



# Behind the curtain, between blood and stone: the representation of god in Peter Shaffer's *Yonadab*

Gladir da Silva Cabral

Programa de Pós-graduação em Educação, Universidade do Extremo Sul Catarinense, Av. Universitária, 1105, 88806-000, Criciúma, Santa Catarina, Brasil.  
E-mail: gla@unescc.net

**ABSTRACT.** This article analyzes *Yonadab*, a play by the British playwright Peter Shaffer, first staged in London in 1985. Set in biblical times, the play depicts the machinations of Yonadab, King David's nephew, who wants to destroy the royal family and the religious foundations of that society. The analysis focuses on God's representation in the play through the conflicts and tensions shown by the main character Yonadab. Four main characteristics stand out in the divine figure: violence, exclusiveness, immanence, and absence.

**Keywords:** Yonadab; Peter Shaffer; Tamar; representation of God.

## Atrás da cortina, entre sangue e pedra: a representação de deus em *Yonadab*, de Peter Shaffer

**RESUMO.** Este artigo apresenta uma análise da peça *Yonadab*, de autoria do dramaturgo inglês Peter Shaffer, produzida pela primeira vez em Londres em 1985. A peça é contextualizada na Jerusalém dos tempos bíblicos e mostra as artimanhas de Yonadab, sobrinho do rei Davi, para destruir a família real e a própria base religiosa daquela sociedade. O foco da análise é a representação de Deus na obra dramática a partir dos conflitos e das tensões representadas pela personagem principal: Yonadab. Quatro características principais se sobressaem na figura divina: violência, exclusivismo, imanência e ausência.

**Palavras-chave:** Yonadab; Peter Shaffer; Tamar; representação de Deus.

Received on April 20, 2023.  
Accepted on July 28, 2023.

## Introduction

But the Lord of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he will become a sanctuary, and a stone of offense, and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many shall stumble thereon; they shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken. Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him (*The King James Bible*, 1982, Isaiah, 8:13-7).

"Voolamnown rayah vooshomov Yonadab. 'And Amnon had a friend whose name was Yonadab.' V'Yonadab eese hochom m'owd. 'And Yonadab was a very subtle man'" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 87). With this quotation from the Bible, Peter Shaffer begins his play *Yonadab*. Modifying the quotation, I would say: And Yonadab had a God whose name was Yaveh... And Yaveh was a very subtle God. In this essay I try to analyze the concept of God in Peter Shaffer's play *Yonadab*, arguing that Yaveh is presented in the play as a violent, exclusive, immanent, and absent God. Some of these characteristics are very interrelated like violence and exclusiveness, but others are paradoxical like immanence and absence. The paradox does not invalidate God's image portrayed in the play but contributes to a more convincing and complex design. In this play, Shaffer combines the elements of "[...] ritualistic tragedy, satirical comedy and probing psychological drama" (Fisher, 1987, p. 108).

The play was inspired in Dan Jacobson's novel *The Rape of Tamar* (1970), dressed in Shaffer's use of color, ritual, choreography, music, and costume, as well as "[...] elaborate physical actions" (Innes, 1992, p. 406). And the novel is inspired in the biblical passage of II Samuel 13, where Yonadab appears as a very subtle and manipulative character. Yonadab is the protagonist of the play by Peter Shaffer and criticizes the violence of the old kingdom of David, his uncle, his intolerance and abuse of power, the same vices he sees in David's son Absalom. Intoxicated by envy and bitterness, Yonadab scheme to destroy King David's house and to change

Jerusalem into a different society. Besides, Yonadab affirms to be living “[...] in limbo for eternity [...]” for being “[...] intelligent” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 87). According to Yonadab’s perspective, David’s God is the source of law, power, and rigor, being ready to punish any disobedience. Yonadab is in fact an observer of what is happening around, a voyeur, but also a manipulator of the passions and ambitions of King David’s children. “Shaffer calls his protagonist the Watcher” (Gianakaris, 1992, p. 129). In fact, “Peter Shaffer is primarily interested not in re-creating history but in exploring aspects of human behavior, and, with this end in mind, he follows Jacobson in shifting the focus of the biblical story” (Gianakaris, 1992, p. 132). Here, Yonadab is the center of the story, not King David.

