Tradition has long maintained that the older a document, the greater its authenticity and authority—Jewishly speaking. There can be no doubt as the authenticity and antiquity of the source I’m about to share with you, uncovered by one of our rabbinic students some 30 years ago in the discarded archives, or Geniza, of a synagogue in Northern Michigan. The folios discovered contain what are, in effect, three quasi-Mishnah passages. Although they did not quite make it into the canonized MISHNAH, I shall refer to each passage as a Mishnah rather than a Tosefta or Baraita. Yet more remarkable are the Gemara-like expositions that were discovered in situ, a literary form that has seldom survived outside of the canonized Talmud. Let us begin.

MISHNAH I: IRONY, MEANING & JOY

Ven es zol helfn Got betn, volt men shoyn tsugedungen mentschn. Trotst Sie wuerden ein Rebbe sein? 1 “If praying to God did any good, they would have already hired someone to do it. But [still] you would be like to be a rabbi?”

Gemara to Mishnah I: Why did the sages say this? Surely they believed praying to God does some good. One could say that they wrote this because they didn’t want rabbis to take their roles too seriously. An objection: But isn’t the rabbi’s role, to pray on Israel's behalf, a serious role? Reb Rorty responded: Yes, it is serious, but this Mishnah speaks with an ironic voice, hoping to teach us that irony permeates all of life, even prayer itself! Rabbi Chaim added: Even the Torah itself—מה תלמידי לומדים—that is, the Torah itself, which can be demonstrated through a verse in Exodus, רֹבְרוֹת אֵין על הַמִּקְרָא מֶנָּה בֵּין נְכוֹנֵי אָדָם (Exod 25:22), which, if you translate literally, appears to mean, quite ironically: “I, God, will speak to you from above the curtain, from between those two idol-like objects which are situated above the very box that contains the divine testimony.” Right there, in the Torah, is the definition of ironic. God will speak to Moses from between those two idol-like objects, you know, the ones Jews are otherwise rather prohibited from making. And how can we be certain this passage is written this way to

1. Taken from James A. Matisoff, Blessings, Curses, Hopes, and Fears: Psycho-Ostensive Expressions in Yiddish (Stanford University Press, 2000) p.41, emended for the present context.

2. Reference is to the themes of Richard Rorty’s Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (Cambridge University Press, 1999) particularly chapter 4, “Private Ironic and Liberal Hope.”
instruct us regarding the Torah’s use of irony? The word ‘aron’ here, and but five other places, is written k'tiv chaser, that is, without the vav for the vowel sound <o> [as in void]. This surely teaches:

אלה תקנו אדיבריה... על ארון קדש... אלו רבדות אולרות Außen לא תקנו.

Read the Exodus 25 verse to mean: “I will speak with you regarding the irony [of those statues that hover] over the testimony.” In other words, the place from which God speaks is a place cloaked in irony.

If God speaks from a place of irony, then surely Torah emerges from that same place of irony. Something is ironic when it entails meanings that exceed what is expected on the basis of a statement’s plain meaning. That is, in addition to what has been said overtly, meanings emerge out of what is said silently. Everything from humor to tragedy pivots off of this inexhaustable aspect of language, its surplus meanings, which also happens to contribute to the indeterminate character of most things said. This surplus of meaning is not a defect, but reflective of nature’s “plentitude and inexhaustibility” (ROSS, 22).

Virtually everything we utter, everything we write, can be interpreted in diverse ways. Judaism since antiquity has embraced an interpretive system that actually builds upon life’s complexity and the meaning surplus in all things uttered—even divine utterances. You might say, irony has served Jews the way a life preserver serves a cast away on the rough seas of history. If we let go now, we will surely drown.

But there are evil forces at work today—Jewish and non-Jewish—that seek to constrict artificially meanings to theological and political absolutes. The Reform rabbi must be courageous and resist calls for simplistic, populist forms of religiosity and truth. In the face of reactionary forces, the rabbi must stand firm as an advocate of an interrogative faith, holding but one thing as certain—precious few things are as they appear to be.

