



## **DEBT, GRATITUDE, AND JEWISH VALUES FROM SHAKESPEARE'S STAGE TO THE OVAL OFFICE**

**I** will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you," declares Shylock to Antonio, the title character of Shakespeare's 16<sup>th</sup>-century dramatic comedy *Merchant of Venice*.<sup>1</sup> Although the Jewish moneylender agrees to loan Antonio 3,000 ducats (which his broke friend Bassanio uses to woo a wealthy heiress named Portia), Shylock declines the invitation to dine with the merchant and his companions later that evening. Shylock's rejection of the Christian's apparent hospitality no doubt stoked anti-Jewish sentiment of the time. It also echoed the refusal of another Jew residing under gentile rule nearly ten centuries earlier: "Daniel resolved not

to defile himself with the king's food or the wine he drank" (Daniel 1:8).

The life of the Hebrew prophet Daniel resonates throughout Shakespeare's conspicuously scriptural play, though it is most pronounced (literally) in the climactic courtroom scene when Shylock comes to collect the pound of flesh penalty from Antonio after he defaults on the loan. As the crowd assembled in the Venetian courtroom grows increasingly riotous, Shylock presses the state to grant his bond. Portia, now married to Bassanio, feels indebted to Antonio and rushes to his aid disguised as a young lawyer by the name of "Balthazar," the same name Daniel receives upon his arrival at the

Babylonian court (Daniel 1:7). When Portia pronounces the validity of the contract, Shylock cheers, "A Daniel come to judgment! yea, a Daniel! / O wise young judge, how I do honour thee!"<sup>2</sup>

In all of Shakespeare's works, the name of the Hebrew prophet Daniel only appears in this scene in *The Merchant of Venice*, where it is repeated half a dozen times to great dramatic effect. While the play invokes a host of biblical figures from Genesis including Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Laban, and Leah, why include Daniel? What does Portia *do* that calls Daniel to Shylock's—or Shakespeare's—mind?

To make sense of Daniel's presence

in the play, we must first understand who he was to early modern English theatergoers. During the Renaissance, the biblical story of Daniel, a young Judean living under Babylonian captivity in the sixth century BCE, inspired writers and artists from Chaucer to Rembrandt, and depictions of Daniel in the lions' den became some of the most common penitential images in Christian art. Throughout the English Reformation, Daniel's struggle to maintain his religious identity in an antagonistic environment resonated with both Catholics and Protestants: when Henry VIII broke from Rome and established the Church of England; when his daughter Mary reestablished Catholicism; and when Elizabeth attempted to reestablish Protestantism and achieve a religious settlement for her people. In his commentary on the Book of Daniel, reformer John Calvin likened the predicament of the Jews in the diaspora with the state of the Protestants in the 1530s—fragile and flanked by enemies on all sides. He also cites prominent Jewish commentators of the Middle Ages including Ibn Ezra, Rashi and the Ramban. For Christian and Jewish readers throughout the ages, Daniel models the faithful fortitude needed to resist cultural assimilation. From ferocious felines to flaming furnaces, his exilic episode offers proof that God remains a loyal protector of those who remain loyal to Him.

Calvin's commentary was translated into English and widely circulated in London in the early 1570s, though a surge of publications on Daniel's eschatological prophecies in the last decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century marked early England's anxiety over the end of days with the impending turn of the millennium. To fabricate his

Jewish protagonist in the late 1590s, Shakespeare need only turn toward Daniel—a Jew already occupying the world stage and permeating England's cultural consciousness.

While the Hebrew Bible provides several instances of Israelites living among idolatrous, hostile peoples, Daniel, unlike Joseph and Moses, wears his Jewish identity on his gabardine sleeve. What sets Daniel apart, however, is unparalleled interpretive dexterity. He alone can read the writing on the wall. When the fingers of a human hand appear and write on the plaster of King Balthazar's palace, Daniel is summoned and translates the message as follows: "Menay: God has counted the years of your kingship and terminated it. Tekel: You have been *weighed* in the scales and found *wanting*. Peres: Your kingdom has been broken up and given to Media and Persia" (Daniel 5:25–8).

