Yom Kippur in the Public Latrine:
Pelimo Learns his Lesson from Satan

Admiel Kosman

“If at the gate there stands a guest / Who has landed from overseas,
What should we offer this guest / When he comes from there?
A green basket of fruit, a white flower, / Red wine and some bread with salt.
That’s what we have. / Sit down with us here.” Naomi Shemer – The Guest / Ha-Oréah

The eve of Yom Kippur is so busy with bathing, dressing nicely, and preparing a filling festive meal for all the guests in one’s home that one may forget to devote time both to one’s inner purification and to the renewal of one’s moral responsibility to those outside the home and those needy on the periphery of society. The narrowing of one’s vision threatens to undermine the true meaning of this day of “at-one-ment” with our inner selves and this day of granting and requesting forgiveness from our fellow human beings. This problematic situation on the eve of this sacred fast day appears to be the background to a two-thousand year old story told by the Rabbis about Yom Kippur in the household of Pelimo.

The narrative has a simple moral lesson to teach, but it grabs the readers’ attention by its fantastic style. In Act One, Satan, dressed up as a particularly repulsive beggar, progressively invades the home and joins the inner sanctum around the table of a pious, wealthy man – Pelimo. His task is to test Pelimo’s character by seeking hospitality from his reluctant household. Pelimo is found wanting and ends up in Act Two as far from his
own table, his own home, and the sanctity of Yom Kippur as one can flee. The new setting, the public latrine to which Pelimo has fled rather than to the synagogue, is now the site of a second encounter with Satan. Here the masks of Pelimo and of Satan will be removed. It is in the impurity of the latrine that Pelimo learns a profound lesson regarding his hypocritical spiritual purity, the supposed sanctity of his wealthy hearth, and the defective way in which his beautiful home shows sensitivity to the filthy homeless.

The narrative begins with a daily event in the inner life of Pelimo, in which he trumpets his achievement of religious perfection and dares Satan to test him as Satan once tested Job, whom God praised for his righteous perfection. Pelimo violates the cautionary adage, “Never open your mouth to Satan” (TB Ketubot 8b) and the reader intuits that pride goes before the fall. The story focuses on the day that Pelimo learned not to be so arrogant and self-confident, and that day was appropriately a day of contrition, the eve of Yom Kippur. Pelimo’s household was putting on its sacred pre-fast banquet before going off to the synagogue to join other respectable Jewish families for the day of confession of sin, conciliation, and repentance. Considering the spiritual heights that Pelimo claims to have attained, Yom Kippur seems to be superfluous. But enveloped in a mantle of both religious and social self-importance, Pelimo is ironically very far from being ready for a Day of true Atonement until God’s agent teaches him a lesson in humility. As we read this symbolic story before Yom Kippur we must ask what we too have to learn. Here is our tale:

Exposition: Daring Satan
Pelimo [a rabbinic pupil of Rabbi Judah the Prince, 3rd century in Eretz Yisrael] would say every day: “An arrow in Satan’s eyes!”

Act One: Sacred Hospitality and Access to the Holiday Table
One day, on the eve of Yom Kippur, he disguised himself as a pauper, and came and knocked on his door. Bread was brought out to him [so that he would eat outside].

He asked them: “On such a day as today [one that is as special and important as Yom Kippur eve], the entire world is inside, but I [shall remain to eat alone] outside?”

They brought him in, and set bread before him [so that he could eat inside the house, but not at the table where all were dining].

He said to them: “On such a day as today, the entire world is at the table, but I am alone?”

They brought him and sat him at the table. As he sat, he raised [on his body] sores which discharged pus, and he engaged in repulsive behavior [probably pinching these sores].

They said to him: “Sit properly [behave politely, and not in a manner that disgusts people]!”

He said to them: “Give me a glass,” and they gave him a glass. He coughed and spat his phlegm into it. They berated him [for this behavior], and then he fell dead. They [Pelimo and the members of his household] heard people shouting: “Pelimo has killed a man! Pelimo has killed a man!”

