

“TILLING OUR SOULS”
The central midrashic text of
Midrash and Medicine: Imagining Wholeness
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In traditional midrash, the rabbis try to make meaning about a particular text in the Hebrew Bible by excerpting another text (usually from one of the books in the *Writings* portion of the Bible) and linking the two together by creating a thread of connection between the two texts. In this, our Midrash and Medicine: Imagining Wholeness conference’s central text, the rabbis use a verse from Psalm 103 (verse 15, in particular) to explain a verse in the book of Samuel 4.

Here is the verse from Psalm 103:

אֲנוֹשׁ כַּחצִיר יָמָיו כַּצִּיץ הַשָּׂדֶה כֵּן יָצִיץ:

“The days of the human life are like grass in the field, indeed, like grass”

Before moving to the midrash, pause to reflect for a moment about this verse. To what do you think the verse is alluding? What, do you imagine, is the context for such a statement? What emotion(s) might this verse evoke?

Now, let us look at the midrash, itself:

טַעֲמָה בָּרַךְ יִשְׁמַעֵאל וְרַב עֲקִיבָא שֶׁהֵיוּ מְתַלְמִידִים בְּ
 יְרוּשָׁלַיִם וַתְּנֶה עֲשֵׂתָם אֶדָם אֶסְדֵּר. כִּנְעַן בָּהֶם אֶדָם תּוֹלֵהָ.

לָהֶם: רַבּוּתִי, אָמְרוּ לִי, בְּמָה אֶתְרַשָּׁאז אָמְרוּ לוֹ: קַח לָךְ בָּרַךְ
 וְכַף עַד שֶׁתִּרְשָׁא. אָמַר לָהֶם אוֹתוֹ הָאִישׁ שֶׁהֵיָה עֲשֵׂתָם: וּמִי
 הֵבִיאוֹ אוֹתוֹ בְּחֵלֶיז אָמְרוּ לוֹ: הַקְּרוֹשׁ-בְּרוּךְ-תּוֹא. אָמַר לָהֶם:
 וְאַתֶּם הַבְּנֵי עֲצָמְכֶם בְּדָבָר שֶׁאֵינּוּ שְׁלֵכֶם – הוּא הֵבִיאוֹ וְאַתֶּם
 מְרַשָּׁאִים! אָמְרוּ לוֹ: מַה-מְלַאכְתְּךָ? אָמַר לָהֶם: עוֹבֵד אֲדָמָה אֲנִי,
 נִהְרִי הַמְּגַל בְּיָדִי. אָמְרוּ לוֹ: מִי בָרָא אֶת-הַבְּנֵי? אָמַר לָהֶם
 הַקְּרוֹשׁ-בְּרוּךְ-הוּא. אָמְרוּ לוֹ: וְאַתָּה מְבַנֵּים עֲצָמְךָ בְּדָבָר שֶׁאֵינּוּ
 שְׁלֵךְ – הוּא בָרָא אוֹתוֹ וְאַתָּה אוֹכֵל מִרוֹטֵיו מִסִּטּוֹ? אָמַר לָהֶם:
 אֵינְךָ מְרַשָּׁא רֹאִים הַמְּגַל בְּיָדֶיךָ – אֵלּוּלֵי שֶׁאֲנִי יוֹצֵא וְחוֹרֵשׁ וּמְקַחְחוֹ
 וּמְנַבְּלוֹ וּמְנַבְּשׁוֹ לֹא הִעֲלָה מְאוּמָה. אָמְרוּ לוֹ: שׁוּבָה שֶׁבְּעוֹלָם,
 לֹא שֶׁמֶצֶת מֶה שֶׁתּוֹב: אֲנוֹשׁ כַּחצִיר יָמָיו – כִּיּוֹיֵז – כִּשֶׁם שֶׁהַעֲצָ
 אִם אֵינּוּ נֹבֵל וּמְתַנַּכֵּשׁ וְנִחְרַשׁ אֵינּוּ עוֹלֵה, וְאִם עוֹלֵה וְלֹא שֶׁתָּה
 מִיִּם אֵינּוּ מִי וְהוּא מֵת. כִּף הַגּוֹיף הוּא הַעֲצָ. מְנַבֵּל הוּא הַשֶּׁם,
 אִישׁ הַעֲבָרָה הוּא הַרוֹשָׁא (מִדֵּי שֶׁמִּי ד).

1. Translation by Rabbis Julie Pelc and Elliot Kukla

It is told of R. Ishmael and R. Akiva that, while they were walking through the streets of Jerusalem accompanied by a certain man, a sick person confronted them and said, “Masters, tell me, how shall I be healed?” They replied, “take such-and-such”, and you will be healed.”

The man accompanying the sages asked them, “Who smote him with sickness?”

They replied, “The Holy One.”

The man: “And you bring yourselves into a matter that does not concern you? God smote and you would heal?”

The sages (to the man): “What is your work?”

The man: “I am a tiller of the soil...”

The sages: “Who created the vineyard?”

The man: “The Holy One.”

The sages: “Then why do you bring yourself into a matter that does not concern you? God created it, and you eat the fruit from it!”

The man: “... if I did not go out and plow the vineyard, prune it, compost it, and weed it, it would have yielded nothing.”

The sages: “...have you not heard the verse, ‘the days of the human life are like grass’ (Psalm 103:15)? A tree, it will not grow if not given water to drink, it will die - will not live. So, too, the human body is a tree: a healing potion is the compost, and the physician is the tiller of the soil.”

Questions:

- a. How does the midrash change, or deepen, the meaning of the psalm?
- b. What might “healing potions” mean, in our context? (midrash, narrative, art, tools of tradition...)
- c. How might a physician (or rabbi, or therapist, or another kind of healer) “till the soil”?

Why is this the central text of the Midrash and Medicine conference?

- Our tradition offers rich “healing potions”. In this midrash, they are referred to as compost. Like the structure of midrash, itself, our tradition layers teachings, interpretations and creative expression beside and on top of one another. This is the “compost” we use to bring about our own meaning, our own healing.
- However, it doesn’t matter how rich the soil is by itself; if it’s not tilled (and broken up), the nutrients won’t get in. This is the practice of studying texts ourselves and “breaking up” our own level of knowledge and understanding.
- It is also interesting to think of the image of parched earth: when there is a drought, the ground hardens and the healing elements of water and other nutrients just run off. When we are in pain, our “earth” can become hardened, too. We must “till” our soil in order for true healing to enter. Soil can only be tilled in relationship. We help one another to “till”, so that the healing potions can seep in.