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Introduction

We are incredibly proud to present this year's Matmidot Torah Journal, the product of a year-long process of learning, research, and reflection by the 5785 Matmidot Scholars cohort at Midreshet Lindenbaum. The Matmidot Scholars Program aims to enhance students' learning, writing, and leadership skills. The program consists of two components, and the Matmidot can opt to be in one or both.

One component is that the Matmidot Scholars have the unique privilege of spending some of their free Monday nights travelling to the homes of different figures who have made a significant impact on Am Yisrael in some way. This year's Matmidot learned and conversed with a wide variety of educators, visionaries, and leaders, including Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander, Dr. Yael Ziegler, Rabbi Dr. Joshua Berman, Rav David Stav, Ms. Nitsana Darshan-Leitner, Dr. Avivah Zornberg, Prof. Moshe Koppel, and many more.

The second key feature of the program is training this talented group of students to research and produce high-quality Torah articles. The process involves numerous drafts, continuously challenging the students to sharpen their ideas, expand their research, and hone their writing. The Journal you hold in your hands is the product of that intensive work.

Special thank you to Rav Yitzchak Blau for sharing his vast knowledge of the available literature with the Matmidot.

With gratitude to Hashem,

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Tragedy And Tanach

Arielle Bronstein

Of all of the stories in Tanach, Shaul HaMelech's narrative stands out as uniquely emotionally wrought. The high stakes drama between Shaul's familial struggles, his rise to kingship, and subsequent fall from grace mark his story as unusually tailored as a tragedy. In this paper I will analyze Shaul's story through the lens of a classic Greek tragedy, and will assess whether Shaul fits the archetype of a tragic hero.

Elements that Characterize Greek Tragedy

To be able to assess whether Shaul fits the template of a tragedy, we first must ask: What exactly is a tragedy? What elements are common to all heroes in this genre?

In *Poetics*, Aristotle defines tragedy as an imitation of "an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude,"¹ in order to evoke pity and fear in the audience. He explains that a tragic hero has set characteristics and key elements:

1. *Hamartia* - A tragic flaw
2. *Peripeteia* - A reversal of fate or a downfall, usually as a direct result of the hero's tragic flaw
3. *Anagnorisis* - The hero makes an important discovery or is faced with a major revelation. The most distressing realizations and moments are when family or friends betray each other.

¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, Part VI, (Translated by S. H. Butcher), Macmillan & Co., 1895, p. 21-3.

4. Moral ambiguity - The most effective tragic heroes are characters who are not particularly righteous nor evil, but ambiguously good; someone who is inherently morally inclined, yet is unfairly doomed by a tragic flaw
5. *Hubris*
6. Consequence/punishment that is completely inevitable

In addition to the above list of common elements,² in Greek tragedy, fate is inescapable. For heroes, doom is inevitable, whether assigned by the Fates, by prophecy, or by the gods. They always fall because of a flaw, a weakness they cannot overcome. These narratives illustrate how heroes, despite resistance, are ultimately totally powerless against fate. Virtue and piety do not matter if doom is predetermined.

One of the most prominent examples of a tragic hero is Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. He is fated to kill his father and sleep with his mother. Even when purposefully trying to circumvent the prophecy, he fulfills it. The mode of avoiding the prophecy becomes the means through which it happens. He is horrified, but there is nothing to be done. He cries, "Oh, oh! All brought to pass, all true. Light, may I now look on you for the last time – I who have been found to be accursed in birth, accursed in wedlock, accursed in the shedding of blood."³ His doom is predetermined, and so are his children's fates for being born of incest – all of them are killed for it.

Antigone, his daughter, is aware of her destiny: "O mother, your marriage-bed the coiling horrors, the coupling there – you with your own son, my father – doomstruck mother! Such, such were my parents, and I their wretched child. I go to them now, cursed,

² Another classic element of Greek tragedy is the audience of the play's fear and anticipation of the inevitable downfall of the hero. (Originally tragedies were in play format.)

³ Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, translated by Sir Richard Jebb, Cambridge University Press, 1937, lines 1183-6.

unwed, to share their home – I am a stranger!”⁴ Antigone knows her fate was sealed by her parents, not her own actions. Her suffering is inevitable.

Oedipus, and Greek heroes like him, never have a chance to change their fates. They have no true free will or hand in determining their own destiny. Even gods⁵ are confined to the dictation of fate, which operates outside divine will – nothing and no one can change destiny. If every decision brings someone to fulfill their destiny, there is no true free will, no true freedom to live without doom hanging over the heroes’ heads.

Analyzing Shaul as a Tragic Hero

Now that we have a general understanding of the key elements that comprise a tragedy, let us determine whether Shaul’s narrative contains these elements.

1. *Hamartia* (Tragic Flaw)

I believe that Shaul’s tragic flaw that sabotages him throughout his life is his insecurity. His fear of the people’s opinion causes him to override God’s directives. Shaul allows his flaws to hasten his downfall.

Signs of Shaul’s flaw are evident from the outset. We first meet him in Shmuel I perek 9, when his father Kish sends him and his servant to find their lost donkeys. Shaul’s insecurity is manifest

⁴ Sophocles, *Antigone*, translated by Robert Fagles, Penguin Classics, 1984, lines 951-6.

⁵ *Prometheus Bound*, translated by Ian Johnston, Vancouver Island University, 2012, lines 637-40.

“Chorus: Then who is the one who steers Necessity?

Prometheus: The three-formed Fates and unforgetting Furies

Chorus: Are they more powerful than Zeus?

Prometheus: Well, Zeus will not at any rate escape his destiny.”

throughout the entire episode. First, he consistently follows his servant's instructions, rather than the other way around.⁶ Once Shaul and his servant find Shmuel, Shmuel reveals to Shaul that God has told him that Shaul will be king. Despite this remarkable revelation, Shaul's insecurity again shows its face. Though he is from a relatively wealthy family in Binyamin who have animals and servants,⁷ Shaul's response is:⁸

הָלוֹא בְרִימִינִי אֲנִכִּי מִקְטָנֵי שְׁבֹטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִשְׁפַּחְתִּי הַצָּעִרָה מִכָּל־מִשְׁפָּחוֹת
שְׁבֹטֵי בִנְיָמִן וְלָמָּה דִּבַּרְתָּ אֵלַי כִּדְבָר הַזֶּה.

But I am only a Benjaminite, from the smallest of the tribes of Israel, and my clan is the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin! Why do you say such things to me?⁹

Shaul proceeds to follow all of Shmuel's directives,¹⁰ just as he had earlier submitted to his servant's plans. He follows Shmuel home, even staying overnight, despite the concern he had voiced earlier to his servant that they should head home in case his father comes to worry. Further highlighting his insecurity, when Shaul

⁶ Shmuel I 9:4-10. After searching all day, Shaul wants to give up and return home but his servant suggests they first ask the **אִישׁ הָאֱלֹקִים** (Shmuel) if he knows anything about their missing donkeys. When Shaul hesitates because they have nothing to give the **אִישׁ הָאֱלֹקִים** in return for whatever information he will share, it is his servant who comes up with some money. And so Shaul says to his servant "טוֹב דְּבַרְךָ" and they follow the servant's plan to go to the **אִישׁ הָאֱלֹקִים**, rather than Shaul's to return home.

⁷ Shmuel I 9:3.

⁸ Shmuel I 9:21. On Shaul's background: At the time, Shevet Binyamin had been recovering from suffering major losses at the end of Shoftim. Shaul is therefore from the smallest, most dishonored tribe, from a small family, whose power is so negligible that they aren't mentioned in the Binyamin family tree breakdown in Bamidbar. (Shoftim 20:47, Shoftim 21:1-3,16, Bamidbar 26:38-41)

⁹ Translation by JPS, 1985.

¹⁰ Shmuel I 9:19.

encounters his uncle while on his way home, he does not tell his uncle that Shmuel has anointed him as king.¹¹

Shaul's lack of faith in himself is perhaps most evident at his coronation. When Shmuel gathers the nation to crown Shaul king, Shaul cannot be found. Shmuel has to inquire of God, where Shaul is, revealing that Shaul is hiding among the vessels.¹² When, after his coronation, people mock him and question his ability to save them, he claims not to care.¹³ Time and time again, throughout these early encounters, Shaul defers to others, does not assert authority, and shrinks from honor. Humility is an admirable quality but Shaul seems to cross the line into insecurity and demonstrates a lack of authority.

2. *Peripeteia* (Reversal of Circumstances / Downfall Caused by Tragic Flaw)

Shaul's insecurity is only exacerbated during his leadership period, leading to disastrous results.¹⁴ Shaul's first major misstep as king involves a korban at Gilgal, which he is supposed to sacrifice only after Shmuel arrives. Frightened by the Plishtim, people from across the Yarden River and from all over the country run to him to raise morale and gather to fight.¹⁵ Instead of waiting for Shmuel as instructed, Shaul watches his people start to give up and leave Gilgal.¹⁶ Feeling desperate to regain favor with them, he impulsively

¹¹ Shmuel I 10:16.

¹² Shmuel I 10:21-24.

¹³ Shmuel I 10:27.

¹⁴ As mentioned in footnote #2, a classic element of Greek tragedy is the audience's anxious anticipation of the hero's fall. This element is present in Shaul's case as well. As he makes error after error, one cannot help but experience fearful anticipation of the consequences that are sure to come.

¹⁵ Shmuel I 13:8.

¹⁶ Shmuel I 13:9. The nation had traveled from every corner of the country, hoping to be inspired by their king, and were instead leaving totally

sacrifices the korban early. **He prioritizes military strategy and keeping morale over following God's directions.** When Shmuel arrives and is angry that Shaul did not wait for him before bringing the korban, Shaul explains that he was watching the people leave and forced himself to bring the korban, revealing what will become a pattern of prioritizing immediate optics over obedience to God.¹⁷ This first mistake leads to a brutal punishment – Shmuel tells Shaul that his dynasty will end with him.¹⁸

After this, Shaul imposes a foolish oath on his soldiers, prohibiting them from eating or drinking until night.¹⁹ Unaware of the decree, his son Yonatan eats honey.²⁰ Shaul, bound by pride, nearly executes him, but is convinced not to by his soldiers.²¹ **Shaul displays two facets of his insecurity here – irrational decision making and bending to public pressure.** He lets his pride override his better judgement to the extent that he is ready to execute his own son. Ultimately, it is not his own sense of morality that prevents him from doing so, but only his desire to preserve the support of his troops.²²

The next episode in which we see Shaul's tendency to bend to public pressure is when Shaul is commanded to destroy Amalek and everything they possess. Shaul hesitates, sparing Agag the king and the best of the livestock.²³ When Shmuel confronts him for his

disenchanted with Shaul. This caused Shaul to panic to regain their approval from this blatant dissatisfaction.

¹⁷ Shmuel I 13:11.

¹⁸ Shmuel I 13:13-14 - Had Shaul obeyed, his kingdom would have lasted forever.

¹⁹ Shmuel I 14:24 - The extreme, impractical oath undermined the morale and physically debilitated the forces with him, leaving them weakened (Shmuel I 14:29-31).

²⁰ Shmuel I 14:27.

²¹ Shmuel I 14:43-45.

²² Shmuel I 14:45.

²³ Shmuel I 15:9.

choice to spare them,²⁴ Shaul refuses to be held accountable, blaming his troops.²⁵ Shmuel tells him:²⁶

הָלוֹא אִם־קָטָן אַתָּה בְּעֵינֶיךָ רֹאשׁ שְׁבֵטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתָּה

Although you are small in your own eyes, you are the head of the tribes of Israel.

Even if it were only the people who saved the animals (which it was not)²⁷ it was Shaul's duty to stop them. The soldiers' actions are a reflection of him as the authority figure. He is the relayer of God's command to those on the battlefield. However, Shaul makes this excuse twice, blaming the people instead of admitting fault.²⁸

The aftermath of Amalek is the moment of total rejection – Shaul rejects God's instruction, and God rejects Shaul as king. In rebuke, Shmuel reminds Shaul it was an active choice:²⁹

כִּי מֵאִסְתָּה אֶת־דְּבַר ה' וְיִמְאַסְךָ ה' מִהָיִית מֶלֶךְ עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל

For you have rejected the word of God, and God has rejected you from being king of Israel.

Shaul's fear of losing the throne stems from his deep insecurity, which manifests into a desire to hold onto power once he attains it. The kingship is the conduit through which he derives worth and validation, though he feels inherently unworthy of it. This creates a cycle: the throne sustains his sense of self-worth directly through public approval; without it, he would be reduced to what his self-perception was before – a son of a small family from the smallest tribe. His self-esteem depends on external validation and endorsement, despite never having sought power before. Insecurity

²⁴ Shmuel I 15:14.

²⁵ Shmuel I 15:15.

²⁶ Shmuel I 15:17.

²⁷ Shmuel I 15:9.

²⁸ Shmuel I 15:20-21.

²⁹ Shmuel I 15:26.

bleeds into pride, leading to overcompensation. The obsession to chase David down stems from that same desperation to cling onto power he did not desire but cannot give up. Shaul allows his identity and worth to become inseparably tied to it, driving his decline.

Shaul's final error is his visit to the necromancer in En-Dor. Desperate and terrified the night before facing the remustered Plishti army, Shaul finally acknowledges his need for guidance. It is too late for him to go to the counsel he trusts – Shmuel is dead and God unresponsive.³⁰ Out of sheer terror, Shaul resorts to necromancy to talk to Shmuel,³¹ but summoning Shmuel offers no comfort. Shaul pleads with him for guidance and direction³² but Shmuel refuses, instead affirming that the kingship will be transferred to David because Shaul chose to disobey direct commands from God regarding Amalek. Shaul leaves the conversation with Shmuel, further terrified and distrustful of himself. The next day, he falls in battle.³³

The relationship between a Jewish leader and God must be open and thriving in both directions, but Shaul proves highly susceptible to outside pressure. This leads to rash decision-making and a widening gap between him and God. He frequently chooses not to listen to God's commands (due to public pressure), denies he has sinned, and allows his insecurity to overpower his rational thinking until he is ultimately rejected and cut off from God completely.

³⁰ Shmuel I 28:1,4, 6.

³¹ Shmuel I 28:7.

³² Shmuel I 28:15.

³³ Shmuel I 31:3-4.

3. *Anagnorisis* (Revelation/Realization)

Shaul's *anagnorisis* is when Shmuel tells him that he will not remain king, but rather will be replaced by David. Shaul's revelation comes too late to save his kingship, but instead leads to Shaul's *peripeteia* (downfall) when he is ultimately rejected by God and replaced.

As with the most effective Greek tragedies, Shaul's downfall is all the more upsetting because it is at the hands of a beloved member of his own household. David is both the husband of Shaul's daughter and the best friend of Shaul's son. After David flees the palace to escape Shaul's murder attempts, Shaul admits his guilt to him twice in private. During both encounters, Shaul addresses David as his son, calling him בְּנִי, underscoring the familial and personal nature of the conflict.³⁴ In addition, the one who has to let Shaul know that he will lose the throne is the very mentor who anointed him and guided him throughout his reign. It is a saddening scene when, after Shaul fails to kill Agag the king of Amalek, Shmuel tells him that God is going to tear the kingship away from him.³⁵

4. Moral Ambiguity

As with classic Greek tragic heroes, Shaul is a morally ambiguous figure. He starts out naive and modest, shying away from the limelight and hesitant to assert authority even over his own servant, let alone the nation. Though his excessive humility is a weakness in his role as king, it is not a moral failing. However, as his career continues, Shaul shifts more and more to the shadowy side of morality, disobeying explicit commands from God (such as to wipe out Amalek and not to engage in necromancy) and almost

³⁴ Shmuel I 24:17, 26:17

³⁵ Shmuel I 15:27-29.

killing his own son. Repeatedly attempting to kill David³⁶ cements Shaul's shift from ambiguously good to morally depraved.

Is Shaul a Tragic Hero?

We have shown that Shaul's narrative has striking similarities to Greek tragedies. He has a tragic flaw (insecurity), he suffers a downfall as a result of his flaw (the loss of the throne), he experiences *anagorisis* (revelation) but too late to save his reign, his downfall is at the hands of those closest to him (David, who is both his son-in-law and his son's best friend and relayed to him by his trusted mentor, Shmuel), and despite his ultimate end, he begins morally ambiguous (overly timid but not ignoble in his actions).

Despite all these commonalities, I believe that Shaul is **not** a tragic figure because he lacks the last two defining characteristics of a Greek tragedy:

Hubris

First, Shaul does not display hubris. On the contrary, Shaul suffers from insecurity and feelings of inadequacy. It is precisely because Shaul has so little self-worth that he sometimes appears prideful, trying to hide that he does not feel comfortable in the role thrust upon him. As he spends more time in power, his pride becomes linked to the throne, and then, even though he did not want the malchut in the first place, he can no longer let it go. This manifestation of insecurity and pride is *not* hubris.

Inevitability of Fate

Second, and most importantly, **Shaul's fate is not inevitable**. Shaul is not doomed to fail. He could change course at any time, but at every critical moment, he chooses not to. He **chooses** not to wait

³⁶ Shmuel I 18:10-11

for Shmuel to bring the korban, to leave Agag alive, to chase ruthlessly after David. **Shaul has the ability to overcome his tragic flaw, but he allows it to overtake him. That is not foretold doom; it is a devastating series of mistakes.**

Shaul was not set up to fail; he was chosen to succeed. He was meant to build the melucha, and would have started a dynasty if not for his mistakes. In fact, Shaul appears extremely apt at first. His introduction deliberately mirrors the description of a paradigmatic king described in Devarim:

כִּיתְבָּא אֱלֹהֵאֲרֵץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ וַיִּרְשָׁתָהּ וַיִּשְׁבֶּתָהּ בָּהּ וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲשִׁימָה עָלַי מֶלֶךְ כְּכֹל־הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר סְבִיבֹתַי: שׁוּם תִּשִּׂים עָלֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ בּוֹ מִקְרֹב אֲחִיךָ תִּשִּׂים עָלֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ לֹא תִּוְכַל לָתֵת עָלֶיךָ אִישׁ נֹכְרִי אֲשֶׁר לֹא־אֲחִיךָ הוּא: רַק לֹא־יִרְבֶּה־לּוֹ סוֹסִים וְלֹא־יָשִׁיב אֶת־הָעָם מִצְרִימָה לְמַעַן הָרְבוֹת סוֹס וְה' אָמַר לָכֶם לֹא תִסְפּוּן לָשׁוּב בְּדֶרֶךְ הַזֶּה עוֹד: וְלֹא יִרְבֶּה־לּוֹ נָשִׁים וְלֹא יִסּוּר לִבּוֹ וְכֶסֶף וְזָהָב לֹא יִרְבֶּה־לּוֹ מְאֹד: ... לְבַלְתִּי רוֹם־לִבּוֹ מֵאֲחִיו וּלְבַלְתִּי סוּר מִן־הַמִּצְוָה יְמִין וּשְׂמָאוֹל לְמַעַן יֵאָרִיךְ יָמִים עַל־מַמְלַכְתּוֹ הוּא וּבָנָיו בְּקֶרֶב יִשְׂרָאֵל:³⁷

If, after you have entered the land that your God has assigned to you, and taken possession of it and settled in it, you decide, "I

³⁷ Devarim 17:14-20 - Why else was Shaul chosen as the first king? The people wanted a king specifically to defend them in wartime, and accepted the dangers of having one person in the highest form of authority for that reason. And Shaul leads in a war for the first time, he wins. He excels at strategy, and successes in battle. The issue was that he was too suited for a military focused rule, and not suited enough for a spiritual one. He wins against the Emoni, gathering hundreds of thousands of troops and leading a surprise attack, and achieves victory against Amalek. His son, Yonatan, shows the same qualities of military understanding- he ambushes the Plishtim in a surprise attack too. They are what the people wanted, a dynasty focused on strengthening the kingdom to the outside, defending the land.

The Abarbanel notes that Shaul was naturally suited for leadership due to his physical characteristics, upright moral character, and military acumen:

להיותו בכלם מיוחד מכל איש ישראל, כמו שכתוב אין איש בבני ישראל טוב ממנו משכמו ומעלה גבוה מכל העם, בחר האל יתברך בו למלך, לפי שטבע תולדתו ואביו יחייב אומץ לבבו ושהוא יושיע את ישראל, ולשלמות מדותיו היה ראוי שימלוך על אחיו וינהיגם על פי התורה והמוסר, וליופי תוארו יהיה מכובד בעיני העם וייראו מלפניו, ומצד שמו יורה על העתיד להיות בו. הנה התבאר מזה שראוי היה שאל שיהיבחר יקום בו למלך על ישראל מצד הכנתו הטבעית הרצונית והמסכמת.

will set a king over me, as do all the nations about me," you shall be free to set a king over yourself, one chosen by your God. Be sure to set as king over yourself one of your own people; you must not set a foreigner over you, one who is not your kin. Moreover, he shall not keep many horses or send people back to Egypt to add to his horses, since God has warned you, "You must not go back that way again." And he shall not have many wives, lest his heart go astray; nor shall he amass silver and gold to excess... Thus he will not act haughtily toward his fellows or deviate from the Instruction to the right or to the left, to the end that he and his descendants may reign long in the midst of Israel."³⁸

When Shaul is chosen, he fits every requirement listed above for a king of Israel:

- 1) The king must be of the Jewish people – Shaul is introduced with a lengthy family tree to make it clear he is from Binyamin, one of the tribes of Israel.³⁹
- 2) The king may not have too many horses – Shaul's family owns donkeys, an animal of lower status than horses. This description of Shaul and his donkeys highlights that he was not setting out for power from the start; it is not natural to him.⁴⁰
- 3) A king may not have too many wives – Shaul ignores the women who show him where Shmuel is in town. Though the setup of the scene looks like a Biblical well type-scene, which always leads to a marriage, he is seemingly uninterested in the women.⁴¹
- 4) A king may not hold onto too much wealth – Shaul's servant holds the money, not Shaul himself.⁴²

³⁸ Translation by the JPS 1985.

³⁹ Shmuel I 9:1-2.

⁴⁰ Shmuel I 9:3.

⁴¹ Shmuel I 9:11-14.

⁴² Shmuel I 9:7-8.

- 5) A king may not be haughty to the people, but rather must remain humble – Shaul does not tell his uncle that Shmuel has chosen him; he does not brag.⁴³

In a classic tragedy, the protagonist is doomed from the start. No matter the cause, there is always an inevitable downfall. **Shaul is not destined to fail.** We see from the description of the ideal king in Sefer Devarim, that Shaul meets every qualification; he possesses every quality. He starts as the ideal king and could have remained a model king throughout his reign. He could have had a glorious legacy, with a long dynasty. Every time he is tested, whether waiting for Shmuel at Gilgal, wiping out Amalek, or chasing David, he has the power and potential to choose well, to listen to God and to serve as a strong leader. However, Shaul actively makes the wrong decision over and over, and these unfortunate decisions send him on a downward spiral.

The Centrality of Free Will and Teshuvah in Torah

Judaism emphasizes human agency and responsibility in determining our future. God says that Bnei Yisrael can choose from the options laid out before them – between life and death, blessing and curse.⁴⁴

If people were predestined to righteousness or wickedness, divine justice would be inherently flawed. How could we be punished or rewarded for actions that we had no say in doing? Yet, God promises blessings to those who follow mitzvot,⁴⁵ and warns of

⁴³ Shmuel I 10:16.

⁴⁴ Devarim 30:19-20.

⁴⁵ Vayikra 26:3-4.

consequences for disobedience.⁴⁶ Our texts warn against the ways of the wicked,⁴⁷ telling us that all behavior is a choice, not fate.⁴⁸

Judaism affirms that everyone is responsible for their decisions and through this, teshuvah is possible. Teshuvah depends on the belief that people always have the power and ability to change and act morally, no matter how far we have strayed.

Our prophets say that God desires teshuvah over punishment.⁴⁹ This principle is reflected in the idea that negative prophecies, such as warnings of destruction, can be overturned through teshuvah,⁵⁰ while positive prophecies will always come true.⁵¹ Teshuvah is an opportunity for people to exercise their free will in pursuit of renewal. It reaffirms that divine compassion is within reach for those who seek it⁵² – but they have to choose to look for it.⁵³ We are not doomed by our past or future, and we do not have to experience a downfall like Shaul did. We can make conscious choices that change our course for the better.

Conclusion

Shaul's story mirrors the structure and elements of a Greek tragedy, but he differs in seemingly minute but incredibly profound ways. Unlike the predetermined tragic fate that is assigned to a tragic hero, such as Oedipus or Antigone, Shaul is not doomed from the start. He is not bound to suffer from hubris, his downfall is not

⁴⁶ Devarim 28:15.

⁴⁷ Mishlei 3:31.

⁴⁸ Yehoshua 24:14-15.

⁴⁹ Yechezkel 33:11.

⁵⁰ Rambam, Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 10:4: שְׁכַל דְּבַר טוֹבָה שֶׁיִּגְזֹר הָאֱלֹהִים אֶפְלוּ עַל תְּנָאִי אֵינוֹ חוֹזֵר

⁵¹ Yirmiyahu 28:8-9.

⁵² Yoel 2:12-13.

⁵³ Yoma 86a.

unavoidable. His story offers lessons about Jewish values in leadership, responsibility, divine expectations, and the potential for teshuvah.

Shaul lets himself fall prey to his insecurity and self-doubt, and instead of pursuing change, commits terrible deeds against the people in his kingdom and his own family. His downfall is not predetermined or written in the stars by the Fates, but rather is the natural consequence of Shaul's own choices and failures.

A story that contains tragic elements is not necessarily a tragedy. While Shaul's story resembles a tragedy, by definition there can be no such thing in Tanach because Judaism believes in everyone's ability to change the course of their lives, while in Greek tragedy, Fate controls the future. Shaul's refusal to adapt and change his ways eventually does seal his fate, but every step he takes to get there is a choice. Shaul actively allows his fear and insecurity to overtake him. When faced with crisis, he spirals. His failure to adapt is a huge part of why he fails as a leader.

Shaul never truly does teshuvah. He expresses regret without taking action to change or taking true ownership of his actions. Teshuvah involves more than regret and remorse. It requires a real, genuine behavioral change. Shaul's story serves as a lesson both to us and to our leaders: we all possess the ability to change our destinies, and must demand of our leaders and of ourselves to acknowledge our mistakes, take responsibility, and follow God's commands, so that, unlike Shaul, we can reach our potential and fulfill our chosen destiny.

Not Just a Shortcut: Rethinking Tanach Translation

Hila Cohen

In my senior high school Tanach class, my teacher asked a simple question: How is your understanding of the mefarshim so much better on at-home assignments than in the Beit Midrash? I jumped to raise my hand: “At home, I use a translation of the commentary, and then I read the commentary back in Hebrew.” While this was not the answer my teacher had hoped for, it was honest, and prompted my classmates to acknowledge that they too used translations at home.

After this classroom experience, I began to think about the use of Tanach translation in general. I wondered when the Torah was first translated and under what circumstances, and I considered what the best approach to translations might be. Should educators ban their use or embrace them? What are the potential benefits of translation as well as its drawbacks? Could translations possibly be utilized as a creative educational tool?

The Roots of Tanach Translation

When the first Beit HaMikdash was destroyed by the Babylonians, the Jews were sent into exile. After 70 years of living among other nations, they were finally granted permission to return to the land of Israel and build the second Beit HaMikdash, ushering in an era known as Shivat Tzion, Return to Zion. The Jews who returned to Israel were the first Jews since the giving of the Torah to

have lived for an extended period of time in exile, speaking a foreign tongue more comfortably than Hebrew.

