

Rumi and Midrash



Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi meets Master Shams i Tabrizi

from : Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi's masnavi.

A prince, while engaged on a hunting excursion, espied a fair maiden, and by promises of gold induced her to accompany him. After a time she fell sick, and the prince had her tended by divers physicians. As, however, they all omitted to say, "God willing, we will cure her," their treatment was of no avail. So the prince offered prayer, and in answer thereto a physician was sent from heaven. He at once condemned his predecessors' view of the case, and by a very skillful diagnosis, discovered that the real cause of the maiden's illness was her love for a certain goldsmith of Samarkand. In accordance with the physician's advice, the prince sent to Samarcand and fetched the goldsmith, and married him to the lovesick maiden, and for six months the pair lived together in the utmost harmony and happiness. At the end of that period the physician, by divine command, gave the goldsmith a poisonous draught, which caused his strength and beauty to decay, and he then lost favour with the maiden, and she was reunited to the king.

This Divine command was precisely similar to God's command to Abraham to slay his son Ismail, and to the act of the Angel in slaying the servant of Moses, and is therefore beyond human criticism.

Rumi, Masnavi i Ma'navi, tr. EH Whitfield

The Prince and the Handmaid.

A prince, while engaged on a hunting excursion, espied a fair maiden, and by promises of gold induced her to accompany him. After a time she fell sick, and the prince had her tended by diverse physicians. As, however, they all omitted to say, "God willing,¹ we will cure her," their treatment was of no avail. So the prince offered prayer, and in answer thereto a physician was sent from heaven. He at once condemned his predecessors' view of the case, and by a very skillful diagnosis, discovered that the real cause of the maiden's illness was her love for a certain goldsmith of Samarcand.

In accordance with the physician's advice, the prince sent to Samarcand and fetched the goldsmith, and married him to the lovesick maiden, and for six months the pair lived together in the utmost harmony and happiness. At the end of that period the physician, by divine command, gave the goldsmith a poisonous draught, which caused his strength and beauty to decay, and he then lost favour with the maiden, and she was reunited to the king.

This Divine command was precisely similar to God's command to Abraham to slay his son Ishmael, and to the act of the angel in slaying the servant of Moses,² and is therefore beyond human criticism.

Description of Love.

A true lover is proved such by his pain of heart;
No sickness is there like sickness of heart.
The lover's ailment is different from all ailments;
Love is the astrolabe of God's mysteries.
A lover may hanker after this love or that love,
But at the last he is drawn to the KING of love.
However much we describe and explain love,
When we fall in love we are ashamed of our words.
Explanation by the tongue makes most things clear,
But love unexplained is clearer.
When pen hasted to write,
On reaching the subject of love it split in twain.
When the discourse touched on the matter of love,
Pen was broken and paper torn.
In explaining it Reason sticks fast, as an ass in mire;
Naught but Love itself can explain love and lovers!
None but the sun can display the sun,
If you would see it displayed, turn not away from it.
Shadows, indeed, may indicate the sun's presence,
But only the sun displays the light of life.
Shadows induce slumber, like evening talks,

But when the sun arises the "moon is split asunder." 3
 In the world there is naught so wondrous as the sun,
 But the Sun of the soul sets not and has no yesterday.
 Though the material sun is unique and single,
 We can conceive similar suns like to it.
 But the Sun of the soul, beyond this firmament,
 No like thereof is seen in concrete or abstract.⁴
 Where is there room in conception for His essence,
 So that similitudes of HIM should be conceivable?
 Shamsu-'d-Din of Tabriz importunes Jalalu-'d-Din
 to compose the Masnavi.¹

