

The Family Pfefferman: Bearing The Cross of Ivri¹

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A Promiscuous Midrash

I wasn't Bat Mitzvah, not because my Father was at a cross-dressing retreat claiming his womanhood. But because my mother was an Israeli who thought a raw shrimp buffet at Cookie's Steakhouse for my sweet 16 was by far the superior rite of passage for her first-generation American daughter. The synagogue by our house in Long Island was more a fashion show for God than a real religious experience she would say. My Vienna born Father, who had escaped Berlin and the Nazi extermination of the Jews on the second to last illegal boat, was fine as long as he could dance to an 8-track of Louis Armstrong's "What A Wonderful World" with his bubbeleh. Under a strobe light if possible.

Which is all to say I grew up an American girl, a Hebrew school dropout, and, like the Pfefferman kids, wondered why I felt fearful of everything. What trauma, historical and personal, had I internalized? I too was 'tap dancing for Hitler,' to use Jill Soloway's disturbing phrase in her memoir *Tiny Ladies in Shiny Pants*.¹ As is the thirteen-year-old Ali Pfefferman, when, standing on the top of the family kitchen table, she recites, for the stranger/caterer, her Torah portion, *Lekh lekha* (Genesis 12:1 - 17:27), meant for her *bat mitzvah* that was cancelled.

Transparent, without paradox or contradiction, combines parasha² *Lekh lekha* with its Jewish characters who are driven, haunted, consumed with desire, "split at the root" in Adrienne Rich's phrase³, who are in between cultures and genders, who are full of rage and fear, who are

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also tap dancing, performing their generational traumas for all to see. Through its daring, radical, messy, refractions of Judaism diffused through its Jewish characters, *Transparent* invites us to midrash in its margins.

Biblical scholar Aviva Zornberg explains that central to Midrash is “the telling of stories that fill in gaps in the written Biblical text.”⁴ *Transparent*’s performed, visual text dwells within the spacious gaps and unceasing silences of the written Hebrew Biblical text. From there, in between its adaptations of tradition and modernity, *Transparent* invents meanings and narratives that are both our contemporaries and that are resonant with the centuries of Jewish readings and interpretations of the Hebrew Biblical text.

About Midrash, about the countless inventive retellings of the Passover Haggadah, Zornberg asserts: “It is precisely through narration, by fulfilling the biblical imperative to tell the story, by the continuing interaction between parents and children, that transformed versions of self and of the meanings of liberation will be generated.”⁵ We may receive this statement as the very definition of what *Transparent* intends to do, and of what it does.

Transparent is (to use Philip Roth’s felicitous phrase) “imagining Jews being imagined, by themselves and by others”⁶; this is another name for Midrash. “The idea is to perceive your invention as a reality that can be understood as a dream,” Roth also writes.⁷ And this too is what Midrash does, what *Transparent* does.

I do not argue, I assume therefore, that *Transparent* is itself a Midrash, an imaginative elaboration of meanings not scribed but performed, as stories and characters, in the margins of the Torah. Thus, I respond with a midrash on *Transparent* that speaks in multiple, heterogeneous voices, that elucidates *and* blurs, that questions and, maybe, sometimes answers, but never resolves or concludes. [I respond to *Transparent* as if it too is knowingly composed and elaborated around

a Torah portion, and thus is a text that is open to every means of interpretation--both the traditional and the modern, the ancient and the contemporary, available through Jewish readings of the Hebrew Bible. This allows me to use midrashic modes of interpretation that speak in multiple, heterogeneous voices, that elucidate *and* blur, that question and, maybe, sometimes answer, but never resolve or conclude.] Mine is a promiscuous midrash.

Transparent's Jewishness: Style *and* Substance

Transparent's interest in Jewishness, what it is, what it means to be a Jew, is better delineated when compared and contrasted with that Jewishness which interests Philip Roth. "Talking about Jewishness hardly interests me at all," Roth has said. "The Jewish quality of books like mine doesn't really reside in their subject matter," he explains. "...It's a kind of sensibility...the nervousness, the excitability, the arguing, the dramatizing, the indignation, the obsessiveness, the touchiness, the playacting—above all the talking. The talking and the shouting...It isn't what it's talking about that makes a book Jewish—it's that the book won't shut up. The book won't leave you alone. Won't let up. Gets too close."⁸

Well, *Transparent* too partakes of this Jewish style, and it "won't let up. Gets too close." It doesn't leave you alone. *Transparent*, it is said⁹, is the most Jewish show to hit the screen; more and differently Jewish than Larry David. It is intensively, pervasively interested in talking about Jewishness, and its Jewish quality resides precisely in its subject matter. *Transparent* does not use Jewish anxiety as a joke or a trope or as a self-hating disavowal. Rather, it mines its Jewishness to discover what it is; and it's not afraid to make mistakes, as when Maura gets the Shabbat prayer wrong and says the prayer for Hanukkah. Amen. So be it.