**Act Two: Shedding Disguises - The Revelation and the Lesson**

He fled and hid in the [public] latrine. And he [Satan who had only pretended to die] followed him. He fell before him. When he saw how he was suffering, he revealed himself.

He said: “Why did you speak thus?” [daring me daily with the words, “An arrow in Satan’s eyes!”]

[ replied]: “Then how should I have spoken?”

He said to him: “My lord should have said: ‘May the Merciful One rebuke Satan.’” (BT Kiddushin 81a–b)
פלימו והשטן: שיעור אלף, בתיה-המשו השביבו

"פלימו היה רגיל לומר כל יום: 'חץ בעיניו' השטן!

וימ את ערב ים כפרי היה,

נִדְמַה לו כִּנְיָה (ר' התפתח השטן לעני'),

ב' וַעֲטָרֵה לע דְּלָת

וזְאָה לו פַּת לַחֵם (ר' משך חובן)

אמר להם (ר' התפתח): 'יוֹם כִּמוֹ יָוֵם (ר' מְיִוחַד וַחֲשׁוֹב כּוֹרֵב יָוֵם הכִּפְּוֹרֵים) - כִּלְּעַלּוֹם בְּפֵנוּי

(ר' אָשָּׂאֵר לַאֵכָל לַבְּד) (ר' חֹוָי).

הָכְנִיסוּ אָוֶהוּ, וּ מוֹבָאֲבֶה לְפַט לַחֵם (ר' משך בַּדְּרָק הָבִית, אָרָל עֲלֵי שַלֹּחַן הָמָסְבֹּבֶם),

אמר להם: 'יוֹם כִּמוֹ יָוֵם - כִּלְּעַלּוֹם אֶצְּלָה השטן וּאֵי לָדוֹב?'

(ר' אָשָּׂאֵר לַאֵכָל לַבְּד) (ר' חֹוָי).

הָבִיאוּ אָוֶהוּ וַחֲשׁוֹב אַוּטָה לְיד השטן.

הַיְוָה יִשָּׂב וּמַמְלָא עָצָמוּ (ר' משך לע פַּג) שִׁחוּי מוֹגָלָה עָלֵי,

רְוָה עֲשָׂה וּבְמֵעֲשָׂה מִאוֹסִים.

אמַר לוֹ: 'שָׂבֵי יֵפְהו (ר' בֵּכְּה בֵּנִימּו, אָלָא בְּאוֹמִים מַעֲוָרָה גַּעְּלָה)

אמַר לְהָם: 'תַּנְוֵו לוֹ כּוֹ.

זָגֵן וְלָו לוֹ כּו.

השָׁעְרָה הָשָׁלְכָר אֶת כָּחָן (ר' יָרִי לִיחוֹת) לְתוֹכָה.

גָּעֵר בּוֹ (ר' בַּעַל חמָנָגוֹת) וּוֹאָה מְצַדֶּה עָצוֹמָה פְּמוֹ שְּבָנָהּ废气ו עָלָה - נְפֵל וּמַת.

שָׁמַע (ר' פְּלִיתוֹ וּבָנִי-בַּחֵו) שֶּנִּי זְמוֹרִים: 'פְּלִיתוֹ הָרֶג אֱדָם! פְּלִיתוֹ הָרֶג אֱדָם!'

בְּרָה וְחָסִיב אָצַּמּוּ בְּחֵי הָכָס.

הַלְּלָה אָחָרִי מְרַבָּא

נְפֵל לַפְּניי

כָּשְּרָה שָׁחוֹא מַצְרִיע יְנָה לְאָט עָצָמוּ,

אמַר לוֹ (ר' התפתח): 'מָדוּעַ אָמַרְתָּ כֶּלָּד?

(אָמַר לוֹ פְּלִיתוֹ) פַּדְּלָא אָלָא אָמַר?