The sun (Shams) of Tabriz is a perfect light,
 A sun, yea, one of the beams of God!
 When the praise was heard of the "Sun of Tabriz,"
 The sun of the fourth heaven bowed its head.
 Now that I have mentioned his name, it is but right
 To set forth some indications of his beneficence.
 That precious Soul caught my skirt,
 Smelling the perfume of the garment of Yusuf;
 And said, "For the sake of our ancient friendship,
 Tell forth a hint of those sweet states of ecstasy,
 That earth and heaven may be rejoiced,
 And also Reason and Spirit, a hundredfold."
 I said, "O thou who art far from 'The Friend,'
 Like a sick man who has strayed from his physician,
 Importune me not, for I am beside myself;
 My understanding is gone, I cannot sing praises.
 Whatsoever one says, whose reason is thus astray,
 Let him not boast; his efforts are useless.
 Whatever he says is not to the point,
 And is clearly inapt and wide of the mark.
 What can I say when not a nerve of mine is sensible?
 Can I explain 'The Friend' to one to whom He is no Friend?
 Verily my singing His praise were dispraise,
 For 'twould prove me existent, and existence is error.⁵
 Can I describe my separation and my bleeding heart?
 Nay, put off this matter till another season."
 He said, "Feed me, for I am an hungered,

¹ The *Masnavi*, *Masnavi-i Ma'navi* (Persian: مشنوی معنوی) or *Mesnevi* (Turkish), also written *Mathnawi*, *Ma'navi*, or *Mathnavi*, is an extensive poem written in Persian by Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi, the celebrated Persian Sufi saint and poet. It is one of the best known and most influential works of both Sufism and Persian literature. The *Masnavi* is a series of six books of poetry that amount to about 25,000 verses or 50,000 lines. It is a spiritual writing that teaches Sufis how to reach their goal of being in true love with God.

And at once, for 'the time is a sharp sword.'
 O comrade, the Sufi is 'the son of time present.' 6
 It is not the rule of his canon to say, 'To-morrow.'
 Can it be that thou art not a true Sufi?
 Ready money is lost by giving credit."
 I said, "'Tis best to veil the secrets of 'The Friend.'
 So give good heed to the morals of these stories.
 That is better than that the secrets of 'The Friend'
 Should be noised abroad in the talk of strangers."
 He said, "Without veil or covering or deception,
 Speak out, and vex me not, O man of many words!
 Strip off the veil and speak out, for do not I
 Enter under the same coverlet as the Beloved?"
 I said, "If the Beloved were exposed to outward view,
 Neither wouldst thou endure, nor embrace, nor form.
 Press thy suit, yet with moderation;
 A blade of grass cannot, pierce a mountain.
 If the sun that illumines the world
 Were to draw nigher, the world would be consumed.7
 Close thy mouth and shut the eyes of this matter,
 That, the world's life be not made a bleeding heart.
 No longer seek this peril, this bloodshed;
 Hereafter impose silence on the 'Sun of Tabriz.'"
 He said, "Thy words are endless. Now tell forth
 All thy story from its beginning."

*NOTES:

1. As enjoined in Koran xviii. 23. One cannot converse with a strict Mosalman for five minutes without hearing the formula, "In sha Allah Ta'alla," or D. V.

2. Koran xviii. 73. قَالَ لَا تُؤَاخِذْنِي بِمَا نَسِيتُ وَلَا تُرْهِقْنِي مِنْ أَمْرِي غَسْرًا

Transliteration: Qala la tuakhithnee bima naseetu wala turhiquee min amree AAusran

Abdullah Yusuf Ali

Moses said: "Rebuke me not for forgetting, nor grieve me by raising difficulties in my case."

Mufti Taqi Usmani

He (Musa) said, .Do not hold me punishable for what I forgot, and do not make my course too difficult for me..

Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall

(Moses) said: Be not wroth with me that I forgot, and be not hard upon me for my fault.

Sahih International

[Moses] said, "Do not blame me for what I forgot and do not cover me in my matter with difficulty."

3. Koran liv. l.

4. There is a tradition, "I know my Lord by my Lord."

5. See *Gulshan i Raz*, I. 400. In the state of union self remains not.

6. The Sufi is the "son of the time present," because he is an *Energumen*, or passive instrument moved by the divine impulse of the moment. "The time present is a sharp sword," because the divine impulse of the moment dominates the *Energumen*, and executes its decrees sharply. See *Sohravardi* quoted in *Notices et Extraits des MSS.*, xii. 371 note.

7. "When its Lord appears in glory to the Mount of existence, Existence is laid low, like the dust of the road." *Gulshan i Raz*, I. 195.