Throughout *Merchant*, Shakespeare equips his Jewish protagonist with the most basic approach to biblical interpretation by having him pronounce allegorical relationships between the Bible and lived experience. Early in the play Shylock fancies himself a "Jacob" due to his ingenuity and prosperity. And when he extols Portia (disguised as a youthful judge) as a "Daniel," it is because she alone seems to recognize that Antonio's debt has been counted and his bond is forfeit. His "kingdom" or wealth has been broken up with the loss of his ships and now his flesh must be *weighed* because his contract has been found *wanting*. When the well-meaning Venetians beg Portia to dissolve the deed unlawfully, her reluctance bears resemblance to Daniel's decision not to forsake

Torah law and comply with the larger (corrupt) social world.<sup>3</sup>

Yet Shylock's "reading" of Portia does not stand. After Portia rules that the Jew may have his "bond" but draw no blood, Antonio's friend Gratiano heckles Shylock while simultaneously praising Portia: "A Daniel, still say I, a second Daniel! *I thank thee, Jew, for teaching me that word.*"<sup>4</sup> Gratiano mocks the Jew by turning his own words against him, and the declaration of a "second Daniel" announces the arrival of a revisionist Christian approach. Several keen critics have argued that Shakespeare dramatizes the supersession as the Jew's law becomes the "Old" Testament, overridden with the "New" Testament of Venetian jurisprudence.<sup>5</sup> American scholar and Catholic theologian Rosemary Ruether has argued that anti-Semitism has its very roots in the development of a hermeneutical method that legitimizes Christian faith by appropriating Jewish scripture, while simultaneously demonizing its original inheritors.<sup>6</sup>

Like most jokes, Gratiano's scornful jest springs from an underlying truth and acute self-awareness. Indeed, Gratiano owes the Jew thanks for "teaching" him the word "Daniel" through the provision of the Hebrew Bible. Although the dramatic tension in the scene is broken, this seemingly minor exchange hits an Early Modern nerve: Christianity's sense of indebtedness to Judaic scripture and its exegetical traditions.

The theme of indebtedness pulses throughout the Book of Daniel, which begins with King Nebuchadnezzar enriching his court by carting off the most promising young minds from Jerusalem to Babylon where he can benefit from their brilliance.

The narrative of Daniel repeatedly features the gentiles' appreciation of Israel's wisdom, and the gratitude the Jew must show his Creator for that endowment. Shortly after Daniel's arrival, he is summoned to recall and interpret a dream the king has forgotten. When Nebuchadnezzar is satisfied with the interpretation offered, Daniel proclaims, "I thank thee and praise thee, O thou God of my fathers, that thou hast given me wisdom and strength" (Daniel 2:23). Daniel's expression evinces the essence of the "Jew" (*yehudi*), derived from the word "*hodu*" meaning praise, glorify and extol. Nevertheless, Nebuchadnezzar insists on demonstrating gratitude to Daniel, much like Antonio and Bassanio insist on "paying" Portia for her "wisdom" and "courteous pains."<sup>7</sup> Daniel disdains the proffered titles and riches, but succeeds in making the king pay his "debt" in a form of currency Daniel willingly accepts: encomium to God. Thus Nebuchadnezzar, a pagan ruler touted as the "king of kings" (Daniel 2:37), finds himself in the paradoxical position of acknowledging the Hebrew God's power as superior to

1290.<sup>8</sup> Attending to Shakespeare's biblical references illuminates the play's preoccupation with the pervasive presence of Jews through the potency of their Scripture, which early modern Christians encountered daily. Gratiano's sarcastic "I thank thee, Jew" and appropriation of the term "Daniel" reveals the paradox of gratitude Shakespeare uses to power his play: ever-present in the declaration of thanks is some admission of dependence. In response to the anxiety of being indebted to earlier claimants, Reformation theologians, writers, and policymakers alike deployed a strategy of legitimating through denunciation, which Shakespeare enacts here. With the *Merchant's* substitutions of financial capital with flesh and a "hoop of gold" with a husband's heart, the play is not subtle in its consideration of the various forms of material, intellectual, and emotional debt accrued in routine human interactions.