It is instructive to consider, as I do, *Transparent's* fictional Jews in the company of Philip Roth's fictional Jews, for at least two reasons: because *Transparent's* fictional Jews have provoked

reactions of opprobrium similar to reactions Roth's fictions have provoked, and, it turns out, for the same reasons. And because, as Arnold Eisen, the current chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, observed: "[Roth's] questions about Jewish life and identity and their dilemmas have always been the right questions."¹⁰ *Transparent* is going its own way to places Roth has, with his fictional characters, already been too; and it is working with those same questions with which Roth worked.

As do Roth's fictions, *Transparent* intrepidly, subversively, provocatively faces issues of Jewish trauma and shame and fear head-on. And like Roth's Jewish characters, *Transparent's* characters fiercely contend against (to again quote Roth) "how strongly the Jew in the post-Holocaust decades has been identified in American fiction with righteousness and restraint, with the just and measured response rather than with those libidinous and aggressive activities that border on the socially acceptable and may even constitute criminal transgression."¹¹

Transparent does both, yes, but for an entirely different purpose and with a radically different intended result. The family Pfefferman, unlike Larry David's characters, want each to discover what it means for them to be a Jew, to be Jewish, not just culturally but religiously and spiritually. The family Pfefferman is an improvised, willy-nilly laboratory of Jewish experimentation.

Lekh Lekha: A Feminine Calling

And it is Ali Pfefferman who, by reciting her Bat Mitzvah parasha *Lekh lekha*, gives us an intimation, a signal, a key as to what this Jewish experimentation is concerned with essentially. We have already said that the Family Pfefferman, through continued interactions between parents and children, generates---that is begets--- "transformed versions of self and of the meanings of liberation". Studying *Transparent* as elaborated from, within, and around parasha *Lekh lekha*, we

may discern the existential impetus that calls forth and initiates the Pfefferman's shared project of departure from various physical and personal, cultural and spiritual servitudes toward *transformation* and liberation, impure and imperfect as they certainly must be.

This initiatic impetus is found in the first sentence of the parasha and in the seminal associated use of the Hebrew verb *abara*, 'to cross over', from which comes the word "Ivri". Here is the original *Lekh lekha*, or rather its plain reading, as conveyed through Robert Alter's English translation from the original Hebrew:

*"Go forth from your land and your birth place and your father's house to the land I will show you."*¹²

A more interior, nuanced reading, for the opening imperative "go forth" (*lekh lekha*), one based on the precision of meaning in the Hebrew words, and a reading that has long been normative to Jewish interpretation of this verse, gives us not "Go forth" but "Go towards yourself", or, "Go for yourself", "*starting from* your land and your birth place and your father's house."

For Maura, this imperative call has been coming in a crescendo for her entire life, coming from within the 'sterility' and impasse and crisis of her not living as the woman she knows herself to be. For Maura's children, Sarah, Ali, Joshua, and ex-wife Shelly, this call comes from Maura's *transcendent* transgender emergence as a woman. It is Ali, true to her Bat Mitzvah parasha, who realizes what this call of their father's emergence as woman means: "It just means," she says, "we have to start all over again."¹³ It means the family Pfefferman must depart with Maura toward an 'unseen land'; *lekh lekha* is now their calling, their imperative too.

They, each, must go toward themselves, while not denying or renouncing their pasts, the conditionings, the circumstances of family, place, and identity in which they have lived until now; these places, their pasts are, rather, points of departure.¹⁴ *Lekh lekha* is thus an imperative of

knowledge, like “Know thyself” or “I think therefore I am,” which sounds within a human being as a directive to inwardly depart toward a still absent, or unrealized, dimension of their existence.