In connection with this story, a very hard problem arises to which an answer must be found: Two of the three things done by Hadrat Khidr are obviously against those commandments of the Law which have always been in force since the creation of man. No law allows anyone the right to damage the property of another and kill an innocent person. So much so that if a man were to know by inspiration that some usurper would illegally seize a certain boat, and that a certain boy would be involved in a rebellion and unbelief, even then no law, sent down by Allah, makes it lawful that one should bore a hole in the boat and kill the innocent boy by virtue of one's inspiration. If in answer to this, one were to say that Hadrat Khidr committed these two acts by the Commands of Allah, this does not solve the problem, for the question is not this, "By whose command did Hadrat Khidr commit these acts"? but it is this: "What was the nature of these commands"? This is important because Hadrat Khidr did these acts in accordance with Divine Command, for he himself says that these acts of his were not done by his own authority, but were moved by the mercy of Allah, and Allah Himself has testified this by saying: "We gave him a special knowledge from Ourselves". Thus it is beyond any

doubt that these acts were done by the Command of Allah, but the question about the nature of the command remains there, for it is obvious that these commands were not legal because it is not allowed by any Divine Law, and the fundamental principles of the Qur'an also do not allow that a person should kill another person without any proof of his guilt. Therefore we shall have to admit that these commands belonged to one of those decrees of Allah in accordance with which one sick person recovers, while another dies: one becomes prosperous and the other is ruined. If the Commands given to Hadrat Khidr were of this nature, then one must come to the conclusion that Hadrat Khidr was an angel (or some other kind of Allah's creation) who is not bound by the Divine Law prescribed for human beings, for such commands as have no legal aspect, can be addressed to angels only. This is because the question of the lawful or the unlawful cannot arise about them: they obey the Commands of Allah without having any personal power. In contrast to them, a man shall be guilty of a sin whether he does any such thing inadvertently by intuition or by some inspiration, if his act goes against some Divine Commandment. This is because a man is bound to abide by Divine Commandments as a man, and there is no room whatsoever in the Divine Law that an act may become lawful for a man merely because he had received an instruction by inspiration and had been informed in a secret way of the wisdom of that unlawful act.

The above-mentioned principle has been unanimously accepted by scholars of the Divine Law and the leaders of Sufism. `Allamah Alusi has cited in detail the sayings of 'Abdul Wahhab Shi'irani, Muhy-ud-Din ibn-'Arabi, Mujaddid Alf Thani, Shaikh 'Abdul-Qadir Jilani, Junaid Baghdadi, Sirri Saqti, Abul-Hussain An-nuri, Abu Said-al-Kharraz, Ahmad ud-Dainauri and Imam Ghazzali to this effect that it is not lawful even for a sufi to act in accordance with that inspiration of his own which goes against a fundamental of law. (Ruh-ul-Ma'ani, Vol. XVI, pp. 16-18). That is why we have come to the conclusion that Hadrat Khidr must be an angel, or some other kind of Allah's creation, exempted from human law, for he could not be the only exception to the above-mentioned formula. Therefore we inevitably come to the conclusion that he was one of

those Servants of Allah who act in accordance with the will of Allah and not in accordance with the Divine Law prescribed for human beings.²

Rumi's Midrashic parable concerns the conflict between the divine law versus the inspired act of the prophet. The commentary changes the actor to a divine angel to avoid the conflict however Rumi embraces the conflict through the very narrative of the parable much in the way the midrash operates. The true healer comes from heaven since the earthly ones do not invoke the divine mercy prior to their healing arts.

However in this parable I see something far deeper, that penetrates the spirit of Hassidic inquiry as is found in the schools of Pshyshka and Ishbitz.

The conflict between the moral and ethical law and the divine decree resounds down to our own age of Kafka and his idea of the Law. A true inheritor of rabbinic midrash Kafka alerts us to the same conflict.

"The physician by divine command gave the goldsmith a poisonous draught" we are told. I am haunted by the orthodox tradition that all that happens down on this earth happens by divine decree, that all is hashgacha pratis divine providence. The logical conclusion of this is that Mengele is the physician giving the divine potion of death by divine decree!