A secondary figure in David’s kingdom, Yonadab is the central character of the play, an audacious, evil agent. He is the main character in the play, but functions as its narrator as well, an artifice that Shaffer had used in other plays like *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, *Equus*, and *Amadeus*. Yonadab can be seen as “[...] a study of the title character” (Klein, 1988, p. 69). As a voyeur, he is set aside from the scene, apparently as a marginal figure, incapable of feeling faith, or passion, or love. The story is told by him to the audience as a confession, a kind of recollection of things past. He presents himself in contrast to David and his God:

The thing was, you see, alone in all the tribe I was delicate. That is actually my main defence for all the horror that follows. I was delicate: God clearly was not. How could He possibly have made me in His image? I saw no resemblance. Here was Yonadab the Sensitive – there was Yaveh the Savage, with no female consort to soften Him and not one trace of humour to keep Him in temper (Shaffer, 1989, p. 89).

It is a very strange argument, because the name Yonadab means ‘Yaveh is bounteous’, ‘the Lord gave spontaneously’, or ‘Yaveh is noble’ (Jonadab, 2011-2022), in Hebrew. Ironically, Yonadab has the name of Yaveh inside his own name, in the origin of his own name. According to Keith Bodner (2014, p. 35), “[...] [a]mong the numerous minor characters in 2 Samuel 11-19, Jonadab remains among the most enigmatic, and his malignancy marks a key juncture in the story”.

The play, produced for the first time at the National Theatre in 1985 and directed by Peter Hall, is divided into two Acts: the first until the rape of Tamar, and the second after the rape and its unfolding. The play starts with a quotation of the Bible in Hebrew: “*Voolamnown rayah vooshmov Yonadab*. ‘And Amnon had a friend whose name was Yonadab’. *V’Yonadab eese hochom m’owd*. ‘And Yonadab was a very subtle man’. Meaning devious – the usual adjective used in my tribe for anyone of intelligence” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 87). Yonadab tries to destroy King David’s family and change Jerusalem. He is totally poisoned by envy and bitterness for being rejected by God and despised by Him. David’s God, as portrayed in the play, is in fact the Old Testament God, the God of the Law, a powerful, violent being, ready to punish any disobedience, and His power in the world is real and active. Peter Shaffer (1926-2016) rarely explored his Jewish culture in his writings. “Yet themes from Jewish history, and especially from that greatest of Jewish texts, the Bible, invariably show themselves in his plays” (Joffe, 2016, p. 77). In this play, Yonadab, the Jewish tradition comes to the spotlight. The première of the play was received with moderate enthusiasm by the public and with certain indifference by the critics in 1985. Shaffer himself admitted that the text was not complete, not sufficiently mature, and extensively revised for its first publication in 1989 (Gianakaris, 1992). What I analyze here is the revised text.

This is a story of deceit: Amnon is deceived by Yonadab and deceives Tamar, Yonadab is deceived by Tamar and Yaveh, Absalom is deceived by Yonadab and David is deceived by all his sons. In spite of being deceived by Amnon, Tamar deceives Absalom, Amnon, Yonadab, and even her father. As the play unfolds, it seems a great game about who is in control of the situation and manipulate the other characters. Yonadab’s intelligence contrasts with Amnon’s naïve strong lust (Shaffer, 1989). Tamar’s intelligence contrasts with Absalom’s power and beauty. Intelligence and deceit are conjoined in a story of vengeance and incest. The rape of Tamar by her own brother breaks many taboos in Israel (Shaffer, 1989, p. 97) or as it is written in the Bible: “‘No, my brother!’ she said to him. ‘Don’t force me! Such a thing should not be done in Israel! Don’t do this wicked thing’” (II Samuel 13, 12). Vengeance moves Tamar and Yonadab. The play also shows Yonadab’s incapacity to believe, and his surprise at the possibility of faith in an alternative God (100-1). Yonadab – a Iago-like figure (Joffe, 2016) – tempts Amnon to believe in the legend of a Kingdom of Perpetual Peace, and during the process he is caught in the verge of believing in the legend. Indeed, David’s capacity for faith makes Yonadab wish to believe too. When King David is praying, Yonadab comments that “[...] [in] those few minutes, lying on the dusty rugs, I tried with all my being to imagine myself David – a Priest King influencing the universe.... Oh, the wonder of that!” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 109). In fact, the story concocted by Yonadab distorts the biblical myth of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and refashions it in Amnon’s dreams of

being a godlike Prince possessing a godlike Princess and living in an eternal realm of love and gentleness, a pagan framework (Shaffer, 1989). As C. J. Gianakaris (1992) observes, Yonadab, as the tempter, has some features of Satan and of Faust. His power is in his cleverness and astute use of language. He manipulates Amnon and later on Absalom, King David's sons, but at the end of the play he is defeated by Tamar.