I name this Pfefferman *lekh lekha*, this itinerary of departures, of crossings, of (temporary) arrivals, which in turn become new departures, “bearing the cross of Ivri”, punning on both the words “trans” and “Ivri”.

The meaning of the Hebrew word *ivri* is: ‘one who is crossing over,’ who is in passage between and across borders and boundaries, while residing in the ‘in-between’, able to re-interpret and re-translate oneself. These meanings of *ivri*, all millennially central to Jewish Thought, allow us to perceive *Transparent* as being about how one American Jewish family is ‘bearing the cross’, the vocation, of *ivri*, of being a Jew, in early 21st century American culture, wherein gender, religion, sexuality, ethnicity, centers, peripheries, boundaries and borders, are all being reconceived, redefined, and renegotiated. Is this not, in fact, historically what Jews have done: continually interpret and invent new meanings for themselves, both within their own Jewish culture and within ambient non-Jewish culture, wherever and whenever they have integrally engaged with a host society?

“Trans” is a precise translation for the Hebrew word “Ivri”, first applied to Avra(ha)m and his wife Sara(h). What makes them “Ivri”, what makes them “trans”, is what makes Maura Pfefferman “Ivri” or “trans”, and his ex-wife and children too. Accepting to enter into the *transformational* itinerary of *Lekh lekha* is what makes one “Ivri” or “trans.”

My title, now it may be perceived, is a triple cross, a triple pun. First, because “bearing the cross of Ivri” is literally the particular burden of being a Jew in a society still dominated by Christian imagery, symbols and beliefs. Second, I envision Moppa--the trans-Jewish, Yiddish-speaking intellectual, as a Christ figure bearing her cross (reminiscent of Chagall’s painting “White

Crucifixion”). The pun’s third dimension is of this “bearing” itself, conceived as giving birth to more crossings, for Maura’s transitioning prompts her entire family’s respective crossings; she gives birth to more translations of self, more questions or permutations of what it means to be a Jewish-American, a father, a wife, a daughter, a son, straight, gay, single, childless, sexual, not sexual, and so on.

It is a profound rupture and disturbance, a necessary and unavoidable one, in one’s own life and in the lives of others whom one loves. *Lekh lekha*, “go toward yourself”, requires, ideally, the balance Hillel proposes (*Pirkei Avot* 1:14): “If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am only for myself, what am I?” But this is not your father Avraham’s, not your mother Sarah’s, *Lekh lekha*. *Transparent*’s characters, like Philip Roth’s characters, are ‘Jews behaving badly’.

A Defense of “Pagan Drek”

In Jewish thought, *Lekh Lekha* is received as a narrative that, in its own potential for psychological interpretations and applications, is comparable to the myth of Oedipus or the myth of Narcissus. Such an approach seeks contemporary analogies for the infertility and sterility mutually experienced by Avram and Sarai (and who therefore are not yet Avraham and Sarah). Their infertility and sterility is understood as a physical-psychological symptom of a comprehensive civilizational and cultural illness or disturbance to which Avram and Sarai are especially subject; a symptom that confronts them with in an impasse that prevents them from advancing further toward the promise of their humanity. And symptoms, as child psychoanalyst and essayist Adam Phillips has observed, “are forms of self-knowledge.”¹⁵ *Transparent* is concerned to imagine the spiritual, the personal and ethical, ‘sterility’ of its Jewish characters, and therefore involves itself—in a messy, undisguised, unapologetic manner, in the respective

‘symptoms’ as “forms of self-knowledge” with which each of its characters inescapably must contend.

Each character has, what Phillips calls, a need *to not know* herself or his self, to each be ‘cured of their self-knowledge’, of their wish to know themselves in a “coherent, narrative way.”¹⁶ “You can only recover your appetite, or appetites,” Phillips explains, “if you can allow yourself to be unknown to yourself. It’s only worth knowing about things that make one’s life worth living, and whether there are in fact things that make it worth living.”¹⁷ Each character’s behavior, their self-indulgent attentions to themselves, and the choices each of them make for themselves, is then integral to the *Lekh lekha* ‘journey’ they each are attempting toward knowing what makes their life worth living and toward surpassing the impasse of their particular ‘sterility’.