אָמַר לוֹ: 'אָמַר אָדוֹן: הָרָתִּימוּ (ר' יָגִעְו בּוֹ בְּשֶׁנָּו)

[בַּבּל, קְדָשִׁי פֶּא ה-ע-ב"ב]
Daring Satan

We meet Pelimo through his daily bragging and his “dare-devil” challenge to Satan. Traditional commentators argue that this narrative teaches that one should not provoke Satan (the Evil Inclination), and that the thought that human beings are capable of overcoming the Evil Inclination and its temptations on his own, without God’s assistance, is a delusion. That may be good practical advice to keep one out of trouble, but there is more to learn about Pelimo’s spiritual failings from a close reading of the details of the story. Time and space define the plot,– its timing on the eve of Yom Kippur and its spatial tensions between inside and outside, between the manners of those who are “in” in society and the world of the “outhouse,” between the table where one engages in “intake” of sacred meals and the latrine where one engages in excrement and bodily discharges.

Pelimo begins with a startling declaration (to himself?) that he no longer fears Satan’s trials. The “arrow” that he shoots to Satan’s eye is a phallic symbol that appears elsewhere in the Talmud when Satan sets a sexual snare. In one story Rabbi Hisda says that he is superior to his fellow Rabbis, because he married at the age of sixteen. He adds that if he had married at the age of fourteen, then he would have been able to tell Satan: “An arrow in your eye!” (BT Kiddushin 29b–30a). In other words, he would no longer have feared illicit sexual temptations at all having satisfied his urges with this wife. In another place Rabbi Aha bar Jacob uses a lulav to figuratively stab Satan in the eyes. When he shook it, he exclaimed: “An arrow in Satan’s eyes!” (BT Sukkah 38a). There as well, the Talmud notes the danger entailed in such provocations.

Appropriately, Pelimo’s tale is incorporated in the fourth chapter of tractate Kiddushin among a series of narratives concerned with the Evil Inclination’s assaults upon the Rabbis who thought they were immune to its appeal. So too Pelimo’s immense self-confidence in his spiritual power expresses his feeling that, as far as he is concerned, the
struggle with the temptations of this world and the Evil Inclination has come to an end, and that he is on the level of the angels.

Satan therefore prepares for Pelimo a short lesson in self-awareness. His task is to set before this man a mirror that will show him his true inner state, but that requires paradoxically not only honest introspection but first opening one’s eyes to that which is outside, the Other who is beyond the periphery of our well-ordered world. Human beings are too often blind both to their own inner worlds and those of the poverty-stricken. Therefore Satan who stands outside Pelimo’s house chooses to disguise himself as a poor man and to call upon the people of the household to open the door and include him in their meal. The narrator’s choice of Satan, dressed as a derelict, is obviously not coincidental; this character is the diametric opposite of the bourgeois life enjoyed by the members of the household. Rabbi Levi says: “Wherever you find eating and drinking, Satan brings accusations” (Genesis Rabbah 38:7). Thereby the narrator puts to the test Pelimo’s opening bravado.

**Act One: Sacred Hospitality and Access to the Holiday Table**

Act One is about the outsider and the insiders, about those in need and those in abundance and how the social space is traversed from the homeless to the bastion of the inner home – the table. Since it is Yom Kippur, we expect hearts to open up and the poor to be invited inside as they are supposed to be on Passover: Let all who are hungry come and eat. Maimonides reminds us that on holidays when we gather at home “and when one eats and drinks, one must also feed the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, and other poor and unfortunates.” But in Pelimo’s household which mirrors his own ethos or purity and self-satisfaction it is very difficult to open one’s heart and home especially for a hard-core beggar.

The Talmudic narrator masterfully focuses, in a painstaking close-up, on the dual dynamic that is central to the story: on the one hand, he reveals to us the extent to
which this beggar “bothers” the members of the household because they see him as such a repulsive and threatening stranger, who is unfit to sit in their company; while, on the other, the narrator shows us, in slow motion, how the beggar “infiltrates” the very heart of the family center, penetrates into the inner circle of their ceremonies, and dismantles it, while applying calculated pressure to their “religious” sense of guilt. The poor man provides them with a true vision of their religious world that is so complacent and self-confident that it directs its arrogant arrows at Satan-God.