The first great element which characterizes Yahveh is violence, violence in the history of Israel, violence in the city of Jerusalem, in David's and Tamar's experiences of life and faith, and in Yonadab's critique of the Jewish religion as being intolerant of other religious traditions. The history of Israel is presented as the conquest of a land with the annihilation of many foreign nations. As Yonadab points out, Israel "[...] smote the whole world in the name of his God of Commandments. Ammonites, Canaanites, Jebusites, Amalekites, Hivites, Hitites, Perizites, Moabites – all the Ites... smote [...] so completely" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 88). All this violence was done in the name of God, under the justification of "[...] holy war [...]", a kind of sanctification of violence. Yonadab continues to say that violence is something very common in the country, "[...] beyond the desert, for miles, the blood of [...] chopped enemies soaking the sand" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 89).

Jerusalem is also a place full of violence, in contrast with the origin of its Hebrew name יְרוּשָׁלַיִם (*Yerushalaim*): 'the Foundation of Peace'. In the beginning of the play, Yonadab observes that in Jerusalem "[...] the air stank of blood. Human blood in the gutters: animal blood from the altars" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 89), which divides violence into two different classes: religious and political. Religious violence is represented by the blood in the altar and by the "[...] ten commandments of stone" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 88). According to Yonadab, the worship of Yaveh was a bloody spectacle repeated in Jerusalem day by day, at the sanctuary, where animals were sacrificed for the people and the blood was spread on the altar. The behavior of the people was controlled by a strict number of commandments written on stones, and disobedience was punished with stones. Yonadab supposes to have a good reason to call Jerusalem a 'stony city', besides the fact that the old city was really built with stones of that arid region. "Beneath the cynic and wily manipulator, one can clearly see a spiritual buccaneer, a philosophical desperado, obsessively embattled with a God he intellectually rejects" (Nightingale, 1985, p. 5). And, in fact, one can see the hubris of this character who chose to fight the transcendent all-powerful God of Israel, the creator and savior of his people, the founder of David's throne. Besides, the political violence occupies Jerusalem and transforms the "Foundation of Peace [...]" into a "Place of Stones" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 88). Just in the beginning of the play four men were executed by the priests under the order of King David, in the first scene of the first act. "These men are foes of the One God [...]", says David, "[...] therefore they die" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 88). Their crime: they were caught "[...] pissing against the wall" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 88). The execution is done in a context of religious ritual, directed by the priests with raised hands, among expressions of *selah*. When execution is being performed, King David says sternly: "Cursed is he who sets his hand against Him [Yaveh] or His anointed [King David]", putting together the religious and the political matter, which is something that alludes to the Biblical rhetoric: "The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed, saying" (Psalm 2, 2).

Violence as something related to Yahveh can be observed in King David's religious experience and also in Tamar's devotion. David, for example, interpreted Amnon's feigned sickness as God's rebuke, as "[...] a punishment for injustice" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 108). Punishment is a strong element of Yahveh's relationship with David. Besides, in the fifth scene of the second act, David expresses his fear of God's punishment lamenting Tamar's preference for Absalom instead of her father. He asks God: "Was this 'You'? [author's emphasis]. Is this still my punishment for Bathsheba? 'Surely not'. When You took my son with her I thought we were quits for that" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 150, author's underline). In the first scene of the first act, Yonadab had commented to the audience that "[...] it was said that God killed [David's] first son with Bathsheba [...]" as a punishment (Shaffer, 1989, p. 90). And in his prayer David shows his sense of guilt and fear of punishment when he says: "King of the Universe, we implore Thee! Turn away Thy wrath from this guiltless son and his unworthy father" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 108).

In addition, Tamar's experience with Yaveh also displays the sense of violence in relation to God. Tamar does in the play "[...] what no man can do for Yaveh" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 176), pushing Absalom against his brother Amnon, making him commit murder, "[...] cleaning the People, rooting out iniquity from their midst" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 176), presuming to move "[...] under the Lord's hand [...]", promoting His Justice (Shaffer, 1989, p. 179). At the end of the play, Tamar explains to Yonadab how Yaveh helped her in her vengeance, how He 'hardened' her heart (Shaffer, 1989, p. 177) in order to get "[...] the People purified". In other words, she explains how God mixed her faith with violence, how her faith justifies her violence and how her violence intensifies her faith. Celebrating her victory, Tamar composes, like her father in the old times, a song,