In the Book of Daniel, *Merchant*, and Elizabethan England at large, the Jew himself might be scorned, but

in his redemption, Antonio remains indebted to Judaism by virtue of its exegetical approach. However, once Portia's skill has been used to achieve the desired end, the court slips back into prejudiced and hypocritical practices, granting Antonio a "favour" by declaring that the Jew "presently become a Christian."<sup>9</sup>

Had the Hebrew prophet Daniel, instead of Portia, adjudicated Shylock's case, I imagine he would have come to the same conclusion as Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, who finds the contract unenforceable because wounding another is prohibited by Torah law, even if the other person grants advance permission, since the human body is not the property of the individual—it is holy and belongs to God.<sup>10</sup> In a mock appeal of Shylock's case commemorating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Venice ghetto in 2017, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg and her fellow judges unanimously granted Shylock's principal be returned, since otherwise Antonio would have been "unjustly enriched," and "the conversion be vacated," upholding a right to religious freedom that was unfathomable in Shakespeare's time.<sup>11</sup>

While the *Merchant of Venice* is a play with many troubled afterlives and cruel applications, the questions it raises about ethics, interfaith relations, and how to pursue the truth of a text—whether sacred or secular—are still being pursued today. I believe Shakespeare's habit of justly enriching his works with echoes and invocations of the Hebrew Bible contributes to their enduring impact and prominence in Western literature. Of course, this prudent practice extends far beyond playwrights. As

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his own.

While most critics have read *The Merchant of Venice* as deeply concerned with the *physical* presence of Jews/*conversos* in Europe in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, James Shapiro has shown Londoners had scarce contact with Jews since their expulsion in

his Scripture and its teachings are valued since they explore universal concerns such as moral practice, civic duty, religious reverence, and textual interpretation. This is perhaps most evident in Portia employing the law, a traditionally Jewish exegetical mode, to save Antonio. Thus, even





my colleagues at YU’s Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought have tracked in *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land: The Hebrew Bible in the United States*, “Turning to the Hebrew Bible for inspiration, solidarity, comfort, and purpose, as the men of the First Continental Congress did, is a common *theme* in American history.” Nearly two hundred years after Bassanio pursued Portia, another young, scrappy and hungry bachelor raised money to travel abroad and married a woman of worth above his station. Alexander Hamilton, reflecting on the miraculous success of the America experiment, expressed in awe and gratitude, “I sincerely esteem it a system which without the finger of God, never could have been suggested and agreed upon by such a diversity of interests.”

America has struggled with and been strengthened by the diverse interests

of its inhabitants since its infancy, but the importance of expressing thanks to God remains present throughout the ages and stages of its development. In 1621, one year after arriving on the Mayflower and enduring a devastating winter and the loss of his wife, Edwin Winslow recorded a thanksgiving feast celebrated with the indigenous peoples in his travel memoir, noting that “although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want.” For the next two centuries, annual Thanksgiving gatherings were celebrated informally in many American homes until 1863, when Lincoln established a national day of “Thanksgiving and Praise,” calling upon Americans, even in the midst of a civil war, to “remember the most high God who has given us so much.”