These ‘symptoms’, by which *Transparent’s* characters unsuccessfully, changeably define themselves, are they ‘symptoms’ of narcissism? In his essay “Narcissism, For and Against,” Adam Phillips presents clinical and psychoanalytical definitions of narcissism. Narcissism is a key term, Phillip writes, for “those forms of life that, in various ways, have tried to escape from all those things that are assumed...to make life worth living. A good life is one in which one has been able to escape from the right things.”¹⁸ Those who “believe in something they call narcissism,” Phillip maintains, “have an especially strong sense of what a good life for a person is.”¹⁹

Phillips offers one summary definition of narcissism as “the keeping oneself company at the cost of other company.”²⁰ Or it can be “a flight...from something deemed to be life-denying; and a flight toward something assumed to be life-affirming.”²¹ Again, it can be perceived as “an escape from [emotional] development”²² which involves “an odd mixture of licence (‘anything is permitted’) and immobility, paralysis, isolation, stagnation, withdrawal, feeling stuck, cut off and out of reach.”²³ The narcissist, Phillips also states, “wants to keep otherness down to a

minimum.”²⁴ By any definition, the so-called narcissist utilizes strategies of ‘retreat’ and ‘escape’, as s/he identifies the ‘reality/realities’ from which s/he attempts to ‘retreat’ or ‘escape’ (and from which, inescapably, s/he cannot). Phillips, and I concur with his conclusion, finds all this coincident with our common human predicament. As he asserts: “Everybody is dealing with how much of their own aliveness they can bear and how much they need to anesthetize themselves.”²⁵

Narcissism, then, by whatever definition of it or denomination of belief in it one chooses, is not a liability but might be a precondition for growth, when, in going toward yourself, you are able to ‘bear the cross of Ivri’. What is more salient and interesting is not the narcissistic proclivities of the family Pffefferman, but rather their ability to bear, to contend with their narcissism(s) and to find spaces/cracks to let some light in, to celebrate birthdays and Jewish holidays, to re-connect and reconcile with each other---especially the ways the siblings connect with, support and console each other, to find places of provisional wholeness in their mutually interdependent journeys toward themselves. *Lekh lekha*---and off they go, usually clumsily bumping into each other, into strangers, into their own image. The unintended consequences and the collateral damage are often painful to watch.

The family Pffefferman are unabashedly wounded, and they alienate some viewers who offer their moral castigation, or, more extremely, vehemently reject them as, what one Blog respondent called, “pagan dreck”, as if each of the Pffefferman---*ivri'im*, crossers that they are---should wear a scarlet “T” for *Trans* imposed on a pink Jewish star. Their ‘crossings’ happen precisely because they are unabashedly wounded, and human all too human. Maura’s stillborn, negated womanhood, Shelly’s sexual abuse when a child, Sarah’s S & M humiliation, Josh’s adolescent paralysis, his father-void, and Ali’s too---because they give voice to their dirty silences, their ‘crossings’ can be redemptive.

Jewish tradition well knows the crooked, switchback, impure paths by which something of liberation and redemption may occur. Even the lineage of the Mashiach begins with an illicit union. It is our impurity, our own contradictions, our own resistant, rebellious, untamable “otherness” we see dramatized in the accentuated flaws, the existential impasses of *Transparent*'s characters.

“In every silence there is the hypothesis of a secret,” writes Nabokov in an early short story.²⁶ The family Pfefferman is breaking through and out of the carapaces of their silences. The liberation and transformation to which I previously referred consists in this. They are learning to confide, each to him or herself, directly or indirectly to one another, the secrets of their respective ‘sterilities’. And doing so while also experimenting with an awakening jouissance (in some ways connected with the obscure object of their Jewishness). The jouissance of “difficult freedom” (to use Levinas’s phrase) involves each Pfefferman in libertine subversions of a “self” to which their body is no longer obedient. As Nietzsche writes in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “The body is a great reason, a multiplicity with one sense, a war and a peace, one herd and one shepherd.”²⁷

Transparent is not afraid to desire. Whereas the characters of other Jewish artists who write for TV, like Larry David and Sarah Silverman, dwell in irony and wryness, the Pfeffermans dwell in longing. *Transparent* released on to the screen a torrent of Jewish bodies, women’s bodies, men’s bodies, transgender bodies, swollen with Jewish desire and self-will. Their flagrant lack of restraint and tact, their constant emerging and crossing, their stiff-necked performances of appetites, of needs and hungers, which often blind the characters to seeing themselves, let alone each other’s needs, is precisely why they are so disturbing for many spectators.