according to Yonadab “[...] the Song of Blood-thirst slaked sanctity” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 180), a song speaking about “[...] the stones of the way which rebuked him,” a “[...] head being shattered as a winepot [...]”, as a “[...] winepot [...] broken on stones! The feet of the mule did trample: the feet of his sister made dance!” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 180). Tamar sings violence. For Benedict Nightingale (1985, p. 5), the transformation of Tamar from an innocent victim of rape into “[...] an archetype of baleful feminism and slyly to have arranged both her brothers’ ruin [...]” is not convincing. In fact, says the author, “[...] [o]ne feels it’s her author, not she, who is manipulating the plot”. Some critics comment that this sudden transformation of Tamar from a victim into a revenger, a powerful manipulative woman, is one of the fragile aspects of the play. The change of personality is too radical and possibly unprepared. Michael Coveney (1985, p. 21), commenting on the play, declares that “[...] theatrical creation keeps bumping into theatrical reality as Tamar, scarred beyond redemption by the rape, bursts through the Egyptian charade to lead the destruction of Amnon at the sheep-shearing festival and claim war goddess status, stained in blood and defiantly feminist”. For him, this solution is “[...] crudely and inefficiently laid out” (Coveney, 1985, p. 21). This strong feminist paragon of a woman was not compatible with the cultural context of the biblical times nor with the first act of the play. Tamar, the pious, fragile victim suddenly becomes the priestess in a pagan legend.

Pamela Tamarkin Reis published in 1997 a very interesting article entitled ‘Cupidity and Stupidity: Woman’s Agency and the ‘Rape’ of Tamar’ presenting an alternative interpretation to the biblical character Tamar. Traditionally, Amnon is seen as a rapist and Tamar as an innocent, helpless victim. She argues that “[...] the sexual intimacy of Amnon and Tamar is consensual, and that their incestuous union is encouraged by Tamar’s flirtatiousness and supported by her easy virtue, persistent ambition, and implacable stupidity” (Reis, 1997, p. 43). This argument is quite attuned with Shaffer’s portrayal of her. According to Reis, there could be a rape, but probably not an incest. “The majority of commentators believe Amnon is not also guilty of incest because marriage between half-brother and sister was permissible at that time” (Reis, 1997, p. 43). Reis presents all the different interpretations of the story of Tamar, including the Talmudic and modern readers commentaries. For authors like J. Fokkerman, for example, the loss of virginity was a more serious matter than the consanguinity. In Reis’s opinion, Tamar “[...] wants to marry the heir apparent and one day be queen” (Reis, 1997, p. 48), a sign of ambition, manipulation, and complicity with Amnon’s desires. All King David’s sons are faulty:

Absalom is a true son of David in his propensity for revenge; Amnon is a true son of David in his desire for a woman forbidden to him, but Tamar, so dense and tactless (as we shall see) is completely unlike her father who was notably discerning of speech (1 Sam. 16, 18). (Reis, 1997, p. 45).

She has a plan in mind, “[b]ut Tamar is not a clever woman” (Reis, 1997, p. 50). For Reis, Tamar could have escaped, but did not. She wanted the matrimony. But Amnon went too fast and avoided all ‘marital protocols’, the betrothal, the bride-price. “[...] in her ignorance, her foolishness, or her ambition, she believes she and Amnon can marry in propriety and with David’s blessing” (Reis, 1997, p. 50), but things went wrong. The lack of virginity was considered an obstacle to her marriage. Reis recognizes the problem or her interpretation of the biblical text:

My analysis of the erroneously termed rape of Tamar may be inimical to those who find her cruelly exploited by an oppressive patriarchal society. Partisans of the rape theory may accuse me of blaming the victim, but Tamar is not the victim of male domination; like her eponymous forebear in Genesis 38, she engages willingly in incest (Reis, 1997, p. 60).

According to this peculiar interpretation of the Bible, Tamar was not able to convince her father that she was innocent, notably considering Amnon’s violent rejection of her, after the sex intercourse.