The drama unfolds as follows: the pauper outside first knocks perhaps hoping to be invited in for festive meal as Maimonides urges. But the householders throw him only bread and leave him outside to eat it, while they return to their meal, perhaps feeling satisfied with their generosity. It is clear to the reader that they are threatened by his repulsive appearance, and they are happy to go back to their orderly and respectable table. But the beggar does not desist. Now he claims that his hunger is not solely physical, he pines for family warmth, love, and friendship: “the entire world is inside, but I [shall remain to eat alone] outside?”

Their revulsion at his hideous appearance is overpowered by their guilt feelings, and they allow him to enter. This invitation, however, is not sincere, since they do not ask him to join them at the main table. This is actually a further rejection, in which they relegate him to a corner of the house. The pauper, however, continues to press them: “The entire world is at the table, but I am alone?” The members of the family finally acquiesce and allow him to sit with them at the table, the sacrosanct family symbol. Their pious hospitality is a façade which the beggar will now expose.

The beggar now initiates a series of revolting actions meant to completely shatter the sacred and polite image of the “table.” His body is covered by repulsive sores at which he begins to pick. Then the hosts berate the beggar, rebuking him for his lack of respectability. Their moral self-righteousness is more natural to them than their guilt-
ridden expressions of compassion and hospitality. The beggar had rebuked them and now they reply in kind. But the beggar does not desist. He asks for glass – presumably to drink as well as to eat – for drinking together, literally a symposium, is the essence of sociability. (One wonders why the hosts have not offered him wine beforehand. Perhaps they think he is a drunk? Certainly they do not wish to be too sociable with the likes of this beggar).

When he is given a cup perhaps with something to drink, he spits into it, in front of everyone. We can easily imagine how the terrible smell and the repulsive sights affected the appetite of those in Pelimo’s house, which also explains the readers’ identification (on one level) with the family’s harsh response to their “guest.” But one element in this drama has been forgotten: the pauper himself. He suffers from hunger—and from loneliness and seclusion, too. The stench that exudes from this unfortunate’s body and his spitting into the glass could easily be consequences of his grave illness, and not born of any desire to offend his hosts.

The members of the family, however, cannot apprehend this, since they are not truly concerned with the spiritual and the religious; if this had been so, they would have opened their hearts to the suffering person out of true generosity. They would have seen his distress and would have been happy to aid him in any way possible. The reality, however, is different: they want to preserve the bourgeois framework of the meal, the comfortable and pleasing family “togetherness.” Instead they rebuke him again for awful table manners rather than extending help to a sick man wholly dependent on their compassion. Then he falls dead before them from his illness or, as in many rabbinic tales, from his shame which literally mortifies him.

Now it is evident to them all that their blindness to the pauper’s suffering resulted in his death. If Pelimo’s household had been capable of sincerely feeling the mendicant’s pain and suffering and of easing his burden, then the table would truly have become an “altar” on
which man’s bestial ego is sacrificed, and it would have been sanctified by the act of
eating. We see, however, that the offering on this altar is the poor man, who “fell dead.”

Here Maimonides can help us interpret the shame engendered by the beggar’s death as
well as the deeper meaning of the table as altar and the desecration of that table when
the beggar spits into the glass and exposes the pus in his sores. The table is meant to be
an altar that replaces the Temples where Jews once sought purification of their sins.
Inviting guests is an essential part of the process. But when one closes one’s home to
needy pilgrims, then one desecrates the altar morally as if it were covered with physical
refuse, vomit. Let us reread Maimonides, now with the full text:

“And when one eats and drinks, he must feed the stranger, the orphan, and the
widow, and other poor and unfortunates. But if one locks the doors to his
courtyard and eats and drinks with his wife and children, but does not give food
and drink to the poor and the embittered, [his meal] is not the rejoicing in a divine
command, but a celebration of his stomach [...] and such rejoicing is a mark of
shame to all who so indulge themselves, as it is says: I will strew dung upon your
faces, the dung of your festival sacrifices [and you will carried to its dung heap]
(Malachi 2:3).” (Laws of Holidays, Mishneh Torah, 6:18).

