

A Homiletic Reading of Matan Ben Cnaan's *The Bureaucrat*

David Grossman

At first glance: a group of people, men and women, boys and girls, stand on a patch of earth or coarse sand. Bright sunlight illuminates them, casting their shadows. In the background, an Israeli landscape in “Israeli” colors: green fields, red loam soil, a few cypress trees. Slightly farther back: low, flat-topped hills. It might be Hiriya, the national landfill turned tourist site. Most of the people look anxious, almost fearful. Why are they worried? What are they afraid of? What is it that they are becoming aware of?

In the center of the picture, at the focal point of the viewer’s attention, is an enigmatic encounter – or confrontation – between a silver-haired man who holds a notebook or document of some kind, and a woman who stands opposite him, fixing him with a piercing look. She expects something from him: An explanation? Action? The reversal of a cruel fate?

The silver-haired man seems to be the source of authority and knowledge in this scene. His head is slightly bowed. He listens to the woman without interrupting, but his passive yet stubborn posture implies that he is not amenable to her demand. He may have just read out (or may be about to read out) an official notice of some sort, a harsh edict that will change the lives of these people standing in the field.

He is doing his job, neither cheerfully nor enthusiastically. In fact, he appears slightly embarrassed, almost ashamed of the role he must play. Another look at his face suggests a note of anger and bitterness at those who tasked him with this job. And yet he will perform it thoroughly, uncompromisingly:

subservient yet unyielding, he stands there absorbing whatever this woman directs at him and at what he is introducing into her life.

And he does not meet her eye. Is this because the woman is warning him with her fiery look not to utter the bad news he brings? Not to give his words the force of reality, of a fait accompli? Perhaps the only way he can deliver the blow is to avoid her eyes. Hers, as well as the eyes of all these people in the group – the community? – who surround her.

There is no doubt: he is “the bureaucrat”; it is he who gives the painting its title.

His stance seems to draw all that is happening toward himself. His face is sealed, erased, impervious to the woman’s demand. There is something hypnotic about his internal retreat into “doing his job,” about the way he is entirely absorbed by his “orders.” He looks motionless, but inside there is a dramatic unfolding: one must, after all, erase certain parts of oneself, of one’s humanity, in order to be capable of erasing other human beings.

This man clearly represents a system of some kind, and everyone in the field is aware of the system’s power. The bureaucrat himself, therefore, is not only impenetrable, but invulnerable. He appears weak and ineffectual, yet it would occur to none of these people to hurt him: he is imbued with impermeable, absolute power.

Let us leave the man for a moment.

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This is a disturbing picture that becomes more disturbing the longer one looks at it, the more questions one formulates. Who are these people? Where have they come from? Why have they gathered here, and what news are they receiving?

From their faces, it is clear the news is not good. There is not a single smile in this entire expressive painting. (One exception: a little boy is smiling, but it is his own private smile, seemingly dissociated from the rest of the scene.) It is also apparent that they do not yet understand the repercussions of the news. Most of the people seem to be in a void, in the flash of nothingness between a blow and the pain. Have they just been ordered to leave their homes? Are they about to be thrown out? To become exiles? Refugees? Is it news of a loved one's death? Or an even crueler fate?

And what of the young man who stands third from the right, in the front row, almost crying? Why is he wearing one shoe? And the men surrounding him – are they protecting him, or preparing to block him if he has a sudden outburst? Could his bare foot be reminding them of a memory long silenced and buried, the memory of a distant catastrophe? One that might reoccur?

More and more questions. Stories upon stories.

The people in the painting are extremely restrained: there are no anguished cries, no falling to the ground. None of them turn to embrace the person next to them, to comfort or draw comfort. There is something passive, suspended, almost victim-like, in the postures and expressions of these people. Mostly the men: each of them belongs to the group, yet each sets himself apart with his body language. It is as though the body, even before the brain, has understood that the togetherness is beginning to unravel. And yet these people seem to have already

intuited what the poet Byron phrased so aptly: “Joy’s recollection is no longer joy, while sorrow’s memory is a sorrow still.”

And again – the bureaucrat. The bearer of news. The tilt of his head is full of information: he seems to bow it to express respect and commiseration with the woman’s pain, but he is clearly aware that *in the course of his duty* – the term clings to him – he must stand there in precisely this way, adopt this exact expression, and absorb whatever the woman hurls at him. Because her cry, too, is a parameter that has been foreseen and factored into the protocols that dictate how this moment should be “managed.” The protocols of the “system” must process the woman and her cry. And the bureaucrat already knows that, ultimately, this woman and her cry will be defeated, worn thin under the cogwheels of the system she faces.

The men standing there might know it, too. They are familiar with the rules. Perhaps long ago, in a different time, they helped formulate such rules. Why do I mention only men here? What of the women in the painting? Perhaps because it is men who have created hierarchical, tyrannical systems, rigid structures: states, armies, religions.