Yonadab criticizes the Jewish religious tradition, disagreeing with this practice of stoning, rejecting this God of punishment, and he makes it with irony, humor, and intelligence. “This religion of violence, stones, and blood [...]”, says Yonadab “[...] is simply not good enough for me” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 89). According to Yonadab, Jerusalem is “[...] the world of perpetual anger [...]”, (Shaffer, 1989, p. 90) not a place of peace, but a place where faith is blended with blood. Yonadab, whose name means ‘Yaveh is Merciful’, lives under the terror of a merciless God. “That was me [...]”, says Yonadab, “[...] that actually is what you become when you bow to One God because you’re terrified of stones – but long in your heart for another one altogether, who has no use for stones” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 89). Criticizing Tamar’s fanaticism, Yonadab comments to the audience, at the end of the play, that she “[...] sat for life in her palace and sang to her savage God the stink of vengeance, the incense of her faith” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 180).

Exclusiveness is another important element which characterizes Yaveh's personality in the play. He is the One God of one king of one people. He has no peer, no companion, He does not share His power with a congregation of gods. The faith in Yaveh is therefore a complete negation of polytheism. David, for example, when he realizes that his son Amnon had visited a wizard in secret, declares: "There is no help but from God who is One" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 108). Besides, in scene fourteen, second act, Tamar says to Absalom and Yonadab: "Did you think I would believe such evil? You and I Gods? GODS? There is only one God in Heaven!" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 176). In contrast with the faith in Yaveh, Yonadab presents and defends The Legend of Perpetual Peace, which describes a place "[...] smiled on by [a] radiant couple filling their worshippers with the scent of their joy" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 91). The legend proclaims the establishment of Perpetual Peace through the sexual intercourse of two loving brother and sister, which is seen as abomination according to Yaveh's Law (99-100). Yonadab's fabricated religion is totally pagan in form and content, what is clearly forbidden according to the Jewish faith – goddesses, sex intercourse between family members, the centrality of pleasure –, a kind of fertility ritual frankly opposed to the precepts of the Jewish Bible. What Yonadab is suggesting sounds like a Canaanite or Egyptian idolatrous practice. And 'Yaveh', comments Yonadab in scene 3 of the first act, "[...] shares His divinity with no one, not even a wife" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 99). In the previous scene, as part of the theatrical devices, "[...] two HELPERS on the outer stage [...] assume hieratic poses suggestive of Egyptian god-figures, one male, one female" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 90), making contrast with the One God, the One male without consort, without the pleasure of a sexual intercourse, without the joy of a partner. Yonadab is judging Yaveh using alien idolatrous forgeries.

Besides the fact of not having a companion, Yaveh is also the God Who does not have a competitor. And Yonadab presents the Egyptian gods whose characteristics were this conflict of power and worship, just in opposition to the supposed One God. Influenced by Yonadab, for example, Amnon tries to convince Tamar to abandon Yaveh, saying that "[...] in Egypt everything is colossal" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 122). Yonadab declares in the beginning of the play his personal rejection of the One God Who makes you become creep by the terror of stones and reveals his intimate longing for another one who has no use for stones (Shaffer, 1989, p. 89). He wants an alternative god, a different one who tolerates the existence of another god. In a plan of destruction of David's house and God, Yonadab convinces Amnon of the superiority of the Egyptian gods, inventing the Legend of the Kingdom of Perpetual Peace as paradise, a place "[...] where flutes filled the air [...]" in direct contrast with the Jerusalem, where "[...] the squeal of ram's horns, or rams themselves dragged shitting to slaughter for a ravenous God" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 90), a "[...] place where walls showed pictures of undying pleasure [...]" in contrast with the "[...] letters of proscription" of the ten-commandments – "Thou Shalt Not!" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 90). "By the Nile [...]", says Yonadab, "[...] it is all different!" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 99).

Another important element of contrast between Yaveh and the diverse gods of the Legend is that Yaveh does not share His divinity with man. In the Legend, man and woman reach immortality and become God and Goddess (Shaffer, 1989). Amnon, for example, trying to convince Tamar, says: "[...] we are chosen [...] ordained to be Gods" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 141). Before, in another scene, he had said: "Amnon and Tamar – Immortal! Yeas! People will pray to us" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 123). And Yonadab, in a transport of faith, confesses that "[...] another King was rising. Mercy and Gentleness were coming to this quailing People. All stones down at last... Perhaps a young God and Goddess! Who knows what is possible?" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 173). The One God does not know the importance of sharing Himself with another, therefore He "[...] did not create friends... Male and Female created He them. There's no mention of friends," comments Yonadab (Shaffer, 1989, p. 168).

