

Shaping the Shift

From Rabbi Gershon



“After seven years,” taught the ancient rabbis, “the hyena turns into a large bat. After seven years as a large bat it turns into a small bat. After seven years as a small bat it turns into a thorny weed. After seven years as a thorny weed it turns into a thorn. After seven years as a thorn it turns into a Shay’d” (*Talmud Bav’li, Baba Kama 16a*).

A Shay’d is a creature of Twilight, half mortal, half spirit, a Creature of Limbo, dancing in the chasm between both worlds and deriving its powers from the vacuum, from Absence. It is, the force that responds to the shaman’s call.

In order to explore this obscure lesson, we need to first understand that the mystical wisdom of Judaism considers the beginning chapters of Genesis not only as the “story of Creation,” but also as the “creation of Story.” In the words of the 18th-century Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen: “The universe is Creator’s book; the Torah is its commentary” (*Tzidkat HaTzadik, No. 219*).

This “Book,” or Story, is in turn, divided into three segments, each of which, in Hebrew, is spelled exactly the same: סִפֵּר סִפֵּר סִפֵּר – Boundary [space], Counting [time], and Telling [matter] (*Sefer Yetzirah, 1:1*) – or, respectively, the laws of the Universe, the dynamics of Time, and the drama of Everything. The first, סִפֵּר, is the story itself. This is it, and it is what it is, and this is how it works, so deal with it. It is unchangeable, and so much so that God would have to re-create the entire universe from scratch if salt, for example, were to be rendered sweet or your nose was to be situated in the back of your head. The second, סִפֵּר, is about the context in which story unfolds, the scenario through which the story weaves, all of which is determined by the fluid nature of Time, which flings open the gates of absolutes to the endless horizons of possibility and change. And the third, סִפֵּר, is the actual telling, the actual playing-out of the story. It is Matter’s translation of Space as filtered through Time. It is Creation creatively weaving Creator’s intent, partially sticking to the script and partially improvising, which is what translation is all about.

The hyena is a creature symbolic of scavenging, known for its tendency to move in on what others have achieved through their own hard and patient efforts, only to snatch it away from them. This is Hyena's story, its nature, how its script was written at the time before time when God thought "Hyena." As Hyena journeys impulsively through its pre-scripted life cycle, the dynamics of Time gradually morphs it into a blind creature that flies about erratically and is also known for its blood-sucking tendencies, namely a large **bat**. Because Hyena has not made much innovative use of its eyes, to try and see things



differently, and has rather surrendered its life path to the instinctive radar of its ears and nose which in turn drove it to wherever there is a recent kill, to wherever there is an opportunity to take advantage of someone **else's** endeavors.

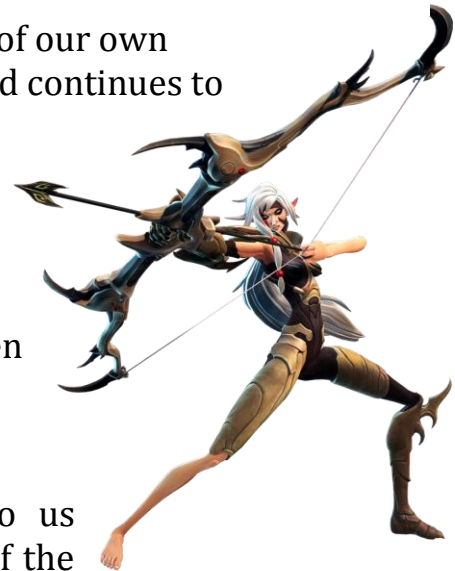
As its gluttony intensifies, the hyena, now in the form of a large bat, further shifts into a **smaller** bat, enabling it to feed on yet **more** possibilities, smaller, more accessible meals, and with greater expediency. Lazily resigned to the automated flow of Space and Time, absent personal participation in the direction of Story, the hyena's life journey continues exclusively focused on scavenging and usurping, so much so that in time and with time it morphs into a weed, where it no longer has to move all over the place in search of sustenance, it simply can just stay put where it is and usurp the nutrients intended for others.

The weed remains the hyena. The story remains the same, only the translation has over time mildewed in Darwinian reversal. The translation continues yet further when the hyena-turned-weed is so entrenched in its newfound way of scavenging without the hunt that it becomes fearful of losing its precious ground and focuses on becoming self-protective, so much so that in time and with time it morphs into a thorn. Along each phase of its shape-shifting, the hyena grows farther and farther distant from its core essence, from its original story, its aboriginal roots, to the point where its life focus eventually turns into an obsessive but futile attempt to fill the vacuum created by lifetimes of desperately trying to satiate the longing **within** through the accomplishments of others.

In other words, in time and with time, it ultimately morphs into a Shay'd. Because, basically, the Shay'd is a shape-shifting creature that manifests and thrives within the vacuum; it is an entity that flourishes in the

twilight of oblivion, in the undefined chasm between story and translation (*Midrash Bereisheet Rabbah* 7:7; *Maharal, Derech Chayyim*, folio 236).