Sefer Nechemia chapter 8 takes place at the completion of the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the second Beit HaMikdash. The main focus of the perek is Bnei Yisrael's new need for a way to understand the Torah text. Without a translation, the people would have limited access to Torah.¹

Nechemia 8:8 says:

וַיִּקְרְאוּ בְּסֵפֶר בְּתוֹרַת הָאֱלֹקִים מִפָּרֶשׁ וְשׁוּם שָׁכַל וַיְבִינוּ בְּמִקְרָא:

They read in the book of the Torah of God *meforash* and giving the sense; so they understood the reading.²

Many believe that this pasuk is the earliest reference to the Torah being translated. This reading is rooted in Masechet Megillah 3a which explains:

“וַיִּקְרְאוּ בְּסֵפֶר בְּתוֹרַת הָאֱלֹקִים” - זֶה מִקְרָא; “מִפָּרֶשׁ” - זֶה תִּירוּגוֹם

“And they read in the book of the Torah of God” - this refers to the Scriptural text; “*meforash*” - this refers to translation.³

According to this reading, the Gemara sees this pasuk in Nechamia as the foundational source for translating the Torah. Others, however, understand the pasuk differently. A peshat reading of the word “*meforash*” might suggest that the Torah was being explained, not translated word-for-word. There is great irony in that the word in this pasuk that might be the earliest allusion to translation (מפורש) has a disputable translation in and of itself.

¹ Avigail Rock, *Great Biblical Commentators*, Maggid Books, 2023, p. 4.

² Original translation, intentionally leaving the critical word מפורש untranslated for now.

³ The William Davidson Talmud (Koren-Steinsaltz).

The Drawbacks and Benefits of Translation

In many Judaic Studies classrooms, translation is banned. It is seen as a shortcut, undermining the learning process, rather than supporting it. The use of translation platforms greatly detracts from students honing their own independent skills. Students lose out on the opportunity to have direct access to *Devar Hashem* - the word of God - unmediated by human translation. The Hebrew text itself is uniquely rich in meaning in ways that are impossible to capture through translation. Often, *pesukim* are formulated in ambiguous ways to intentionally embed layers of meaning, while a human translation captures only one of them. In addition, there are often word plays in the Torah, as well as unusual words that appear in two different stories, calling us to compare the two. Another powerful feature of the Biblical Hebrew text are *milot manhot* - words that repeat several times within a single story, highlighting its central themes. All of these phenomena are literally lost in translation. Thus, someone who learns Torah only from a translation loses out on much of the richness, depth, and complexity contained within God's Torah.

When calculators were first created, many math teachers thought that fundamental, basic skills would become obsolete or would fail to be mastered by their students. As we now know, math education has far from disappeared. Rather, it has evolved. Expectations have risen, and math education has developed to work with the new tools available. Currently, we are at a similar crossroad with the development of Artificial Intelligence. Rather than banning AI from classrooms, educators are experimenting with ways to redesign assignments that account for the ever-changing technological world.

I believe that the same shift can and should be done in Tanach education. While banning translation may seem like the obvious,

easy solution, in the long term, it is not productive or realistic. Translation has become a fundamental part of the 21st Century, and avoiding, ignoring, or prohibiting it will do no good. While translation resources have been available for a long time, recent advances in technology have made translation more readily available, literally at one's fingertips. Translation does not need to be a replacement for analysis, critical thinking, and engagement with the text. Instead, it can become part of the process.

The Perspectives of the Translations

One example of how teachers can educate their students to use translations in thoughtful ways is to highlight that translation is interpretation. Usually, students unthinkingly select whichever Hebrew-English Tanach happens to be the most accessible at the moment. Educators can raise their students' awareness that there is much more to these translations than the name of the publishing house. Each Hebrew-English Tanach translation aims to present Torah in a linguistically accessible manner, yet each has uniquely different approaches and guiding principles that shape their translation, and therefore, the reader's understanding of the text.

I set out to explore the mission statements of Jewish Publication Society (JPS), Artscroll, and Koren's Tanach translations. These translations have become the backbones and first resorts of many English-speaking Torah learners. Thus, I aimed to shed light on each translation's objectives and priorities, so as to raise awareness of the different perspectives and goals of each one. When selecting a translation, one should be aware that they are making a choice and should make it thoughtfully and with full awareness that each translation is colored by the translator's unique biases and goals. In order to explore these different goals, I turned to the statements at the beginning of each of the three translations that I chose to delve more deeply into.

The Jewish Publication Society, known as JPS, has published four different translations of Tanach. They put out the first one in 1917, then published a completely new translation (not a revision of the 1917 one) in 1985, a third gender-sensitive edition in 2006,⁴ and finally a revised Tanach translation in 2023. In the 2023 version, they tell us that their translation “made use of the entire range of biblical interpretation, ancient and modern, Jewish and non-Jewish. The resulting text is a triumph of literary style and biblical scholarship, unsurpassed in accuracy and clarity.”⁵ The JPS Tanakh emerged from the “collaborative efforts of an interdenominational team of Jewish scholars and rabbis working together over a twenty-year period.”⁶ JPS explains that, “The translation avoided obsolete words and phrases and, whenever possible, rendered Hebrew idioms by means of their normal English equivalents...the modern ‘you’ was used instead of the archaic ‘thou,’ even when referring to the Deity (‘You’).”⁷ JPS intends for readers of all Jewish denominations, and of all religions, to feel a connection to the Tanach text through their translation.

ArtScroll’s translations are “faithful to traditional Torah commentary,”⁸ meaning they focus less on literal accuracy and more on reflecting the explanations of classic commentators.⁹ ArtScroll’s

⁴ Only the Torah portion was revised from the 1985 edition to the 2006 one.

⁵ JPS Tanakh Customer Guide - <https://jps.org/resources/tanakh-customer-guide/>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Preface to the 1985 English Edition, September 1985.

⁸ Rabbi Nosson Scherman, Introduction, ArtScroll: Stone Edition, 2010.

⁹ ArtScroll themselves note that their translation of Shir HaShirim follows Rashi, who midrashically interprets the entire Megilla as an allegory for the relationship between God and Am Yisrael. They translate the Megilla along those lines, abandoning entirely the literal meaning of a relationship between a man and woman. They are not as extreme in their other translations, but their self-proclaimed preference for traditional interpretation over literal translation is evident in their translations of other books of Tanach as well.

goal is not to stick to the exact Hebrew syntax or word-for-word meaning but to capture the “essence of a phrase,”¹⁰ and to explain the Torah through the lens of Chazal and Rashi.

Koren has become one of the most widely used Jewish publishers, especially for Hebrew-English Tanachs. They put out their first Hebrew-English Tanach in 1967,¹¹ and in 2021 published the Magerman Edition, a new Tanach translation whose Torah portion was translated by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. The publisher, Matthew Miller, writes in his preface:

In translating God’s words and those of His prophets, one assumes the precarious position of mediator between Him and the reader, searching for the formulation that will do His work the greatest measure of justice, while simultaneously bringing the reader closer to the text. While there are already numerous English translations of the Bible in the Jewish world, ours aims to stand out through its emphasis on authentically conveying the *hadrat kodesh*, sacred majesty, of the original Hebrew.”¹²

How To Use Translation: A Case Study

To highlight the differences between the three Tanach translations, I selected an ambiguous pasuk to serve as a focal point for observing and analyzing the distinctions between the translations. Bereishit 6:2 comes immediately after the genealogy of Adam HaRishon through Noach, and leads into the Mabul story. It states:

וַיֵּרְאוּ בְנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּנוֹת הָאָדָם כִּי טֹבֹת הֵנָּה וַיִּקְחוּ לָהֶם נָשִׁים מִכָּל אִשָּׁר בְּהָרִי:

¹⁰ Rabbi Nosson Scherman, Introduction, ArtScroll: Stone Edition, 2010.

¹¹ The translation was based on The Jewish Family Bible (edited by M. Friedlander and published in 1881), but modernized and revised by Prof. Harold Fisch.

¹² Ibid.

There are no unusual or rare words in this pasuk so its literal translation seems clear at first glance:

The sons of God saw the daughters of man that they were good and they took for themselves wives from all that they chose.

However, this translation is quite challenging theologically. Does the Torah believe that God has sons? That Divine beings are capable of marrying humans? Thus, this pasuk provides an excellent opportunity to examine how the various translations grapple with such difficulties.

The full translations are as follows:

JPS (2023): The divine beings saw how pleasing the human women were and took wives from among those who delighted them.

ArtScroll (Stone Edition): The sons of the rulers saw that the daughters of man were good and they took themselves wives from whomever they chose.

Koren (Magerman Edition):¹³ When the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were lovely, they began to take whomever they chose to be wives to them.

¹³ Fascinatingly, this is a case where different translations published by the same publishing house differ in significant ways. In Koren's Jerusalem Bible edition (revised and edited by Harold Fisch, 1967), בני האלוהים is translated as "the distinguished men"! In other words, even though the Koren Magerman edition is the most literal and translates בני האלוהים as "sons of God," the Koren Jerusalem Bible edition is the least literal, and translates it as "distinguished men"!

In both Koren editions, the translators alert readers to the thorniness of attempting to translate this particular phrase. In the Jerusalem Bible edition, which departs from the literal meaning of the words and translates בני האלוהים as "distinguished men," they insert an asterisk that directs readers to a note at the bottom of the page, which states, "lit.: the sons of God." And in the Magerman edition, where they translate it literally as "sons of God," they insert a footnote which informs readers that "Opinions vary regarding the meaning and proper translation of this phrase" (p. 14, footnote 14).

	בני האלוהים	בנות האדם	מכל אשר בחרו
JPS (2023)	Divine beings	Human women	Those who delighted them
ArtScroll (Stone Edition)	Sons of rulers	Daughters of man	Whomever they chose
Koren (Magerman Edition)	Sons of God	Daughters of man	Whomever they choose

These translations reflect the competing goals driving the translators. By translating בני האלוהים as *divine beings*, JPS is attempting to balance between translating the word אלוהים consonant with its usual meaning of *God* while avoiding the theological bombshell of claiming that God has sons. They accomplish this by understanding בני as *one who is characterized by*¹⁴ rather than *sons of*, so that בני האלוהים means *those who are characterized by God*, resulting in their translation, “divine beings.”

Once JPS has translated בני האלוהים as *divine beings*, it follows that they translate בנות האדם as *human women*.¹⁵ JPS sees the pasuk as setting up a contrast between the divine beings and the human women they choose to marry. Divine beings marrying human

¹⁴ This is similar to how the word בני is used in the phrases *bnei Torah* and *bnei chorin*, which mean *those who are characterized by Torah* and *those who are characterized by freedom*, respectively.

¹⁵ Interestingly, JPS then translates מכל אשר בחרו as *those who delighted them*, straying from the conventional Hebrew translation of the root בחר, which is typically translated as *chosen* or *selected*.

women is a problematic image theologically but less problematic than the notion of God having sons.

ArtScroll translates בני האלוהים as *sons of rulers*, i.e. human rulers. This completely avoids the problematic implication that God has sons, and is consistent with Rashi's first interpretation,¹⁶ based on Bereishit Rabbah 26:15. *Rulers* is not the typical translation of the word אלהים, which usually refers to God. ArtScroll's choice to translate it here as *rulers* illustrates their commitment to translating the Torah in accordance with classic commentators (in this instance, Rashi and Bereishit Rabbah), and in line with traditional Jewish theology, rather than the most literal.

The Koren Magerman Edition translates בני האלוהים as *sons of God*.¹⁷ Interestingly, this translation is even more literal and theologically problematic than JPS's translation of *divine beings*. Koren seems committed to a translation consistent with what the word usually means throughout the Torah, without being swayed by the problematic implications of such a translation.

After seeing the different translations offered for the word אלוהים here, I was curious to explore what the translators would do in another instance where it is problematic to translate the word אלוהים as God. In Shemot 4:16, God tells Moshe at the Burning Bush that Aharon will serve as his mouthpiece. He says:

וְדַבֵּר-הוּא לְךָ אֱלֹהִים וְהָיָה הוּא יְהִי-לְךָ לִפֵּה וְאַתָּה תְהִי-לּוֹ לְאֱלֹהִים:

He will speak for you to the people; he will be a mouth for you,
and you will be an אלוהים for him.

It seems very problematic and unlikely that God is telling Moshe that he should be a God for Aharon. As expected, ArtScroll chooses

¹⁶ Rashi does bring a second interpretation in which he suggests that בני האלוהים refers to angelic messengers of God.

¹⁷ See footnote #13.

to translate it similarly to how Rashi does: *He will be your mouth and you will be his leader*.¹⁸ This is consistent with ArtScroll's translation of בני האלוהים in Bereishit 6:2 as *sons of rulers*, also based on Rashi.

JPS translates the end of the pasuk: *Thus he shall serve as your spokesman, with you playing the role of God to him*. By adding the words *playing the role of*, JPS avoids the problematic and unlikely meaning that God is telling Moshe to be a God to Aharon. However, it necessitates inserting words not found in the Hebrew Biblical text. Their approach here seems consistent with their approach to Bereishit 6:2, where they translated בני האלוהים as *divine beings*. In both instances, JPS displays a commitment both to translate אלוהים according to its usual meaning (*God*), and at the same time, to translate the pasuk according to its most likely intended meaning. In both instances, JPS (2023) balances these two competing goals by preserving that אלוהים means *God* but sacrificing some other element of literal translation, understanding בני in Bereishit 6:2 as *characterized by* (rather than *sons of*), and inserting the phrase *playing the role of* into Shemot 4:16.

Interestingly, Koren's Magerman Edition addresses Shemot 4:16 very differently than it approached Bereishit 6:2. In its translation of Bereishit 6:2, it remained unwaveringly committed to a literal translation, and translated בני האלוהים as *sons of God*. Yet, in its translation of Shemot 4:16, it deviates from the literal, and translates ואתה תהיה לו לאלוהים as *and you will be his access to God*. Similar to JPS, Koren inserts words not found in the Biblical text in order to render the pasuk as it was most likely intended to be understood.¹⁹

¹⁸ Rashi explains לאלוהים as: לרב ולשר - as a master and chief.

¹⁹ Fascinatingly, Koren's 1967 translation does remain faithfully committed to a literal translation despite its problematic implications, and renders the pasuk: *and thou shalt be to him instead of God*. Yet the 1967 edition deviates from the literal in its translation of בני האלוהים in Bereishit 6:2 as *distinguished men* (see

Each translation's approach has strengths and weaknesses. Someone who learns only from ArtScroll's translation will not even be aware that God in His Torah chose to use the provocative word **אלוהים** in these contexts, calling for us to explore further. On the other hand, if one learns from JPS or Koren, they will be more aware of the shocking implication of the phrase, but might not invest the effort to explore further, and thus might be left with a problematic impression of the pasuk.²⁰

How to Use Translation to Enhance Learning

The above case study highlights the importance and value of analyzing translations carefully, and knowing the background of the translation you use. It also illustrates a potentially powerful way that educators can train their students to use translations judiciously. Teachers can construct assignments in which the students have to compare and contrast various translations the way we did in our case study. This would train them to be aware of and sensitive to the nuances of each translation, the ways they are similar, the ways they differ, and how each crafts their translation. Part of the assignment should be evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the various translations, and especially comparing them to the original Hebrew so that the translations serve to make the students more sensitive to the Biblical text, rather than less. Translations do not have to be a crutch that hamper the students' learning, but rather can be harnessed to add another layer of depth to the learning process, serving as a guide and springboard for deeper exploration.

footnote #13). Surprisingly, the 2021 edition does the opposite. It translates Bereishit 6:2 literally as *sons of God*, yet deviates from the literal in its translation of Shemot 4:16 as *and you will be his access to God*.

²⁰ For two additional pesukim where the word **אלוהים** seems to mean something other than God, see Shemot 22:7 and 22:27.

Conclusion

Translation has become a prevalent tool in our modern Jewish society; it has granted accessibility to Torah learning unimaginable a century ago to Jews living in the Diaspora who did not speak Hebrew fluently. Each translation, whether it be JPS, ArtScroll, Koren, or others, offers unique ways of understanding our texts. Rather than viewing translations as detrimental to our education system, they can be used to analyze our text in ways we may not have previously considered. Every translation is an interpretation, providing opportunities for deep analysis. Translation can be a meaningful way to engage critically with the Torah if one examines how translations interact with the original language, the nuances they reveal, and the messages they convey. We need to rethink the ways we educate, and as students, how we learn. Students need to still know the original, sacred texts, while also acknowledging the blessing of resources we have. When used thoughtfully, translation does not replace the learning process but enhances it, empowering students to engage more deeply with the text while fostering their own connections to and interpretations of the Torah.

Neuralink: Does it Clash with Halachah?

Esther Friedlander

The past 200 years have encompassed tremendous advances for humanity through the industrial and technological revolutions. These revolutions have transformed how humans live and carry out daily activities, requiring reflection on how to best apply Halachic principles to these advances. One notable example of this intersection between technology and Jewish law is the work of Elon Musk's company, Neuralink, which is developing surgically implantable brain-computer interfaces (BCIs) designed to restore neurologic function in people with severe disabilities and, eventually, enable communication with artificial intelligence through thought alone.

On January 29th, 2024, the first chip was successfully implanted into a human, Noland Arbaugh. In 2016, Arbaugh suffered from a severe diving accident leading to quadriplegia paralysis from the neck down. Arbaugh claims the device has restored his life's purpose by enabling him to regain a sense of control over his life.¹ Now, he can simply think a thought and Neuralink transmits it onto the screen (he thinks go to google and Neuralink opens his computer to it). These advances, however, bring with them numerous Halachic questions, particularly regarding their permissibility on Shabbat.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tDTr252Xskg>

Neuralink is a coin-sized device powered by Bluetooth technology. It consists of 1,024 thin, flexible electrodes that record the activity of nerve cells, responsible for sending signals throughout the body. The device is meticulously implanted into the cerebral cortex, where higher-level brain processing occurs. By recording, decoding, and transmitting these neural signals through electrical stimulation, the chip allows users to control devices solely through thought. At this initial stage, the technology is aimed at patients with conditions like quadriplegia, Parkinson's disease, and Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) to restore essential motor functions. However, Neuralink's future vision is broader, with the potential to connect human thought directly to computers for everyday uses – from scanning books by thought to mind-to-mind communication. This raises significant moral concerns about the potential for abuse, but for the purpose of this paper, we will focus on the Halachic issues.

The question of Neuralink on Shabbat fits into the larger debate surrounding the use of electricity on Shabbat, and whether it constitutes a violation of one of the 39 melachot. When electricity first became widespread, poskim virtually universally agreed that its use on Shabbat was forbidden, but they disagreed on the exact nature of the prohibition and which issur it violates. A number of different approaches emerged. Some poskim concluded that the use of electricity on Shabbat constitutes a melachah de'oraita (Torah prohibition). Even within this camp, there are a number of different opinions about which melachah it violates, with opinions including mavir (kindling a fire), boneh (building), and makeh be'patish (completing an appliance). Other poskim concluded that electricity does not violate any Biblical melachah but is still forbidden de'rabanen (Rabbinic prohibition) under molid (creating something new) or uvdin de'chol (weekday activities). In addition to the above issurim that any electrical device might violate, Neuralink

potentially violates another melachah, kotev (writing), since it involves digital writing.

Mavir is derived from the pasuk, **לֹא־תִבְעֲרוּ אֵשׁ בְּכֹל מִשְׁבְּתֵיכֶם בְּיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת** - *You shall not light a fire in any of your dwelling places on Shabbat* (Exodus 35:3). Traditionally, this relates to creating or manipulating fire. In modern times, many authorities have extended the prohibition to actions that generate or manipulate electricity, as they involve a "spark" or similar creative process. In the case of modern technology, the Aruch HaShulchan and Rav Kook extend this principle to any action that results in generating or manipulating electricity in a manner analogous to lighting a fire. Although electricity is not a fire in the literal sense, the act of completing a circuit (which may cause a light to turn on or a device to function) is seen as creating a "spark" or initiating an electrical flow, and thus would be prohibited on Shabbat in the same way that kindling a fire would be.

Boneh, refers to creating or completing a structure or functional system. The Chazon Ish, Rabbi Abraham Isaiah Karelitz, asserts that completing an electric circuit is a form of building as it deems a previously useless wire into a viable one — thus prohibited on Shabbat.² In contrast, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach argues that completing a circuit is analogous to closing a door — an action intended to be done routinely, so electricity would not fall under the category of boneh.³

Makeh be'patish refers to the final stage in completing an item. Some argue that since an electric device is useless until the addition of electrical currents, the prohibition of electricity falls under this

² Chazon Ish, Orach Chaim 50:9. See also Meorot Natan 6:7 and Levush Mordechai 3:25.

³ https://www.daat.ac.il/daat/english/journal/broyde_1.htm

category. However, Rabbi Shlomo Auerbach⁴ and Rabbi Yaakov Breisch⁵ disagree, arguing that appliances are designed to be turned on and off repeatedly, hence, activating them does not constitute completing their creation. Most poskim agree that electricity does not violate makeh be'patish.

Beyond the prohibitions of electricity, Neuralink potentially violates kotev - the prohibition against writing. Today, many authorities apply this to creating text digitally, which could be a concern for Neuralink, as the brain's signals result in data being inscribed or recorded electronically. Some poskim argue that since the text is not permanent and can be erased it does not violate kotev on a biblical level. However, Rabbi Shmuel Vosner disagrees, arguing that since it lasts for a significant amount of time (i.e. an hour) it is considered permanent and therefore forbidden.⁶

There are some poskim who believe that electricity does not fall under the category of any of the Biblical melachot at all and only violates Rabbinic prohibitions, either molid or uvdin de'chol.

Molid refers to the Rabbinic prohibition of creating something new. Rabbi Yitzchak Schmelkes, the Beit Yitzchak, argues that completing a circuit constitutes a rabbinic violation of molid.⁷ The Gemara prohibits one from adding scent to a garment because of molid, so the Beit Yitzchak applies this to introducing electricity into a wire, as it creates something new.⁸ Conversely, Rav Shlomo Auerbach, in his Minchat Shlomo, argues that the two are different as adding a scent to a garment is introducing something that was

⁴ Minchat Shlomo pp. 69-73.

⁵ Chelkat Yaakov 1:53.

⁶ Shevet haLevi 6:37, bringing the example of writing on one's body which is Biblically forbidden (Shabbat 104b).

⁷ Teshuvot Beit Yitzchak 2:13.

⁸ Beitzah 23a.

previously never there, while electricity was meant to be constantly activated and deactivated into a device.⁹

Uvdin de'chol refers to the Rabbinic prohibition of weekday actions on Shabbat. The Chazon Ish argues that electricity feels like a weekday behavior and that is enough to prohibit it on a de'rabanan level.¹⁰ Similarly, Rav Shlomo Zalman Arbauch argued that electricity itself does not inherently violate any melachah, but it should be avoided due to being a weekday activity and degrading Shabbat (zilzul Shabbat).¹¹

Now that we have outlined the potential issurim as to why electricity is prohibited in general, let's turn to Neuralink and assess under what circumstances it may be permitted on Shabbat.

There is a principle of pikuach nefesh doche Shabbat, that saving a life permits violating Shabbat. Thus, electrical devices that preserve life, such as pacemakers which regulate the heart, are clearly permitted on Shabbat.^{12,13} Even when activities only *might* lead to preserving life, they are permitted on Shabbat.¹⁴ Hence we allow couples to drive to a hospital on Shabbat to give birth or to get their child stitches. Thus, if Neuralink is preserving a life, or even just *potentially* saving a life, it would clearly be permitted.¹⁵ This would include uses such as restoring motor functions for someone with ALS or quadriplegia, where the disease can lead to life-threatening complications. Both ALS and quadriplegia, if not

⁹ https://halachipedia.com/index.php?title=Electricity_on_Shabbat

¹⁰ Orach Chaim 50:9

¹¹ Meorei Esh and Minchat Shlomo I:9

¹² <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/pacemaker/about/pac-20384689#:~:text=A%20pacemaker%20is%20used%20to,move%20through%20the%20heart%20chambers.>

¹³ https://www.daat.ac.il/daat/kitveyet/assia_english/avraham-1.htm

¹⁴ Yoma 85a-b.

¹⁵ Yoma 85b.

properly managed, can lead to respiratory failure or other complications that could endanger life. In such cases, the use of Neuralink to restore motor function and improve basic bodily functions, such as breathing or mobility, could be considered a life-saving intervention.

The question arises, however, when using Neuralink for therapeutic purposes whose goal is quality-of-life improvement. Then we must analyze exactly how Neuralink functions, what Shabbat violations it might entail, and under what circumstances such violations might be permissible. The case of hearing aids on Shabbat serves as a precedent and an instructive case study.

According to Rav Moshe Feinstein, although a hearing aid uses electricity and is not used in life-threatening situations, one is permitted to use a hearing aid on Shabbat.¹⁶ His basis for leniency is that the electrical flow is typically not directly manipulated by the user in a way that would be considered "active" involvement in the creation or modification of an electrical circuit. In this case, the hearing aid is viewed more as a passive device that does not require direct interaction with the electrical current, especially since the device's primary function (amplifying sound) operates in a manner that is indirect. Furthermore, the action of "speaking" or creating sounds does not directly involve modifying the flow of electricity in the hearing aid. The volume of a hearing aid, for example, is typically adjusted before Shabbat, and users are prohibited to make changes to the settings while the device is in use on Shabbat.

Turning to apply this to Neuralink is complicated because in some ways, it is less direct than a hearing aid, and in other ways, more direct. On the one hand, it seems less direct as the technology reads brain activity (which itself is an indirect form of signal –

¹⁶ Igrot Moshe, Orach Chaim Vol. 4, Siman 85.

neural activity is interpreted and translated into commands) and then it sends those signals to a device. The brain itself is not directly generating electrical currents for the device; it's sending neural impulses that are then converted into electronic signals. When a person uses Neuralink to control a robotic arm, a computer, or even to input data, the signals from the brain are translated into a digital or electrical command by the device. This is somewhat analogous to how a microphone picks up sound and transmits it electronically; the brain's electrical impulses are being converted, but the electrical flow itself is not originating from the device or the person, but from the neural activity. Conversely, in some ways it is more direct than a hearing aid. The electrical activity that Neuralink works with originates from the user's brain, and the signals are directly controlled by their thoughts and intentions. Even if the signals are interpreted or mediated by technology, it still amounts to direct interaction with electricity, as the commands are coming from the user's brain. For example, in the case of controlling a robotic arm or a cursor on a screen, the user is directly influencing the flow of electricity, albeit indirectly through their neural signals. This complicates the application of Rav Moshe's heter of hearing aids to Neuralink on Shabbat.

When it comes to Neuralink, the leniencies depend heavily on how one classifies the device and its operations on Shabbat. If one paskens that it truly violates melachot de'oraita, it is likely to only be permitted in a case potentially involving pikuach nefesh. However, Rav Moshe Feinstein believes that we are only choshesh (concerned) for the possibility that electricity violates melachah de'oraita; we are not at all certain that it does. This allows him to be lenient and permit the use of hearing aids, and this logic should apply to Neuralink as well.

Poskim who are confident that electricity does not violate any Biblical issurim but at most, only Rabbinic ones, have even more leeway to extend the use of Neuralink on Shabbat to even non-life-threatening medical conditions, such as improving a prosthetic.

In conclusion, determining whether Neuralink may be used on Shabbat depends on its intended function, the nature of its technological interface, and the various halachic opinions as to the general prohibition of electricity on Shabbat. If used in situations of pikuach nefesh—such as preserving motor function in life-threatening conditions like ALS or severe quadriplegia—it would clearly be permitted under Halachah. Outside of life-threatening circumstances, permissibility hinges on whether one paskens that electricity violates melachah de’oraita or at most only Rabbinic prohibitions and on the nature of the activity it enables. Ultimately, as with many questions that lie at the intersection of Halachah and modern technology, the use of Neuralink on Shabbat will require nuanced, case-by-case guidance from qualified Halachic authorities who understand both the technology and the Halachic framework.

The Chosen Land: An Analysis of Its Various Names

Aviva Kessock

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”¹

Although a name could ostensibly be arbitrary, once assigned, it comes to connote the values and qualities of the named object. All the more so if an appellation has an intrinsic meaning. Many entities throughout Tanach are given multiple names, each one reflecting a different aspect of the named person or object. Some examples are Yitro² and Har Chermon.³ Another well-known example is

¹ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene II.