God Playing Doctor³

God worked in Auschwitz. He was everywhere. He stood on the transport ramps for the selections. He granted life; he took life. He had love for his children, and would smite them when he was finished with them. The strongest he let live, and the weakest he left to die, if he did not kill them himself. God was of a darker complexion than one would have expected of him. His hair and eyes were brown. His hair- with a widow's peak, and slicked into a part on one side; his eyes- cruel and cold, "wild eyes", "dead eyes". Above

² From the Islamic Foundation UK commentary

³ Jonathan Wallace from his spectacle.org site.

these eyes were pointed eyebrows and a broad head, and between them was a short, medium-sized nose. His ears were flat and round. He had a Cupid's Bow mouth. His coat was always a shining white, his boots always polished. He seemed elegant and tall with his exaggerated perfect posture, but was average height. He was said to have looked like "a Hollywood actor", "Clark Gable", "Rudolph Valentino", or "Peter Sellers, but better. . . ." Some even believed him to be tall and blond, with the essence of Marilyn Monroe. He smelled of eau du cologne, because he was very sensitive to bad smells. God's name was Josef Mengele. And Josef Mengele was no god. He was a man.

Perhaps it was Mengele's charisma that led people to believe him a god of some sort. He strode with an air of flawless confidence, "star quality", that haughty, almost sexual Nazi air, that was to such an extreme that he was a presence almost any prisoner or SS man knew well. Simon J. said "Mengele was judgment day." He was "the main show" with an "on-the-floor presence", and "always in charge." Mengele relished absolute control. He was arrogant with other SS men. He had the power to manipulate, while he himself was beyond manipulation. He never seemed to look into another's eyes, yet people could describe Mengele's at any time. No matter what he was doing, his mind always appeared to be elsewhere. With others he would only discuss business, and never anything personal, though he would act generous and appreciative to those who helped contribute to his research on eugenics. Anyone who interacted with him knew him to have a "split personality". According to one of his prisoner-doctors, Dr. Marek P., he could go from "attentive and jovial . . . within a fraction of a second, cynical and brutal." As Dr. Alexander O. put it, he was "the double man. . . . The double, . . . that is to say he had all the sentimental emotions, all the human feelings, pity, and so on. But there was in his psyche a hermetically closed cell, . . . impenetrable, indestructible cell, which is obedience to the received order. He can throw himself in the water to go and save a Gypsy, try to give him medication, . . . and then as soon as they are out of the water, . . . tell him to get in the truck and quickly off to the gas chamber." There were times when he would listen to prisoners' pleas, and times he wouldn't. In order to prepare the subjects for experimentation, each subject was given four thorough

examinations: an anthropological, a morphological, an x-ray, and a psychiatric evaluation. The anthropological examination, which Mengele performed himself, consisted of each body part measured exactly while the subject was naked in an unheated room. Mengele was never rude while examining his subjects. Twins were measured together, and their measurements were compared. The measurements lasted several hours, which exhausted small children. Photographs were taken of the more interesting subjects. Prisoner-doctors performed the other tests. In the ophthalmological test, an unknown liquid was dropped into the subject's eye, causing partial blindness in some. The psychiatric test included questions such as "All animals die. Napoleon died. Was Napoleon an animal?" Twenty cubic centimeters of blood were taken, along with stool, urine, saliva, and sometimes cerebral-spinal fluid. The samples were taken for analysis by prisoner-doctors. The large amount of blood taken caused anemia in the malnourished children. The blood tests became more difficult to draw over time due to the Auschwitz diet, and were therefore rather painful. Blood transfusions, not preceded by blood cross-matching, were done between unrelated twins to study the reaction. All subjects were tested for typhoid, and a family history was taken. Dwarves and handicapped persons were photographed before their examinations. After examinations, they were tested on, and usually killed for dissection. Their skeletons were prepared to be sent to the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute. Mengele considered physical and mental defects to be Jewish traits, as he saw Jews to be freaks.

Very few people have the courage to face the face of evil. Very few of us will ever have to see evil face to face. Cathy Weiss is such a one. Facing evil directly, she had a courage that few of us have or will have. Cathy currently lives in Los Angeles and is enjoying her old age. But there was that moment when Dr. Mengele looked her in the face. She was born in Romania and when the Nazis took over that country, she was rounded up and inspected. All the women touched up their faces so that they looked healthy enough for labor tasks. If they looked sickly, they were "experimented" on by Dr. Mengele and his goons. According to Ms. Weiss, "Herr Dr. Mengele looked me square in the face and passed me by." Let us rejoice in Cathy's good fortune.