This ancient wisdom is about the default fate of our own transformative processes. Life goes on and the world continues to spin with or without our participation. The story unfolds in **spite** of us. However, absent our **involvement**, the story eventually dissipates into the ether, and life empties into the Abyss of the Great Void. Sort of like what Shlomo, one of our tribal rulers, may have implied 3,000 years ago when he wrote: “All of the rivers empty into the sea, yet the sea is never full” (*Proverbs* 1:7).



And what applies to the hyena applies to us humans as well, he taught, “for the circumstance of the human and the circumstance of the animal is one and the same circumstance; as with one, so with the other” (*Ecclesiastes* 3:19). After all, it was **we** who defined the animals (*Genesis* 2:18). It was **we** who in that moment integrated their story within ours and our story within theirs. “The souls of animals and of humans,” our ancestors taught, “are imprinted one within the other” (*Zohar*, Vol. 1, folio 20b). Or, in the words of the 13th-century Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet, “the souls of animals are sparks of the human souls” (*Manuscript Parma-de Rossi* 1221, folio 288b).

And just in case you truly think that by this whole hyena *schpiel* they were just talking about the animal world, the teaching continues with one more passage: “And as for **you**, O human, after seven years, **you** could turn into a snake! – by way of your spine.”

So, the default metamorphosis for a hyena is bat, then weed, then thorn, then Shay’d, and the default metamorphosis for you and me is snake. Why snake? What in the nature of our relationship with Snake would make it so that Snake becomes **our** default metamorphosis? Because in our Creation story, Snake was the very first creature to activate, to “break the ice,” to take the initiative and move beyond itself and engage Other. It even spoke our language. And it awakened us out of our primeval stupor with the cunning use of one of its most creative inventions: **Question**. Question, in turn elicited **Response**. And the elicitation of Response, in turn, created the very first **Dialogue**. Snake, in other words, initiated us into the world of Response. The shadow cost of all this was the introduction of *ey’vah*, of enmity (*Genesis* 3:15) --

Adam blames Eve, and Eve blames Snake; everyone's pissed-off at each other instead of claiming responsibility.

In the end, and as a result of Snake's intervention in our lives, we died in Creator's intended story -- the Garden of Eden -- and were reborn into our **own** story, reborn into *Adamah*, the Earth World, or literally: "Clay World," where, as with clay, we have a better chance at participating in **shaping** our lives.

Snake is our default metamorphosis. If we resign to just roll along in life and not participate in the translation, our spine, our backbone, the very pillar that holds us upright in our life walk, shape-shifts into Snake, and, like in the Garden, we lose our connection with our essential selves and the story out of which we emerged. Yet, the gift is we are then challenged to rebirth our own story. For there is no curse that does not also carry the potential for blessing.

To do this, the ancients suggested, we ought to get into the practice of being thankful for what he have, for what Creator gifts to us morning, afternoon, and evening daily, especially those things we tend to take for granted. In this way we actively participate in and contribute to the making of our story and to its translation. And so it is to our advantage to use our spine toward this objective, as in "bowing in gratitude." And we pray our gratitude like the second-century Rabbi Shey'shet did, bending like a bamboo shaft in the wind and slithering upward like a snake (*Talmud Yerushalmi, Shekalim 25b*).

Creation is a story. Your life, your choices, your actions, they are all your unique **take** on the Story as it unfolds in the distinct scenario of your personal life walk.



My spine is my snake self, and how it will manifest, whether as a rerun of the Serpent in the Garden of Eden story or of something totally different and perhaps even healing for me -- by shedding layers of what went wrong in my own personal Forbidden Fruit escapades -- depends on **me**. It depends on my translation. It depends on whether I deceive myself into thinking that "my power and the might of my own hands alone has accomplished all this" (Deuteronomy 8:18) or whether I open my eyes and heart to the gift of simply being, and express my gratitude for that and for all the trimmings

that go with it that are so easily and so commonly taken for granted.



The question Creator posed to humanity in the Garden was: “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). Or, paraphrased: Will you absently glide with the flow of Space and allow the dynamics of Time to morph you by default into the whimsical vacuum of oblivion? Or will you actively participate in the drama of the translation and avoid losing your

connection with Story? Will you resign to the seeming hopelessness of world events as they spin out of control toward the black hole of chaos, or will you hold steadfast to your continued participation **in** and contribution **to** the translation of My story?

How we shift within our own **personal** stories has a rippling effect on the **universal** Story. In the words of the second-century Rabbi Shimon bar Yo’chai: “With the arrival of the New Year [*Rosh Hashanah*], we blow our breath through the horn of the ram [*shofar*] to unify the elements of Air [space], Fire [time] and Water [matter], and to merge them into a single voice that is the Song of Earth [our story]. Through this sound we awaken the Voice of the Above [God’s story] so that the Song of Heaven joins in unison with the Song of Earth until they become one unified resonance that shatters and confuses all of the forces of divisiveness” (Zohar, Vol. 4, folio 99b).