It is interesting to note that there is virtually no intermingling between the men and the women. But the differences between them are not only in their physical positions: most of the women brim with initiative and alertness. They project cooperation, an affinity that binds them to one another. The men, for the most part, look effete, bottled up. Even more significantly, the women are all looking *at* someone, touching reality with their eyes, while almost all the men are turned inward without looking directly at anyone, not even at the audacious woman. Like the bureaucrat, they cannot look her in the eye. The bureaucrat does

not want to see the outcome of his deed. The other men do not want to see a reflection of their own failings.

I think of the strange attraction so many people feel toward bureaucracy. Toward the sense – or illusion – of order that it creates, even within the most chaotic, reckless, murderous reality. I cannot think of bureaucracy without thinking of arbitrariness, of tyranny. Kafka, in *The Castle*, in *The Trial*, and in fact on almost every page he wrote, showed us to what extent bureaucracy is a powerful branch of every despotic regime (and, of course, of non-despotic regimes, too) and how it is a language unto itself, a worldview. Bureaucracy grows increasingly convoluted, wraps itself more tightly around its subjects, invades every single facet of their lives, even the most intimate ones, feeds off them, turns them into components of the tyrannical system and, eventually, into its representatives.

When we look at human history, we see how easy and seductive it is to accept the rules of such a mechanism, to legitimize it, to create an ideology for it, and to gradually assimilate within it and allow it to replace all that is human and fertile – and alive.

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I look at the people in the painting: Is this what a person looks like at the moment of receiving bad news? The faces continue to express what they can, but they are beginning to show their limitations. A person's face is incapable of containing and conveying the totality of catastrophe (or of joy). At a certain point it simply cannot communicate all the nuances of grim, complex human sensations.

And perhaps some part of every catastrophe is always impossible to take in, impossible to comprehend.

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One young woman is seated, as though her legs have faltered. She is the only one on a chair. (Where did the chair come from? Was someone anticipating that a chair would be needed?) Her hand touches her chest in a gesture of alarm or shock. Another woman sits on the ground at her feet, pouring her a glass of water. This gesture is different from all the other movements in the painting: it is a maternal, generous movement.

The viewer's gaze is pulled toward the seated figure (how could I have missed this drama before?). A few of the other women cluster around and observe her with compassion; they close in on the distraught woman as though trying to form a scab around an open wound. But closer inspection of one or two of these onlookers shows that they have been seduced by the potential for something sensational, by the familiar voyeuristic urge to glimpse another person's tragedy. In fact, they seem to be denouncing the seated woman, even denigrating her weakness, her hint of self-indulgence, the theatrical gesture of her hand on her chest.

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One's eye is drawn, again and again, to the woman in the center of the painting. She is the only one whose face expresses actual defiance, even rebellion. She

evinces boldness and courage. She protects her daughters, who cling to her. She is the only one still fighting for the group's lost cause. She is my hope in this painting.

She – and the woman who pours water.

She – and the basket of bread.

But suddenly – perhaps because now, upon yet further observation, I sense how powerful the woman resisting the bureaucrat is in her protective maternal stance – the picture changes before my eyes again, and the possibility of a different, horrifying story surfaces:

The bureaucrat is demanding that the woman give him one of her daughters.

Is that the content of the edict he reads to her?

It is a terrible possibility, but the painting does not rule it out.

Has he determined which of the two girls will be taken, or is he ordering the mother to choose?

One's mind struggles to absorb this possibility, but, again, the painting allows for it.

The younger daughter seems unaware of the edict's meaning. The older one – almost a young woman, wearing maroon leggings – understands.

Strangely, the horror of the edict offers a more compassionate explanation for the people's passivity. Perhaps its dreadful cruelty has stunned them, rendered them unable to respond. Perhaps the fact that the command is beyond the capacity of human tolerance has thoroughly suppressed them, paralyzed them, turned them into collaborators.

That is, after all, how dictatorships stay in power: by subjecting their citizens to despair. Despair of the possibility to remain human in such a reality.

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I search for a story because it is through stories that I can feel and comprehend. But when it comes to this painting, with its mysteriousness and vicissitudes, the attempt proves futile: almost every aspect of this piece is cast in doubt, evades conclusions, repels interpretation, resists being boxed into any reasonable plotline. Even after prolonged observation, something in it remains inexpressible. Something occurs in regions of the soul that have no name and no translation in the light.

I cannot say with any certainty that I understand Matan Ben Cnaan's painting, nor do I wish to *understand* it. But I think that I *know* it.

The shadow of distress that it casts – I do know that.

Inside the shadow is a spark, and that is something I also know: the flash of knowledge and consolation that only art, at its finest, can grant us. Art is perhaps the only place where things and the loss of them can coexist. Art is the dimension in which we – who look at paintings and sculptures and films, who listen to music, who read books – experience our singularity, along with the bitter realization of just how transient we are.

David Grossman, The Bureaucrat, Painting by Matan Ben Cnaan, Reading by David Grossman
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Translated from the Hebrew by Jessica Cohen