In another presidential

pronouncement in 1985, Ronald Regan wished “His choicest blessings on all who observe this holiday” of feasting, which “provides a fitting opportunity to reflect on the gifts a generous God ever wills to bestow on those who are faithful to Him.” But the holiday was not Thanksgiving, it was Chanukah. Approximately one year later, during Yeshiva University’s centennial, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm and a delegation from YU presented President Regan with an honorary Doctor of Laws and “a handsome silver Menorah” (as Regan observes in his diary). Two days later, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, delivered a talk in which he noted President Regan’s endorsement of public menorah lightings in keeping with the “spirit of the Founders, whose lives in this country began with a public expression of gratitude to the Almighty.”<sup>12</sup>

While sharing food and drink can facilitate fellowship, ultimately what is shared is depleted. However, as demonstrated by Daniel and subsequent leaders through the centuries, when we gift gratitude, knowledge, friendship, and influence, “the more we share, the more we have,” as Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks argued, “because social goods are not about competition. They’re about cooperation.”<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps this is why Shakespeare fails to produce a completely satisfying resolution for a play so attentive to the ways in which we become bound to others. The fathers, daughters, husbands, wives, and cohabitants in *Merchant* are all-consumed by contracts. As Rabbi Sacks taught, “A contract is a *transaction*. A covenant is a *relationship*. A contract is about *interests*. A covenant is about *identity*. That is why contracts *benefit*, but covenants *transform*. A covenant creates a moral community. It binds people together in a bond of mutual responsibility and care... In a covenant, what matters is not wealth or power but the transformation that takes place when I embrace a world larger than the self.”<sup>14</sup>

Upon returning from her covert

Venice visit, Portia sees a light coming from her house in the distance and reflects, “How that little light throws its beams. So shines a good deed in a naughty world.”<sup>15</sup> The Hebrew Bible—and the acts of thanksgiving and fellowship it has inspired—indeed throws its beams far and wide, inviting readers then and now to consider the shared experience of indebtedness, whether linguistic, legalistic, cultural, or theological, and to see with more clarity the bonds that exist between and among all peoples. And for that, I believe we owe thanks.

## Endnotes

1. Act 1, Scene 3. Although many scholars including John Gross have argued that Shakespeare’s Shylock “belongs, inescapably, to the history of anti-Semitism” (*Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy*, 1992), the play was billed as a comedy in its time and classified as such when Shakespeare’s collected works were published in the first folio in 1623. Typical of Shakespearean comedies, the central plot focuses on lovers overcoming near-tragic obstacles and resolves in multiple marriages.
2. *Merchant of Venice*, Act 4, Scene 1.
3. Although Shylock identifies the shared virtues between Daniel and Portia, he also exposes his own conditional relationship with the Bible: while familiar with its narratives, Shylock does not follow its teachings or emulate its exemplars. The Jew initially refuses to “smell pork” and violate his

dietary restrictions as Daniel did, but quickly concedes and goes to dinner at Antonio’s home, showing that he lacks the conviction of his prophetic precursor.

4. *Merchant of Venice* Act 4, Scene 1, italics added.
5. See, for instance, A. D. Moody’s *Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice* (1964).
6. *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*, 1996
7. Bassanio offers the disguised Portia the 3,000 ducats once due to the Jew. When she refuses, he insists, “Dear sir, of force I must attempt you further: Take some remembrance of us, as a tribute, Not as a fee,” whereupon she demands (and receives) the wedding ring she gave him, which he swore never to part with as a symbol of his matrimonial bond (Act 4, Scene 1).
8. *Shakespeare and the Jews* (1996).
9. *Merchant of Venice*, Act 4, Scene 1.
10. “*Mishpat Shylock Lifi Hahalakhah*,” published in his work *L’or Hahalakhah* (1964).
11. “Justice for Shylock: A Mock Appeal” Library of Congress, <https://youtu.be/ljFaVJ6RNpE>.
12. Yud-Tes Kislev, Thanksgiving, and Chanukah, <https://youtu.be/bguqj7VaZxk> (1986).
13. <https://rabbisacks.org/the-politics-of-hope>.
14. *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Modern Times*, pp. 313–314.
15. *Merchant of Venice*, Act 5, Scene 1.



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