Protestant America likes its sanitized secrets, which require strategic tact, restraint, quiet and discretion. For Protestant America, ‘bearing the cross of Ivri’ is for that de-Judaized Jew Jesus to do. It cannot bear, as indeed some Jewish cultural critics and intellectual seem not able to bear,

the Jewish wild appetite made public, the incessant anxious logorrhea, the self-refractive, relentlessly metamorphosing, somersaulting desire. It fears and loathes these “rootless cosmopolitans,” and may even wish to be rid of them.

The behavioral norms of the contemporary Mussar movement, to put it another way, is not for the family Pfefferman. A Jewishness of “righteousness and restraint, with the just and measured response,” to again quote Roth’s words, is not for them. Though, at the same time, *Transparent* dramatizes a conservative longing for a new Judaism. A crossing over from a more traditional, perhaps now exhausted Rabbinic Judaism. *Transparent* longs for new forms, new rituals, and in this longing it is not ironic or secular. It pushes us in an old-fashioned, decidedly unironic way in its depiction of a family of upper-middle class LA Jews trying to find their way toward a still recognizable Rabbinic style of Judaism peppered---*pfeffered*---with other heterogeneous elements of “pagan dreck”.

Lekh Lekha: Embryonic Birth Pains of Beginning Again

Transparent’s characters long to arrive, to be shown a new ‘land’, and to settle in it. Wrestling with their origins, peregrinating in the wilderness of their bodies, to where do they return, over and over again? To the scene of the crime of the nuclear family, to the home, where their wounds were inflicted, to the matrix of their impasses and the point of departure for their *lekh lekha* liberation.

Because before there can be anything of such an arrival, or of a new Judaism, or a *teshuvah*, a return to some adaptation and re-invention of Rabbinic Judaism, there must be a *Lekh lekha*, starting all over again. For millennia, Jews have known that becoming a human being, a mensch, takes hard lifelong work. The Mishnah (*Pirkei Avot* 2:60) transmits a saying attributed to Hillel: “In a place where there are no human beings, try to be one.” It is often an ordeal, an insufferable

project, this ‘bearing the cross of Ivri’. The Hebrew word for “embryo”, *ubar*, comes from the same root as Ivri. The Ivri is an embryonic human being, crossing through stages of gestation toward maturity and birth. And there are birth pains.

For there is no static arrival either, is there? There might be momentary homelands, historical eras of sovereignty, 40 year marriages, there might be delicious, provisional spaces of Shabbat rest; if we are lucky, there might be trysts and transient liaisons, and they are good. But this too shall pass. And in her *trans*-migrational life, the Ivri must bear this all as well.

Pirkei Avot (2:16) also transmits a saying attributed to Rabbi Tarfon, which begins: “The day is short, the work is great...” The Pfeffermans are, at last, waking up into this “day”. All they have to do is to “start all over again”, go toward themselves. Their work is to make peace with the provisional peace they are granted; to make, for it is not given. Can the family Pfefferman come eventually to say, as Roland Barthes once wrote: “The art of the catastrophe calms me down.”²⁸ They improvise themselves, cross over themselves clumsily, selfishly, of course. This is a Jewish art, this task of making. And it is good.

Our painful in-between-ness that all too frequently feels like vertigo and paralysis can also liberate. We are always already, ‘at sea’, crossing over to our “other” side, not yet knowing what is there. If we live in-between the obvious meaning and the obscured, hidden meaning, between exile and freedom, remembering that we once were slaves in Egypt, if we live in this way, maybe, *Transparent* tells us, we can be ‘at sea’, borne upon the waters, in style.

Maybe this in-between is the very vessel of our passage, the *trans* vessel par excellence, whatever the body we inhabit and/or long to inhabit. Maybe it is by abiding in the in-between that we can arrive at transient places of peace and repose, even, yes, of pleasure and joy. We can cross

between ordinary time and holy Shabbat time, we can choose life--L'Chaim!--even as we incessantly wrestle with our ivri condition, our own constant recalcitrant badly behaving otherness.

To be *trans*, to be *ivri*, is to bear the cross of being in-between. For every arrival will in turn become a point of departure, since the imperative of *Lekh lekha* never ends. Its call is unceasing.