Yaveh is also presented in the play as the Mediator of life, that is, an immanent presence which stands between the 'me' and the 'self' and between 'me' and reality. When Yonadab is watching David's prayer, he comments that it seems to be like a "[...] massive appeal to the Unknown" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 109). Yaveh is the great Unknown, the one totally different from reality, the peculiar, the One Who cannot be object of knowledge, Who is a constant appeal to faith. According to Yonadab, to pray to his Unknown is like "[sending] out to It what also must be unknown to me – I mean my very Self: the Self of Myself without reservation" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 109). And Yonadab continues saying that to pray is "[...] to let that [the self] be known by the vaster Unknown and return to me with such tremendous force that I can know it – in the storming of my blood" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 109). And Yonadab ends affirming that this "[...] Unknown God [is] confirmed as surely as the existence of myself" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 109). The self is known through the mediation of this Unknown, so that God becomes the instrument of perception and understanding of reality and the foundation of the conscience of the self.

Another evidence of the concept of Yaveh as the Mediator of life is the constant recurrence of blessings in David's family. Before meals they thank God, praising Him and recognizing Him as priority in their lives, confirming Him as the 'King of the Universe'. Tamar, for example, calls Absalom's attention, in scene eight of the second act, by advising him: "Say the Blessing first" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 156). Tamar insists: "Say it." Then he accedes: "Blessed art Thou, O King of the Universe – who has given us food from lovely women" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 156). Of course, Absalom does not seem to be sincere, and his prayer is not so authentic, in fact it is a little malicious with that reference to "[...] lovely women[...]", but he confirms the idea of Yaveh as Mediator. In the second scene of the first act, Tamar calls also King David's attention to the precedence of Yaveh in human life: "Blessing first. You must always say the Blessing first: don't you know that?" and then David prays: "Blessed art Thou, King of the Universe, Who has given us bread from the earth" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 95). Besides, in the scene twelve of the second act, Amnon and Absalom bless Yaveh together: "Blessed art Thou King the Universe, who hast given us the fruit of the vine" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 169). And Tamar, believing in Amnon's pretense of sickness, prays: "Blessed art Thou, King of the Universe, who giveth sickness and taketh away..." (Shaffer, 1989, p. 122). Every moment of life is seen under the Mediation of Yaveh.

The blessings are manifold during morning, afternoon and night in Jewish life, but specially on the Shabbat. Some of these blessings come from the Babylonian Talmud, and some were originally formulated during the Middle Ages. In one of the liturgical books of the Jews we find an explanation about these blessings:

As reported by the Babylonian Talmud, most of the *b'rakhot* [...] were originally recited at home as one went through the daily acts of working and rising [...]. Each passage extols God as we begin the day: on arising from sleep, on hearing the birds sing, on dressing, on taking one's first steps, and so on. Maimonides stated: 'These *b'rakhot* are without a prescribed order, each is to be recited only on the appropriate occasion... and not as part of the synagogue service' (Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Tefillah 7:7,9). Other authorities, however, beginning with the Siddur of Rav Amram Gaon in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, recommend the public recitation of these *b'rakhot*. This has been the standard Ashkenazic practice to this day; the common Sephardic practice is to recite these *b'rakhot* privately and to begin the service with the morning psalms (Siddur Lev Shalem, 2016, p. 103).

These blessings are remarkably reverent, pious, and poetic, like the following ancient examples:

*Barukh atah Adonai*, our God, sovereign of time and space,  
Who enables the bird to distinguish day from night,  
Who made me in the divine image,  
Who made me free,  
Who made me Jew,  
Who gives sight to the blind,  
Who clothes the naked,  
Who releases the bound,  
Who straightens those who are bent,  
Who stretches out the earth over the water,  
Who steadies our steps,  
Who has provided for all my needs,  
Who strengthens the people Israel with courage,  
Who crowns the people Israel with glory,  
And who gives strength to the weary (Siddur Lev Shalem, 2016, p. 103-104).

Contrasting with the concept of Yaveh as immanence, the play presents also Yaveh as an absent God. Yonadab questions the existence of such a God, calling for His interference in his life. But throughout the play Yaveh is characterized by His unpardonable absence. Yonadab screams in the beginning of the play: "Ruin even to the God of David... Why not? Let Him defend Himself! Prove that He exists, 'finally!' 'Let Him stop me' if He is there – Yaveh the Prohibitor" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 98, author's underline). Doubting His existence, Yonadab asks if "[...] he was there at all [...]", confessing "[...] not totally convinced of this terrifying fact" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 89). Yaveh, Whose Hebrew name means 'He Is' is openly challenged to show Himself. In the scene thirteen of the second act, when discussing with King David, Yonadab appeals: "'Why could you not have seen? Stopped me? Struck me down?' SHOWN ME – SHOWN ME HE IS?" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 172, author's underline), accusing David for Yaveh's absence. Yonadab then proclaims his victory: "Your daughter ruined, your son speared like a board! And nothing stopped me! 'God did nothing!' [author's emphasis] Just kept you blind and left me to do it!" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 172, author's underline). However, Yonadab also experiences the tension of Yaveh's possible presence. "Was this actually going to happen? ... Surely Yaveh must show His

