them! What he sees he knows not; but that which he sees he burns for, and the same delusion mocks and allures his eyes.... No thought of food or rest can draw him from the spot; but, stretched on the shaded grass, he gazes on that false image with eyes that cannot look their fill and through his own eyes perishes. Raising himself a little, and stretching his arms to the trees, he cries: "Did anyone, o ye woods, ever love more cruelly than I?"... While he thus grieves, he... wasted with love, pines away, and is slowly consumed by its hidden fire.... He drooped his weary head on the green grass and death sealed the eyes that marveled at their master's beauty.... In place of his body they find a flower, its yellow center girt with white petals.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, "Narcissus and Echo"

His soul was strongly attracted to Dinah the daughter of Jacob, and he **loved** the young woman.

Genesis 34:3

After this Absalom the son of David had a lovely sister, whose name was Tamar; and Amnon the son of David **loved** her.... Then Amnon hated her exceedingly, so that the hatred with which he hated her *was* greater than the **love** with which he had **loved** her.

2 Samuel 13:1-15

Afterward it happened that he **loved** a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah.... Then she said to him, “How can you say, ‘I **love** you,’ when your heart is not with me?”.... And it came to pass, when she pestered him daily with her words and pressed him, so that his soul was vexed to death, that he told her all his heart.

Judges 16:4-17

The soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan **loved** him as his own soul.... Then Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he **loved** him as his own soul.

2 Samuel 18: 1-3

Now Michal, Saul’s daughter, **loved** David.

2 Samuel 18: 20

But King Solomon **loved** many foreign women... from the nations of whom the Lord had said to the children of Israel, “You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. Surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods.” Solomon clung to these in **love**.

1 Kings 11:1-2

Oholah played the harlot even though she was Mine; And she lusted for her **lovers**.... She has never given up her harlotry brought from Egypt, for in her youth they had lain with her, pressed her virgin bosom, and poured out their immorality upon her. Therefore I have delivered her into the hand of her **lovers**, into the hand of the Assyrians, for whom she lusted.

Ezekiel 23: 5-9

And there a woman met him, with the attire of a harlot, and a crafty heart.... So she caught him and kissed him; with an impudent face she said to him.... “Come, let us take our fill of **love** until morning; let us delight ourselves with **love**....” With her enticing speech she caused him to yield, with her flattering lips she seduced him. Immediately he went after her, as... a bird hastens to the snare, he did not know it would cost his life.

Proverbs 7:10-23

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for **love** is as strong as death, jealousy as cruel as the grave; its flames are flames of fire, a blazing flame.

Song of Songs 8:6

The portrayal of love in the Hebrew Bible... is a stark warning: Passionate, unrestrained love, when directed toward other human beings, is fraught with danger.... Love can wreak havoc when let loose among men... [leading to] the surrender of one’s identity, and the total fusion of oneself into another. Such is the risk, the Bible seems to be saying, inherent in all interpersonal relationships, when love is left unchecked, and given over to its own power.

James A. Diamond, “Love’s Human Bondage: A Biblical Warning”

17

Simeon the Just said: Only once in my life have I eaten of the trespass-offering brought by a defiled tear. On one occasion a nazir came from the South country, and I saw that he had beautiful eyes, was of handsome appearance, and with thick locks of hair symmetrically arranged. Said I to him: "My son, what [reason] didst thou see to destroy this beautiful hair of thine?" He replied: "I was a shepherd for my father in my town. [Once] I went to draw water from a well, gazed upon my reflection in the water, whereupon my evil desires rushed upon me and sought to drive me from the world. But I said unto it: 'Wretch! Why dost thou vaunt thyself in a world that is not thine, with one who is destined to become worms and dust? I swear that I will shave thee off for the sake of Heaven.'" I immediately arose and kissed his head, saying: "My son, may there be many nazirites such as thou in Israel!"

Nedarim 9b

18

While the rabbinic corpus contains comparatively few parallels to Greek myths, the story of the rabbinic Narcissus stands out not only in its very inclusion in rabbinic works, but in the number of times that it is cited. Its presence in both Palestinian (early as well as later) and Babylonian compilations attests to the emblematic quality and relevance that the story held for the entire rabbinic-canonic body of literature.

Dina Stein, *Textual Mirrors: Reflexivity, Midrash, and the Rabbinic Self*

19

And he made a molten sea, ten cubits from the one brim to the other... And under the brim of it round about there were buds compassing it, ten to a cubit, compassing the sea round about... and the brim thereof was wrought like the brim of a cup, with flowers of lilies [פרח שושן].

1 Kings 7:23-26

Of the many suggestions put forward in identifying "shoshan"/ "shoshannah," the most likely appears to be the narcissus (*Narcissus tazetta*), a fragrant flower with six enveloping petals that flourishes particularly in valleys with a heavy soil.

"Flowers," *Encyclopedia Judaica*

20

R. Kattina said: Whenever Israel came up to the Festival, the curtain would be removed for them and the Cherubim were shown to them, whose bodies were intertwined with one another, and they would be thus addressed: Look! You are beloved before God as the love between man and woman.

Yoma 54a

21

Mature love is union under the condition of preserving one's integrity, one's individuality. Love is an active power in man; a power which breaks through the walls which separate man from his fellow men, which unites him with others; love makes him overcome the sense of isolation and separateness, yet it permits him to be himself, to retain his integrity. In love the paradox occurs that two beings become one and yet remain two.

Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*