Now the host - Pelimo - will be carried out to the dung heap, to the public latrine, to
Dung Gate, now that his classy table has been reduced to the level of phlegm and pus
and the impurity that the death of the beggar at the table imparts.

The Message of Act One: Respectable Religion versus a Spirituality Open to the Other
What is the message of Act One about what is truly religious life and what is merely
empty forms that lead us to the sin of self-righteousness and insensitivity to those who
lack the symbolic behaviors of respectability by which class societies rate each member
and determine who is an honoured insider and who a disreputable outsider and
interloper.

In the context of this narrative, true spirituality is about opening not only one’s door but one’s heart to the “stranger” and the other (in our case, the sick pauper with filthy clothing). The stranger bears the genuine Divine Presence. The profound understanding is that all such “filth” is always God’s messenger, come to put us to the test, and to teach us to accept the whole and not the partial. When we insist on purity and hygiene, we create the family, the societal and ostensibly the sacred “order,” but then true sanctity vanishes from our lives, and religion becomes a despotic authority, like any other “secular” rule.

Our narrative, which focuses on a sage by the name of Pelimo, is a metaphor for the way of life of such “religious” society. Pelimo imagines in his mind’s eye that he adheres to the divine truth, and he cannot see that, in actuality, all this is merely a mask. Like Pelimo, the head of the family, the members of the household follow his lead in doing God’s official bidding. But this institutionalized religious order is merely a cloak disguising their true bourgeois aim which is to maintain the propriety of the family monopoly on the pleasure awaiting them from the communal festive meal. This is confirmed by their attitude to the sick pauper who comes knocking on their door. With no compassion or empathy, they disgustedly reject this pitiful mendicant. Satan’s disguise, which is matched by the masks of the Pelimo household, is meant to strip Pelimo and the members of his family of their own disguise, the religious “cloak” that they wear, the order of the smug and self-satisfied religious society.

Pelimo and his company sit down to the festive s’udah mafseket meal (literally, “cessation [from eating] meal”), in preparation for the lengthy Yom Kippur fast. The entire household is certain that this meal is an act of profound religious significance, the fulfillment of a commandment. For them, participation in this obligatory meal is part of their overall religious activity, whose symbolic repertoire includes the table as the
altar of the Lord in the Temple, the “altar” that they “ascend” during the meal to see
God’s countenance (as BT B’rachot 55a declares: “As long as the Temple stood, the Altar
atonces for Israel; and now, a person’s table atones for him”).xxxiv Then this tale teaches
us that in order for this table to be a truly religious symbol, we must first sacrifice on it
our class assumptions and the comfortable family ego in favor of the suffering stranger.
However the family does the exact opposite: they offer the wretched beggar as a
“sacrifice” to maintain their respectable family comfort and contentment.

Act Two: Shedding Disguises - The Revelation and the Lesson

Strangely Pelimo has not appeared in Act One at all. Has he watched this whole farce of
hospitality without intervening? Has he tacitly agreed with the household whose self-
righteous ethos reflects his own? Perhaps he has been elsewhere and he only hears
about this catastrophe when the neighbors begin gossiping about his role, however
indirect, in this poor man’s embarrassing death on the eve of Yom Kippur. Pelimo may
simply be fleeing the public shame of this notorious incident. Or he may actually feel
guilt and remorse for his inaction, so that Pelimo runs to hide in the public latrine from
the “police” of his conscience that he imagines are pursuing him, and there—in the
latrine—he receives a telling religious lesson from God’s messenger. It is not to the
synagogue and its rituals of confession and atonement on Yom Kippur that he turns not
to his high society who disassociate from him rather than showing solidarity and
offering solace.