hand now and stop it! How far would He let it go? – and what would His punishment be?” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 111). Yonadab's attitude is ambiguous: in a way he wants another god and confesses his disbelief in Yaveh's existence, but in another way he cannot bear His absence and lives under the expectation of His interference. Yaveh is absent, but for how long? Yonadab is tormented by the possibility of this presence, a presence of judgement, stones, and blood. “Could I actually bring down the Lord's Anointed and his insufferable family? Or would he stop me – the Great Punisher above? What a test! What a marvelous outrageous challenge! Let's see who is really there” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 102). And at the very end of the play, watching Kind David's hour of prayer, Yonadab suspects of Yaveh's victory, as if His existence has being proved. Yonadab says: “Tell me – is He not proven to exist, a God whose Priest-King can work this?” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 181).

David also experiences the absence of God when he cries out for His interference: “A ‘Sign!’ [author's emphasis] Just one! Tell me your will: it's all I ask” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 150). But there is no answer, just the sense of absence and despair, his prayer is a solitary cry, a vow of faith in the room of frustration. But the most significant moment of Yaveh's absence is when Amnon violates Tamar. The most consistent figure of faith is violated by her brother and God stayed out, without any interference, in spite of all her urgent prayers, screams, and tears: “O God who created Heaven and earth, help me! O Lord who protects Thy children, help me! [...] O God thou God O God Thou God! O God!” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 124-125). Nothing works, nothing changes the course of events, there is no celestial interference. Crime is done, God is absent. Amnon reinforces God's absence when he says: “Don't pray to Him! Come to me! Now!” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 125), presenting himself as an alternative, as saying: He is not here, I am here. Tamar still cries out: “Thou art my shield – stretch forth Thy arm!” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 124), but there is no protection, no shield, no arm. The cadence of the language in the play reaches a level that almost compares to the liturgical language. Diction is quite important in order to accomplish the effect desired by the author, by appropriating some biblical words and symbols, some traditional prayers and blessings, and using them in a different context, subverting and sometimes almost perverting their meaning. All those acquainted with the Hebrew language and culture know the importance the spoken and above all written language has to import a sense of the sacred, convey reverence, almost at the verge of the ineffable, such a mysterious word so appreciated by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1996).

The absence of God is symbolized in the play by the ‘curtains’. According to the biblical tradition, there were curtains in the Temple of Jerusalem separating the ‘holy place’ from the ‘holy of holies’, although they were not transparent, on the contrary they were thick and heavy. Following Yaveh's orientation, the priests should put a “veil” dividing the holy place and the holy of holies (Exodus 26, 31-33). Yonadab compares Amnon's bed with a Temple and the sexual intercourse between Amnon and Tamar with a religious sacrifice – “And in the drench of it I bowed my head into the cloak with which he had wrapped her as into the veil of a Temple” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 160). In the sequence, Yonadab continues: “I wiped my dissolving eyes as on the fringes of the holiest prayer shawl”. But the curtains suddenly stand between Yonadab and Amnon and Tamar. “‘Curtains!’ It was like some fantastic joke against me!”. Amnon had pulled down the curtain in Yonadab's face (Shaffer, 1989, p. 126, author's underline). That makes Yonadab's contemplation of his “alternative god” impossible. He is a voyeur, “[...] [h]iding to watch the rape and appalled when it becomes just another fornication, at times wallowing in his mediocrity, at times wrenching loose from it in a burst of tormented eloquence” (Kroll, 1986). There was a curtain between Yaveh and his people, there is a curtain between Yonadab and his God. Yonadab is condemned “[...] to watch for ever unmoved. To see ‘gestures’ of faith in others, but no more. The consonants of credulity, but never the vowels which might give its feeling” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 181, author's underline). Amnon's frustration is great: the act of rape gives him no physical pleasure, and no “[...] ennobling religious experience [...]” as well (Gianakaris, 1992, p. 138), but only a sense of bestiality and boredom.