Lekh Lekha Interruptus

The final episode of the third season of *Transparent* features the co-incident complement and contrast between two quintessential story events of bearing the cross of Ivri.

They are 1) Maura's seemingly definitive impasse, out of which she cannot trans-migrate; that is, because she cannot, after such ardent anticipation, undergo "gender re-assignment surgery" and receive the woman's body she desires; and 2) Maura's ex-wife Shelly's complete act of 'crossing-over', performing, at sea, her one-woman show, "To Shel and Back", in which she, finally, tells her story to her family, and they listen.

Maura's is a *lekh lekha* interruptus, or is it? Shel's is, in fact, a *trans* act par excellence, of an Ivri completing a crossing. Indeed, it is Shelly, the least likely of the family Pfefferman, who crosses over to her painful beginnings, who makes a *teshuva*, a re-turning, in the final episode of season three.

Maura's ultimate leap to get "gender reassignment surgery," which would cross over the final boundary in emerging as a woman, claiming a lost body, is thwarted by this very body; it is prohibited by her own wounded heart. She has reached a crisis in *Lekh lekha*, the crisis of her own still 'in -between' body. This crisis begets in her a gesture of liberated mourning, one that complements her son Joshua's pouring Rene's ashes into the waters.

Maura in sorrow, in anger, resentfully, tries to cast her tight spanx upon the same waters that her own mother crossed over to America, and thus Maura continues crossing over toward herself. She holds hands with Ali, in a triumphant act of solidarity, joy and victory. Here we may detect an allusion to Moses, Maryam, the men, women and children of the Bnei Israel singing and dancing in victory after crossing over, through the Sea of Reeds, to the shore beyond. Which, of course, is only another point of departure.

For Maura, it is, maybe, an intimation of her true *trans* body, not subject and in servitude even to her own desired physiological gender.

This project of becoming human, to which I referred earlier, which Jewish tradition says began with Avraham and Sarah, and with *Lekh lekha*, this project that Jews have insisted upon for millennia, is infinitely more about sustaining the transformational itinerary of *Lekh lekha* than it is about an end to the work. *Transparent* keeps us in-between, at sea; it does not let us either go into the promised land. Even in the Land of Israel.

To some, it may be surprising that it is Shelly who, while at sea, performs, for *Transparent*, a first complete act of crossing. Shelly, the most ignored, the most neglected character, whose story no one expresses interest in or wants or asks to hear, Shelly whose own *Lekh lekha*, provoked by Maura and by her own children, is like a *tikkun* for the fate of Lot's wife. Lot's wife who was paralyzed, petrified, 'turned to salt', by her fatal fixation on the past, on what was behind her but which she could not bare to leave behind.

As her son Joshua spills into the waters the ashes of his lover/abuser, with whom he conceived a child, Shelly, a survivor of child sexual abuse spills her voice, her song, her story into her family. She will no longer be merely a "shell" of herself. Shelly goes more toward herself, she

bears the cross of Ivri, the human stain and impurity of it, to become a beautiful wild performer of her wounds, by which she transforms pain into narrative art.

Unlikely as it may seem, of all *Transparent's* characters, it is Shelly who first finds her way of "starting all over again". Shelly's one woman show is as a haggadah, a telling, her narrative of emergence from personal servitudes. She answers, as Zornberg called it, to the "imperative to tell the story". By her family's response, we may anticipate that as they receive Shelly's story, as it becomes integral to the family narrative, elaborated between parents and children, it will generate, again quoting Zornberg, "transformed versions of self and of the meanings of liberation".

Here, maybe, will be a new point of departure for the family Pfefferman, for their *Lekh lekha* as a family. Whereas, initially, it was Maura's metamorphosis that was the catalyst, now it is Shelly, through her narrative art, through re-telling a story her family assumed they already knew but did not know, who has called upon Maura along with their children to inwardly depart toward themselves, from *within* their "land", their "birthplace", the "father's house".

And then, finally, there is Maura's gaze. Finally: a smile. Finally: a moment of her fulsome recognition of and admiration for Shelly. The rapturous kvelling gazes of Shelly's family emerge as they too cross over into a moment of grace and freedom, a moment of what Judaism calls *zekhor*, remembrance. They were slaves and now they are free.

It is a moment of mutual transparency, an old-fashioned word for illumination. Shelly spoke, told her story, and there was light. And it is good.