² Rashi to Shemot 18:1 writes:

יתרו – שבעה שמות נקראו לו: רעואל, יתר, יתרו, חובב, חבר, קיני, פוטיאל.
יתר – על שייתר פרשה אחת בתורה: ואתה תחזה (שמות י"ח:כ"א), יתרו –
לכשנתגייר וקיים מצות הוסיפו לו אות אחת, חובב – שחיבב את התורה,
חובב הוא יתרו, שנאמר: מבני חובב חותן משה (שופטים ד':"א).

Yitro – He was called by seven names: Reuel, Yeter, Yitro, Chovav, Chever, Keni and Putiel. [He was called] Yeter [from יתר "to add"] because he added a section to the Torah: "And from all the people you shall look for" (Shemot 18:21). Yitro – when he became a proselyte and fulfilled the Mitzvot one more letter was added to his name. Chovav – because he loved (חָבַב) the Torah. Chovav is identical with Yitro, as it is said, "of the sons of Chovav, the father-in-law of Moshe" (Shoftim 4:11).

³ Rashi to Devarim 3:9 comments:

צדנים יקראו לחרמון וגומ' – ובמקום אחר הוא אומר: עד הר שיאון הוא חרמון (דברים ד':מ"ח), הרי לו ארבע שמות. למה הוצרכו ליכתב? להגיד שבח של ארץ ישראל, שהיו ארבע מלכיות מתפארות בכך, זו אומרת: על שמי יקרא, וזו אומרת: על שמי יקרא

Yerushalayim.⁴ Most telling, God Himself has many names.⁵ The Land of Israel, too, is referred to using many different literary terms throughout Tanach.

Rav Kook teaches in *Orot*:

Eretz Yisrael is not a superficial element, a possession external to [the essence] of the nation, merely a means to the goal of [establishing] a comprehensive union and fortifying its material, or even its spiritual, existence. Eretz Yisrael is an essential element connected by way of a living bond to the nation, attached through its inner qualities to its essence."⁶

The concept of the Land of Israel is an essential element in the development of the Jewish people from our forefathers until now. A shared destination to a specific land is a distinctive feature binding the Jewish people, but it is unclear what the nature of the land is. While the physical land promised to the Jewish people is singular and remains constant, the different names given to the land reflect various aspects of the character of the land. Is it simply a

The Sidonim call Hermon Sirion – But in another passage it states, "Even unto Mount Sion which is Hermon" (Devarim 4:48). So you see it had four names. And why had they all to be written in Scripture? To tell the praise of the land of Israel: that there were four kingdoms (kings) priding themselves in this – one saying, "After me shall it be named", and another saying, "After me shall it be named."

⁴ Bamidbar Rabbah 14:12:

דָּבָר אֶחָד, כְּנִגְדֵי שְׁבַעִים שְׁמוֹת שֵׁשׁ לוֹ לְהַקְדֹּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, שְׁבַעִים שְׁמוֹת שֵׁשׁ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, שְׁבַעִים שְׁמוֹת לְתוֹרָה, שְׁבַעִים שְׁמוֹת לְיְרוּשָׁלַיִם

Another matter: It corresponds to the seventy names of the Holy One blessed be He, the seventy names of Israel, the seventy names of the Torah, and the seventy names of Jerusalem.

⁵ El, Eloah, Elokim, Shakkai, Ehyeh, Tzevaot, יְיָ. This does not include other names like HaMakom, Hashem, or HaKadosh Baruch Hu that are not formally used in Tanach.

⁶ Avraham Yitzchak Kook, *Orot*, trans. Bezalel Naor (Jerusalem: Maaliyot Press, 2004), p. 9.

dwelling place? A location for the mission of spreading God's name? A safe haven? A symbol of God's love for the nation of Israel? A convenient geographic location?

To address these questions, it is essential to analyze how the land is named in Tanach, both its standard names as well as how it is labeled in particular contexts, including "nicknames" and even derogatory terms. In his *Kuzari*, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi introduces the ancestral and religious importance of the Land of Israel by listing its various names.⁷ This paper, too, will seek to understand the significance of the Land of Israel by exploring the nuance imbued in each name and the context in which it occurs in the text. More well-known names, like *Eretz Yisrael*, *Eretz Zavat Chalah* *U'Dvash*, *Ha'aretz*, and *Eretz Canaan*, will be analyzed in great depth. Less commonly used names will also be explored to reveal added dimensions to the importance of the Land of Israel. All together, they can be used to demonstrate the historical interconnectedness of the nation of Israel and the Land of Israel, and also teach us of the inherent relationship we have today with the land, both nationally and personally.

⁷ The *Kuzari* 2:20:

והנה ידיעת שבתות ה' ומועדי ה' תלויה בארץ שהיא נחלת ה' (שמואל א כו, יט), עם מה שקראתו, מאשר נקראת הר קדשו (תהלים ב, ה) והדום רגליו (תהלים צט, ה) ושער השמים (בראשית כח, יז) וכי מציון תצא תורה (ישעיהו ב, ג).

Knowledge of the "Sabbath of the Lord" and the "Festivals of the Lord" depends upon the Land which is the "inheritance of the Lord," [Samuel I 26:19] which is also called "His holy mountain" [Psalms 48:2], "His footstool," [ibid 99:5], the "Gate of heaven" [Genesis 28:17], and "For from Zion will the Torah come forth" [Isaiah 2:3].

Eretz Yisrael

Due to the common use of the term Eretz Yisrael, many may be inclined to consider this name the most standard term for the land. It is surprising to discover that the term Eretz Yisrael is only used twelve times in all of Tanach, none of which is in the Chumash. Eretz Yisrael translates to the Land of Israel. Every time the term Eretz Yisrael is used throughout Tanach, it is in the context of comparing the land to bordering nations. Rav Yoel Bin-Nun explains that Eretz Yisrael is a practical term to indicate where the Jewish people were living.⁸ The first time the name Eretz Yisrael is used is when Shmuel and Shaul are speaking about the Jewish nation needing to fight the Philistines who remained in the land.⁹ The verse describes how there were no blacksmiths amongst the Jews to manufacture swords for war, demonstrating the stronghold the Philistines had over our land. Rav Doron Perez emphasizes that “the implication is clear: the Philistines were dedicated to preventing any possibility of a political or military Jewish presence in this land.”¹⁰ Interesting to note is that the name Eretz Bnei Yisrael is used only twice in Tanach,¹¹ both times in Sefer Yehoshua. Sefer Yehoshua acts as a transition from the Jews wandering in the desert to their becoming a civilization. The term Eretz Bnei Yisrael bridges the transition of the Land of Israel from being a holistic destination in the journey from Egypt to a land that Bnei Yisrael must conquer and settle. Eretz Yisrael represents the obligation and duty the Jewish people have to always define themselves separately from the rest of the nations of the world. The Land of Israel gives the Jewish

⁸ Rav Yoel Bin-Nun, “The Land and 'Land of Canaan' in the Torah,” Megadim 17 (1992): 16 https://www.herzog.ac.il/vtc/tvunot/mega17_ybn.pdf.

⁹ Shmuel I 13:19.

¹⁰ Doron Perez, *The Jewish State: From Opposition to Opportunity* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2023), pg. 23.

¹¹ Yehoshua 11:22 and Yehoshua 18:10.

people a means to separate from other nations, and therefore, it is imperative to strengthen and defend our Jewish connection to the land.

Eretz Zavat Chalav U'Dvash

Although one of the well-known terms used for the Land of Israel is Eretz Zavat Chalav U'Dvash, a Land Flowing with Milk and Honey, the term itself is quite obscure by nature. What does a land flowing with milk and honey look like? What does this description imply, and why these specific products? Is the term literal or metaphoric? Many commentators suggest that these specific products are highlighted because they are everlasting in this region. Others explain that a surplus of these products indicates an abundance of the land in general. From the physical nature of this term for the land, it would seem to imply that the land's purpose is to make products and profit. Another possibility is to live luxuriously off the good crops God bestows upon us in this region.

However, none of these explanations addresses why this term is only used after Israel becomes a nation. If the land is agriculturally desirable, would that not be a descriptive term starting from the time of Avraham? Exploring this term further reveals that it is used fifteen times in all of Tanach, eleven of which are in clear juxtaposition to Egypt. Slavery in Egypt is the shared history that forges Bnei Yisrael into a nation in the journey toward a shared destination and goal, Eretz Yisrael. Egypt acts as a symbol of outside influences in the modern world, and possible distractions from our goals, both nationally and individually. Egypt was economically a powerhouse in the world and had many attractions, such that even after Bnei Yisrael suffered there for centuries and then were redeemed by God, the nation still craved Egypt. This type of yearning is sometimes the result of habit and societal expectation.

The Land of Israel needs to be a foil to Egypt in order to form a Jewish society.

The most direct example of the link between this term and Egypt is in Sefer Bamidbar, when Datan and Aviram shockingly use Eretz Zavat Chalav U'dvash to describe Egypt, while complaining to Moshe. The fact that both Egypt, the land of suffering for the Jewish people, and Israel, our promised land, could be described in the same terminology of Eretz Zavat Chalav U'Dvash¹² has striking significance. The Jewish people were not ready to inhabit the Land of Israel until they had separated themselves from the mental blockages set by other nations, mainly Egypt.

This theme is displayed in other instances in the text, namely the list of Arayot (forbidden sexual relations) and the ending of the Aseret HaDibrot. The introductory verse to the forbidden sexual relations is a warning to Bnei Yisrael not to act in the manner of Egypt.¹³ And then the concluding verse states:

You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess it, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am Hashem your God, who has separated you from the peoples.¹⁴

These two verses create bookends that frame the Arayot within the larger message that the Jewish people require separation from other nations in order to maintain our national values and boundaries. The laws of forbidden relations specifically require us as individuals to set limits and boundaries from improper outer influences, as represented by the need for a land that is distinct from Egypt and its practices.

¹² Bamidbar 16:1, 14.

¹³ Vayikra 18:3.

¹⁴ Vayikra 20:24.

The term *Eretz Zavat Chalav U'Dvash* also appears at the end of the section describing Matan Torah in Sefer Devarim.¹⁵ Once again, this term appears specifically in a context that declares us a separate nation with boundaries and guidelines unique only to us as a people. Ibn Ezra points out here that there is a specific idea of possessing the land.¹⁶

In Devarim 26:15, the term *Eretz Zavat Chalav U'Dvash* is not only used after a mention of being taken out of Egypt,¹⁷ but with the mention of “our fathers.” The Ramban comments that the “fathers” in this verse refer to the generation of people who themselves came out of Egypt,¹⁸ further creating this bond between leaving Egypt and specifically the Land Flowing with Milk and Honey.

In Devarim 27:3, Moshe is commanded to inscribe the laws of the Torah onto stones to be brought into the land upon crossing the Yarden. A set of laws and codes to separate and guard ourselves from outside influences is the final step required before entering the land. With it, the nation is now ready to develop a society in the proper Jewish way. The term *Eretz Zavat Chalav U'dvash* highlights the behavioral obligations we must take into the land as a nation, while discarding the immorality of outside influences like Egypt to settle and enjoy a land that is flowing with milk and honey.

¹⁵ Devarim 6:3.

¹⁶ Ibn Ezra to Devarim 6:3:

ארץ זבת - דבק עם: לרשתה (דברים ו':א) ואם הוא רחוק ממנו.

It should also be noted that the Ibn Ezra highlights the same theme of possessing the land when the land is described as *Eretz Zavat Chalav U'Dvash* in other places, such as Devarim 11:9.

¹⁷ Devarim 26:8.

¹⁸ Ramban, Devarim 26:15:

לא יקשה בעיניך בכאן כי לא נזכר בשבועת האבות ארץ זבת חלב ודבש, כי מאחר אשר הארץ בעת ההיא זבת חלב ודבש הנה נשבע להם בארץ זבת חלב ודבש.

Rav Elchanan Samet describes how Eretz Zavav Chalav U'Dvash highlights the natural treasure of this land from God in contrast to the land of Egypt.¹⁹ He uses the chiasmic structure of the verses in Devarim chapter 11 to highlight this point of differentiating ourselves from Egypt, and reminding ourselves of this differentiation with the land:

Verse 9 - A land flowing with milk and honey

Verse 10 - Not like the land of Egypt

Verse 11 - A land of mountains and valleys, which soaks up its water from the rains of the Heavens

Rav Samet explains that milk and honey are two resources that are not dependent on human action; they are produced naturally. This is coupled with the statement in verse 11 that we are reliant on rain from Hashem. Between these two descriptions of Hashem's influence on the land is verse 10, which commands not to be like Egypt, which is dependent on human irrigation systems for its agriculture and produce. Chazal teach that Israel receives its water from God, and the rest of the world receives water through an intermediary.²⁰ All of the mitzvot and holidays that relate to our agricultural cycles – shmitah, orlah, bikkurim, fasting, and tefillot for rain – let us continue to use this land as a natural reminder that we are not the ones in control, but God is.

Nowadays, Israel is the leading country in the world for reusable water innovations. We have changed the game of agriculture in societies that are susceptible to draught. However, we still have to remember God in our tefillot and be aware of His presence in our lives. We cannot lose sight of the fact that this is all possible only

¹⁹ *Iyunim BeParshat HaShavua*, Sidra 2, Volume 2, Yerushalayim, 2004, p. 224-226.

²⁰ Ta'anit 10a.

with God's help and support. Therefore, we must live our lives as a people faithful to God in His land.

Eretz Canaan

The name Eretz Canaan is used from the beginning of Tanach through Divrei HaYamim to refer to the Land of Israel. While it is understandable from a historical perspective that the land was called Eretz Canaan due to the Canaanite nation dwelling in the land,²¹ it feels ironic to use Eretz Canaan to describe the Jewish national homeland, promised to our forefathers. There is an idea in the Zohar,²² that when the Jewish people act according to high moral standards, the land is called Eretz Yisrael, but when they do not, it is called Eretz Canaan. While this source is difficult to take literally, it does identify Eretz Canaan as a land with an immoral culture.

Supporting this idea, Hoshea 12:8 states:

כְּנָעַן בִּידוֹ מֵאֲזֵנֵי מֶרְמֶה לְעֶשֶׂק אָהֵב:

A trader who uses false balances, who loves to overreach.

The word “canaan” in this pasuk does not refer to the land but to a merchant who deals with scams and trickery. The word “canaan” has become synonymous with deceit and dishonesty, clearly indicating that that was what the Canaanites were known for. The Radak²³ uses this verse to explain that when Yechezkel mentions

²¹ https://www.herzog.ac.il/vtc/tvunot/mega17_ybn.pdf (pg. 13)

²² Zohar, Noach 36:300:

כֹּד הוּא זָפֵאִין יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶקְרִי אֶרְעָא עַל שְׂמָא דָּא אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל. כֹּד לֹא זָכוּ אֶקְרִי אֶרְעָא עַל שְׂמָא אֶחָרָא, אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן.

²³ Radak Yechezkel 16:29:

אֵל אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן כְּשִׁדְיָמָה – יֵשׁ מִפְרָשִׁים כְּמוֹ מֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן, וְאֵינָנוּ נִכּוֹן כִּי מִן הַשְּׂמוּשׁ הוּא הֵפֶךְ מֵלֵת אֵל וּלְמִדַּת הַשְּׂמוּשׁ וְעוֹד מִה צָרִיךְ לִזְכוֹר כְּנָעַן הִיא לֹא לִמְדַּת מֵאֶרֶץ אֵלָּא פִּירוּשׁוֹ כְּמִשְׁמָעוֹ אֵל אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן כְּלוּמַר כְּתוּעֻבוֹת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן שֶׁהִיוּ עוֹשִׂים הַכְּנַעֲנִיִּים אֲשֶׁר הוֹרִישׁ יִי מִפְּנֵי כְּמַעֲשֵׂיהֶם עֲשִׂית וְהִרְבִּית אֵת תְּזוּנוֹתֶיךָ כְּמוֹ שֶׁכְּתוּב בְּמִנְשָׁה מְכַל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה הָאִמְרִי אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵי (מְלָכִים ב

Eretz Canaan (Yechezkel 16:29), he is referring to the culture of the Canaanites who once lived there, representing a life of promiscuity and cheating. The verse mentions a place called Eretz Canaan Kasdim. The Abarbanel²⁴ points out that Eretz Canaan Kasdim does not exist, and even Eretz Canaan does not exist, only Eretz Yisrael. He answers that the Jews in Eretz Yisrael at that time were so involved with the gods and abominations of the Kasdim, that therefore, the verse refers to the land as Eretz Canaan. The Yalkut Shimoni²⁵ also suggests that the land is referred to as Eretz Canaan to remind us that:

It is not because of your virtues and your rectitude that you will be able to possess their country; but it is because of their wickedness that your God is dispossessing those nations before you, and to fulfill the oath that God made to your fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.²⁶

כ"א:י"א) ופירוש אל ארץ כנען דמית בתזנותך אל ארץ כנען כשהיתה ארץ כנען. וכשדימה רוצה לומר אל כשדים כלומר הרבית תזנותך ודמית לארץ כנען ולארץ כשדים בתזנותך כי לא שבעת באחד מהן וגם בזאת לא שבעת בדרך שתיהן.

²⁴ Abarbanel Yechezkiel 16:29:

ואומרו ותרבי את תזנותך אל ארץ כנען כשדימה הוא קשה לפי שאין ארץ כנען כשדימה ולא כשדימה ארץ כנען, גם שהיה לו לומר מארצך לא אל ארץ כנען כי כבר לא היה ארץ כנען אלא ארץ ישראל, אבל ענינו שעשתה כתועבות ארץ כנען שהיו עושים הכנענים בשבתם עליה כמעשיהם עשית, וכן בכשדימה רוצה לומר וכן זנית עם הכשדיים שעבדת אלהי הכנענים ואלהי הכשדים והוא על דרך מה שנאמר במנשה מכל אשר עשה האמרי אשר לפניו (מלכים ב כא, יא):

²⁵ Yalkut Shimoni 742:11:

ויתורו את ארץ כנען. אמר רבי ברכיה בשם רבי סימאי מה ראה כנען להזכר כאן, אלא אמר לישראל לא בצדקתך וביושר לבבך וגו' כי ברשעת הגוים האלה, אמר הקב"ה עונותיו ילכדנו את הרשע ואין רשע אלא שבעה עממים שנאמר כי ברשעת הגוים האלה, ראה הקב"ה שאין לישראל זכות שיכנסו לארץ נזכר ליצחק שנולד לאברהם בן מאה שנה ושרה בת תשעים שנה, וכנען כ' עשרים נ' חמשים הרי מאה ותשעים שנה

²⁶ Devarim 9:5.

He adds that Avraham was 100 years old, and Sarah was 90 years old when she gave birth to Yitzchak. The gematria of the word Canaan is 190, and since we are getting the land due to God's covenant with the Avot, this is represented by calling the land Canaan. These sources portray Eretz Canaan as a land that is not naturally meant for the Jewish people. The land has no inherent connection to the Canaanites, nor to the Jews. Rather, our settling of the land is solely due to God's will.²⁷ Rav Chaim Navon proves this idea using the story of the Ma'apilim.²⁸ The Ma'apilim decided to go to the land after being told that this was not the will of God. The idea that a physical land is "meant" for a certain people, without God's will, is against our Jewish belief system. Therefore, the Ma'apilim died, failing at their goal to go independently to the land.

When the Torah uses the term Eretz Canaan to describe the Land of Israel, we must recognize the God-given element of the physical land we live on. Just like it is God's will that we have the land, it could be God's will that we not have it.²⁹ In addition to this idea, Rav Menachem Leibtag posits that the reason the land is called Eretz Canaan is to act as a scare tactic to the Jewish people. The land will spit out those who do not follow God's command and live a life of

²⁷ Rabbi Chaim Navon, "Eretz Yisrael in Tanakh and Jewish Thought," *Yeshivat Har Etzion*, September 21, 2014, <https://etzion.org.il/en/holidays/yom-haatzmaut/eretz-yisrael-tanakh-and-jewish-thought>

²⁸ Devarim 14:40-45.

²⁹ Rabbi Yeshaya Horowitz, *Shenei Luchot HaBrit*, III, 11:

הכלל העולה, יושבי הארץ צריכין להיותן בהכנע וכמו גרים, לא יעשו העיקר להתישב באיתן מושבו. וזה שאמרו רז"ל (ב"ר פד, א), וישב יעקב [בארץ מגורי אביו] בארץ כנען (בראשית לז, א), בקש לישוב בשלוח, אמר הקב"ה לא דיין לצדיקים כו', רק יהיה בארץ מגורי, גר אנכי, ויהיה ארץ כנען, ויהיה מגורי אביו סוד פחד יצחק הוא מדת הדין מגור מסביב וסביביו נשערה מאוד (תהלים נ, ג). וזהו (ויקרא כה, כג) כי גרים ותושבים אתם עמדי, בשעה שאתם רוצים לישוב בשלום, תהיו גרים. וסימנך, (במדבר יג, לב) ארץ אוכלת יושביה, היא מכלה הרוצים לישוב בה בשלוח ובתוקף לאכול פירותיה ולהנות בה לבד. ואף שהמרגלים דברו זה הפסוק, הם דברו לרעה והוציאו דברי קדושה לחולין, חולין הוא להם:

Torah.³⁰ Therefore, the land is not filled with Canaanites, and just as easily, the land does not have to be filled with Am Yisrael. This idea is hard to keep in mind nowadays. We live in a time when we are fortunate to book tickets to Israel, make Aliyah, and visit the Kotel whenever we would like. We take the physical land for granted, when only 77 years earlier, that was not the case. Therefore, the fact that God lets us remain on this physical land is not a given. The land does not naturally emanate a culture of kedusha; we must work to actively transform it into one that is reflective of God's will.

HaAretz

The last major name to explore, and arguably the name that holds the most weight to us as a people, is HaAretz. The *hey hayidiah* (the *hey* used as a definite article, "the") of HaAretz, and in its expanded form HaAretz Hazot, specifies that the Land of Israel was chosen. This specific land, and no other, was chosen for one specific group of people, the Jewish nation. HaAretz represents the Divine choice that we are part of. Rav Yoel Bin-Nun³¹ explains that the entire time HaAretz is used in Bereishit up until Avraham, it denotes **תנל**, universal land. It is not yet sanctified for a higher purpose; rather, it is simply "the land" that was created and exists in the world. Just as Avraham was chosen by God, and through him, humanity was guided to become fit for God, the same phenomenon happened with the land.³² The turning point for the land becoming

³⁰ Vayikra 18:28.

³¹ *Pirkei HaAvot*, Tevunot: Alon Shvut, 2003, p. 35.

³² This idea is very much supported by the verses in Shemot 19:5-6:

וַעֲתָה אֲמִשְׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹלִי וּשְׁמֹרֶתֶם אֶת־בְּרִיתִי וְהָיִיתִם לִי סֹגֵלָה מִכָּל־
הָעַמִּים כִּי־לִי כְּלֵה־אֶרֶץ: וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיֶינִי מִמְּלֶכֶת כְּהֹנִים וְגוֹי קֹדֶשׁ אֶלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים
אֲשֶׁר תְּדַבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My **treasured possession** among **all the peoples**. Indeed, **all the earth** is Mine: And you shall be to Me a **kingdom**

fit for God's people is Lech Lecha, Avraham's journey to Israel. Avraham needed to go to HaAretz and carry out tzedek (justice) and mishpat (law) in the land. Bereishit chapter 11, verse 31 is the story of Terach's (Avraham's father) journey from his homeland.

וַיִּקַּח תֶּרַח אֶת־אַבְרָם בְּנוֹ וְאֶת־לוֹט בְּנֵהָרָן בְּרֵבְנוֹ וְאֵת שָׂרִי כַלְתּוֹ אֵשֶׁת אַבְרָם
בְּנוֹ וַיֵּצְאוּ אֹתָם מֵאוּר כַּשְׁדִּים לָלֶכֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד־חָרָן וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם:

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there.

Parallel terminology and literary patterns are used when describing Avraham's journey in chapter 12, verses 1, 4-7:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־אַבְרָם לֵךְ מֵאַרְצְךָ וּמִמּוֹלֶדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר
אֹרְאָךְ: ... וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵי ה' וַיֵּלֶךְ אִתּוֹ לוֹט וְאַבְרָם בְּרַחֲמֵשׁ שָׁנִים
וְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה בִּצְאָתוֹ מִחָרָן: וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָם אֶת־שָׂרִי אֵשֶׁתוֹ וְאֶת־לוֹט בְּרֵאֲחִיו וְאֵת
כָּל־רִכּוּשָׁם אֲשֶׁר רָכְשׁוּ וְאֶת־הַנֶּפֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר־עָשׂוּ בְּחָרָן וַיֵּצְאוּ לָלֶכֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן
וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן: וַיַּעֲבֵר אַבְרָם בְּאֶרֶץ עַד מְקוֹם שָׂכָם עַד אֵלוֹן מוֹרָה וְהַכְנַעֲנִי
אֵז בְּאֶרֶץ: וַיֹּרֶא ה' אֶל־אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר לֵזְרַעְךָ אֵתֵן אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת וַיָּבֵן שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ
לַה' הַנִּרְאָה אֵלָיו:

God said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you"... Abram went forth as God had commanded him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the persons that they had acquired in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan. When they arrived in the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, at the terebinth of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land. God appeared to Abram and said, "I will assign this land to your offspring." And he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him.

of **priests and a holy nation**. These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel.

Rav Yoel Bin-Nun points out that this comparison is the transition from teivel to kodesh. Terach's journey was teivel, and therefore the land that he is traveling to is purely of natural existence, Eretz Canaan. However, when God tells Avraham to go to HaAretz, as the land that God Himself will show Avraham, that indicates a land that is chosen by the Divine for Avraham, for a purpose. This turning point ends with verse 7, when God declares that HaAretz Hazot will be for Avraham's offspring.

In the majority of instances in which HaAretz is used in Chumash when to refer to the Land of Israel,³³ the verse includes ancestral connection to the land, or the inheritance or giving over of the land to descendants. Words like yiten (will give), banecha (your sons), and zarecha (your descendants) appear frequently in connection with this term.

Bereishit chapter 13 describes the separation between Avraham and Lot. Verse 6 states:

וְלֹא־נָשָׂא אֹתָם הָאֶרֶץ לְשֹׁבֵת יֶחֱדוּ כִּי־הִיא רַב וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לְשֹׁבֵת יֶחֱדוּ:

The land (HaAretz) could not support them staying together; for their possessions were so great that they could not remain together.

The verse could be understood to mean that haaretz – the grazing land – was not sufficient for both flocks. I suggest, however, that HaAretz here refers to the land that Avraham and Lot resided in at the time, the Land of Israel. The issue was much more fundamental than insufficient grass. HaAretz could not contain both of them because it was the covenantal land and Lot was not

³³ This is to exclude when *Haaretz* is used to describe Sdom, Mitzriyam, and other locations. Also, *Kol Haaretz*, many times refers back to the general universal earth, and not the specific Chosen Land. Lastly, the term *Am Haaretz* refers to a native of the land, and therefore using this term is for legal clarification and not for inherit meaning in the name *Haaretz* itself.

part of the covenant. The conflict ends with Lot choosing to move to Sedom and out of HaAretz. Perhaps that is because Lot had not been chosen; he was merely brought by Avraham to the land, and therefore, was not part of the ancestral dynasty inheriting HaAretz.

