

THE FABLE OF THE GOAT WHOSE MILK TASTED OF EDEN

S. Y. Agnon

Adapted from 1966 translation by Barney Rubin at www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/three-stories-fable-of-the-goat

The tale is told of an old man who groaned from his heart.¹ The doctors were sent for and they advised him to drink goat's milk. He went out, bought a goat and brought her into his home. Just a few days later, the goat disappeared. They went out to search, but she was nowhere to be found.

Before a week had passed, the goat returned by herself with her udder full of milk, the taste of which was as the taste of Eden! Not just once, but many times she disappeared from the house. They would go out in search of her but would not find her until she returned by herself. Always, after such disappearances, her milk was sweeter than honey and its taste was the taste of Eden.

One time the old man said to his son, "My son, I want to know where she goes and how she comes by this milk which is sweet to my mouth and a balm to all my bones."²

His son said to him, "Father, I have a plan."

He replied, "What is it?"

The son got up and brought a length of cord³. He tied it to the goat's tail. He said, "I am tying a cord to the goat's tail, so that when I feel a pull on it, I will know that she has decided to leave, and I can catch the end of the cord and follow her on her way."

The old man nodded and said, "My son, truly your heart is wise."⁴

The youth tied the cord to the goat's tail and minded it carefully. When the goat set off, he held the cord in his hand and did not let it slacken until the goat was well on her way. He followed along behind her until he came to a cave. The goat went into the cave, and the youth followed her, holding the cord. They walked thus for an hour or two...maybe even a day or two! The goat wagged her tail and bleated, and the cave came to an end.

When they emerged from the cave, the youth saw lofty mountains, and hills full of the choicest fruit, and a fountain of living waters that flowed down from the mountains; and the wind wafted all manner of perfumes. Carob fruits full of honey dropped from a nearby tree, and the goat ate of the carobs and drank of the garden's fountain.

The youth lifted up his eyes to the heavens and said, "Blessed be the Omnipresent, blessed be the One who has brought me to the Land of Israel." He kissed the soil and sat down under the tree.

¹ From Psalm 38:9

² From Proverbs 16:24

³ The Hebrew word משיחה (cord/pulling) may have been a pun upon משיח (Messiah)

⁴ From Proverbs 23:15

He said, “Until the day begins to pass, I shall sit on the hill under this tree. Then I shall go home and bring my parents to the Land of Israel.” As he was sitting and feasting his eyes on the holiness of the Land of Israel, he heard a voice proclaiming: “Come, let us go out to greet the Sabbath Queen.”⁵

And he saw men like angels, wrapped in white shawls, with boughs of myrtle in their hands, and all the houses in the land were lit with a great many candles. He perceived that the eve of Sabbath would arrive with the darkening, and that he would not be able to return. He uprooted a reed and dipped it in the juice of gallnuts, from which the ink for the writing of the Torah scrolls is made. He took a piece of paper and wrote a letter to his father:

From the ends of the earth, I lift up my voice in song to tell you that I have come in peace to the Land of Israel. Here I sit, close by Tz’fat, the holy city, and I imbibe its sanctity. Do not inquire how I arrived here but hold on to this cord which is tied to the goat’s tail and follow the footsteps of the goat; then your journey will be secure, and you will enter the Land of Israel.

The youth rolled up the note and placed it in the goat’s ear. He said to himself: “When she arrives at Father’s house, Father will pat her on the head, and she will flick her ears. The note will fall out, Father will pick it up and read what is written on it. Then he will take up the cord and follow the goat to Israel!”

The goat returned to the old man, but she did not flick her ears, and the note did not fall. When the old man saw that the goat had returned alone, he clapped his hands to his head and began to cry and weep and wail, “My son, my son, where are you? My son, would that I might die in your stead, my son, my son!”⁶

So he went, weeping and mourning over his son, for he said, “An evil beast has devoured him, my son is assuredly rent in pieces!”⁷

And whenever he saw the goat, he would say, “I will go down to my grave in mourning for my son.”⁸

The old man’s mind would not be at peace until he sent for the butcher to slaughter the goat. The butcher came and slaughtered the goat. As they were skinning her, the note fell out of her ear. The old man picked up the note and said, “My son’s handwriting!”

When he had read all that his son had written, he clapped his hands to his head and cried, “Vay! Vay! Woe to the man who robs himself of his own good fortune, and woe to the man who requites good with evil!”⁹

⁵ A reference to Kabbalat Shabbat – the *piuuyt* (liturgical song) *L’cha Dodi*.

⁶ A reference to David’s lament for Absalom, his son. 2 Samuel, 19:1.

⁷ A reference to Jacob’s mourning for Joseph, who he believes has been killed by wild beasts after his brothers sold him into slavery. Genesis 37:33.

⁸ Another quote from the Joseph story (Genesis 37:35).

⁹ A paraphrase of Isaiah 5:20.

He mourned over the goat many days and refused to be comforted, saying, “Woe to me, for I could have gone up to the Land of Israel in one bound, and now I must suffer out my days in this exile!”

Since that time the mouth of the cave has been hidden, and there is no longer a short way. And that youth, if he has not died, shall bear fruit in his old age, full of sap and freshness¹⁰, calm and peaceful in the Land of the Living.¹¹

From: *Storytelling of the Rabbis*

Howard Schwartz (p. 179)

Agnon’s use of sources is well illustrated in his “Fable of the Goat”... The *aggadic* prototype for this fable is likely to be found in the legends concerning the Cave of Machpelah, in which the bodies of Adam and Eve were said to be buried—perfectly preserved—along with those of the Patriarchs, and which was filled with the aroma of the Garden of Eden, suggesting that the cave was located in the vicinity of the Garden. This belief is directly stated in the Zohar.

A parallel motif is also found in the hasidic legend about the journey of the Baal Shem Tov to the Holy Land. Here, robbers offer to show the Baal Shem Tov a short way to the Land of Israel through caves and underground passages. But when the Baal Shem Tov entered the cave he saw there *the flaming sword which turned every-which-way* (Gen. 3:24), meaning that the way was closed to him.

Also standing behind this fable of Agnon’s is the messianic tradition that when the End of Days arrives, “the righteous who were buried abroad . . . will roll through underground caves until they reach the Land of Israel. And when they reach the Land of Israel He will put the spirit of life into them and they will stand up.”

The Israel Folktales Archives in Haifa has collected a dozen or more variants of this folktale, some about a goat, some a cow. One of these is remarkably close to Agnon’s version of the tale, suggesting that he himself may have heard the tale and retold it in a way that is quite close to the original, except for elements of style and interpretation, which, of course, are central in Agnon’s writing.

¹⁰ From Psalm 92:15, recited during *Kabbalat Shabbat*

¹¹ From Psalm 27:13

An Arab Shepherd is Searching for his Goat on Mt. Zion

Yehuda Amichai

Translation by Chana Bloch

An Arab shepherd is searching for his goat on Mount Zion
And on the opposite hill I am searching for my little boy.

An Arab shepherd and a Jewish father
Both in their temporary failure.

Our two voices met above
The Sultan's Pool in the valley between us.
Neither of us wants the boy or the goat
To get caught in the wheels
Of the "*Chad Gadya*" machine.

Afterward we found them among the bushes,
And our voices came back inside us
Laughing and crying.

Searching for a goat or for a child has always been
The beginning of a new religion in these mountains.