Mengele "read" faces like texts. Obsessed as he was with the human body there is ample testimony as he directed traffic based on age and health "on the ramp" to Auschwitz. This physician from hell loved Schubert and art, was cultured and sensitive.

The doctor read the face like a text divining age and prospects for survival as human slave or experimental subject.

God was not present nor incarnated in Mengele. We know that now. Yet as physician he had the power to heal or destroy lives. He read faces and diagnosed conditions and produced disease for the sake of scientific research. Much of his data has been hidden or destroyed. The allies made use of his cooling experiments after much ethical soul searching in order to save lives of future soldiers and sailors lost at sea, and determine how long one should maintain search and rescue missions for those in cold waters. And of God? must Mengele be His physician sent from heaven?



Yet there were many people who viewed Mengele as a deity, a god-like creature who could bring Good and Evil to the situation at Auschwitz. Simon J., who was a prisoner at Auschwitz, said it himself, "Mengele is God--we found it out very fast." As did Teresa W., "Mengele was a god." Several prisoners called him "the Angel of Death", and another said he was "God playing doctor." Simon J. continued to explain his feelings about Mengele as a terrifying deity, "he always carried around him and aura of . . . some terrifying threat, which I suspect is unexplainable to . . . normal . . . human beings who didn't see this. I [have] found it found . . . [it] literally impossible to transmit the edge of

this terror." He was "the lord of life and death", beauty and evil. "You see a handsome, tall man coming. Do you know if he is a doctor or not a doctor? You know it is Mengele, nothing else."

Physician as reader of the face as text is seen in our own midrashic literature as quoted below:

A MIDRASH FROM THE ZOHAR

Commentary on the verse: "THE NAKEDNESS OF THY SISTER... THOU SHALT NOT UNCOVER."

R. Abba was once going from Cappadocia to Lydda in company with R. Jose. As they were going they saw a man approaching with a mark on his face.

Said R. Abba: 'Let us leave this road, because that man's face testifies that he has transgressed one of the precepts of the Law against illicit intercourse.' Said R. Jose: 'Suppose this mark was on him from his boyhood; how can it show that he has transgressed by illicit intercourse?' R. Abba replied: 'I can see that he has by his face.'

R. Abba then called him and said: 'Tell me, what is that mark on your face?' He replied: 'I beg of you, do not punish me further, because my sins have caused this.' How is that?' said R. Abba. He replied: 'I was once traveling with my sister, and we turned in to an inn, where I drank much wine. All that night I was in company with my sister. When I got up in the morning I found the host quarreling with another man. I interposed between them and received blows from both, one on one side and one on the other, and was severely wounded, but was saved by a doctor who was living among us.'

R. Abba asked who the doctor was, and he replied: 'It was R. Simlai.' 'What medicine did he give you?' asked R. Abba. He replied: 'Spiritual healing. From that day I repented, and every day I looked at myself in a mirror and wept before the Almighty for my sin, and from those tears my face was healed.' Said R. Abba: 'Were it not that you might cease repenting, I would cause that scar to be removed from your face. However, I will say over you the verse, "And thine iniquity is taken away and thy sin purged" (Isa. VI, 7). Repeat that three times.' He repeated it three times and the mark vanished; whereupon R. Abba said: 'In sooth, your Master was fain to remove it from you, which shows that you have truly repented.' He said: 'I vow from this day to study the Torah day and night.' R. Abba asked him what his name was, and he said 'Eleazar'. Said R. Abba: 'Eleazar, God is thy help; as thy name is so art thou.' He then sent him away with a blessing.

Some time after, R. Abba, as he was on his way to R. Simeon, went into the town where this man lived. He found him expounding the verse: "A brutish man knoweth not, neither doth a fool understand this" (Ps. XCII, 6). 'How stupid', he said, 'are mankind that they take no pains to know the ways of the Almighty by which the world is maintained. What prevents them? Their stupidity, because they do not study the Torah; for if they were to study the Torah they would know the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He. "A fool doth not understand this": to wit, the ways of "this" (zoth, the Shekinah), in the world, how it judges the world. For they only see the punishments of this zoth alighting on the righteous and not alighting on the wicked who transgress the precepts of the Torah, and who inherit this world in every direction, as it is written, "the wicked spring as the grass".