The culmination of this theory is seen through comparing two everlasting covenants between God and Avraham, which are then passed on for the eternity of Jewish existence: Brit Milah and Brit Bein HaBetarim. Brit Bein HaBetarim (Bereishit chapter 15) promises HaAretz HaZot to Avraham and his descendants. God also describes the future suffering that Avraham's descendants will face, and promises that they will make it to this very land, Israel. Brit Milah (Bereishit 17:1-12), required for every Jewish boy, serves as a sign of belonging to the covenant of the people who shall inherit the land. He, too, shall inherit the land and pass it on to his descendants. Why then do the verses about Brit Milah use the name Eretz Canaan instead of HaAretz? Especially since this is a commandment that generations of Jews will pass down and uphold, connecting centuries of history, HaAretz seems the more fitting term. The takeaway of the name Eretz Canaan is the responsibility the Jewish people carry to transform the natural, unholy Land of Canaan into a land of kedusha. So too with Brit Milah, every Jewish boy must take an active part in transforming himself to be part of the Am Segula.³⁴ This is different than Brit Bein HaBetarim, which caused instantaneous chosenness of the land. Regardless of who lives there and what actions people will do, *HaAretz* will always be The Chosen Land. The takeaway from this name is a reminder that the Land of Israel was divinely chosen for us – not because of anything we did, but simply because we were born Jewish – and therefore, we are meant to live in it.

³⁴ Inspired by the ideas of my teacher, Rav Shmuel Klitsner.

Additional Names

There are minor names that are used much less frequently in Tanach to refer to the Land of Israel that deserve mentioning: HaAretz HaTova,³⁵ Eretz Chita U'Seorah...U'Dvash,³⁶ Eretz Dagan V'Tirosh,³⁷ Admat Hashem,³⁸ Admat Ami,³⁹ Nachalat Yaakov,⁴⁰ Eretz HaKarmel,⁴¹ Eretz Chemda,⁴² Tzvi Ha'aratzot,⁴³ Eretz HaTzvi,⁴⁴ Admat HaKodesh,⁴⁵ HaMakom, and more. All of these names can add additional dimensions to our understanding of the land by relating the specific name used to its context.

Medinat Yisrael

The goal of this paper is to help the reader navigate the nature of their relationship to the Land of Israel through the lens of Tanach. Each name adds a nuanced layer and touchpoint to the land. The takeaways from each of the names become concretized under the newest name, Medinat Yisrael. Eretz Yisrael expresses the value of differentiating ourselves as a nation and strengthening our roots in the Land of Israel. In the diaspora, Jews are standing together with pride to show that our nation will not back down in defending our land, and in Israel, the country's men and women physically risk

³⁵ Devarim 3:25.

³⁶ Devarim 8:8.

³⁷ Devarim 33:28.

³⁸ Yeshayahu 14:2.

³⁹ Yeshayahu 32:13.

⁴⁰ Yeshayahu 58:14.

⁴¹ Yirmiyahu 2:7.

⁴² Yirmiyahu 3:19.

⁴³ Yechezkel 20:6.

⁴⁴ Daniel 11:16.

⁴⁵ Zecharia 2:16.

their lives to fight and sacrifice for the defense of Israel, the Jewish state.

Secondly, the name Eretz Zavat Chalav U'Dvash demonstrates the importance of upholding God's commandments in God's land to shield ourselves from inappropriate cultures and practices. Building off of the previous idea, through the prism of *Eretz Canaan*, we understand the necessity to uphold the level of society's overall behavior and commitment towards God. This standard is exemplified in the ongoing debate about how religious the government of the State of Israel should be.

Lastly, HaAretz shines light on the unique privilege it is to be part of the Jewish nation, a covenant that includes our national homeland. There is no reason to have the land, if the Jews who are duly part of it do not live in it. Through the name HaAretz we see the call for all Jews to live in Medinat Yisrael. Engagement with Tanach roots our ancestral and nationalistic purpose to the land, and challenges each one of us to recognize our role in conjunction with The Chosen Land.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Thank you to Rabbanit Rivky Krestt for her mentorship and guidance during the writing of this article.

Does a Ben Noach Have to Believe in God?

Elizabeth Kohl

Introduction

The Sheva Mitzvot Bnei Noach, or the Seven Noachide Laws, are a set of ethical commandments incumbent upon all humanity, not just Jews. These laws are:¹

1. No idolatry
2. No murder
3. No theft
4. No sexual immorality
5. No blasphemy
6. No eating from a living animal
7. Establishing courts

They are seen in Jewish tradition as universal moral obligations.

Interestingly, one might assume that to be a fully observant Noachide, the Noachide must believe in the Jewish conception of God and must be observing these commandments out of commitment to doing what God demands of him. However, belief in God is notably not one of the Sheva Mitzvot Bnei Noach. The commandment that comes closest to requiring belief is the

¹ Sanhedrin 56a-b. This list is how we pasken – see Rambam Hilchot Melachim 9:1. However, there are other opinions in the Gemara. R' Chananya ben Gamla adds drinking blood from a live animal to the list, R' Chidka adds sterilization, R' Shimon and R' Yose add Kishuf (witchcraft), and R' Elazar adds Kilayim (mating animals of different species or grafting different species of trees together).

prohibition against Avodah Zarah. However, the two are not the same.² For example, an atheist or agnostic does not believe in *any* God, neither Avodah Zarah nor HaKadosh Baruch Hu. If such a person observed all seven of the Noachide commandments, would he be deemed in full compliance with everything God expects and wants from him?

To push the question further: What about a member of a different monotheistic religion who observes these commandments because his conception of God demands it? Would that be better or worse than an atheist who observes them for moral reasons? And at what point do other religions cross over into Avodah Zarah, which would clearly disqualify their followers from being adherents of the Seven? For example, what about Christians who believe in the Trinity? This paper will attempt to address all these questions.

Ger Toshav

To understand fully whether Kabbalat Shamayim is needed for a Ben Noach, one must understand the different possible statuses that may be conferred upon a non-Jew. Specifically, the difference between the definition of a Ben Noach (one who keeps the Sheva Mitzvot) and a Ger Toshav (to be explained soon), two different categories of non-Jews, must be clarified.

² In Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 2:1, the Rambam explains the prohibition against Avodah Zarah as follows:

עֵקֶר הַצְּוִי בַעֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים - שֶׁלֹּא לַעֲבֹד אֶחָד מִכָּל הַבְּרֻאִים: לֹא מַלְאָךְ וְלֹא גִלְגֹּל וְלֹא כּוֹכָב וְלֹא אֶחָד מֵאַרְבָּעָה הִסּוּדוֹת וְלֹא אֶחָד מִכָּל הַנִּבְרָאִים מֵהֶם.

The essence of the commandment forbidding the worship of false gods is not to serve any of the creations, not an angel, a sphere, or a star, none of the four fundamental elements, nor any entity created from them.

While the Rambam's definition of what exactly counts as idol worship is vast, it does not include any positive aspect of believing in God.

In Masechet Avodah Zarah 64b, the definition of a Ger Toshav is discussed and three possibilities are suggested:

מִיתִיבִי: אֵיזֶהוּ גֵר תוֹשָׁב? כֹּל שֶׁקִּיבֵּל עָלָיו בִּפְנֵי שְׁלֹשָׁה חֲבֵרִים שֶׁלֹּא לַעֲבֹד עֲבוֹדָה זָרָה, דִּבְרֵי רַבִּי מֵאִיר. וְחֻכְמִים אוֹמְרִים: כֹּל שֶׁקִּיבֵּל עָלָיו שֶׁבַע מִצְוֹת שֶׁקִּבְּלוּ עֲלֵיהֶם בְּנֵי נֹחַ. אֲחֵרִים אוֹמְרִים: אֵלֹהֵי לֹא בָּאוּ לְכָלֵּל גֵּר תוֹשָׁב, אֲלֵא אֵיזֶהוּ גֵר תוֹשָׁב? זֶה גֵר אוֹכֵל גְּבִילוֹת, שֶׁקִּבֵּל עָלָיו לְקַיֵּם כָּל מִצְוֹת הָאֲמֹרֹת בְּתוֹרָה חוּץ מֵאִסּוּר גְּבִילוֹת.

The Gemara raises an objection from a baraita: Who is a Ger Toshav? It is anyone who has accepted upon himself before three chaverim (i.e., people devoted to the meticulous observance of mitzvot, especially halachot of ritual purity, teruma, and tithes) not to worship idols. This is the statement of Rabbi Meir. And the Rabbis say: Anyone who has accepted upon himself observance of the seven mitzvot that the descendants of Noach accepted upon themselves is a Ger Toshav. Others say: These have not entered the category of Ger Toshav. Rather, who is a Ger Toshav? This is a convert who eats slaughtered animal carcasses, which are not kosher, but who has accepted upon himself to observe all of the mitzvot that are stated in the Torah except for the prohibition against eating unslaughtered carcasses.

The first opinion is the most lenient: one who has accepted in front of three religious individuals that they will not worship Avodah Zarah. The second possibility is one who has accepted the Sheva Mitzvot Bnei Noach. And the third and most strict possibility is one who has accepted upon himself all of the mitzvot in the Torah except for the prohibition of eating neveilah (unslaughtered carcasses).

The Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 124:2 paskens according to the second definition in the Gemara and defines a Ger Toshav as the following: גֵּר תוֹשָׁב דֵּהֵינּוּ שֶׁקִּבֵּל עָלָיו שֶׁבַע מִצְוֹת. This seems to equate a Ben Noach and a Ger Toshav and to erase any halachic or practical difference between them. This implies that for a non-Jew to be doing what God wants is for him to accept and do all of the Sheva Mitzvot Bnei Noach, nothing more and nothing less. The Shulchan Aruch

does not mention that one must commit to observing these mitzvot specifically because of their divine origin, and thus he seems not to require it for either category.

Other commentators feel very differently about the connection between a Ger Toshav and a Ben Noach and about the need for belief in God, revealing a machloket about what exactly a Ben Noach must do to fully meet God's expectations of him.

Rambam on Ben Noach vs. Ger Toshav

The Rambam writes in Hilchot Melachim 8:10:

וכן צוה משה רבנו מפי הגבורה לכף את כל באי העולם לקבל מצות שנצטוו
בני נח. וכל מי שלא יקבל יהרג. והמקבל אותם הוא הנקרא גר תושב בכל
מקום. וצריך לקבל עליו בפני שלשה חברים.

By the same regard, Moses was commanded by the Almighty to compel all the inhabitants of the world to accept the commandments given to Noah's descendants. If one does not accept these commands, he should be executed. A person who formally accepts these commands is called a Resident Alien (Ger Toshav). This applies in any place. This acceptance must be made in the presence of three Torah scholars.

Based on this, it seems the Rambam defines a Ger Toshav as someone who accepts the Sheva Mitzvot Bnei Noach in front of three Torah scholars. However, in the next Halachah, the Rambam writes:

כל המקבל שבע מצות ונזהר לעשותן הרי זה מחסידי אמות העולם. ויש לו
חלק לעולם הבא. והוא שיקבל אותן ויעשה אותן מפני שצוה בהן הקדוש
ברוך הוא בתורה והודיענו על ידי משה רבנו שבני נח מקדם נצטוו בהן. אבל
אם עשאן מפני הקרע הדעת אין זה גר תושב ואינו מחסידי אמות העולם אלא
מחמיהם:³

³ There is debate whether the correct girsa here is ולא מחמיהם or ולא מחמיהם. If it's ולא מחמיהם, then the Rambam does not even count those who observe the Sheva Mitzvot out of moral conviction among the wise. If it's ולא מחמיהם, then he does think they should at least be counted among the wise. Frankel and Shilat in their critical editions of the Rambam both have אלא and indicate

Anyone who accepts upon himself the fulfillment of these seven mitzvot and is precise in their observance is considered one of 'the pious among the gentiles' and will merit a share in the world to come. This applies only when he accepts them and fulfills them because the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded them in the Torah and informed us through Moses, our teacher, that Noah's descendants had been commanded to fulfill them previously. However, if he fulfills them out of intellectual conviction, he is not a resident alien, nor of 'the pious among the gentiles,' rather is of their wise men.

In this Halachah, the Rambam seems to be dividing those who observe the Seven Mitzvot into two different categories. Those who follow the Seven because they believe in the divine command to do so are termed חסידי אומות העולם and they earn a portion in the World to Come. The second category comprises those who only follow these mitzvot out of "intellectual conviction" rather than belief in their divine origin. The Rambam writes that someone in this group is *not* considered a Ger Toshav or a חסיד אומות העולם, but merely is one of "חכמיהם." The implication is that the Rambam believes that people in this latter group do not receive a portion in Olam Haba.

This makes it clear that the Rambam believes that observance of the Sheva Mitzvot Bnei Noach must be predicated on belief in God. One must be keeping these mitzvot *because* they believe that the God who gave the Torah commanded them. If they observe them merely out of moral conviction, they are deemed wise, but their observance has no religious value whatsoever.

The question is: How can the Rambam require a Ben Noach to believe in God if it is not listed as one of the Noachide Commandments? One approach is to claim that the list of Seven Noachide Commandments is not an exhaustive list but rather there

that all of the kitvei yad (manuscripts) have אלא. It seems ולא was a printing mistake.

are additional mitzvot that a Ben Noach is obligated to observe besides the Sheva Mitzvot, and believing in God is one of them.

Along these lines, the Sefer HaChinuch in Mitzvah 416:4 describes the Sheva Mitzvot as categories, each including many prohibitions:

וְאֵל תִּטְעֶה בְּנִי בְּזֶה הַחֲשִׁבוֹן שֶׁל שִׁבְעַת מִצְוֹת בְּנֵי נֹחַ הַיְדוּעַ וְהַמְזָכָר בְּתַלְמוּד (סנהדרין נו ב), כִּי בְּאִמַּת שְׂאוֹתָן שִׁבְעָה, הֵן כְּעֵין כְּלָלוֹת, אֲבָל יֵשׁ בָּהֶם פְּרָטִים הַרְבֵּה. כְּמוֹ שְׂאֵתָהּ מוֹצֵא שְׂאֵסוֹר הָעֲרִיּוֹת נִחָשֵׁב לָהֶם דֶּרֶךְ כָּלֵל לְמַצְוָה אַחַת וְיֵשׁ בָּהּ פְּרָטִים, כְּגוֹן, אִסּוּר אִם, וְאִסּוּר אַחֻת מִן הָאִם, וְאִסּוּר אִשְׁתִּי אִישׁ, וְאִשְׁתִּי אָב, וְזָכוֹר, וְבִהְמָה (סנהדרין נח, א)...

And do not err, my son, with this well-known tally of the seven commandments of the Noachides mentioned in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 56b); as truthfully these seven are [only] like general principles, but they have many details. So you will find that the prohibition of sexual immorality is considered for them to be one commandment as a general principle, but there are details in it; such as the prohibition of the mother, and the prohibition of the sister from the mother's side, and the prohibition of a married woman, and the wife of the father, and the male, and the animal (Sanhedrin 58a)...

One could explain that the Rambam similarly holds that belief in the divine nature of the Sheva Mitzvot is a subcategory of one of the other Sheva Mitzvot, likely either the prohibition against idol worship or against blasphemy.

Alternatively, one could posit that belief in God is a *prerequisite* for the Sheva Mitzvot; therefore, it is not listed because it is not its own independent commandment but rather the foundational bedrock that must underlie the Seven. A similar argument is made regarding belief in God for Jews. Some poskim⁴ count אנכי ה' אלקיך as its own separate mitzvah of belief in God, but others do not

⁴ Rambam (Sefer HaMitzvot 1:1) and Sefer HaChinuch (25:1) do count it as a mitzvah.

include it on their list of the 613 mitzvot, claiming that it is the backbone behind all the mitzvot, not one of its own.⁵

Application of Rambam's Opinion

Though the Rambam writes that belief in God is a necessity for fulfilling all of what God expects from non-Jews, he does not address what the contours are of the required belief. What exactly does a non-Jew need to believe in order to fulfill this mandate?

Rav Moshe Feinstein paskens like the Rambam and writes:

אף שלא הזכיר זה במנין ז' מצות ודאי מחוייב להאמין

Even though it is not mentioned in the list of Seven Mitzvot, one definitely must believe [in God].”⁶

Rav Moshe writes this in the context of addressing whether a Ben Noach can daven. Rav Moshe's response is that since belief in God is a fundamental aspect of being a Ben Noach, in a time of need, a Ben Noach has a *chiyuv* to daven!

Rabbi Mayer Twersky defines precisely what non-Jews are required to believe.⁷ He says that to get sechar (reward) in Olam HaBa, a Ben Noach needs to believe in Rambam's 13 Ikkarei Emunah, or Principles of Faith. This includes ideas like the belief in God and His Oneness, belief in the primacy of Moshe's prophecy, and belief in the coming of Mashiach. He even suggests that this is what the Rambam himself intended when he said that faith is needed for a Ger Toshav and Ben Noach to receive a portion in Olam

⁵ The BeHaG does not list it as one of the 613.

⁶ Igrot Moshe, Orach Chaim Chelek 2 Siman 25.

⁷ Rabbi Mayer E. Twersky, “אם בני נח נצטוו במצות אמונה או לא,” YUTorah.org, June 5, 2005, <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/735004/>

HaBa.⁸ Other commentators discuss whether belief in creation is necessary, with Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky thinking that belief in God is necessary but not belief in creation.⁹

Let's now return to the questions we posed at the outset, and determine how the Rambam would answer them. The Rambam and those who agree with him, require observance of the Sheva Mitzvot to be rooted in, and stemming from, faith in the Jewish conception of God. The Rambam explicitly writes that one must keep the Sheva Mitzvot:

מפני שצוה בהן הקדוש ברוך הוא בתורה והודיענו על ידי משה רבנו.

This indicates that even being a monotheist and observing the Sheva Mitzvot due to divine command (as their religion mandates)

⁸ The fact that he says “שצוה בהן הקדוש ברוך הוא בתורה והודיענו על ידי משה רבנו” proves that they need belief in the Torah and Moshe’s uniqueness. Additionally, in Hilchot Teshuvah 3:6, the Rambam writes:

ואלו הן שאין להן חלק לעולם הבא אלא נכרתים ואובדין ונדונין על גדל רשעים וחסאתם לעולם ולעולמי עולמים. המינים. והאפיקורסין. והכופרים בתורה. והכופרים בתחית המתים ובביאת הגואל. המורדים. ומחטיאי הרבים. והפורשין מדרכי צבור. והעושה עברות ביד רמה בפרהסיא כיהוים. והמוסרים. ומטילי אימה על הצבור שלא לשם שמים. ושופכי דמים. ובגלי לשון הרע. והמושד ערלתו:

The following individuals do not have a portion in the world to come. Rather, their [souls] are cut off and they are judged for their great wickedness and sins, forever:

the Minim, the Epicursim, those who deny the Torah, those who deny the resurrection of the dead and the coming of the [Messianic] redeemer, those who rebel [against God], those who cause the many to sin, those who separate themselves from the community, those who proudly commit sins in public as Jehoyakim did, those who betray Jews to gentile authorities, those who cast fear upon the people for reasons other than the service of God, murderers, slanderers, one who extends his foreskin [so as not to appear circumcised].

This implies that even if a Ben Noach is following the Seven, they must also not be violating these (because it doesn’t say that these only apply for a Jew to not receive Olam HaBa). Included in these are belief in the Torah, techiat ha-metim, Mashiach, etc. This is Rav Twersky’s proof that the Rambam believes the Thirteen Ikkarim are necessary for all Bnei Noach.

⁹ Emet LeYaakov 8:22.

would not be sufficient. According to the Rambam, proper fulfillment of the Seven entails committing to them because HaKadosh Baruch Hu commanded them through Moshe. In other words, the Rambam seems to view the Sheva Mitzvot as simply an alternative to conversion; Judaism does not insist that everyone convert, even those who recognize the truth of Judaism. Someone who is not born Jewish and believes in Judaism just has to keep the Seven; that's all God asks of him. Given this conception of the Seven Mitzvot, it would be virtually impossible for an atheist or believer in a different monotheistic religion to be a Noachide according to the Rambam.

Rav Sternbuch on Ger Toshav vs. Ben Noach

However, Rav Moshe Sternbuch¹⁰ in his book called Teshuvot VeHanhagot takes a completely different view on this topic. He too discusses the different possible statuses of a non-Jew but he comes to different conclusions than the Rambam.

He writes in Teshuvot VeHanhagot 3:264:

דבגר תושב אין החיוב רק לשמור השבע מצוות לבד ככל בן נח, שהרי הוא צריך גם להאמין בהקב"ה, ומה עוד שהוא צוה לעשותו, וע"ז אין כופין שלא שייך כפייה להאמין.

Regarding a Ger Toshav, the obligation is not merely to observe the Seven Commandments like all Sons of Noach - for he must also believe in God, and that He commanded that [these laws] be observed. On that, [the Jews] cannot force [the non-Jews], because you cannot force a belief.

Rav Sternbuch here implies that there is a base-level status of a Ben Noach who just keeps the Sheva Mitzvot without believing in God, and then there is an even higher level, termed a Ger Toshav,

¹⁰ Rav Sternbuch is a British-born chareidi Rabbi currently living in the Har Nof neighborhood of Jerusalem.

who keeps the Seven due to belief in God. Rav Sternbuch makes this even more explicit in Teshuvot VeHanhagot 3:317 where he writes:

וכ"ש לפי המבואר אצלינו במק"א שכן נח אמנם מצווה שלא לעבוד ע"ז אבל אין בזה מצוות אזהרה להאמין רק לא לעבוד ע"ז, ובנעשה גר תושב נשתנה דינו שמקבל ע"ע בזה האמונה.

...and all the more so according to what we have explained elsewhere, that although Sons of Noach are commanded not to serve idols, there is no commandment among the Seven Commandments a requirement [literally, 'warning'] to believe; only not to serve idols, and when he becomes a Ger Toshav his status changes for he accepts upon himself this belief.

Based on these two excerpts, Rav Sternbuch agrees with the Rambam that to be considered a Ger Toshav, one must accept the Sheva Mitzvot because of God. However, unlike the Rambam, Rav Sternbuch thinks that anybody who accepts the Sheva Mitzvot is a full observer of the Seven Noachide Commandments, even if they do not believe in God!¹¹ He would put anyone who does believe in God in the category of Ger Toshav, meaning that according to him, Rambam's view of חסידי אומות העולם really is a Ger Toshav and Rambam's view of חכמיהם is his definition of a Ben Noach.

Application of Rav Sternbuch's Opinion

Once Rav Sternbuch opens the door to saying that it is possible to be doing what God wants by following the Sheva Mitzvot, even without believing in the Jewish God as the basis, many questions arise. Specifically, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, could it be that an atheist, Christian, or Muslim could be viewed as doing everything God wants of them?

¹¹ Essentially, he views a Ben Noach on the lower of Rambam's two levels (בן נח (מחכמיהם). However, unlike the Rambam he says that this Ben Noach is doing the right thing!

If there is no consideration of the reason behind doing the mitzvot, and all that matters is observing the Sheva Mitzvot themselves, then it is quite likely that an atheist's practices are acceptable. For an atheist, none of these mitzvot would pose a problem; on the contrary, an ethical atheist would likely be keeping all seven anyway!

However, when considering Christianity and Islam, the question becomes more difficult. One of the seven prohibitions is against Avodah Zarah. Thus, when determining whether a Christian or Muslim might be a proper adherent of the Sheva Mitzvot Bnei Noach (according to Rav Sternbuch who does not require faith in Hashem as their basis), the critical question is: Are Islam and Christianity considered Avodah Zarah?

The Rambam famously writes in his Letter on Apostasy that if one is given the choice between being killed or converting to Islam, one should choose to convert. Since idolatry is one of the three prohibitions that one should die rather than commit (yei'hareig ve'al ya'avur)¹² and yet the Rambam thought one should convert to Islam rather than die, it must be that the Rambam believed that Islam is not idolatry.

The Rashba (Torat HaBayit 5:4) agrees with the Rambam and says that Islam is not considered Avodah Zarah, as seen from the fact that a Jew can benefit from their wine.¹³

¹² Sanhedrin 74a. The other 2 are murder and adultery.

¹³ It is Biblically forbidden to drink Yayin Nesech, wine that was used for an idolatrous ritual. The Rabbis instituted a prohibition of Stam Yaynam, wine owned by non-Jews. As the Shulchan Aruch explains in Yoreh De'ah 124:6:

כל גוי שאינו עובד אֱלִילִים, יֵינוּ אֲסוּר בְּשִׁתּוּהָ וּמִתֵּר בִּהְנֵאָה

Any non-Jew that does not worship idols, his wine is prohibited for drinking but permitted for benefit.

If Islam were considered Avodah Zarah, it would be prohibited to benefit from their wine.

Commenting on this ruling in the Shulchan Aruch, the Taz also agrees that it is not considered idolatry.¹⁴ Lastly, Rav Ovadia Yosef says that it is permissible for a Jew to daven in a mosque if necessary, explaining that his psak is based on the fact that Islam is not Avodah Zarah.¹⁵

Most of the Sheva Mitzvot are included within the Muslim religion itself. Islam also has rules against blasphemy,¹⁶ adultery,¹⁷ theft,¹⁸ injustice,^{19,20} eating from live animals,²¹ and murder.²² Thus, according to Rav Sternbuch's approach that belief in the Jewish conception of God is not necessary for fulfilling the Seven, most Muslims would be in full compliance according to the Rambam,²³

¹⁴ Taz, Yoreh De'ah Siman 124.

¹⁵ Shu"t Yabia Omer, Chelek 7 – Yoreh De'ah Siman 12.

¹⁶ Surah Al-An'am 6:108.

¹⁷ Surah Al-Isra 17:32.

¹⁸ Surah Al-Ma'idah 5:38.

¹⁹ Surah An-Nahl 16:90.

²⁰ However, there is no outright command to establish a justice system, rather there is a system of judgement based on the Quran and a command to act with justice.

²¹ Surah Al-Ma'idah 5:3.

²² Regarding murder, Islam takes an interesting stance. Islam classifies murder as a terrible sin and doles out harsh punishments to murderers (Surah Al-Isra 17:33, Surah Al-Ma'idah 5:32). However, there are instances within the Quran itself where Islamic leaders threaten to kill people who don't accept Islam. (Surah At-Tawbah 9:5). Sometimes, Islam validates killing people and does not consider it murder, when by Judaism's standards it would be classified as such. Obviously, a Muslim who committed a murder under these circumstances would be considered a murderer by Jewish law and would be in violation of the Seven Mitzvot. However, this would not render all Muslims in violation of the Sheva Mitzvot; only the ones who actually commit a murder.

²³ The Rambam himself does not agree with Rav Sternbuch and thinks that belief in the Jewish conception of God must be what motivates one's commitment to the Seven, and therefore he thinks that Muslims are NOT proper adherents of the Seven even though he thinks Islam is not Avodah Zarah.

Rashba, Taz, and Rav Ovadia Yosef who hold that Islam is not Avodah Zarah.

However, the Ritva,²⁴ Meiri,²⁵ and the Ran²⁶ all believe that Islam is Avodah Zarah. They are all very strict, saying that every aspect of the religion is not allowed and they have a completely different God than us. According to these Rishonim, it is impossible for any Muslim to be an adherent of the Sheva Mitzvot because they all violate the prohibition against idolatry.

Regarding Christianity, there is much disagreement about whether it is considered Avodah Zarah. Rambam is very clear that he thinks Christianity is assur and says all of its holidays, sects, etc. are Avodah Zarah.²⁷ Many people agree with this black and white view, including the Ritva²⁸ and the Shulchan Aruch.²⁹ However, there is an interesting view taken by some that while Christianity is Avodah Zarah for Jews, it would not be considered Avodah Zarah for a non-Jew due to Christianity's unique view of God.³⁰ For example, in the Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim 156, the Rama says that Shittuf (worshipping God with an intermediary) is not considered Avodah Zarah for non-Jews because its goal is Shem Shamayim.

It is most commonly accepted, however, that Christianity is considered Avodah Zarah³¹ and therefore a Christian would not be

²⁴ Ritva on Rosh HaShanah 17a, s.v. פושעי אומות העולם בגופן

²⁵ Beit HaBechira, Avodah Zarah 57a.