Yaveh, the God of Israel, is presented in the play as a violent, exclusive God which is characterized by mediation and absence. Of course, Peter Shaffer did not write a religious drama, he is not making theology but theatre. However, he develops a religious theme and presents a human problem related to faith and incredulity, portraying an image of God. This portrait is done under the perspective of Yonadab, a despised, revengeful man. His vision is clearly limited and directed by the context of his personality as a character. On the other hand, Yaveh, the God of the Jews, cannot be misunderstood as a God limited by violence, exclusiveness, absence, or mediation. There are many other positive characteristics, according to the Scriptures, in contrast to the religious customs of other nations of that time, in the person of Yaveh, characteristics like love, tenderness, justice, mercy, forgiveness, and dignity. In addition, Jesus Christ, “[...]”

being also one of [Yonadab's] family connections" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 89), reveals Yaveh mainly not as "[...] the King of the Universe [...]", but as a loving father, a friend, a God who becomes man, who humanizes Himself. However, according to Yonadab, Yaveh is presented as a God behind the curtain, between blood and stone. As the prophet Isaiah says, "[...] the Lord of hosts is holy [...] and he shall be for a sanctuary; but for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence to both the houses of Israel, for a gin and for a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (Isaiah 8: 13-14). At the very end, Yonadab has fallen in His trap and snare. He is cursed by King David to be "[...] a Watcher and no more, for life" (Shaffer, 1989, p. 172). Yonadab's last words are:

David ben Jesse – you are revenged! And your God with you. And Tamar, your terrible, exalted daughter. How I *despised* her! And how I 'envied' her! ... Hateful to me are they who stink of Faith, and murder in its name. But hateful to me as fully are they who bear King David's curse and stink of Nothing. Who have no sustenance beyond themselves [...] What choice, then, is this? You tell me, my dears. The fanatic in her blazing simplicity – the sceptic in his chill complexity? Creed and the ruin that makes all over the earth. Or No Creed, and the rape 'that' makes. She or me? What choice, I ask you, is this – between Belief and None, where each is lethal? (*Pause*). Yonadab hangs in Yonadab's world, attached to the Tree of Unattachment. Who will cut me down? (Shaffer, 1989, p. 181-182, author's underline?).

Although Yonadab claims to have defeated King David's God, his position in the end is very weak and his success quite dubious.

## References

- Bodner, K. (2014). *The rebellion of Absalom*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Coveney, M. (1985, 6 december). Yonadab/Olivier. *Financial Times*, p. 21. Retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/FinancialTimes1985UKEnglish/Dec%2006%201985%2C%20Financial%20Times%2C%20%2329798%2C%20UK%20%28en%29/page/n19/mode/2up?view=theater>
- Fisher, J. (1987). [Review of Yonadab, by P. Shaffer]. *Theatre Journal*, 39(1), 108–109. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207634>.
- Gianakaris, C. J. (1992). *Peter Shaffer*. Londres, UK: Macmillan Education.
- Heschel, A. J. (1996). *Moral grandeur and spiritual audacity: essays* (S. Heschel, Ed.). New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Innes, C. (1992). *Modern british drama: 1890-1990*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Jacobson, D. (1970). *The rape of Tamar*. Londres, UK: Secker and Warburg.
- Joffe, L. (2016). Mildred Gordon, Peter Shaffer. *Jewish Quarterly*, 63(2), 75-77. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0449010X.2016.1202631>
- Jonadab. (2011-2022). *Abarim Publications*. Retrieved from <https://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Jonadab.html>
- Klein, D. A. (1988). Yonadab: Peter Shaffer's earlier dramas revisited in the court of King David. *Comparative Drama*, 22(1), 68-78.
- Kroll, J. (1986, 13 january). Four from the London stage. *Newsweek*. Retrieved from <http://www.betsyda.com/ash/sources/newsweek011386.txt>
- Nightingale, B. (1985, 22 december). Peter Shaffer creates another envious outsider. *New York Times*, p. 5.
- Reis, P. T. (1997). Cupidity and stupidity: woman's agency and The "Rape" of Tamar. *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*, 25(1), 43-60.
- Shaffer, P. (1989). *Yonadab*. Londres, UK: Penguin Books.
- Siddur Lev Shalem: for Shabbat and Festivals*. (2016). New York, NY: The Rabbinical Assembly.
- The King James Bible*. (1982). II Version (4th ed.). Baker Book House.