Here Pelimo bows before beggar who has pursued him to his place of hiding. Perhaps he
thinks this beggar is a ghost returned from the dead to take revenge. The homeless
beggar had fallen dead before Pelimo’s table in his fine home, and now Pelimo, who
stands in the beggar’s territory, the dung heap, the only residence where the
marginalized are permitted to live, falls down in abject supplication before the beggar
whose appearance may signify Pelimo’s imminent death. This is a Yom Kippur moment
when one makes a honest reckoning with one’s soul knowing this may be my last
moment of life. Traditionally Ashkenazi Jews dress in a *kittel*, a shroud-like nightgown on Yom Kippur as they face their possible demise. By kneeling before the beggar, Pelimo reneges on his self-righteous spiritual arrogance as well as his social standing. He asks for forgiveness from human beings whom he has shamed, just as the Rabbis require on the eve of Yom Kippur, before one dares to turn to God for Divine compassion and an extension of life for another year.

Seeing his remorse, Satan now shows compassion on him and reveals his true identity. On one hand, that might spook Pelimo even more to know he stands opposite the Satan whom he insulted and challenged. On the other, he may be relieved to know he has not caused the death of an innocent, homeless itinerant. Now both Satan and Pelimo have removed their masks and like two human beings seeking conciliation they revisit the insulting remark, “An arrow in Satan’s eyes,” that triggered this tragic feud. Satan instructs him how to express himself more circumspectly and to give deference to God, the Merciful One, whose compassion is needed by all.

Why was the latrine selected as the venue for Satan’s revelation? Because this is where “culture” discards everything that belongs to the dirt and filth of the “wild,” just as the grimy pauper had previously been cast forth from Pelimo’s house. Here social distance between respectable and marginal people disappears along with the masks we wear dissolve. Here honesty about a true self is most available where we defecate.

**What is the Lesson of Act Two?**

Act Two reinforces the message of Act One that the standard religious rituals of Yom Kippur must be disrupted by external events. Often an unexpected death or an unforeseeable reversal in our social standing must shock us in order to enable *heshbon ha-nefesh*, honest spiritual stocktaking. The narrative bears a subversive message: if Pelimo had finished his meal as usual, he would have gone directly to the synagogue for the evening Yom Kippur service. The “pious” congregation would begin with the usual
petitionary prayers and requests for divine forgiveness, and all would think that their salvation was to be found in this familiar order of things that is routinely performed every year, and that the good God would pardon them and the members of their households by merit of these prayer ceremonies. If this routine were the order of the day this year, as well, then Pelimo would have continued in his spiritual blindness for an additional year, with the same complacency engendered by empty trust in his “religious” life cycle. But Satan “saved” him by removing his spiritual blinders.

Act Two, however, also introduces a new message through a new character whose presence has been missed not only by Pelimo but by the readers in their own spiritual blindness. After all, who sent Satan to mock Pelimo? The Talmudic belief in Satan and angels is a complicated issue, but none of the varied Rabbinic conceptions claims that Satan is capable of acting against the will of God, in contrast to the dualistic notions of an evil principle parallel to the good one. The Bible, in the book of Job and elsewhere, clearly indicates that Satan is sent to fulfil missions given him by God, and the Rabbis stress that his authority to tempt and incite comes from God Himself. Satan is the legitimate agent of God, and his intentions are therefore always good and educational. Thus, for example, Rabbi Levi says that Satan’s persecution of Job was “for the sake of Heaven.” xxxv So it is God, not just Satan, who chooses to be revealed to Pelimo in a latrine, upon the entry of the holiest of the year in the form of a disgusting beggar! Pelimo receives the word of God here, while all the congregation is feverishly engaged in prayers for atonement and forgiveness in the public synagogue.