²⁶ Chiddushei HaRan, Sanhedrin 61b, s.v. יכול

²⁷ Perush HaMishnah Avodah Zarah 1:3.

²⁸ Ritva on Rosh HaShanah 17a, s.v. פושעי אומות העולם בגופן

²⁹ Yoreh De'ah 148.

³⁰ Christianity believes in the idea of God as a trinity, implying that something/someone other than God Himself has divine power and authority. Meaning that Christianity still believes in our God, but not *only* our God.

³¹ Nodah BeYehuda Yoreh Deah 148

able to be considered a Ben Noah and be viewed as fulfilling what God requires.

The Maharal's Approach

There is one final approach to explore, that of the Maharal.³² To understand his approach, one must first ask: What is the source for the Sheva Mitzvot Bnei Noah?

The derivation of these commandments is discussed by the Gemara in Sanhedrin 56b-57a. Rabbi Yochanan locates references to each of the seven in a command given to Adam HaRishon (Bereishit 2:16), while **תנא דבי מנשה** finds hints to each of the seven in various pesukim stated to Noah (Bereishit 6:11, 9:3, 9:4, 9:6).

None of the above pesukim contain clear or explicit commands regarding any of the Seven, merely allusions³³ (except for possibly murder). Thus, the Maharal³⁴ suggests a novel approach—that the Sheva Mitzvot are logically binding moral laws that don't require explicit divine command.³⁵

³² Rabbi Yehuda ben Betzalel Loew (1512–1609), better known as the Maharal of Prague.

³³ For example, according to Rabbi Yochanan, all seven are derived from Bereishit 2:16, which states:

וַיֹּצֵא ה' אֱלֹקִים עֲלֵהָאָדָם לֵאמֹר מִכָּל עֵץ הָגֶן אָכַל תֹּאכַל:

And God commanded Man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat..."

Rabbi Yochanan claims that each word serves as the source for another one of the Seven. For example, **וַיֹּצֵא** is the source for the obligation to set up a court system; **ה'** teaches the prohibition against cursing God; **אֱלֹקִים** is the source for the prohibition against Avodah Zarah, etc.

³⁴ Chiddushei Aggadot, Yoma 67b.

³⁵ Each position regarding the source of the Sheva Mitzvot reflects a different theological outlook on the Seven: an original human expectation (Adam), a formal covenantal obligation (Noah), or inherent universal morality (logical derivation). These positions seem to match up with the approaches explored thus far. Rav Sternbuch, who grants recognition even to Bnei Noah who

The Maharal is thus the polar opposite of the Rambam. The Rambam believes that observance of the Seven must be predicated on belief in God - one must observe them *because* God commanded it in the Torah. In contrast, the Maharal says their source is not in the Torah at all but rather is rooted in ethical behavior that is independently valid even outside Divine revelation. According to the Maharal, not only are non-Jews not obligated to base their observance of the Seven on Divine command but there actually was no Divine command! The entire concept of the Seven is that God expects all humans, Jew and non-Jew alike, to figure the Seven out themselves and commit to them based on their own natural morality.

Application of the Maharal's Opinion

Of course, according to the Maharal, one can be a full-fledged adherent of the Sheva Mitzvot without believing in God. Thus, an atheist or agnostic who observes all seven is in full compliance. Whether or not the same can be said of a Christian or Muslim hinges on the debate explored earlier as to whether their religions are considered Avodah Zarah. If they are, then by definition, they are not in full compliance since they violate the prohibition against idolatry. If their religions are not considered Avodah Zarah, then the Maharal would embrace them as full Bnei Noach.

Conclusion

The exploration of whether adherents of other faiths or atheists can fulfill the Sheva Mitzvot Bnei Noach reveals three primary approaches to this complex question. The Rambam, followed by

observe the Seven without faith in God, seems to view the Seven as an original human expectation. The Rambam, who insists that observance of the Seven be predicated on faith in God, sees the Sheva Mitzvot as a formal covenantal obligation. And the Maharal views the Seven as inherent universal morality.

authorities like Rav Moshe Feinstein, maintains that proper observance requires not only following the seven laws but also believing in the God of Israel as their source. Under this view, Muslims, Christians, and atheists would generally not qualify as **עוֹלָם חַסִּידֵי אֱמוּנוֹת הָעוֹלָם** deserving of Olam Haba, despite potentially observing many of the actual prohibitions.

Conversely, Rav Sternbuch's distinction between a Ger Toshav and a Ben Noach creates a more inclusive possibility. By requiring belief only for the formal status of Ger Toshav but not for a Ben Noach, this approach suggests that righteous individuals of various belief systems might receive divine reward for their moral conduct. A Muslim who follows ethical principles aligned with the Sheva Mitzvot could potentially qualify, if one accepts that Islam does not constitute Avodah Zarah. An ethical atheist would likewise qualify under this framework, while Christians would face the additional hurdle of Christianity's widespread classification as Avodah Zarah.

Finally, the Maharal believes the source of the Sheva Mitzvot is not located in a pasuk in the Torah, but rather in natural morality. He is the most inclusive of the three examined and would clearly include as a Ben Noach anyone who adheres to the Seven regardless of their religious affiliation (or lack thereof), as long as their religion does not constitute Avodah Zarah.

These theological distinctions have practical implications for Jewish-gentile relations in contemporary society. The more inclusive view provides a foundation for greater mutual respect between Jews and adherents of other faiths, allowing for recognizing divine favor upon righteous gentiles.

Ultimately, the Sheva Mitzvot represents Judaism's understanding of God's universal covenant with humanity, suggesting that while the Sinaitic covenant is particular to Israel, God's moral expectations extend to all people. Whether that

universal covenant requires theological alignment or merely ethical conduct remains a debate among our sages, but both perspectives affirm that righteous conduct among gentiles holds value in God's eyes.

The Sound of One Hand Clapping: Rabbi Yochanan, Resh Lakish, and the Tiberian Academy

Dina Kolodny

Introduction

The early Amoraic period is perhaps one of the most influential in the development of Rabbinic Judaism. During Rome's "Crisis of the Third Century,"¹ Israel flourished as a center for Jewish learning and scholarship. In this period, the recently compiled Mishnah gained widespread acceptance as the fundamental work of Halachah and the Oral Torah. This, too, was due to the careful managing and rabbinic leadership of Rabbi Yochanan.

While the Amoraic era is the story of the gradual ascendancy of Babylonia over Israel as the center of Jewish learning and thought, throughout his lifetime, Rabbi Yochanan maintained Israel's preeminent status. He himself became one of the most influential rabbis in Jewish history, with his rulings quoted on almost every page of both the Jerusalem and the Babylonian Talmuds.

What was the secret to his success? What factors of personality, goals, and values allowed this "son of a smith" to rise to such dizzying heights?

¹ During the 200s, the relative peace that existed since Augustus was shattered, and Rome was wracked by civil wars, invasions, and economic decline.

Although the rabbis themselves had little interest in preserving biographical details for posterity, their core values, underlying motives, and personal reasoning can be reconstructed by carefully analyzing their recorded statements, legal rulings, and the stories told about them. The debates, narratives, and teachings involving Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish serve as particularly rich sources for understanding not only what drove the remarkable success and flourishing of the early Tiberian Academy, but also for developing a comprehensive character analysis of both Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish as individuals. Moreover, examining their interactions and conflicts illuminates the unique dynamic between these two towering figures.

Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish on the Patriarchate

Throughout the entire period of classical Jewish history (roughly the first six hundred years of the Common Era), one of the main conflicts in Jewish society was between its spiritual and temporal leaders. In Roman-occupied Israel, this tension was between the Rabbis and the Nasi, or "Patriarch."² Rome succeeded in ruling a vast empire by using provincial and local governments to administer conquered territories. The Sanhedrin, led by the Nasi, acted as the local administrative authority. The Rabbis, too, provided local leadership. Because of the latitude bestowed upon local leadership, these two bodies were left to cooperate or contend for authority. Rabbi Yochanan openly supported the power of the Nasi, who, at the time, was Rabbi Yehuda Nesia, also known as Rabbi II, the grandson of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. Rabbi Yochanan's support for the Patriarchate was a vital element of a three-part

² The terms "Patriarch" and "Patriarchate" refer to the Nasi and the political bureaucracy headed by the Nasi, respectively.

alliance between the Patriarchate, the Rabbinat, and the wealthy Priestly urban elites that helped all three groups flourish, maintaining Israel's Jewish identity under Roman rule. The Patriarchate provided political support to the Rabbis and the urban elites, the urban aristocracy provided financial support to both the Patriarchate and the Rabbinat, and the Academy in Tiberias provided judges which were of a caliber to strengthen the Patriarchate, helping maintain its Jewish character despite the central Roman rule, and encourage loyalty of the urban wealthy elite to Israel. As head of the Academy in Tiberias – the seat of Rabbi II and the largest and most important city in the Galilee – Rabbi Yochanan's support was a crucial component of the alliance. Indeed, this three-way alliance, along with providing mutual benefit to all the involved groups, was also a crucial reason why, while the rest of the Roman Empire struggled with economic and political unrest throughout the third century CE, Israel managed not only to survive, but thrive as a center of Jewish learning and culture.

In contrast, Resh Lakish was critical of Rabbi II and was one of the main opponents to the three-way alliance. Resh Lakish, like many of his rabbinic predecessors, was hostile to the power and influence of the Patriarchate, especially when the Nasi was at odds with the Rabbis. Unlike Rabbi Yochanan, who accepted the inferior status of the Rabbis to the Patriarch as a necessary evil in order to achieve the higher goal of rabbinic influence over Jewish life, Resh Lakish believed the Rabbis should hold the most influence.

One of the main ways that the Rabbis expressed and popularized their political and social views was through sermons on Biblical stories and passages. When commenting on stories centering on

kings and prophets,³ Rabbi Yochanan routinely supported the authority of the king, while Resh Lakish supported the prophets:

“Yerovam⁴ could not muster strength again during the days of Aviya;⁵ God struck him down and he died.” R. Shmuel said: Do you think it was Yerovam [who died]? No - It was Aviya! And why was he struck down? R. Yochanan said: Because he shamed Yerovam publicly, as it states: “...a great multitude and having with you the golden calves which Yerovam made as gods for you” (13:8). Resh Lakish said: He ridiculed Achiya HaShiloni,⁶ as it states: “Worthless men gathered about him, scoundrels...” (13:7).⁷

According to Rabbi Yochanan, Aviya’s sin was humiliating Yerovam, a king, whereas, according to Resh Lakish, it was insulting a prophet.

Furthermore, while Rabbi Yochanan often supported political leadership and sought to find positive aspects in even the most despicable of political leaders,⁸ Resh Lakish was much more critical of the very idea of political power, which he viewed as inherently corrupt.⁹

³ While the Rabbis lived in a post-prophetic period, and would frequently contrast themselves with the Biblical prophets (with the Rabbis often receiving the upper hand), nevertheless, the Rabbis considered the prophets as a sort of precursor to the rabbinic enterprise, and thus analyzed many stories involving prophets in this light.

⁴ One of the kings of the Kingdom of Israel.

⁵ One of the kings of the Kingdom of Yehuda.

⁶ A Navi.

⁷ Leviticus Rabbah 33:5.

⁸ See Sanhedrin 102b.

⁹ Richard Kimelman has noted that many of the manuscripts of Sanhedrin 103b include Resh Lakish stating that “Once a man becomes a leader ראש below, he becomes wicked רשע above,” although this is not present in all manuscript variants. All the manuscripts, however, include Rabbi Yochanan’s justification for why the letter נ was included: in order to preserve the honor of King David - the ancestor of the Nasi and the Resh Galuta (Kimelman, “The Conflict

One of the main episodes that demonstrates the difference between Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish's behavior towards the Patriarchate was when Rabbi II included the Rabbis in a tax that was meant to help pay for the building of a wall to surround Tiberias. While Patriarchal policy generally exempted the Rabbis from taxation,¹⁰ in order to ensure that the wall's building would be funded, Rabbi II broke with Patriarchal tradition and included the Rabbis in the tax. Resh Lakish's backlash was swift:

Rabbi Yehuda Nesia once imposed payment of the tax for the wall even on the Sages. Reish Lakish said to him: The Sages do not require protection, as it is written: "How precious are your dear ones to me, O God...If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand" (Psalms 139:17-18). ...And it follows by an a fortiori inference: If the grains of sand, which are fewer in number, protect the shore from the sea, barring it from flowing inland (see Jeremiah 5:22), do not all the more so the deeds of the righteous, which are greater in number, protect them? Consequently the Sages do not need additional protection. When Reish Lakish came before Rabbi Yoḥanan and reported the exchange to him, Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: What is the reason that you did not quote this verse to him: "I am a wall and my breasts are like towers" (Song of Songs 8:10), which may be explained as follows: "I am a wall"; this is referring to the Torah. "And my breasts are like towers"; these are Torah scholars, and towers do not require additional protection"?¹¹

Between Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Laqish on the Supremacy of the Patriarchate," 1981).

¹⁰ See Bava Batra 8a.

¹¹ Bava Batra 7b. As with all Talmudic stories, especially stories in the Bavli portraying Israeli rabbis, the historicity of the tale should not be accepted at face value, as the purpose of the stories was not to inform the audience of historical facts (a concept unknown to premodern authors), but rather to impress moral lessons on the listeners or readers of the story. Nonetheless, this portrayal of the relationship between Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan to the Nasi vis-à-vis the Rabbis is consistent with other portrayals of their views, not just in aggadic sections of the Talmuds (where drift occurred over time as later storytellers improved upon or changed earlier legends), but in

Tax exemptions for the Rabbis was one of the major reasons Tiberias had become the center of Torah scholarship in Israel. Though presumably all the Rabbis were against being taxed to fortify Tiberias strategically, Resh Lakish took a stand against not only the change in tax policy but also what he perceived to be a Patriarchal infringement on traditional rabbinic rights. Rabbi Yochanan remained committed to his alliance with the Nasi, but his respect for Resh Lakish's position, while refusing to explicitly aggravate Rabbi II, is apparent in his providing Resh Lakish an additional Scriptural argument. Indeed, it is noteworthy that Resh Lakish and not Rabbi Yochanan, the head of the Tiberian Academy, was willing to take a stand against Patriarchal encroachment of Rabbinic rights and power.

One of the main methods by which Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi II fortified their alliance was the integration of Rabbis into the Patriarch's bureaucracy. Rabbi II is infamous in Rabbinic literature for his appointing of ignorant men as judges in exchange for money, a practice decried by all the rabbis.¹² Rabbi Yochanan offered an alternative: well-trained Rabbinic scholars who supported the Patriarch's rule. Additionally, these Rabbis must be respected and respectable leaders of the community. As Reuven Kimelman writes:

In order to acquire clergy exemptions and appointments in communal administration for scholars, [Rabbi Yochanan] had to upgrade the scholarly class from within. Such upgrading demanded high standards of academic achievement and of personal deportment. ... Above all, as a jurist, a scholar's life was to be patterned after his teachings. Nothing was considered more despicable than preaching against wresting judgments,

halachic statements as well (which were much more carefully preserved, thanks to the Rabbis' insistence on proper citation). Thus, Talmudic stories can serve as a useful resource - if used carefully - for the purposes of understanding the Rabbinic characters that inhabit them.

¹² See Sanhedrin 7b.

respecting persons, taking bribes, lending on usury, and afflicting¹³ the widow or fatherless, and then, committing all these offenses.¹⁴

Rabbi Yochanan's hard work bore fruit, and the power of the Rabbis in the century following Rabbi Yochanan was known even to non-Jewish observers. Jerome writes in the early fifth century:

The religious teachers were the leaders of the community. The spiritual guides were also the secular guardians. In the latter capacity they appear to have been styled *praepositi*. Before assuming office, they had to pass an examination, the object of which was to test their capacity for deciding ritual questions.¹⁵

Rabbi Yochanan and the Urban Aristocracy

The third group in this three-way alliance consisted of the wealthy urban elites in Tiberias. Both the Rabbinate and the Patriarchate needed the financial support of this wealthy Kohanic class, and the wealthy elites required the political support of the Patriarchate, as well as halachic support from the rabbinic establishment, in order to preserve their status in the face of changing Roman attitudes towards wealthy urban elites throughout the empire.

During the third century, independent provincial wealthy elites threatened the centrality of Imperial Roman control, and the Roman state sought various ways to decrease the financial and political strength of the wealthy urban class, and instead rely on the support of the army.¹⁶ One of the main ways the Romans sought to curb their

¹³ This sentence combines statements in *Kohelet Rabbah* 9,16,1 and *Ruth Rabbah* 1,2.

¹⁴ Reuven Kimelman, *Rabbi Yochanan of Tiberias: Aspects of the Social and Religious History of Third Century Palestine*, (PhD dissertation, Yale University), 1977, p. 70).

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 73.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 76-77.

power was by placing greater financial and political burdens on them. Rich provincials were chosen by the State to work in non-paying and time-costly administrative roles.¹⁷ In order to escape these responsibilities, which oftentimes resulted in financial ruin, Rabbi Yochanan advised wealthy aristocrats to petition the government, and if that did not work, to run away.¹⁸ However, this led to a clash with Halachah – if in the wealthy landlord's absence, a squatter resided in and worked the land for three years, the land would be considered the squatter's.¹⁹ Rabbi Yochanan and other members of the Tiberian academy found leniencies for landowners, who fled positions designed to impoverish them, to maintain ownership of their lands. This protected the financial safety of the wealthy elite, and prevented land in Roman-occupied Israel from being stripped from Jewish hands, despite the best efforts of the Roman occupiers.²⁰

Additionally, Rabbi Yochanan sought to help the wealthy elites increase their wealth, not only protect it. Jewish law prevents charging interest to other Jews, but in the Roman Empire, especially in the eastern provinces, charging interest was one of the main sources of wealth.²¹ Such *sha'at ha'dechak* (שעת הדחק) halachic solutions protected the urban elites from crippling Roman edicts,

¹⁷ See Rabbi Yochanan's statement in Bereishit Rabbah 76:6: "'Behold, there were eyes like the eyes of a man in this horn' – (This is the policy) of the wicked government which begrudges a man his money. 'This one is rich, let us appoint him magistrate (archon); this one is rich, let us appoint him councilor (bouleutes).'"

¹⁸ Yerushalmi Moed Katan 2:3, 81b and Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 8:2, 26b.

¹⁹ See the third perek of Mishnah Bava Batra.

²⁰ See Yerushalmi Bava Batra 3:3, 14c.

²¹ Other sources of wealth in Roman-occupied Israel included the growing of grain, olives, and grapes, as well as participation in the textile industry. Rabbi Yochanan advised engaging in these areas of endeavor, and even urged people to pray for their success. See Bava Metzia 107a and Bava Batra 91a.

and garnered their financial support. This played out both in direct financial patronage of rabbinic scholars, and, most importantly, the financial support of rabbinic sons-in-law, through the marriages between the daughters of wealthy urban aristocrats and rabbis.²²

The three-way alliance between the Patriarchate, the Rabbinate, and the wealthy urban aristocracy paved the way for Rabbinic power over late-antique Israel. The century following Rabbi Yochanan's death saw Rabbis wielding unparalleled strength and influence. Cooperation between the Rabbinate and the wealthy elites enabled Torah scholarship to flourish at a high level. Cooperation between the Rabbinate and the Patriarchate ensured that political matters would be dealt with according to Jewish religious principles, a state of affairs that their Jewish Babylonian counterparts – as well as many other minorities within the Roman Empire – could only dream of.²³

Rabbi Yochanan and the Mishnah

Rabbi Yochanan's support of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's Mishnah is perhaps the most important achievement in his life. Indeed, the impact of his support was so great that many people are not even aware that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's Mishnah was *ever* not viewed as the first and primary code of Jewish law. Rav Sherira Gaon, the first historian of the Talmudic age, wrote in the tenth century:

When everybody saw the form of the Mishnah, the truthfulness of its teachings and the exactness of its words, they abandoned their previous formulations and compilations. These halachos were shunted aside and became like a braissa. They are utilized as a commentary or for their more elaborate style. However, the

²² See Pesachim 53b and Sanhedrin 99a.

²³ In the ancient world, citizens had the choice to either attend secular national courts or their local religious court. Thus, these legal systems competed with each other for participants.

Jewish people gave [only] these halachos [binding] authority. They accepted it faithfully when they saw it, and no one has disputed its authority.²⁴

This position has long remained the traditional view. However, such a position ignores evidence from the Gemara and other Amoraic texts that hint that the acceptance of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's Mishnah was a much slower, more gradual process.²⁵

Compared to their successors, the first generations of Amoraim in both Israel and Babylonia did not place the Mishnah on as high a pedestal. In Israel, collections of Tannaitic thought were collated by Rabbi Chiyya and Rabbi Oshaiya years after the redaction of the Mishnah. Amoraim frequently ignored Rabbi's codifying decisions, declaring an anonymous position – the position likely favored by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi – as the opinion of a specific individual, providing themselves a possible route out of following the Mishnah's codifying decisions. It was only Rabbi Yochanan's influence that changed this, and transformed the status of the Mishnah into that which Jews are familiar with today. The primary way he accomplished this was by creating a hierarchy among the Tannaim, according to which, Rabbis could determine the practical Halachah when the Mishnaic text presented an argument but did not indicate whose opinion a ruling should follow.²⁶

²⁴ Rav Sherira Gaon, *Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon*, translated and annotated by Rabbi Nosson Dovid Rabinowich (Moznaim Press: Jerusalem, 1988), p.28.

²⁵ David Weiss Halivni, "The Reception Accorded to Rabbi Judah's Mishnah," in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, vol. 2: *Aspects of Judaism in the Graeco-Roman Period*, edited by E. P. Sanders, A. I. Baumgarten, and Alan Mendelson (London: SCM Press, 1981), 204–212.

²⁶ In fact, some have argued that the very fact that the Mishnah is often unclear about what the halachic ruling should be – and instead simply states various rabbis' positions without a bottom line – is evidence of the fact that the Mishnah was never intended to be a code of law, but rather a sort of textbook

The rules go as follows:

1. The Halachah follows the anonymous Mishnah.²⁷
2. When there is a debate between Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues, the Halachah follows Rabbi Akiva.²⁸
3. When there is a debate between Rabbi Yosei and his colleagues, the Halachah follows Rabbi Yosei, because “his reasoning is with him.”²⁹
4. When there is a debate between Rabbi Yehuda and his colleagues, except for Rabbi Yosei, the Halachah follows Rabbi Yehuda.³⁰
5. When there is a debate between Rabbi Shimon and his colleagues, except for Rabbi Yosei and Rabbi Yehuda, the Halachah follows Rabbi Shimon.³¹

of the legal thought of the Tannaim. Whatever Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s original goal was, however, is irrelevant for the purposes of this paper.

²⁷ According to the Bavli, Rabbi Yochanan believed the anonymous Mishnah reflects the majority position, and is therefore the most binding, and is also in accordance with the view of Rabbi Meir, the teacher of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi (see Shabbat 46a and Sanhedrin 86a). However, in the Yerushalmi, the view that the anonymous Mishnah is in accordance with Rabbi Meir’s views is actually expressed by Resh Lakish, right after Rabbi Yochanan’s statement that the anonymous Mishnah reflects the majority position (Yerushalmi Yevamot 4:11, 6b). Albert Baumgarten argues that Resh Lakish’s statement is in argument with Rabbi Yochanan. Resh Lakish views the position reflected by anonymous mishnayot to be the personal view of Rabbi Meir, while Rabbi Yochanan views it to be reflective of the majority position [Albert I. Baumgarten, “R. Yochanan and Resh Lakish on Anonymous Mishnayot,” in *Jewish Law Association Studies*, vol. 2, ed. Bernard S. Jackson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 75–88]. While Resh Lakish, as a member of the Tiberian academy and disciple of Rabbi Yochanan, valued the Mishnah more than his predecessors, he did not revere the Mishnah as highly as did Rabbi Yochanan.

²⁸ See Eruvin 46b, where the rules are attributed to Rabbi Yochanan’s students.

²⁹ See Eruvin 46b and Yerushalmi Eruvin 3:1 42a, where the rule is attributed to Rabbi Yochanan.

³⁰ Eruvin 46b and Yerushalmi Terumot 3:1 42a, where the rule is attributed to Rabbi Yochanan.

³¹ Yerushalmi Terumot 3:1 42a, where the rule is attributed to Rabbi Yochanan.

6. When there is a debate between Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi and his colleagues, the Halachah follows Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi.³²

With these rules, Rabbi Yochanan – along with his students in the Tiberian academy – revolutionized how Jews view Halachah and halachic texts. Before, there were three main ways that a ruling in a halachic debate was determined: social and political pressures,³³ a majority vote, or the widespread acceptance of the decision of a greatly respected Torah scholar. While Rabbi Yochanan maintained the spirit of the latter,³⁴ his rankings were in many important

³² Eruvin 46b and Yerushalmi Eruvin 3:1 42a, where the rule is attributed to Rabbi Yochanan's students and to Rabbi Yochanan, respectively. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi himself appears little in the actual text of the Mishnah, which makes this rule appear incongruous with the other rules of halachic arbitration. Those rules mention rabbinic figures who appear frequently throughout the Mishnah. However, the existence of this rule is much less peculiar when one posits that the purpose of this rule was less in order to practically determine the Halachah in the case of debate, than to create a value judgement on Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi himself. By placing his halachic decisions above his contemporaries, Rabbi Yochanan is supporting Rabbi's redactional decisions as well. As the redactor of the Mishnah, total support and confidence in Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi is required if one is to view the Mishnah as a binding text.

³³ Some examples include the preference for Hillel's school as opposed to the school of Shammai and the rejection of many of the positions of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus.

³⁴ The dual claims – that the Halachah follows the anonymous Mishnah and that the anonymous Mishnah reflects the majority opinion – preserve the principle of respecting the majority view in rabbinic decision-making. Additionally, while it was Rabbi Yochanan and his students who formalized the halachic rankings of various Tannaim, the rankings reflect prior views on the relative greatness of these various rabbis. Rabbi Akiva, the most revered rabbi in Israel in the early second century, and the teacher of all the other rabbis with explicit rules regarding them, was a natural choice to be the winner whenever he debates with anyone else. (Rabbi Yishmael's students resided mainly in Babylonia, and thus Rabbi Yishmael's thought is found little in the Mishnah). Rabbi Yosei was seen as exceedingly bright, as evidenced by the fact that unlike any of the other Tannaim, a reason is provided why he ought to win whenever he debates anyone else in a Mishnah. Rabbi Shimon (bar Yochai), on the other hand, while widely respected, seemed to be much less involved

respects an entirely new way of viewing Halachah. They provided an incredibly effective rule-of-thumb with which to approach Halachah. When evaluating the strengths of each position in a particular halachic debate, the status of the Tanna within the ranking system could be used as a heuristic when the Mishnah and other Tannaitic texts leave the ruling otherwise unclear.³⁵

Rabbi Yochanan's motives for establishing the preeminence of the Mishnah were informed by the same values that led him to form the close alliance with the Patriarchate and the wealthy urban class. The current situation was untenable – division among Jews in Roman-occupied Israel was an existential threat to Judaism. Rabbi Yochanan realized the importance of adopting a single legal text.

with the wider halachic world, and is thus much lower down in the ranking than some of his peers. (The legends surrounding him and his time spent hiding from the Romans in a cave in Meron are perhaps evidence that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai was a very knowledgeable scholar, but was not as involved with the Jewish community as those around him).

³⁵ A prime example of this can be found in a comment of Tosafot on Rosh Hashanah 33a. The Gemara there discusses the Mishnah's implication that women should be prevented from blowing shofar on Shabbat. In that context, the Gemara mentions a debate between Rabbis Yosei and Shimon on the one hand, and Rabbi Yehuda on the other, as to whether women can perform semicha on an animal before it is sacrificed. According to Rabbi Yehuda, women are prohibited from performing semicha, as the Halachah applies exclusively to men. Rabbis Yosei and Shimon disagree, and argue that women are permitted to perform semicha on a sacrificial animal if they wish to, but are not required to do so. The Gemara makes no mention as to what the actual Halachah is, but it is implied that Rabbi Yehuda is correct since the Mishnah seems to have a similar implication. Tosafot argues that despite this, the Halachah is that women *are* allowed to perform semicha on an animal, because the debate is between Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Yosei, and in an argument between Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Yosei, the Halachah is in accordance with Rabbi Yosei. This comment by Tosafot is one of the main sources cited in support of women's voluntary practice of mitzvot.

Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish on Halachah³⁶

Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish are perhaps most famous for their many halachic debates found throughout both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds. Behind the technicalities of their arguments and debates, Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish differed in their fundamental views of Halachah, and many of the debates between these two Talmudic giants originate from these differences. Rabbi Yochanan believed that the reasons behind mitzvot are knowable, and therefore are an important factor when determining the Halachah. In contrast, Resh Lakish thought that the reasons behind the mitzvot cannot be known. Thus, he believed that we observe mitzvot only because they were commanded by God. As such, the hypothetical logic behind the formation of a mitzvah is irrelevant when determining the practical Halachah.

Pesachim 34 includes a debate between Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish regarding terumah (tithes) that was left unguarded. According to Rabbi Yochanan, the unguarded terumah is prohibited because there is a concern that it could have been rendered ritually impure while unsupervised. However, if it could be ascertained that the terumah was still pure, the terumah would be permitted for use and consumption. Resh Lakish, on the other hand, argues that it is prohibited simply because the verse states that terumah must be guarded, and thus, even if it could be ascertained that the terumah had not been rendered ritually impure, it would still be prohibited,

³⁶ This section was influenced greatly by Isidore Epstein, "The Religious and Psychosocial Motives in the Halachah of Rabbi Johanan and Resh Lakish." *Meyer Waxman Jubilee Volume: On the Occasion of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, edited by Judah Rosenthal (Chicago: College of Jewish Studies Press and Mordechai Newman Publishing House, 1966), pp. 82-101.

because the commandment to guard the terumah had not been fulfilled.

This fundamental debate continues in their rulings in criminal law. In Ketubot 34b, the Gemara discusses the principle of **קם ליה בדרכה מיניה** – if a person is liable for two punishments, they only receive the greater punishment.³⁷ Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish argue over what should be done if the graver sin was performed unwittingly, and the transgressor would therefore not receive the death penalty or lashes. According to Rabbi Yochanan, such a person would be liable for the lesser punishment, since they are not liable for the greater punishment. However, Resh Lakish argues that they would still be exempt, since, had the sin been performed wittingly, they would have been liable to a greater punishment.

Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish on Aggadah and the Messianic Age

As was mentioned previously, Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish took full advantage of midrashic exegesis in order to further their political and social agendas. The third century of the Common Era was a period of uncertainty and stress, not just in the Roman Empire, but throughout the ancient world. With this background in mind, Rabbi Yochanan's and Resh Lakish's stances on the messianic age can be better understood. They were not statements made in a vacuum, but rather were targeted teachings taught by the greatest Jewish religious leaders of their time in response to real issues Jews faced in their day.

Despite their many disagreements, as cohorts in difficult times, Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish had similar views on the coming

³⁷ For example, if a person committed murder, and in the process burned down the victim's home, they would only be liable for the death penalty, and would not receive a monetary penalty for the destruction of the property.

of the messiah. Since both men lived after the disastrous failure of the Bar Kokhba Revolt in the 130s, they understood that outright military resistance to Roman rule would prove catastrophic. As the years, decades, and eventually centuries passed with no sign of imminent redemption, Jews throughout the ancient world began to despair that they would ever see an end to the exile. Thus, while Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish urged their fellow Jews to continue to believe in and hope for the coming Messianic Age, they also taught how the average Jew should try to spur on the coming of the messiah:

Rabbi Yoḥanan said: The Holy One blessed be He said to Israel: 'Even though I set a limit for the end, and it will come whether they repent or do not repent, it will come only at its time. If they repent, even one day, I will bring it not at its appointed time.'³⁸

Thus, according to Rabbi Yochanan, it is through the observance of the mitzvot, rather than revolutionary force, that the messianic age will arrive. Additionally, both Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish urged the Jewish people to maintain hope in the face of the seemingly endless exile, and to believe that the Messianic Age would come swiftly:

"For the day of vengeance is in My heart"? Rabbi Yoḥanan says that it means that God said: I revealed the day of vengeance to My heart, but I did not reveal it to My limbs, as it were, as I never stated it explicitly. Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish says that it means that God said: I revealed this secret to My heart, but I did not reveal it to the ministering angels.³⁹

Additionally, Jews had long suffered from the mockery of their non-Jewish neighbors, who asserted Jews had been forsaken by their God, and ridiculed them for remaining loyal to their religion. The growing power of Christianity in the first two centuries of the

³⁸ Shemot Rabbah 25:12.

³⁹ Sanhedrin 99a.

Common Era exacerbated this existential taunt. Thus, along with assuring the Jewish community that they would be redeemed one day in the unknowable future, Jewish leaders had to ensure that the Jews suffering persecution and humiliation would not heed their gentile neighbors' taunts:

Reish Lakish said: The community of Israel said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, even when a man marries a second wife after his first wife, he certainly recalls the deeds of his first wife. Yet You have not only forsaken me, but You have forgotten me as well. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Israel: My daughter, I created twelve constellations in the firmament, and for each and every constellation I have created thirty armies, and for each and every army I have created thirty legions [ligyon], and for each and every legion I have created thirty infantry division leaders [rahaton], and for each and every infantry division leader I have created thirty military camp leaders [karton], and for each and every military camp leader I have created thirty leaders of forts [gastera], and on each and every leader of a fort I have hung three hundred and sixty-five thousand stars corresponding to the days of the solar year. And all of them I have created only for your sake; and you said the Lord has forsaken me and the Lord has forgotten me?"⁴⁰

Conclusion

Little is known about the lives of the rabbis whose thought makes up the foundation of Rabbinic Judaism. They helped shape a system which has endured through two thousand years of peaceful prosperity and bloody oppression. All that remains is a collection of legal debates and aggadic legends. The writings produced by their students provide a tantalizing glimpse of the characters of these men and the world they inhabited. Despite the scarcity of information about their personal, private lives, Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish rank among the most quoted figures in Rabbinic

⁴⁰ Brachot 32b.

literature. Without these two towering figures, our halachic system would be much poorer:

Rabbi Simeon ben Laqish said, if a patriarch sinned, one whips him by a court of three [judges]... Rabbi Jehudah the Prince heard this and became angry. He sent Goths to catch Rabbi Simeon ben Laqish. They beat him. He fled to Magdala, some say to Kefar Hittim. The next day, Rabbi Johanan went to the assembly hall, when Rabbi Jehudah the Prince also went to the assembly hall. He said to him, why is the master not telling us words of instruction? He started **clapping with one hand**. He asked, does one clap with one? He answered him, no, but **without ben Laqish there is nothing**.⁴¹

⁴¹ Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 2:1 19d-20a.

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Yosef: A Case Study in Middah Ke'neged Middah

Sarah Schafer

Yosef is colloquially known as “Yosef HaTzaddik” or “Yosef the Dreamer,” remembered for his resistance to Eshet Potifar’s seduction and for his prophetic visions which enabled him to save the world from famine. However, a crucial part of his narrative often gets overlooked. After Yosef rises to power in Egypt, he begins collecting grain for the imminent famine. Once the famine arrives, he strips the Egyptians of their money,¹ livestock,² and land,³ reducing them to permanent tenant farmers,⁴ all in return for food which he had collected from their very own fields. Although his policies ensured survival, it seems that Yosef cruelly capitalized on the people’s desperation at their most vulnerable moment. Why did Yosef behave so harshly?

I would like to suggest that Yosef’s complicated motives began in his childhood home. From a young age, Yosef was an outsider, ostracized by his brothers, who were jealous of their father’s favoritism. Hoping to earn their respect and acceptance, Yosef shares his prophetic dreams with them, the first one, of stalks of wheat, and the second, of planets and stars.

¹ Bereishit 47:14.

² Ibid 15-17.

³ Ibid 18-20. (Only the priests are allowed to retain their own land (Bereishit 47:22,26.)

⁴ Ibid 23.

Yosef was not quite sure of the dreams' meanings, but his brothers and father⁵ interpret them offensively. Instead of the dreams gaining Yosef acceptance, they increase the animosity between him and his brothers.⁶ The recounting of his dreams does not end well for Yosef—he ends up in a pit and is sold into Egyptian slavery—but he emerges with an even stronger desire for acceptance, along with an awareness of the power he holds in dream interpretation.

Yosef brings this newfound knowledge with him into Egypt, where after a short stint as Potifar's servant, he is thrown into jail where he encounters two of Pharaoh's officers. Yosef approaches them, seeking to please these powerfully connected people, and the perfect opportunity appears when they are both troubled by dreams. Yosef prophetically interprets the cupbearer's dream and cleverly asks for a favor in return,⁷ hoping his talent in the important realm of dream interpretation will earn his release from prison.

Yosef also shares with the cupbearer how he came to be in Egypt:

כִּי־גָנַב גָּנַבְתִּי מֵאֶרֶץ הָעִבְרִי:

For I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews.⁸

Here, Yosef is beginning to understand how to utilize dream interpretation to his advantage, but the abandonment of his family remains in the forefront of his mind, and his hope to return to them continues to motivate him.

⁵ The Malbim (Bereishit 37:10, s.v. ויספר) teaches that Yosef intentionally shared the second dream, which included a prophecy about his deceased mother, in front of his father and brothers, knowing he would be rebuked for it, and hoping this would disprove their belief that he was favored.

⁶ Bereishit 37.

⁷ Bereishit 40:14.

⁸ Ibid 15.

Yosef's deep desire to reunite with his brothers begins to take shape when Pharaoh is troubled by dreams of his own. At that moment, the cupbearer finally remembers Yosef and recommends him to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. Yosef is released from prison, and by now, he has mastered the art of using dream interpretation to his advantage. He explains prophetically that the dreams predict seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine, and then subtly suggests himself as the ideal candidate to oversee preparations, an idea Pharaoh enthusiastically accepts.

As second-in-command, Yosef begins to strategically prepare for the impending famine. Drawing on the experiences of his ancestors who experienced Egypt as a global source for sustenance during times of famine,⁹ he anticipates that other nations would turn to Egypt for food. With this foresight, Yosef establishes a monopoly over grain, ensuring that when the famine would reach Canaan, his brothers would have no choice but to come to Egypt and buy food from him. He collects grain aggressively from the Egyptians' own fields, limiting their ability to store personal reserves and making them dependent on the state supply. In doing so, Yosef positions himself as the sole provider not only for Egypt but for the surrounding nations, including his own family.

During these seven years, it seems Yosef's family continues to be on his mind, and he is troubled by the distance between them. This is shown through the names he selects for his sons. He names his first son Menashe,

בְּיָנֹשְׁנִי אֱלֹקִים אֶת־כָּל־עֲמָלִי וְאֶת־כָּל־בֵּית אָבִי

Because God has made me forget all my travails and all my father's house.

⁹ Avraham runs to Egypt to escape a famine (Bereishit 12:10), and Yitzchak would have done the same except that God explicitly tells him not to, but it is clear that Egypt is a viable option for survival of the famine (Bereishit 26:1,2).

Although Yosef claims to have forgotten his father's house, if he had truly moved on, he would not mention it at all, and certainly would not preserve it forever in his child's name. Yosef names his second son Ephraim,

כִּי־הִפְרִנִי אֱלֹקִים בְּאֶרֶץ עֲנִי

Because Hashem has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.¹⁰

Even as second-in-command, he still refers to Egypt as the land of his affliction. This suggests that he feels that something fundamental is still missing from his life – his relationship with his family. I believe Yosef is desperately trying to move past his childhood abandonment, but its impact remains, and he still desires to reunite with his family.

Yosef's plan is successful. His brothers in fact do come to Egypt to buy food. Yosef performs a series of tests on them, including detaining Binyamin to see if his brothers are still driven by the same immature jealousy over their father's favoritism, or if they have changed and now prioritize their brother's life – and, by extension, are ready to accept Yosef as well. Only once they show the degree to which they have changed does Yosef reveal himself. He finally experiences the reconciliation and acceptance within his family that he has desperately yearned for all his life.

However, as Yosef is dining with his brothers, the Torah relays:

וַיֵּשִׁימוּ לוֹ לִבְדּוֹ וְלָהֶם לִבְדָּם וְלַמִּצְרִים הָאֵלֵּלִים אֹתוֹ לִבְדָּם כִּי לֹא יוֹכְלוּן
הַמִּצְרִים לֶאֱכֹל אֶת־הַעֲבָרִים לֶחֶם כִּי־תוֹעֵבָה הוּא לַמִּצְרִים:

They set for him alone, for them alone, and for the Egyptians eating with them alone, because the Egyptians would not eat bread with the Hebrews for it was an abomination to the Egyptians.¹¹

¹⁰ Bereishit 41:51-52.

¹¹ Bereishit 43:32.

The Egyptian's refuse to eat with them. Yosef has finally achieved acceptance within his own family only to realize that he is not accepted by the society he helps rule. Even his lowly servants will not dine with him. Once again, he is tortured by the familiar feeling that he does not truly belong. Yosef has accumulated immense wealth and authority in Egypt, and by now, he does not want to simply step away from it or admit his outsider status. Thus, Yosef changes his focus, and the supply of grain that Yosef originally amassed to bring his brothers to him, becomes the means of earning acceptance for himself and his family within Egyptian society. Yosef reunites with his family down in Egypt, and then tears Egyptian society apart.

First, Yosef charges the Egyptians for the grain he collected from their own fields, continuing until all the money in Egypt is gone.¹² Then he allows them to trade their livestock for food, until that too is exhausted.¹³ Then, Yosef buys their land¹⁴ and takes an even more drastic step—he relocates the entire population from one end of the country to the other.¹⁵ Why would he do this? By uprooting the Egyptians from their ancestral homes, Yosef effectively turns them into strangers in their own land. He erases their local ties, disorients them, and levels the social landscape. In doing so, he creates a population of foreigners, so that his own family, who themselves are foreigners from Canaan, will not be the only strangers in an unfamiliar land.¹⁶ Then, in an ultimate blow, Yosef reduces the Egyptians to tenant farmers—forever in debt to the crown, no longer

¹² Bereishit 47:14.

¹³ Ibid 15-17.

¹⁴ Ibid 18-20.

¹⁵ Ibid 21.

¹⁶ Rashi to Bereishit 41:21, s.v. ואת העם העביר

independent landowners, and only half-members of society, they are citizens of a lower class than Yosef's family.

Yosef's motivation is made clear by the juxtaposition of pesukim. Both at the start and end of the famine, the Torah goes out of its way to highlight the contrast between Yosef's family's situation and that of the Egyptians. At the start of the famine, Bereishit 47:12-13 states:

וַיַּכְלֵל יוֹסֵף אֶת־אָבִיו וְאֶת־אָחִיו וְאֶת כָּל־בֵּית אָבִיו לֶחֶם לְפִי הָטָף: וְלָחֶם אֵין בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ כִּי־כָבֵד הָרָעָב מְאֹד וַתָּלֶה אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן מִפְּנֵי הָרָעָב:

Joseph sustained his father, and his brothers, and all his father's household with bread, down to the little ones. Now there was no bread in all the world, for the famine was very severe; both the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine.¹⁷

These pesukim are directly next to each other to highlight that while Yosef and his family are thriving in Egypt with excess food,¹⁸ the rest of the population is left starving and destitute.

When the famine ends, Bereshit 47:26-27 states:

וַיֵּשֶׁם אֶתֶּה יוֹסֵף לֶחֶם עַד־הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה עַל־אֲדַמַּת מִצְרַיִם לַפְּרָעָה לַחֲמֵשׁ רֶק אֲדַמַּת הַכֹּהֲנִים לִבְדָּם לֹא הָיְתָה לַפְּרָעָה: וַיָּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּאֶרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן וַיֵּאָחֲזוּ בָּהּ וַיַּפְּרוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ מְאֹד:

And Joseph made it into a land law in Egypt, which is still valid, that a fifth should be Pharaoh's; only the land of the priests did not become Pharaoh's. Thus, Israel settled in the country of Egypt, in the region of Goshen; they acquired holdings in it, and were fertile and increased greatly.¹⁹ The Egyptians are left as impoverished strangers in unfamiliar neighborhoods on land they are merely borrowing from Pharaoh, while Yosef and his

¹⁷ Bereishit 47:12,13.

¹⁸ The Siftei Chachamim (Bereishit 47:12, s.v. **לפי הצריך לכל בני ביתם**), says that the pasuk clarifies Yosef had enough for the children because children scatter bread unnecessarily, so it shows Yosef had more bread for his family than they needed.

¹⁹ Bereishit 47:26,27.

family dwell securely in Goshen with a stronghold on the land, wealthy enough to profligate.

The famine is bookended by juxtapositions of the Egyptians' suffering with Yosef's family's life of luxury. Yosef has stripped the Egyptians of their wealth, effectively reducing them to second-class citizens, while securing resources and status for his own family – ensuring they become part of Egypt's upper class.²⁰

Even though it seems clear that Yosef's deep desire for acceptance and his need for control lead him to treat the Egyptians unethically, Chazal still hold him in the highest regard, even giving him the title Yosef HaTzaddik. How can these both be true?

The Gemara says:

אָמְרוּ עָלָיו עַל יוֹסֵף הַצַּדִּיק: בְּכֹל יוֹם וַיּוֹם, הָיְתָה אִשְׁתּוֹ פּוֹטִיפָר מְשַׁדָּלָתוֹ

They said about Yosef HaTzaddik that each and every day, the wife of Potiphar tried to entice him.²¹

No matter what form of seduction she would use, Yosef would stand firm and refuse her, driven by his deep belief in Hashem. This unwavering commitment to moral integrity is what earns him the title HaTzaddik.

Yosef displays that same inner conviction in our story through his determination to reunite with his family and earn their acceptance, even if it means sacrificing the welfare of the Egyptians. However, I believe that in this case, his behavior is a sin. And that, paradoxically, is what makes him truly deserving of the title HaTzaddik. His greatness lies not in perfection but in his ongoing

²⁰Yosef's family are also outsiders in Egyptian society due to their profession as shepherds. But this gains an advantage during the famine when livestock becomes a form of currency – further demonstrating that they hold wealth and access to resources that most Egyptians no longer do.

²¹Yoma 35b.

struggle to discern when his conviction serves righteousness and when it serves self-interest. Just like his father Yaakov, who deceived his own father Yitzchak yet was called Emet because of his lifelong battle with honesty, Yosef is called HaTzaddik not because he is flawless but because he strives to be righteous. His conviction for righteousness is admirable, even as he struggles with its application.

But if my claim that Yosef sinned in his treatment of the Egyptians is correct, shouldn't he receive some form of consequence from God? After all, Yaakov receives a divine middah ke'neged middah punishment when he believes he is marrying Rachel only to discover that it is her sibling Leah beneath the veil – just as he once deceived his father by pretending to be his sibling Esav. If Yosef truly acted unfairly toward the Egyptians, wouldn't he similarly receive some form of divine punishment?

I would suggest that Yosef actually does! The beginning of Shiabud Mitzrayim, our enslavement in Egypt, is too closely aligned with Yosef's economic policies to be purely coincidental. A new king arises in Egypt, one who feels threatened by a growing foreign population. His first move is to outsmart them²² by lowering their status: he taxes them, seizes their wealth, and forces them into labor, making them subservient to the crown.²³ Sound familiar? Yosef, too, was a foreigner who rose to power in Egypt. As an outsider and a minority, he implemented a harsh economic policy that left the native Egyptians stripped of their grain, money, livestock, and

²² Shemot 1:10, הָבָה נִתְחַכְמָה לוֹ

²³ Ibid 8-11.

land.²⁴ He transformed them into tenant farmers, dependent upon and subservient to the crown.

There are abundant parallels between these two stories – some seemingly minor, but together they highlight how Pharaoh adapted his system of enslavement from Yosef's earlier policies. When Yosef purchased land and displaced the Egyptian population, he notably left the priests untouched.²⁵ Pharaoh appears to have learned from this, choosing to respect religious leaders and likewise exempting the tribe of Levi from the forced labor imposed on the rest of Israel.²⁶ The textual parallels reinforce this connection: Pharaoh forces the people to build *ערי מסכנות*, storage cities,²⁷ echoing the storage areas Yosef created to collect grain from the Egyptians.

Furthermore, after Yosef reduces the Egyptians to tenant farmers,²⁸ they exclaim: *וְהִיָּינוּ עֲבָדִים לַפַּרְעֹה* – *we shall be slaves to Pharaoh*,²⁹ foreshadowing the very words that generations of Jews would later use to describe their own enslavement, *עֲבָדִים הִיָּינוּ לַפַּרְעֹה*, *בְּמִצְרַיִם* – *We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt*.

Shiabud Mitzrayim was not an isolated tragedy; it was a direct consequence of Yosef's own actions. In building a powerful economic system that reduced ordinary Egyptians to subservience, Yosef unintentionally laid the groundwork for future oppression. The very system he designed is turned against his own family, the very people he had created the system to protect! In classic middah

²⁴ Another interesting parallel is that Yosef doesn't collect land of the priests (Bereishit 47:22) and many parshanim say that Pharaoh didn't enslave the Kohanim, and instead they worked as police for him.

²⁵ Bereishit 47:22.

²⁶ Rabbeinu Bachya, Shemot 5:4 s.v. *לִכְסֹב לְעֹנֻתֵיכֶם*

²⁷ Shemot 1:11.

²⁸ Bereishit 47:23, *וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל־הָעָם הֵן קָנִיתִי אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם*

²⁹ Ibid 25.

ke'neged middah fashion, the very tools that Yosef used to unfairly dominate the Egyptians later become the instruments of Pharaoh's oppression of Yosef's descendants.

By focusing on an often-overlooked part of the Yosef narrative, a new perspective emerges – not only on Yosef's character but also on the broader history of Bnei Yisrael. Understanding the lasting impact of Yosef's childhood abandonment, particularly his deep need for acceptance, offers a compelling explanation for his seemingly harsh and undeserved treatment of the Egyptians. Furthermore, the clear parallels between Yosef's management of the Egyptians during the famine and the later enslavement of Bnei Yisrael shed new light on the story of Shi'abud Mitzrayim, understanding it as a divine consequence, middah ke'neged middah.

The Journey of Rome's Jews: From Ancient Times to Today

Aliza Spizzichino

Introduction

Of all the Jewish communities in the world, the Roman Jewish Community (also known as Bnei Romi) is believed to be one of the oldest, with roots stretching back over two millennia. Having studied in a Sephardi primary school and then an Ashkenazi secondary school, it felt like I had studied just about every Jewish community except for my own. I am a Roman Jew, born and raised in the UK, with limited exposure to my ancestral traditions.

It became obvious that this paper was an opportunity to delve into my own heritage. So I decided to investigate the origins of my community and, by extension, my own family lineage. I wanted to explore the importance of the Jewish Ghetto in Rome, and the history and unique minhagim and prayers of the Roman Jewish community.

The History of the Jews in Rome

The Roman Jewish community is often regarded as one of the most ancient in the Jewish diaspora, with roots extending back to the Second Temple period.¹ Unlike Sephardi Jews (descendants of

¹Fondazione Beni Culturali Ebraici in Italia (29 October 2021). "The Jewish Story of Rome, Italy," <https://www.worldjewishtravel.org/listing/the-jewish-story-of-rome>

Spanish Jewry) or Ashkenazi Jews (from Germanic Europe), Roman Jews trace their ancestry directly to Judea.²

According to a variety of sources, Jews arrived in Rome as early as the 2nd Century BCE, drawn by opportunities to establish business connections in the flourishing Roman Republic.³ We have written evidence from that time, as we can see in the Book of Maccabees Chapter 8:

וַיֵּשְׂאוּ אֶת רִגְלָם וַיֵּלְכוּ מִהֶלֶךְ רַב עַד בּוֹאֵם לְרֹמָא... יְהוּדָה הַמַּכְבִּי וְאֶחָיו וְעַם
הַיְּהוּדִים שָׁלְחוּנוּ אֲלֵיכֶם לְהָקִים בְּרִית שְׁלוֹם אִתְּכֶם. וְעַתָּה הוֹאִילוּ נָא כְּתוֹב
זְכוֹן בְּסֵפֶר, כִּי אַחֲיֵכֶם וְאֲנָשֵׁי בְרִיתְכֶם הֵמָּה.

They went therefore to Rome, which was a very great journey ...
Judas Maccabeus with his brethren, and the people of the Jews,
have sent us unto you, to make a confederacy and peace with
you, and that we might be registered your confederates and
friends.⁴

In this source, we see that Eupoleus son of John and Jason son of Eleazar sought an alliance with Judas Maccabeus, leader of the revolt against the rule of King Antiochus Epiphanes over the land of Israel. These two ambassadors, according to tradition, were hosted by Jewish merchants and freed slaves that were already living in Rome.⁵

² Openshaw, Gene (8 February 2014). 'Rome's Jewish Legacy'
<https://www.ricksteves.com/watch-read-listen/read/articles/romes-jewish-legacy>

³ Misano, Marco (14 August 2020). 'History', <https://romanjews.com/history/>

⁴ The book of Maccabees I was written during 2nd Temple Judea (c.145 - c.125 BCE) and is an apocryphal work about the victories of the Maccabees over the Syrian Greeks. Written in Hebrew by a Jewish author who may have been an eyewitness to the events he describes, the work is considered an important source for the period. It has no official religious status in Judaism but it is often studied to enrich one's understanding of the events commemorated on Chanukah.

⁵ Jewish Community of Rome (28 May 2023). "The Jews in Ancient Rome,"
<https://romaebraica.it/en/history/>

In 63 BCE, Judea was conquered by the Romans and was incorporated into the Roman Republic by General Pompey. Pompey had been asked to mediate the dispute between Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II, the two sons of the Hasmonean Queen Alexandra Salome, over the right to inherit the throne. The conflict led to a war, and Pompey himself claimed power. The conquest resulted in the end of an independent Jewish state, incorporating Judea into the Roman Republic, and later, a province in the Roman Empire.⁶ Pompey also enslaved Jewish prisoners and brought them to Rome. Many of them were redeemed by the local Jewish community, and chose to remain in Rome.⁷

Although Pompey entered the Kodesh HaKodashim, and thus desecrated it, he removed neither ceremonial objects nor other treasure, and the following day ordered the Beit HaMikdash cleansed and its rituals resumed.⁸

Despite Pompey largely allowing free religious practice in Judea, the divide between religious views caused clashes between the Jews and gentiles. This, alongside imperialism and heavy taxes, precipitated the First Jewish Revolt in 66 CE. Jewish forces managed to expel the Romans from Jerusalem, but Emperor Nero responded by sending General Vespasian to meet the Jewish forces. Vespasian was proclaimed Emperor, and in April of 70 CE, the Roman General Titus besieged Jerusalem.⁹

⁶ Rocca, Samuel (2008). *The Forts of Judaea 168 BC - AD 73: From the Maccabees to the Fall of Masada*, p. 44-46.

⁷ Morashá, Edition 104 (July 2019). "Jews of Rome: Ancient Times to the Kingdom of Italy," <https://www.morasha.com.br/en/diaspora-communities/Jews-from-Rome-ancient-times-to-the-kingdom-of-Italy.html>

⁸ Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, 1:152-153.

⁹ See footnote 5.