Nor should we know better, did not King David enlighten us in the second part of the verse, saying, "It is that they shall be destroyed for ever"; that is, to be destroyed in the other world, where they shall be dust under the feet of the righteous.'

He further discoursed on the verse: "My leanness riseth up against me, it testifieth to my face" (Job XVI, 8). 'Observe', he said, 'that if a man transgresses the precepts of the Law, the Torah itself goes up and down and makes marks on that man's face so that all both above and below look at him and heap curses on his head.

As opposed to Dr Mengele and the other doctors at Auschwitz our hero is discovered by the mystical masters in the Zohar who find him dispensing spiritual healing. The mark on the face representing the sin of incest but it is healed by his dispensation. The Holy Rabbi Abba recognizes the sin on the face of the injured one as representing the sin of incest, or licentiousness, with the blows to the face almost incidental to the facial scars as mimetic for lust. There is a tradition known as *chochmat hapartzuf* where those who are adept are able to "read" the face as a text, and infer the moral character of the investigated one.

Of interest is the very lecture they find the doctor expounding upon arrival in his village. The doctor is using a midrashic trope on the fool/wise man paradigm known to Ecclesiastes as being a contrast between one who understands the ways of the divine despite the apparent prospering of the wicked. Using the classical rabbinic notion of the afterlife where the wicked will be punished he supports the need to see beyond the surface facts.

Next he supports the theory of *chochmat hapartzuf* by intimating that the Torah itself marks the face of the sinner. This is a reverse of the notion of the face as a text to be read by the adept physician. The Torah uses the face as a parchment to write and inscribe the very sins perpetrated.

Healing comes with the correct reading of the face. Healing for Dr Simlai is the correction of moral perspective by the patient plus the use of Torah verses as incantations which then remove the markings on the face. Both Mengele and R. Simlai

read the face, both the wicked and the righteous struggle for meaning in a world that apparently survives without divine justice.

Which brings us back to our Rumi parable. The physician from heaven is able to read the illness where others failed to see the lovesickness in the heart. Then he is commanded from on high to give a potion that slowly kills the beloved. The reader is shocked into reality that this is no love story with a happy ending, except for the king. The poisonous draught slowly makes the beloved less and less attractive to the maiden until she returns to the king.

Then the *nimshal* we are told, whereby the parable comes to explore and expose a hidden reason for the divine act normally inscrutable, of God's demand of Abraham to kill Isaac or the angel's attempted slaying of Moses. Whereas a plain reading of the biblical text moves the reader to question God's justice, the parable is provided to explain the behavior. The way the beloved is slowly poisoned in order to reunite the king with his beloved and removes any other love from her heart, so too God's demand was to remove any other motive from Abraham and Moses so that they could be united in faith fully with the divine.

Inscrutable are the ways of the divine we are told in these parables, yet the *mashal* opens us to a possible means of understanding all the while refusing to sacrifice the inherent paradox of imagining the divine as a king.

Along the way we see the physician as healer of sick souls and the very credible ancient distinction already in place between physical ailment and "soul sickness". That the very symptoms that might be mistaken for a physical disease might be transformed by attention to the soul is a startling discovery.

Doctors of the soul and doctors of death are two sides of the same coin. Our canon embodies such archetypes that doctors in Auschwitz perform vivisection on children for the sake of science. How can we see the world the same way after such behavior?

As physicians we must embrace these historical facts as the dark side of medicine. We must see how in small ways cruelty can insert itself into the trust relationship between physician and patient.

We must redouble our efforts to protect our patients for cruel interventions performed for the sake of the patient yet without attention to the spiritual state and emotional care needed alongside. We need to examine our nursing homes and prevent them becoming human warehouses for the dying. Our society may only call itself just when attention to the human dimension of pain and suffering is attended to. We can no longer rely on the technical cure as sufficient.



**The Lovesick Maiden, c1660, Jan Steen, (1626-1679/Dutch),
Oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York**