Remember that on Yom Kippur we go to God’s inner sanctum, the only day human beings enters the holy of holies. But even on pilgrimage holidays all citizens expected to come to the outer Temple court to appear before God’s face and to bring offering to the altar as its says, and none shall appear before Me empty-handed” (Exod. 23:15); “Three times a year all your males shall appear before the face of Sovereign Lord, the God of Israel [...] when you go up to appear before the Lord your God three times a year” (Exod.
34:23). One meets the “face” of God. Both humans and God enter into a direct communication without masks in God’s home at the altar. As we said before, without the Temple the table is the altar and one finds God’s face in the face of the poor when they are truly welcomed. But Pelimo and his household failed to see God’s face through Satan’s disguise. Now they will meet God face to face through his messenger in the public latrine.

God’s choice makes a powerful and daring religious statement: God is present in every place, wherever humans let God in; wherever the human heart is open to one’s fellow, especially the most “other” and least socially valued. There God is to be found. Consequently, God is present in the latrine of life, where the Divine radiates its sanctity in the uncouth place, even more than at the well-heeled family’s festival table or in the communal prayers in the synagogue on Yom Kippur. God’s Presence dwells in the inner place that is free of falsehood and ego. When personal arrogance and class pretence reign, the Divine is inaccessible. External, empty ceremonies—at the family table or the synagogue - actually become “latrines.” even if their outer garb is spotless – or even if they are garbed with a nice talit in the synagogue. By contrast, inner decisions are always personal and totally authentic.

Significantly, it is in the latrine, of all places, that Satan finds Pelimo, alone, without his family or any of his synagogue coterie. Now we can see the ironic measure-for-measure reversal between Satan and Pelimo. Now Pelimo sits alone on erev Yom Kippur far from his holiday table in the latrine. That is the same isolation experienced earlier by the Satan disguised as a poor beggar who had complained: “On such a day as today, the entire world is at the table, but I am alone?” In placing Pelimo in the filth of the latrine, the dirtiest place in the city, on Yom Kippur, the story puns playfully on the ancient meaning of the word “kippur” which means to cleanse. It is precisely in that latrine that the process of the “kippur,” the moral cleansing of Pelimo, takes place. There Yom Kippur purifies and atones and not in the bourgeois “religious” institutions where one
might have expected the cleansing to occur.

What did God’s agent, Satan, teach Pelimo in the latrine? Something very simple—and with him, we, the readers, also learn a fundamental lesson: do not say “An arrow in Satan’s eyes!” but “May the Merciful One rebuke Satan.” Don’t lie to yourselves and others by presenting your actions as those of a pious person who has already overcome the temptations of this world and who already adheres to God. If you cannot live a religiosity that opens the door to the stranger, to the Other (also in the psychological sense, of accepting the Other and not criticizing him, because he seems to you somehow “dirty”), and you hold fast to your social supremacy over uncouth outsiders, then don’t pretend to be what you are not – pure and righteous. The truth has its own power, and all the spiritual worlds are open before you when you do not lie; but if you continue to harbor the illusion that you live are already “religious” and that a “religious” world is madeup of a hierarchy of performers of ritual actions, you will descend further and further into the false ceremonies of your life.xxxvi On Yom Kippur the high priest cleanses the altar of human sin and sins are exported to the outsider, the scapegoat, who is sent to die in the hellish wilderness of Azazel. But we must beware not to identify the otherness of sin with the otherness of the homeless sinner. We all have our place in the dung heap and we cannot so easily cleanse our conscience by expelling the stranger inside ourselves and at the edges of our society. The rabbinic message to Pelimo and to us is that God may be found outside rather than inside our social structures where we feel too much at home.

ADMIEL KOSMAN is an Israeli poet, a full professor in the Department of Religion Studies in Potsdam University, and the academic director of the Liberal Seminar for Rabbis, the Abraham Geiger College, in Berlin. (See the academic version of this article with its extensive footnotes in Admiel Kosman, “Pelimo and Satan: A Divine Lesson in the Public Latrine,” *CCAR Journal*, 3-13. The abbreviated version above was edited by Noam Zion, Hartman Institute, Jerusalem.)