In August of 70 CE, in the Hebrew month of Av, the Second Beit HaMikdash was destroyed. Rome celebrated the fall of Jerusalem by erecting the Arch of Titus, constructed by Titus' younger brother Emperor Domitian, in 81 CE.¹⁰ At an unknown date, a social ban on Jews walking under the arch was placed, and this was not rescinded until 1947,¹¹ following the UN vote to establish the State of Israel. The change was not made public until 1997.¹² Interestingly, the menorah on the Arch of Titus was used as the source for the symbol of the State of Israel.¹³

Following the Roman conquest of Judea in the 1st century CE and the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash, a significant influx of Jewish slaves was brought into Rome and forced into servitude. These Jews initially settled outside the city, in a district across the Tiber River known as Trastevere. Over time, they established a vibrant community that retained its identity despite external pressures such as the *fiscus judaicus*. This "Jewish tax" of half a shekel was imposed by Vespasian to be paid to the Roman treasury, replacing the tithe that had been paid to the Beit HaMikdash.¹⁴ The Jews in Rome during this period of time became a significant part of

¹⁰ Lohnes, Kate. "Siege of Jerusalem"
<https://www.britannica.com/event/Siege-of-Jerusalem-70>

¹¹ The National Library of Israel, description of "Arch of Titus, Rome, 1948".
<https://web.nli.org.il/>

¹² Piperno, Antonella (24 December 1997). "Under The Arch of Titus the Party of the Jews"
<https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1997/12/24/sotto-arco-di-tito-la-festa.html>

¹³ The National Library of Israel, description of "Emblem of the State of Israel."
<https://web.nli.org.il/>

¹⁴ "Jewish Community of Rome," <https://romaebraica.it/en/history/>

the Roman Empire's population, with some estimates as high as 7 million people (10% of the population at the time).¹⁵

Roman policy created tensions throughout the Empire, resulting in more Jewish revolts in the Land of Israel and the Diaspora. The last of these, the Bar Kochba Revolt (132-135 CE), occurred in Israel. Crushed by the Romans, it cost the lives of thousands of Jews and many others were taken to Rome as slaves. As on other occasions, the Jews of Rome sought to rescue them, and many of them remained in the city. Despite the revolts, during the period of the Roman Empire, the Jews of Rome had long years of prosperity and autonomy, unlike during the Middle Ages.¹⁶

Medieval Jewish life in Rome was turbulent and fraught with discrimination. Due to the Papal States – territories in central Italy that were directly governed by the pope – Catholics had considerably more rights than members of other religions. Jews were not admitted to Papal government or to social circles of Rome, and did not have the same standing as members of the Catholic faith.¹⁷ Despite this discrimination, Roman Jews contributed to society as artisans, merchants, scholars, and more.¹⁸ They were even protected when, in 1492, Pope Alexander VI welcomed approximately 9000 Jews expelled by the Alhambra Decree, issued by the Catholic Monarchs of Spain.¹⁹

¹⁵ Pasachoff, Naomi E.; Littman, Robert J. *A Concise History of the Jewish People*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995).

¹⁶ See footnote #7.

¹⁷ Mendez, Jonathan (27 January 2025). "Understanding the Experience of Jewish People in Rome", <https://ansari.nd.edu/news-events/news/understanding-the-experience-of-jewish-people-in-rome/>

¹⁸ Levine, Menachem (2 July 2023). "The Jewish History of Rome", <https://aish.com/the-jewish-history-of-rome/>

¹⁹ Rifkenberick, Madison (8 May 2023). "Mapping the Migration of Sephardic Jews Following Expulsion", <https://storymaps.com/stories/>

The Roman Ghetto

Rome's Jewish quarter, located on the east bank of the Tiber River, was established by Pope Paul IV in 1555 as a result of the papal bull *Cum nimis absurdum*. It sought to isolate the Jews and enforce discriminatory measures under the guise of religious purity. It segregated approximately 2000 Jews into the cramped conditions of a small area. The quarter was walled, and its gates locked at night.

The location of the ghetto was selected due to its undesirable nature, characterized by frequent flooding due to its close proximity to the Tiber River. Additionally, due to the severe restrictions of professions allowed to Jews by *Cum nimis absurdum*, life in the Roman Ghetto was one of intense poverty. Jobs allowed included fishmongers, ragmen, and other second-hand dealers. Interestingly, they were permitted to be pawnbrokers, a job prohibited to Christians, and this caused much hatred of many Christians against the Jews. Jews were required to wear identifying badges, and every Shabbat they were required to attend a nearby Catholic church to hear sermons aimed at converting them.²⁰

As the community within the ghetto grew larger, overcrowding became a serious problem. Jews expanded their houses vertically, further blocking the sun from reaching the streets. Furthermore, diseases like cholera and malaria spread like wildfire. During a plague in 1656, 20% of the ghetto's population of 4000 died.²¹

When the ghetto was dismantled in 1870, there were approximately 8,000 people living there. Although the Pope intended the hardships of the ghetto to coerce the Jews into converting to Christianity, it allowed Roman Jewish customs to

²⁰ See footnote 17.

²¹ Pietrangeli, Carlo (1976). Sant'Angelo. Guide rionali di Roma (in Italian) p.44. Fratelli Palombi, Roma.

flourish without disturbance from the outside world.²² As a result, many people argue today that Roman Jews are one of the closest links to the original *minhagim* of Judea.

Despite the challenges, the Jews of the ghetto developed many distinctive cultural expressions – including unique cuisine, music, and a dialect known as Giudaico-Romanesco, which is a mix of Hebrew and Italian.

This blend can be seen with the word *beridde*, meaning ‘circumcision’: it is a mix of the Italian pronunciation of the Hebrew word *brit*, meaning ‘covenant’ or ‘circumcision.’ Italian influence can also be seen with the word “fear”: the Hebrew root is *pachad*, which in Giudaico-Romanesco became *impachadito*, analogous to the standard Italian adjectival form *impaurito*.²³

The culinary traditions of Roman Jews also emerged as a defining feature of their identity. Dishes like *carciofi alla giudia* (Jewish-style artichokes) and *concia di zucchine* (marinated courgettes) became emblematic of their ingenuity, born from the limited resources available in the ghetto. The city’s poor would collect the unwanted leftovers from Testaccio (home to both Italy and Europe’s largest slaughterhouse²⁴), and, with typical Roman resourcefulness, use them to make something delicious. Hence, offal and other cheaper cuts were (and are) common in Roman cooking, including, for example, the delicacy of fried brains.

²² Koenig, Leah. “Roman Jews,”

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/roman-jews/>

²³ Author unknown, <https://images.shulcloud.com/5061/uploads/Adult-Education/JewishLanguages/markedup>

²⁴ Shearer, Alexa (7 November 2018). “Beyond Trastevere: Testaccio,” <https://blog.johncabot.edu/student-life/italian-life/beyond-trastevere-testaccio>

Today, the Roman Ghetto is a vibrant cultural hub that reflects both its painful history and the enduring spirit of its community.

At the unmarked corner shopfront of the Boccione Jewish bakery, a local landmark for two centuries, the proprietor, Bianca Sonnino, cut me an extra-large slice of pizza ebraica (Jewish pizza) – not pizza at all but a dense nutty-fruity coffeecake. Signora Sonnino told me proudly that Boccione has been her family's business for generations and that her mother devised the recipe for torta della ricotta.²⁵

Visitors can explore the Great Synagogue of Rome, the Jewish Museum, a Holocaust memorial museum, and local kosher restaurants that serve traditional Jewish-Roman cuisine. The area stands as a testament to the survival and flourishing of a community despite centuries of adversity.

The Holocaust

Mussolini led a Fascist government in Italy from 1922; however, he did not include antisemitism as part of his party's manifesto. He even publicly criticized Germany's racist policies and supported Italy's Jews. Unfortunately, this only lasted until the mid-1930's. Behind the scenes, Mussolini's Fascist leadership held antisemitic views and prepared for the removal of the Jews from society.²⁶

In 1943, the Germans occupied Italy. When the SS commander arrived in Rome, he told the Rabbi that the community could be ransomed for 50 kilos of gold. The Jews frantically collected the gold from all their households and from Christian friends who were willing to help. The gold was transported to Berlin, where it was

²⁵ Laskin, David (12 July 2013). "Echoes From the Roman Ghetto," <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/travel/echoes-from-the-roman-ghetto.html>

²⁶ Yad Vashem, "Italy During the Holocaust," <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/stories/italy-background-history.html>

stored inside the office of Kaltenbrunner (the chief of the Reich's Central Security Office) lulling the Jewish community into a false sense of security.²⁷ Two weeks after the 'Gold of Rome' event, orders were implemented for the Final Solution, and on October 16, 1943, the SS began its raids of the Jewish Ghetto despite the paid ransom, sending 1,023 Roman Jews to the Auschwitz concentration camp. Of these deportees, only 15 men and 1 woman survived.²⁸

The surviving woman was Settimia Spizzichino, my great-great aunt. She dedicated her post-Holocaust life to educating people and sharing her story. She felt it was her duty to tell, so she shared her testimony in front of cameras, with young people in schools, and on trips to Auschwitz. In memory of Settimia, a bridge has been dedicated in her name, as has a stamp issued by the Italian Government. I am proud to be her relative.

Minhagim of the Roman Jewish community

When I say to people that I am of Bnei Romi, a Roman Jew, they often shake their heads in confusion. "So does that mean you are Sefardi?" they ask. As is clear from the history of the Roman Jews, these two Jewish subgroups are not the same. When it comes to minhagim, we are, in fact, more similar to Sephardi Jews than to Ashkenazi ones, but also have some minhagim in common with Ashkenazim, as well as some unique ones of our own! In this section, I will be comparing and contrasting the similarities and differences between different minhagim.

²⁷ Misano, Marco (5 June 2022). "The Gold of Rome: an Incredible Story from the Nazi Occupation," <https://romanjews.com/gold-of-rome-incredible-story-nazi-occupation/>

²⁸ Laskin, David (12 July 2013). "Echoes from the Roman Ghetto", <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/travel/echoes-from-the-roman-ghetto.html>

A unique minhag Roman Jews have is that we neither specifically stand nor sit during Kaddish. It depends on the previous prayer – if it was a prayer said standing, Kaddish is said standing, and, likewise, if the prior prayer was said sitting, Kaddish is recited sitting.²⁹ This could imply that in Sephardi and Ashkenazi custom, Kaddish is seen as being a distinct prayer, whereas in Roman custom, it is a continuation of the prayer recited previously.

One similarity of Roman Jews to Sephardi Jews is that Roman Jews consume kitniyot on Pesach. In fact, there is a typical Roman Pesach meal called *agnello alla giudaica* in Italian: lamb with artichokes and fava beans – the beans being kitniyot.³⁰ However, due to the Spanish Inquisition and the relocation of many Sephardi Jews to Rome, I would be interested to find out if the tradition of eating kitniyot was influenced by Sephardi custom, or if it is authentically Roman Jewish.

On Pesach, there is a unique Italian minhag that is different from both Ashkenazi and Sephardi practice.³¹ During Temple times, the central meal at everyone's Seder was roasted lamb from the Korban Pesach. After the Temples were destroyed and we were no longer able to sacrifice Paschal lambs, the minhag developed in many communities to refrain from eating roasted meat the night of the Seder.³² The Mishna in Pesachim 53a states:

²⁹ Spagnoletto, Amedeo (10 January 2023). Roman Judaism. (M. Spizzichino, Interviewer)

³⁰ Guetta, Benedetta Jasmine (11 January 2024). "Lamb with Artichokes and Fava Beans," <https://www.labna.it/en/lamb-with-artichokes-and-fava-beans.html>

³¹ Sanders, Ghila (9 April 2019). "Italian Passover Customs and Recipes," <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/2019/04/09/italian-passover-customs-and-recipes/>

³² Pocono Record (20 March 2013). "Lamb for Passover: Kosher or not, here it comes,"

מָקוֹם שֶׁנֶהְגוּ לֶאֱכוֹל צֵלִי בְּלֵיל פֶּסַחִים — אוֹכְלִין, מָקוֹם שֶׁנֶהְגוּ שֶׁלֹּא לֶאֱכוֹל — אֵין אוֹכְלִין.

In a place where people were accustomed to eat roasted meat on Passover evenings, outside of Jerusalem or after the Temple was destroyed, one may eat it. In a place where people were accustomed not to eat outside Jerusalem, one may not eat it.³³

It has become an entrenched custom among both Ashkenazim and Sephardim not to eat roasted meat the night of the Pesach Seder, but Roman Jews do eat such meat.

Other differences between minhag Bnei Romi and other congregations can be found in the siddur. In Birkot HaShachar, according to Tefillah LeDavid (a Bnei Romi prayer book), instead of the regular blessing of **שֶׁלֹּא עֲשֵׂי גוֹי**, the Italian nusach (version) reads **שֶׁעֲשֵׂי יִשְׂרָאֵל**.³⁴ It emphasises Jewish identity in a positive formulation rather than a negation of non-Jewish status.

This might have been a result of censorship by the Catholic Church during the medieval period, when many Jewish texts were scrutinized, predominantly by the clergy in Rome. The burning of the Talmud in the 14th Century is a notable example of this.³⁵

I additionally discovered in a now-famous 15th Century Roman siddur, written for a “respected and honoured” lady, that the bracha of **שֶׁעֲשֵׂי כְּרִצְוֹנוֹ** during Morning Blessings is formulated as **שֶׁעֲשֵׂיתִנִּי אִשָּׁה וְלֹא אִישׁ**, meaning “for You made me a woman and not a man.”³⁶

<https://www.poconorecord.com/story/lifestyle/food/2013/03/20/lamb-for-passover-kosher-not/49023797007/>

³³ Pesachim 53a. Translation: Steinsaltz.

³⁴ Pacifici, E (1995).

³⁵ Drucker, Johanna. “Chapter 6. Controversies and Controls,” https://hob.gseis.ucla.edu/HoBCoursebook_Ch_6.html

³⁶ Farissol, Abraham (1480). “Complete siddur for the entire year, in accordance with Italian custom,” written for “respected and honoured” lady.

This is no longer common practice, and it is unclear whether it was formulated only for this particular siddur written with the “lady” in mind. Alternatively, this formulation might have been widespread at the time, possibly reflecting local sensitivities to provide respect for women’s religious experience.

Another minhag that is unique to Roman Jewry relates to Havdala. The halachic part of the ritual consists of blessings that are recited over wine, spices, and a flame, and most importantly, the blessing which proclaims the division between sacred and profane. That section is the same across all communities. However, customs have developed to say various texts prior to these blessings. Ashkenazim recite a series of pesukim, starting with הנה א-ל ישועתי אבטח ולא אפחד. Sephardim begin with a different sequence of pesukim that starts with ראשון לציון הנה הנם. In contrast to both of these, the Roman text talks about different biblical themes and includes a piyyut describing the arrival of Eliyahu HaNavi with Mashiach Ben David:

זכור לטוב. שבוע טוב. בסמן טוב:
אלהיו הנביא. אלהיו הנביא. במהרה יבא אלינו עם משיח בן
דוד:
איש אשר קנא לשם הא-ל, איש בשר שלום על יד יקותיאל, איש גש ויכפר
על בני ישראל...

Although I was of the belief that this version of Havdala is only sung by Roman Jews, I recently discovered that some Sephardim also sing it. However, it is an optional minhag for them, rather than being integrated into the Havdala ritual itself as it is for Roman Jews.³⁷

³⁷ Davidoff, Boaz. “The Deeper Meaning of Havdalah: Make it Personal,” <https://www.exploringjudaism.org/holidays/shabbat/havdalah/the-deeper-meaning-of-havdalah-make-it-personal/>

Another interesting minhag can again be found in the siddur Tefillah LeDavid, where the first sentence of the Roman Musaf Kedushah is:

כְּתֹר יִתְּנוּ לָךְ הַמּוֹנֵי מַעְלָה עִם־קְבוּצֵי מִטָּה. יַחַד כָּלֶם קִדְּשָׁה לָךְ יֵשׁוּשׁוּ

A crown is given to You Hashem, our God by the angels on high and by Your people who assemble below: all of them together thrice repeat “holy” unto You.

I found a reference to this formulation of the Kedushah in the siddur of Rav Amram Gaon, one of the Geonim from 10th-century Babylonia.³⁸ This siddur seems to have influenced communities across Spain, France, and Germany, and amazingly, there is plenty of evidence that Keter was said widely from the early Middle Ages on. Abudarham, writing in 14th-century Spain, speaks directly about Keter Kedushah, and it even gets a mention in the Zohar.

The wording of this Kedushah is very similar to the wording of the Sephardi Kedushah. Although the times this prayer is said varies from Sephardi prayers,³⁹ I find it intriguing – why is the Kedushah so similar to the Sephardi version, when some Roman prayers, including Birkat HaMazon, are closer to (although different from) the Ashkenazi version?

Ashkenazim begin their Musaf Kedushah with “Na’aritzcha” because of the belief that the intense mystical themes of Keter, specifically the unity of angels and Israel singing together, were not appropriate to recite outside the Land of Israel. The reasoning is based in part on the Talmud (Chulin 91b), which says:

וְאִין מַה־שׁ (מִלֹּאכֵי הַשֶּׁרֶת) אֹמְרִים שִׁירָה לְמַעַל עַד שִׁיאֲמְרוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמַטָּה

³⁸ Rav Amram Gaon, (10th Century Babylonia). The formulation was found in a siddur he wrote, although there are no original editions left - only versions edited later - so it is difficult to estimate the reliability.

³⁹ Sephardim say Keter only at mussaf, while for Italians it can vary, depending on whether or not they are in Israel.

The angels do not begin to say Kedushah until Israel says it first.

This implies a sequential dynamic – first Israel, then the angels – and not a simultaneous one. Saying "all of them together," could therefore contradict this sequence, perhaps explaining why Ashkenazim avoid the wording of Keter, and instead use Na'aritzcha, which avoids this issue.

On the other hand, the Italian minhag retains ancient Eretz Yisrael traditions, and never adopted the stricter Ashkenazi position that the Diaspora is unworthy of reciting Keter. Instead, they maintained the view (like the Sephardim) that spiritually, the Jewish people can reach that high level, especially on Shabbat, and even outside of Israel.

The Aruch HaShulchan (Orach Chaim 286:3) defends the arguments above by explaining:

בחזרת הש"ץ אומרים הספרדים קדושת כתר, שהיא למעלה מכל המעלות.
והאשכנזים אומרים 'נעריצך', לפי שסוברים שקדושת כתר אין חוץ לארץ
ראויה לה... דיש לומר דכיון דכבר ישראל אמרו בשחרית קדושה - לכן במוסף
יכולים לומר עם ישראל ביחד.

In the repetition of the Shaliach Tzibbur [the prayer leader], the Sephardim say the Kedushah of "Keter", which is above all levels, and the Ashkenazim say "Na'aritzcha", because they hold that the Kedushah of Keter is not fitting for the Diaspora... One can say that since Israel already said Kedushah in Shacharit, therefore in Musaf they are able to say [it] with Israel together.

Conclusion

This exploration into the history and traditions of the Roman Jewish community has taught me the story of immense cultural resilience and adaptation. Tracing our origins back over two millennia, we see a community that has maintained its distinct identity through the rise and fall of empires, religious persecution, and the horrors of the Holocaust.

Some Italian minhagim I grew up with included the Italian version of Havdala, Roman tunes, and the foods of Bnei Romi – but the research for this paper introduced me to so much more! I learnt about the variations in Birkot HaShachar and the nuanced differences in praying. I became aware of the way that the siddur quietly carries centuries of adaptation and identity.

The Roman Ghetto, once a place of isolation and segregation, has become the beating heart of Jewish life in Rome. It tells the story of the Roman Jews while still thriving with modern energy. Learning about how the community and my family endured the Holocaust gives me a new perspective on the Ghetto, reminding me just how fiercely we have held on to our identity, even when everything else was being stripped away.

Writing this paper has deepened my connection to the Roman Jewish community in a way I did not expect. It is one thing to know that my traditions go back over two thousand years, but it is another to trace them through centuries of change, struggle, and survival, and to realize how much of that history lives on in the things we do every day. The Roman Jewish community has held onto its customs, melodies and culture for centuries, and that makes me feel like I'm part of something ancient and ongoing. I feel so honoured to have something that connects me directly to generations before me, and for it to shape and guide me as I grow older.

Sanctity Through Conquest? Examining Bnei Yisrael's War Against the Canaanite Nations

Ariella Susman

As the Jewish nation, a generation from Har Sinai, embarked on their mission to fulfill their destiny in the Promised Land, they were confronted by an extraordinary dilemma- what to do with the native peoples living in the land. Toward that end, guided by the Almighty, they are repeatedly commanded to drive out the seven native nations of Canaan in order to clear the land of idolatry and establish everlasting Jewish sovereignty. The specific methods and comprehensive nature of the conquest seem to be in stark contrast to the motifs and instructions for behavior that the people had received only a short while earlier at the foot of Mount Sinai. How is one to reconcile the annihilation of the indigenous inhabitants of the land with the establishment of a home for the **אור לגוים** and **ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש**? What is the function of that Homeland? Is it a place for Jews to reside and raise families, or are there more ambitious goals and universal significance to the Promised Land? Finally, might those goals require a severe and at times ruthless approach to its conquest?

From the time of Avraham, Judaic tradition has celebrated righteousness and kindness. In fact, it is clear that Abrahamic monotheism was built on ideals of justice, as can be seen when

Avraham negotiates with God after He shares His plan to destroy all of Sedom in Bereishit 18. As Avraham says:¹

חָלָלָה לִּי מַעֲשֵׂת כְּדָבָר הַזֶּה לְהַמִּית צָדִיק עִם־רָשָׁע וְהִנֵּה כְצָדִיק כְּרָשָׁע חָלָלָה
לִּי הַשֹּׁפֵט כָּל־הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט

Avraham firmly believes God is righteous, therefore how can He destroy an entire city and kill the guilty and innocent alike? Eventually, Avraham learns that in fact the entire population is corrupt and evil, and therefore the entire city is doomed for destruction.

Further, it is clear that God has an aversion to war, or at least considers it a blemish to holiness and sanctity. He prohibits King David, his loyal and beloved servant, from building the Beit HaMikdash. Due to his position as commander, David has blood on his hands and therefore is disqualified from being the one to build God's palace. Additionally, in Devarim 10, the Jews are commanded to relay empathy and kindness towards orphans, widows, and strangers, as you were strangers and vulnerable in the foreign land of Mitzrayim:²

עֲשֵׂה מִשְׁפָּט יְתוֹם וְאַלְמָנָה וְאַהֲבָה גֵר לְתֶת לוֹ לֶחֶם וְשִׁמְלָה: וְאַהֲבַתְּם אֶת־הָגֵר
כִּי־גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

Jews are told to be an **עַם לְאֻר גּוֹיִם** - an example to other nations of humanity and propriety.³ The laws bequeathed to the Jews at Sinai prohibit theft, adultery, and certainly murder, and form a basis for creating an ethical and virtuous society. Given this context, it seems incongruous that the Jews, fresh from Sinai, would be instructed to not only kill, but to wipe out entire nations residing in the land destined to be their home. The ethical values and civilized behavior we are expected to adopt, seem to disappear during

¹ Bereishit 18:25.

² Devarim 10:18,19.

³ Yeshayahu 42:6.

wartime, especially as we engage in battle with the seven Canaanite nations.

Prior to Sefer Yehoshua, Bnei Yisrael were instructed multiple times by God on how to deal with the indigenous nations. In Shemot 23 it reads:⁴

כִּי־לֶךְ מִלֵּאכֵי לְפָנֶיךָ וְהִבִּיאֶךָ אֱלֹהֵאֲמֹרִי וְהַחֲתִי וְהַפְּרִזִּי וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי הַחֲוִי וְהִי־בֹסִי וְהַכְּחַדְתִּיו: לֹא־תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לֵאלֹהֵיהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם וְלֹא תַעֲשֶׂה כַּמַּעֲשִׂיִּים כִּי הָרַס תִּהְרָסֻם וְשֹׁבֵר תִּשְׁבֹּר מִצִּבְתֵּיהֶם... אֲתֵּימָתִי אֲשַׁלַּח לְפָנֶיךָ וְהִמָּתִי אֶת־כָּל־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר תִּבְּאֶה בָּהֶם וְנִתַּתִּי אֶת־כָּל־אִיְבֶיךָ אֵלֶיךָ עֶרְף: וְשִׁלַּחְתִּי אֶת־הַצָּרָעָה לְפָנֶיךָ וְגִרְשָׁה אֶת־הַחֲוִי אֶת־הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְאֶת־הַחֲתִי מִלְּפָנֶיךָ... מַעַט מַעַט אֲגִרְשֶׁנּוּ מִפָּנֶיךָ עַד אֲשֶׁר תִּפְרָה וְנִחַלְתָּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ... כִּי אֲתֹן בְּיָדְכֶם אֶת יְשִׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ וְגִרְשַׁתְמוּ מִפָּנֶיךָ: לֹא־תִכְרַת לָהֶם וְלֹא־לֹהֵיהֶם בְּרִית: לֹא יָשְׁבוּ בָּאָרֶץ פְּרִי־חֲטִיאוֹ אֲתָךְ לִי כִי תַעֲבֹד אֶת־אֱלֹהֵיהֶם כִּי־הָיָה לָךְ לְמוֹקֵשׁ:

When My messenger goes before you and brings you to the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, and I annihilate them, you shall not bow down to their gods in worship or follow their practices, but shall tear them down and smash their pillars to bits... I will send forth My terror before you, and I will throw into panic all the people among whom you come, and I will make all your enemies turn tail before you. I will send a plague ahead of you, and it shall drive out before you the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites... I will drive them out before you little by little, until you have increased and possess the land... for I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hands, and you will drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. They shall not remain in your land, lest they cause you to sin against Me; for you will serve their gods – and it will prove a snare to you.

From these pesukim, we see that God clearly orders Bnei Yisrael to erase all the native nations from the land, which will be achieved through their action coupled with divine intervention. If Bnei Yisrael follow His covenant, God will bring a plague that will slowly drive the nations out, allowing for Bnei Yisrael to increase and completely fill the land. However, critically, it is not merely a land

⁴ Shemot 23: 23-33.

grab and dispossession of the native people, but a spiritual purging, a removal of tum'ah and infusion of the land with kedusha. Following each command to initiate war, God firmly forbids Bnei Yisrael from worshipping the gods of these nations. They are explicitly commanded to destroy all remnants of idolatry and to remove the corrupt and evil ways of those previously settled. From these pesukim in Shemot, it seems negotiating for peace and establishing treaties, would be a defiance of God's word and would undermine His goal of ridding the land of idol worship in order to allow for monotheism to thrive.

The second set of instructions regarding our treatment of the Canaanite nations appears in Bamidbar 33. After tracing and summarizing the travels of Bnei Yisrael as they venture through the midbar, God says to Moshe:⁵

...כִּי אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן אֶל־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן: וְהוֹרַשְׁתֶּם אֶת־כָּל־יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ מִפְּנֵיכֶם וְאַבְדֶּתֶם אֶת כָּל־מַשְׁכֵּיתָם וְאֶת כָּל־צִלְמֵי מַסַּכְתָּם תִּאַבְדּוּ וְאֶת כָּל־בְּמוֹתָם תִּשְׁמִידוּ: וְהוֹרַשְׁתֶּם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּיִשְׁבְּתֶם־בָּהּ כִּי לָכֵן נָתַתִּי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ לְרֶשֶׁת אֹתָהּ: ...וְאַסִּילָא תוֹרִישׁוּ אֶת־יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ מִפְּנֵיכֶם וְהָיָה אֲשֶׁר תוֹתִירוּ מֵהֶם לְשָׂכִים בְּעֵינֵיכֶם וּלְצִינָם בְּצַדֵּיכֶם וְצָרְרוּ אֹתְכֶם עַל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם יֹשְׁבִים בָּהּ: וְהָיָה כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּמְיִתִּי לַעֲשׂוֹת לָהֶם אֲעָשֶׂה לָּכֵם:

When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, you shall dispossess all the inhabitants of the land; you shall destroy all their figured objects; you shall destroy all their molten images, and you shall demolish all their cult places. And you shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have assigned the land to you to possess...But if you do not dispossess the inhabitants of the land, those whom you allow to remain shall be stings in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land in which you live; so that I will do to you what I planned to do to them.