Maura's smile, in that moment, is the whole Torah. All the rest is commentary.

Blessings on the Broken Pfeffermans

...I watch *Transparent* late at night. After the secular rituals of feeding my family, doing the dishes, bath, book and bed. Emails and grades. 11 pm. *Transparent* is my doodle dreamtime. My Shabbat. Bless its messy midrash, its flagrant indulgences, its impurities, its “pagan dreck”. Bless its ancient-modern music, its kinky queer magisterial moebius-strip elocutions, bless that it never stops talking, never shuts up, won’t leave us alone. Bless its dirty, libidinous congregants, its man-made lakes with predatory geese who want to nosh on bagels and lox. Bless its Jewish sense and sensibility. It returns me to a spark of Jewish possibility, of sexual possibility, of woman possibility, *lekh lekha*, to go and return, out of the cradle of a moribund civilization, two steps forward, one step back, endlessly rocking. "Turn it, and turn it, for everything is in it."²⁹

I am indebted to Robert Margolis for helping me think through many of the ideas in this essay.

¹ Solloway, Jill. *Tiny Ladies in Shiny Pants: Based on a True Story*. Free Press, 2005, p. 149.

² *Parasha*, the Hebrew word for “portion”, is originally the word used to refer to a section of the Hebrew Bible according to its divisions in the Masoretic Text. The text of the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, is read, portion by portion, each week in synagogues on Shabbat, throughout the Jewish year, until the entire Torah has been read. A girl who is *bat mitzvah* or a boy who is *bar mitzvah*, when called to read from the Torah, reads from the ritual portion for that particular week. This is his or her *parasha*. Each Torah *parasha* is named for a key Hebrew word or phrase in its portion of text.

³ Rich, Adrienne. “Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity.” *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*. Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1982.

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- ⁴ Zornberg, Avivah Gottlieb. *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus*. Image/Doubleday, 2002, p. 3.
- ⁵ Zornberg 5.
- ⁶ Roth, Philip. *Why Write? Collected Nonfiction 1960-2013*. The Library of America, 2017, p. 176.
- ⁷ Roth 144.
- ⁸ Roth 161.
- ⁹ See for example, Eric Thurm, “Transparent is the most Jewish show on television,” *Esquire*, October 6, 2016.
- ¹⁰ Judith Thurman. “Philip Roth Is Good For The Jews.” *The New Yorker*, May 24, 2014. https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/philip-roth-is-good-for-the-jews?irgwc=1&source=affiliate_impactpmx_12f6tote_desktop_Viglink%20Primary&mbid=affiliate_impactpmx_12f6tote_desktop_Viglink%20Primary
- ¹¹ Roth 82.
- ¹² Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*. W.W. Norton and Company, 2004, p. 62.
- ¹³ “The Wilderness.” *Transparent*. Season One. Episode Six. Amazon Studios, 2014.
- ¹⁴ This does not mean that the stories the family Pffeferman tell themselves and to each other are ‘historically correct’. “To articulate the past,” Walter Benjamin writes, “does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.” *Illuminations*. Fontana, 1973, p. 257.
- ¹⁵ Phillips, Adam. “The Art of Non-Fiction No. 7,” *The Paris Review*, Issue 208, Spring 2014. <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6286/adam-phillips-the-art-of-nonfiction-no-7-adam-phillips>
- ¹⁶ Phillips (2014).
- ¹⁷ Phillips (2014).
- ¹⁸ Phillips, Adam. *Promises, Promises: Essays on Psychoanalysis and Literature*. Basic Books, 2001, p. 204.
- ¹⁹ Phillips (2001) p. 210.
- ²⁰ Phillips (2001) p. 209.
- ²¹ Phillips (2001) p. 209.
- ²² Phillips (2001) p. 220.
- ²³ Phillips (2001) p. 220.
- ²⁴ Phillips (2001) p. 218.
- ²⁵ Phillips 2014.
- ²⁶ I am unable to find in which Nabokov story this sentence occurs. It is quoted by Stéphane Zagdanski in his essay “Le miracle Nabokov”. *Les Joies de mon corps*. Pauvert, 2003, p. 224.
- ²⁷ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 23.
- ²⁸ Barthes, Roland. *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*. Hill and Wang, 1978, p. 143.
- ²⁹ *Pirkei Avot* 5:22. The Mishnah’s reference here is to the Torah.