Reb Reznikoff told the following tale of Elijah, the Prophet, who was wandering about, gloomy over the deferred arrival of the messianic era. Suddenly, he looked and saw that he had come into a sunny place. It was at once familiar and strange. “Where am I?” he asked a stranger. “Paradise,” the stranger responded. “Paradise נשמים?! Can this be Paradise? There are here motor-cars and factories.” The stranger replied, “It is indeed. Look, that is the very sun that shone on Adam once; the very wind that blew upon his face, too.” Elijah thought, “Is it possible I’ve been wandering about Paradise all along?” (Talk about ironic! Elijah no less!)

Now how does this inform us regarding the Mishnah’s concern with the ironic role of rabbis in prayer? It doesn’t; at least not directly. But indirectly—quite a lot. As it says in the Good Book: Without irony there is no humor; and without humor there is no joy; and without joy, there is no Judaism. And without Judaism, the rabbi would take him or herself way too seriously. (So you see, we’ve come full circle.) Absurd, you say? It doesn’t seem to hang together, you charge! Midrashic exposition is indeed, absurd, in a most ironic way. (That is what we have been teaching for four years.) Embrace an ironic rabbinate; foster a Judaism at peace with indeterminacy; avoid inadvertently delaying the Messiah’s arrival.

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4. This is an adaptation of a poem by Charles Reznikoff, in The Poems of Charles Reznikoff, ed. Seamus Cooney (Jaffrey, NH: Black Sparrow Book, 2005) p.233.
MISHNAH II: USING WORDS

Rav George Oppen taught: “It is possible to make use of words provided one treat them as the enemy. [...] If one captures them one by one, and proceeds very carefully, it is possible to restore them to meaning.”

How do we derive this notion of words as enemies? The Psalmist says: "from the mouths of young disciples you will establish strength regarding your foes, to put an end to the enemy and avenger. Who, then, are the enemies specifically? These would be newly arrived rabbinic students. And what is taken from their mouths? The words with which they first arrive, as it says in the book of Job: For [they] come full of words (Job 32:18). And what does it refer to? This would be the act of instilling within them Torah, to conquer the enemy. Once it happened on a stormy day that a new class of disciples entered the house of study in Cincinnati eager to utter verses they had learned. Seated before their mentors, on the first day, each one recited a verse. They told of meanings given at Mount Sinai, subtleties more nuanced than any midrashist could imagine. Most importantly, they told of what they felt the words meant. The masters sat silently, in some cases, even patiently. Then one-by-one they rose and cast spells, taking the words of Torah away from the disciples, as it says in the Book of Job: They [the teachers] rendered the words away from them (Job 32:15).” Once that was done, they began instructing as to how they might be recaptured.

Another exposition on the same Psalm verse: Read not as your foes, but as: so that you might become the binders [of words], as implied by Isaiah’s verse, Bind up the message, seal the Torah within my disciples (Isaiah 8:16). Rabbi Simeon taught: Every meaning that is interpreted anew in the Torah contributes to the sustaining of the world through the creation of a new firmament. We have learned that as soon as a new interpretation of Torah leaves a person’s mouth, it ascends and is presented before the Holy One, Blessed be He. And God then takes that original interpretation and He kisses it [just as we would kiss a Torah Scroll] and then adorns it with seventy crowns. The rabbi has many roles, but the rabbi has only one unique role: sustaining the world through the teaching of Torah. God sits waiting to receive new meanings. Who can restore meaning?

A certain skeptic attacked this way of teaching. “Do you really intend to

6. Psalm 8:3, JPS rendering, From the mouths of infants and sucklings You have founded strength on account of Your foes, to put an end to enemy and avenger.
7. Literally, “I have come full of words.”
teach something about a rabbinate on the basis of myth and allegory, from the Zohar no less? Do you mean for rabbis to be armed with what amount to nothing more than semantic ornaments? How can the rabbi transform the world when her only tools are drawn from letters? “File down such a skeptic’s teeth! To the anti-intellectual, the anti-spiritual skeptic, you respond forcefully: We are, as human beings, compromised of but two things: body and the cluster of ideas that constitute our sense of the world at any given moment. Culture shapes lives; lives act through culture. If you leave the formation of culture to the vagaries of time and the whims of the social marketplace, you will end up with a society, with a Judaism, that has been shaped by thoughtless forces, perhaps even by evil forces.

There is nothing potentially more powerful than story; it is what moves history. People live, and often tragically die, because of story. Through story we teach empathy, what is right and wrong; what we believe must be. Through story others learn to be evil and tolerate greed. We are, as human beings, the amalgam of our narratives. The rabbi must place Judaism’s priorities into forceful contemporary narratives. It will not happen without you. If you do not do it, others will fill the void. Be the interpreter, the narrator. Make that your rabbinate’s central task, lest the role be usurped by forces at odds with a liberal, a progressive, an intellectually and spiritually vibrant Torah.

**Mishnah III: WORLD WITHOUT PROPHETS**

Rabbi Amichai Taught:9

Every night, God removes his shiny merchandise from the display window [of His shop]
a Divine Chariot, Covenant Tablets, [Mezuzot, Scrolls, etc.]
and He places them back in dark boxes, and then closes the shutters.

[He mutters to himself] “Yet again, not a single prophet came to buy.”

Rabba asked: Since when do prophets go shopping? 10

Have we not learned, that from the day that the Temple was destroyed, the powers of prophecy were taken away from the prophets?” (Talmud Bavli, Baba Batra 12a). As such, no one should expect to find prophets in the marketplace of ideas. Doesn’t God know this? Consider what the remarkable but nameless father of Rabbi Aptoriki taught: Are we not also instructed that after the destruction of the Second Temple, the powers of prophecy were given to the rabbis! There are even those who say, “A rabbi is preferred over a prophet” (12a). Thus, in this Mishnah, when it speaks of prophets, it also means rabbis. By “prophet” we mean “rabbis.” Well, have we not learned, those who

10. Cf., Bavli Tractate Baba Metzia 5a.
carried on after the greatest of all prophets, Moses, were not actually themselves prophets. Moreover, Judaism has now flourished longer under rabbis than under prophets. Of Caleb, Torah says: My servant, Caleb, because he has a different spirit within him, will carry onward after me (Num 14:24). How do we know that when Torah says my servant it means my rabbis? The Psalmist taught: For my servant, whom I SUPPORT, my chosen one, I have placed my spirit within him. The word ṣמחה [“support”] here has the meaning of ṣמחה [to ordain] as in Deuteronomy’s verse, And Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had placed his hands upon him (Deut 34:9). Joshua receives רוח נביאו, the spirit of wisdom; Caleb received רוח נביאו, a different spirit through his ordination, and according to the Psalmist, God places his spirit into his servant. Consequently, we conclude that just as ṣמחה designates a rabbinic sage, and just as לאה is another word for appointing or ordaining, and everything here involves spirit: from all this, we learn, by means of, albeit, a somewhat strained triple-parallel, double inverted triple-parallel, —that is, strict reasoning through lexical commonalities —that the rabbi’s role is to continue that of the prophet.

And therefore, by extension, we also learn that you, newly ordained rabbis, should, in a manner of speaking, go shopping, now and again. Of course, not in any old store, but rather in the market of holy articles offered by God Himself. After all, have we not been taught in Massekhet Avot: The shop is open, the shop keeper takes note, with the record book spread out for the writing hand; whoever wishes to come acquire, let him come (3,16). There, from among the accoutrements of tradition, you will find the wares you need for building of a vibrant interpretive, innovative Reform Judaism.

In but short moments, you will have symbolically conferred upon you this role of carrying on after the prophets, as hands are placed upon your heads. Serve Israel wisely, creatively, unselfishly. Be sensitive and attentive to life’s ironies; capture words; restore meanings; interpret and innovate; bring sense to the life of the spirit through story; and...go window shopping, periodically, for you never know when new items will be put on display in old windows.