God warns Moshe and the people that if they do not successfully annihilate the inhabitants, any survivors remaining in the land will cause harm and pain to the Jewish people for eternity - "But if you

⁵ Bamidbar 33: 51-56.

do not dispossess the inhabitants of the land, those whom you allow to remain shall be stings in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land in which you live.” Rashi reads this pasuk in its simplest form – they will continue to fight Bnei Yisrael and be hostile towards them. Rashi sees it as a military, not spiritual risk. However, in an article by Rav Shlomo Aviner, he explains that there is a deeper meaning in that they will threaten Bnei Yisrael’s spiritual and intellectual capabilities. The eye refers to the Sanhedrin - they will cloud the people’s moral sense and ability to judge wisely.⁶

The most significant aspect of the war against the Canaanites that distinguishes it from other battles and evokes questions of morality, is the decree in Devarim 20:16 which says:

רק מערי העמים האלה אשר ה' אלהיך נתן לך נחלה לא תחיה כל נשמה:

Just from the cities of these nation that Hashem your God is giving to you as an inheritance *do not let a single soul survive.*

How is one to understand this unique and harsh command, and under which circumstances does it apply? In this perek, God outlines a clear distinction in the ways in which the Jews are obligated to approach both neighboring and distant nations:⁷

כִּי־תִקְרַב אֶל־עִיר לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ וְקִרְאתָ אֵלֶיהָ לְשָׁלוֹם: וְהָיָה אִם־שָׁלוֹם תַּעֲנֶנּוּ וּפָתַחָהּ לָךְ וְהָיָה כִּלְהַעֲמֵם הַנִּמְצָאִים בָּהּ יְהִיוּ לָךְ לְמֶסַח וְעִבְדוּךָ: וְאִם־לֹא תִשְׁלַם עִמָּךְ וְעָשְׂתָה עִמָּךְ מִלְחָמָה וְצָרְתָּ עָלֶיהָ: וְנִתְּנָה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּיָדְךָ וְהִכִּיתָ אֶת־כָּל־זְכוּרָהּ לַפִּי־חֶרֶב: רַק הַנָּשִׁים וְהַטָּף וְהַבְּהֵמָה וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר יְהִי בָעִיר כְּלִשְׁלָלָהּ תָּבוֹז לָךְ וְאָכַלְתָּ אֶת־שָׁלָל אֲנִיבֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר נָתַן ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לָךְ: כֵּן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְכָל־הָעָרִים הַרוֹחוֹת מִמֶּךָ מֵאֵד אֲשֶׁר לֹא־מִעֲרֵי הַגּוֹיִם־הָאֵלֶּה הֵנָּה: רַק מִעֲרֵי הָעַמִּים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ נַחֲלָה לֹא תַחֲיֶה כָל־נַשְׁמָה: כִּי־הַחֶרֶם תַּחֲרִימֶם הַחַיִּי וְהָאָמֹרִי הַכֹּנְעָנִי וְהַפְּרָזִי הַחַיִּי וְהַיְּבוֹסִי כָּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּךְ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ: לִמְעַן אֲשֶׁר לֹא־לִמְדוּ אֶתְכֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּכָל־תּוֹעֲבוֹתָם אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם וְחָסְאֲתָם לָהּ אֱלֹהֶיכֶם:

When you approach a town to attack it, you shall offer it terms of peace. If it responds peaceably and lets you in, all the people

⁶ Rav Shlomo Aviner, “והורשתם את הארץ,” *Short Essays*, Machon Meir, <https://machonmeir.net/harav-shlomo-aviner-short-essays/>

⁷ Devarim 20:10-16.

present there shall serve you at forced labor. If it does not surrender to you, but would join battle with you, you shall lay siege to it; and when your God Hashem delivers it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, the livestock, and everything in the town – all its spoil – and enjoy the use of the spoil of your enemy, which your God Hashem gives you. Thus, you shall deal with all towns that lie very far from you, towns that do not belong to nations hereabout. In the towns of the latter peoples, however, which your God Hashem is giving you as a heritage, you shall not let a soul remain alive. No, you must proscribe them – the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites – as your God Hashem has commanded you, lest they lead you into doing all the abhorrent things that they have done for their gods and you stand guilty before your God Hashem.

In Pasuk 10, God clearly requires Bnei Yisrael to call out for peace with nations before waging war. He then describes how Bnei Yisrael are to respond if the other nation accepts their peace offerings - they are to make those nations their subjects. In contrast, if the nation rejects peace, then the Jews shall go to war, completely wiping out the male combatants and taking the women, children, and livestock for themselves. These are the instructions when dealing with distant nations - if Bnei Yisrael obeys, God will help them and deliver their enemies to them.

However, there is an ambiguity within the text, which makes the instructions regarding the local Canaanite nations unclear. The words of the text that spark a debate between major medieval commentaries are:⁸

כִּן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְכָל־הָעָרִים הַרְחֹקֹת מִמֶּךָ מֵאֵל אֲשֶׁר לֹא־מִעָרֵי הַגּוֹיִם־הָאֵלֶּה הֵנָּה:

Thus shall you do [only] for the cities that are very distant from you, that are not from the cities of these nations.

⁸ Devarim 20:15.

The clear implication is that the prior description applies exclusively to distant nations, while nearby nations are to be treated differently, more harshly. However, it is not clear which part of the prior description is intended to be limited to distant nations. Is it talking about the entire description of the treatment of distant nations, including the initial offer of peace, implying that when it comes to local nations, Bnei Yisrael are instructed to wipe them out entirely without even offering the option of peace first? Or does it refer to just the immediate prior clause, where we are told that if peace is refused, we should wipe out all the men, but keep the women, children, and livestock alive - so that for near nations, if peace is refused, we kill absolutely everyone, but peace is in fact offered first?

These different readings affect how one understands pasuk 16 which says:

רק מערי העמים האלה אשר ה' אלקיך נתן לך נחלה לא תחיה כל נפשמה:

Just from the cities of these nation that Hashem your God is giving to you as an inheritance *do not let a single soul survive.*

Does this only apply after we offer peace and they refuse? This would mean that the only area where God draws a distinction between near and far nations is how we behave **after** they reject our peace offer. Or does לא תחיה כל נשמה mean that we do not offer peace to nearby nations and we need to kill all men, women, and children alike under all circumstances? This second reading is far more harsh and sparks questions of the morality of this command to obliterate entire nations without offering them any possible alternative.

Rashi interprets it the more severe way, opining that our obligation to offer peace only applies to far-away nations. When it comes to the Canaanite nations, peace is not a possibility and they must be immediately destroyed. There is some leeway in his understanding in that Rashi holds that Bnei Yisrael could offer

peace prior to their entry into the land; however once they crossed the Yarden, peace was no longer an option. Although Rashi's interpretation is the more straightforward read of the pesukim, he struggles to defend the seeming immorality of this command.⁹ One could conjecture that to Rashi, a spiritual cleansing of the land to allow for the thriving of holiness requires the harshest of measures, and indeed these are required in the land proper. However, at the fringe, lesser measures are required without existential threat to the spiritual purity of the Promised Land that the near nations would embody.

In contrast to Rashi, both the Rambam¹⁰ and the Ramban¹¹ argue that Bnei Yisrael are obligated to offer peace to all nations, including the seven Canaanite nations.¹² Once these nations accept peace, they are required to pay taxes, perform national service, and accept the Sheva Mitzvot Bnei Noach¹³ if they wish to dwell in the Land. According to these parshanim, the only difference between the non-Canaanite and Canaanite nations is when peace is rejected and battle has been waged. Unique to the Canaanites, Bnei Yisrael are commanded to not let a single soul survive, not even women and children. Although the command remains more harsh than when dealing with non-Canaanite nations, the fact that they have an

⁹ Rashi to Devarim 20:10, s.v. **כִּי תִקְרַב אֶל עִיר**

¹⁰ Rambam, Hilchot Melachim u'Milchamot 6:1-5.

¹¹ Ramban to Devarim 20:10, s.v. **כִּי תִקְרַב אֶל עִיר לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ וְגו'**

¹² In Hilchot Melachim 6:5, the Rambam explains that Yehoshua sent three letters to the Canaanite nations prior to entering Israel. The first message read, **מִי שֶׁרוּצֵה לָבוֹחַ יָבוֹחַ** - whoever wishes to flee, should flee. The second message was: **מִי שֶׁרוּצֵה לְהַשְׁלִים יַשְׁלִים** - whoever wants to make peace, let him make peace. The last message said, **מִי שֶׁרוּצֵה לַעֲשׂוֹת מִלְחָמָה יַעֲשֵׂה** - whoever wishes to make war, let him make war.

¹³ To learn more about the Sheva Mitzvot Bnei Noach, see Elizabeth Kohl's excellent article on the topic, "Does a Ben Noach Have to Believe in God?" in this volume p. 58-74.

option of peace eases ethical concerns. To Rambam and Ramban, the harshest measures are not meted out unless the Canaanite nation has confirmed through rejection of peace that they are a hostile enemy, a source of tum'ah, and antithetical to the goal of holiness and spiritual purity.

The Ramban cites two proofs to support his interpretation. The first proof is from an event that occurs during Moshe's time period. In Bamidbar 21, it says:

וַיִּשְׁלַח יִשְׂרָאֵל מַלְאָכִים אֶל־סִיחֹן מֶלֶךְ־הָאֱמֹרִי לֵאמֹר: אֲעָבְרָה בְּאַרְצְךָ לֹא נֹטָה
בְּשׂוֹהַ וּבְכָרֶם לֹא נִשְׁתָּה מִי בְּאֶרֶץ בְּדֶרֶךְ הַמִּלָּךְ וְלֹא עַד אֲשֶׁר־נַעֲבֹר גְּבֻלְךָ:

As Moshe passed through the Amorite territory, he negotiated for peace. Although he attempted to avoid war, the king, Sichon, refused, forcing Bnei Yisrael to engage in battle, in which they were triumphant. Bnei Yisrael were able to successfully take control of the Amorite's land with the help of God; therefore, it seems that God did not interpret Moshe extending peace as a defiance of His word.

The Ramban uses this episode as proof that Bnei Yisrael are supposed to offer peace even to the Canaanite nations. In his view, Moshe truly was seeking permission to pass through the land peacefully and he had no intention of conquering it. The Ramban holds that this land, on the eastern bank of the Jordan River, was not meant to become part of Eretz Yisrael at that point in time. Bnei Yisrael only pursued conquest after Sichon initiated an aggressive and violent war against the Jews; however they truly preferred peace.¹⁴

Rambam and Ramban's second proof that even regarding wars with the native nations, there is always an obligation to offer peace is derived from Yehoshua 11. In pasuk 19 it says:

¹⁴ Ramban to Devarim 20:10, s.v. 'עיר להלחם עליה וגו'.

לאֲהִיְתָה עִיר אֲשֶׁר הַשְּׁלִימָה אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּלִתי הַחוּי יִשְׁבִּי גִבְעוֹן אֶת־הַכֹּל
לְקַחוּ בַּמִּלְחָמָה:

Of all the nations Bnei Yisrael encountered, none accepted a peace offering except for the nation of Givon.

The next pasuk explains:

כִּי מֵאֵת ה' הִיְתָה לַחֲזֹק אֶת־לִבָּם לְקִרְאָת הַמִּלְחָמָה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמַעַן הַחֲרִימָם
בְּלִתי הָיִיתְלָהֶם תַּחְנָה כִּי לְמַעַן הַשְּׁמִידָם כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶת־מֹשֶׁה:

It was a religious and moral duty to offer peace first and it was done. However, God intended for Bnei Yisrael to go to war and completely annihilate the natives. Therefore, He hardened their hearts, causing them to reject the peace offerings. The perek ends with total victory for Bnei Yisrael and the land completely belonging to them just as God had predetermined:

וַיִּקַּח יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֶת־כָּל־הָאָרֶץ כָּל אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיִּתְּנָה יְהוֹשֻׁעַ לְנַחֲלָה
לְיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמַחְלָקָתָם לְשִׁבְטֵיהֶם וְהָאָרֶץ שָׁקְטָה מִמִּלְחָמָה:

On the other hand, the strange story of the Givonim in Yehoshua 9 seems to offer strong support for Rashi. After witnessing God's might and the extent of His power as Bnei Yisrael are victorious in every war they fight, Givon tricks them in order to sign a peace treaty. The people of Givon disguise themselves, hoping to pose as people journeying from a foreign land because they understand that the native nations are destined to be destroyed. They successfully convince the elders that they are from a foreign land and they agree to be Bnei Yisrael's subjects as part of the pact. Only three days later, the truth is revealed and Yehoshua learns that the Givonim are in truth from a neighboring city. Although it is forbidden to establish peace with the native nations, Yehoshua feels obligated to honor his word and refrains from attacking Givon. Yehoshua relays his frustration, asking why they deceived Bnei Yisrael. They reply:¹⁵

¹⁵ Yehoshua 9:24.

וַיַּעֲנוּ אֶת־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וַיֹּאמְרוּ כִּי הִגַּד הַגָּד לַעֲבָדֶיךָ אֶת אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ אֶת־מֹשֶׁה
עַבְדּוֹ לָתֵת לָכֶם אֶת־כָּל־הָאָרֶץ וְלַהֲשִׁימָהּ אֶת־כָּל־יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ מִפְּנֵיכֶם וַיִּירָא מְאֹד
לִנְפֹשֹׁתֵינוּ מִפְּנֵיכֶם וַנַּעֲשֶׂה אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה:

But they replied to Yehoshua, "You see, your servants had heard that the Hashem your God had promised His servant Moshe to give you the whole land and to wipe out all the inhabitants of the country on your account; so we were in great fear for our lives on your account. That is why we did this thing.

The Givonim were clearly under the impression that God had commanded Bnei Yisrael to completely wipe out the inhabitants of Canaan. Their only option for obtaining a peace treaty was to deceive Bnei Yisrael into believing they were from a distant land. This episode strongly indicates that, as Rashi contends, peace was not offered to nearby nations.

Ramban, who maintains that peace was offered even to the Canaanite nations, suggests two possible explanations for the Givonim's scheme. The first idea he proposes is that they were unaware of the Israelites' policy of offering peace before advancing to war, which explains why they say, *וַיִּירָא מְאֹד לִנְפֹשֹׁתֵינוּ מִפְּנֵיכֶם* – *we were in great fear for our lives on your account*. However, Ramban admits that this is unlikely since there was an abundance of publicity surrounding Bnei Yisrael's every move.¹⁶

The second possibility, suggested by both the Rambam¹⁷ and the Ramban, is that the Givonim initially rejected the offer of peace. This is not surprising, as most of the Canaanite nations stood united in rejecting the possibility of the Israelites dwelling in the land. However, after seeing the miraculous ways the Israelites were defeating their enemies, they reconsidered out of fear for their own

¹⁶ Ramban to Devarim 20:11, s.v. *לְמַס וְעַבְדֶּיךָ*

¹⁷ Ramban, Hilchot Melachim U'Milchamot 6:5.

survival. Textual proof for this approach can be found in the opening lines of the perek:¹⁸

וַיִּשְׁבִּי גִבְעוֹן שָׁמְעוּ אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יְהוֹשֻׁעַ לִירִיחוֹ וְלָעִי. וַיַּעֲשׂוּ גִבְעֹנִים בְּעֶרְמָה...

The inhabitants of Gibeon learned how Joshua had treated Jericho and Ai. And they for their part resorted to cunning...

This indicates that the Givonim only hatched their plot after hearing of the ways in which powerful nations were easily defeated at the hands of Bnei Yisrael. The Givonim apparently mistakenly believed that the offer of peace would not be made a second time, and therefore they felt they had no choice but to resort to trickery.

Rashi and Ramban argue over the reason for completely destroying the Canaanite nations and if Bnei Yisrael should pursue annihilation if the nation would agree to stop committing idolatry. The Ramban uses the text to give license to situational mercy toward the nations to be conquered. He argues that the harsh decree to erase the entire nation only applies when the people persist in their corrupt practices and continue to threaten Bnei Yisrael who can easily be influenced. This is supported by the pasuk that immediately follows the decree to kill every individual:

לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִלְמְדוּ אֶתְכֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת כָּל תּוֹעֲבֹתָם אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ לֵאלֹהֵיהֶם וְחָטְאתֶם לַה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

So that they not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they have done for their gods and you stand guilty before Hashem your God.

However, if they sign a peace treaty, commit to abandon their gods, and adopt the Noachide laws, they are to be spared and can continue to dwell in the land amidst a Jewish state. This is supported by Sifrei Devarim,¹⁹ which says:

¹⁸ Yehoshua 9:3-4.

¹⁹ Sifrei Devarim, 202.

“למען אשר לא ילמדו אתכם לעשות” - מלמד שאם עושים תשובה אין נהרגים.

“So that they not teach you to do” – this teaches that if they would do teshuvah, they would not be killed.

The same applies to non-Canaanite nations. However, even if they refuse and continue to practice idolatry, they are not killed.²⁰

Ramban brings further proof for his stance, using the fact that Shlomo hired children of these nations that survived and remained in the land, as bondservants.²¹

כִּלְהֵעֵם הַנּוֹתֵר מִן־הָאֱמֹרִי הַחִתִּי הַפְּרָזִי הַחִוִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי אֲשֶׁר לֹא־מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
הֵמָּה: בְּנֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר נָתַרְוּ אַחֲרֵיהֶם בְּאַרְצָאֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָכְלוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַחֲרִימָם
וַיַּעֲלֵם שְׁלֹמֹה לְמַסְעֶבֶד עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה:

All the people that were left of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites who were not of the Israelite stock – those of their descendants who remained in the land and whom the Israelites were not able to annihilate – of these Solomon made a slave force, as is still the case:

Shlomo followed the law and employed them as his laborers, showing that it was permissible to let them live if they accepted the seven Noachide laws.²²

Additionally, Rabbi Shimon in Sotah 35b, is aligned with Ramban’s opinion:

רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן אוֹמֵר: עַל גְּבִי סִיד כְּתוּבָהּ, וְכָתְבוּ לָהֶן לְמַטָּה “לִמְדוּ אֶתְכֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת
כָּל וְגו’”. הָא לְמַדְתָּ שָׂאֵם הֵיוּ חוֹזְרִין בְּתַשׁוּבָה — הֵיוּ מְקַבְּלִין אוֹתָן

Rabbi Shimon says: the Jewish people wrote the text of the Torah on top of the plaster, and they wrote below for the gentiles to read that the verse commands the Jewish people to destroy the gentile inhabitants of Eretz Yisrael: “Lest they teach you to do like all their abominations.” You derive from the fact that they wrote this verse that if the gentiles who lived in Eretz Israel

²⁰ Ramban to Devarim 20:10, s.v. ‘כִּי תִקְרַב אֶל עִיר לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ וְגו’.

²¹ Melachim I 9:20-21.

²² Ibid.

would have repented, the Jews would have accepted them, i.e., allowed them to live in Eretz Yisrael.”

However, Rashi, loyal to the simple meaning of the text and suspect of Canaanite motives or potential for redemption, is unswayed and disagrees, only extending this flexibility to non-Canaanite nations. He writes that even if the Canaanites repent, we cannot accept them since we assume they are doing so out of fear. Their intentions and “conversions” lack sincerity and it is probable they will return to their corrupt ways, and continue to pose a danger to Am Yisrael. Therefore, the seven Canaanite nations are not offered peace and are not given the liberty of being spared. On the other hand, the non-Canaanite nations either accept the Noachide laws and peace or are sentenced to be killed.²³

The Gur Aryeh provides a comprehensive analysis of both Rashi and Ramban’s opinions, garnering proofs to support each side. In his interpretation, the emphasis on behavior and potential for spirituality or lack thereof is highlighted. He concludes by sharing his own approach, which claims that one has no obligation to initiate peace with wicked people, such as the seven Canaanite nations, who are liable to be killed due to their own abominations and immoral conduct. The requirement for peace only applies to Milchamot Reshut, optional wars against nations that are not intrinsically designated for destruction. Rather, both Moshe and Yehoshua offered peace out of their own righteousness, without a

²³ Rashi to Sotah 35b, s.v. וכתבו מלמטה:

וּכְתָבוּ מִלְמַטָּה - בְּסוּף הַדָּף לִמְעַן אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד וְגו' לְעֵיל מִיָּנִיָּה כְּתִיב כִּי הַחֵרֶם תַּחֲרִימֶם וּדְבַר זֶה כָּתוּב לַמָּטָה לַהֲדוּדֵי לִשְׁבֹּעַ אֻמוֹת הַיּוֹשִׁבִים חוּץ מִגְּבוּלֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁלֹא נִצְטוּ לְהַחְרִימָם אֲלֵא אוֹתָן שְׁבַתוֹךְ גְּבוּלָם נִצְטוּ לְהַחְרִים כְּדִי שְׁלֹא יִלְמְדוּ אוֹתָנוּ מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם הַמְּקוֹלְקִלִים אֲבָל אַתָּם הַיּוֹשִׁבִים חוּצָה לָהּ אִם אַתָּם חוֹזְרִין בְּתִשׁוּבָה נִקְבַּל אֶתְכֶם וּשְׁבַתוּכָה אֵין מִקְבָּלִין שֶׁמַּחֲמַת יִרְאָה עוֹשִׂין וְה"ג לָהּ בַּהֲדִיא בְּתוֹסַפְתָּא (פ"ח) אִם אַתָּם חוֹזְרִין בְּכֶם אֲנוּ מִקְבָּלִים אֶתְכֶם:

Ramban explicates this Rashi in his commentary to Devarim 20:10.

commandment to do so. If the native nations accepted the offer, and stopped idol worship, they would be spared. However, this does not happen, because God hardens their hearts, thus allowing Israel to completely conquer and inhabit the land.²⁴

Rav Michael Hattin argues that the war against the Canaanites is not a war against a race, but rather a war against an immoral culture that lacks even the most basic levels of humane conduct and civilized behavior. The Seven Noachide laws represent basic human decency. Any nation which refuses to accept these laws thereby proves itself to be corrupt and unethical, poisoning the very land in which Bnei Yisrael are meant to reside. This is why peaceful coexistence is not an option.²⁵

Rav Yoel Bin-Nun, in deference to the belief that the Jewish nation is endowed with natural beneficence, argues that since the Jewish mentality is so deeply averse to war, God had to command Bnei Yisrael repeatedly to annihilate the seven Canaanite nations. The Jews were forced to go against their moral beliefs only during the initial period of settlement. Later, however, the nation must revert back to its usual ethical approach to war.²⁶ Additionally, he says that the morality of war in the Torah is directed at preventing future wars of revenge and vengeance. Generations of Canaanites would continue to be immoral and violent towards the Israelites; therefore, Bnei Yisrael must eradicate them to avoid future battles.²⁷

²⁴ Gur Aryeh to Devarim 20:10, s.v. 'מלחמת הרשות הכתוב מדבר וכו'.

²⁵ <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-devarim/parashat-shoftim/shoftim-waging-war-against-canaanites>

²⁶ <https://traditiononline.org/the-origin-of-nations-and-the-shadow-of-violence-theological-perspectives-on-canaan-and-amalek/>

²⁷ <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-bamidbar/parashat-matot/matot-war-and-morality-war>

Similarly, Rav Kook defends the merciful and ethical Jewish values that determine the way Jews operate during wartime, claiming that during biblical times peace and pacifism were not options. Bnei Yisrael were surrounded by violent and cruel nations who wished to eradicate their existence, forcing them to be brutal and severe. The Jews were obligated to get rid of the threats posed on them by the native nations and establish national security.²⁸

The theme of wars to ensure spiritual purification is empathetically espoused by Rav Elchanan Samet, who describes the war against the Canaanites as a war of *cherem* - a war driven by religious motives, in which everything needs to be completely destroyed and the enemy nation annihilated. One can see examples of this type of warfare in Yehoshua with the battle of Yericho and in Devarim when the Jews are commanded to wipe out any Israelite city that has been poisoned with idol worship (עיר נדחת). This war of *cherem* was not unique to Israel and was an accepted norm in ancient times. Rav Samet brings proof from the Mesha Stone, which describes the war with the cities of Atarot and Nevo as wars of *cherem*. Usually, this type of war is restricted to particular cities. However, there are two instances that are unique and aimed at **nations**. This is the case regarding the war against the Canaanite nations and the war against Amalek - two nations that are symbols of complete evil and corruption. Rav Samet believes that peace must always be offered, and only once it is refused, the laws of *cherem* apply in hopes of protecting Bnei Yisrael. Both Amalek and the Canaanite nations were evil and corrupt, without potential for rehabilitation or moral cleansing. Therefore, they were sentenced to extermination. If members of these nations repent and do Teshuvah,

²⁸ <https://traditiononline.org/the-origin-of-nations-and-the-shadow-of-violence-theological-perspectives-on-canaan-and-amalek/>

then they are no longer defined by the evil their nation represents and they are free from the sins their ancestors committed.²⁹

The conquering and settling of the land of Eretz Yisrael was more than purely a military campaign, and must be viewed through the lens of spiritual purification. So too, the nation of Israel signifies more than just a nation with a homeland, but it is the embodiment of holiness and sanctification of God's name in the world. The establishment of a holy people in a holy land required and requires not only dedication and allegiance to concepts of chessed, but also steadfast, and at times, challenging engagement with gevurah. Hashem demanded removal of tum'ah from the land in concert with establishment of kedushah. This demand, which included what appears to be coldhearted removal of idolatrous and cruel nations, can challenge modern concepts of ethical, moral conduct when viewed as purely a capture of a land promised to the nation's forefathers. However, in order for the Jewish nation to be an עם לאור גויים and to perpetuate Godliness on Earth, tum'ah had to be removed from the land before kedushah could possibly take root and thrive. This type of kedushah, earned through such extreme measures and harnessing such frightening gevurah, should and must engender within us all an awesome dedication and commitment to be worthy and faithful custodians of it, and to live our lives in a manner that preserves it.³⁰

²⁹ <https://etzion.org.il/en/holidays/purim/mitzva-destroy-amalek-and-our-moral-qualms>

³⁰ Thank you to Rabbanit Davina Wanderer-Kriel for her mentorship and guidance during the writing of this article.

The Reluctant Savior: A Tanach Type-Scene

Chani Weinberger

Throughout Tanach there is use of type-scenes, a literary device used to connect various stories and layer meaning throughout. A type-scene is the repetition of a specific scene, in which key plot points remain the same in each story, with slight variation. It is not the similarities, but the differences that enable deeper understanding. Familiar type-scenes include the betrothal at a well and the birth of a hero to a barren woman.¹ A comparative reading of the stories of Moshe, Yonah, and Esther reveals another type-scene: The Reluctant Savior.

These three instances of the Reluctant Savior occur in very different circumstances. Each belongs to a distinct section of Tanach; Moshe in Sefer Shemot of Torah, Yonah in Nevi'im, and Esther in Ketuvim. The differences between the circumstances and national settings of these stories aid us in finding the underlying meaning in each case.

The format for the Reluctant Savior type-scene is characterized by several key elements:²

¹ For a comprehensive exploration of type scenes and their appearance in Tanach, see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Basic Books: New York, 1981.

² Type scenes provide a variety of potential interpretations of each narrative individually and as a collective. While I have chosen to develop a specific interpretation using the elements I have identified, there is no limit to the insights which could be found. As this is a discovery of my own, there may

Hidden Identity – The protagonist's true identity is hidden or denied in some way; its eventual revelation is a pivotal point of the narrative.

Command – The protagonist is commanded to try to bring about the salvation of a certain people.

Refusal and Avoidance – The protagonist promptly refuses the command and takes deliberate action to avoid fulfilling the mission. Understanding the motivation behind the resistance is key to understanding each narrative.

Lottery – Characters turn to forms of chance, often lots, to deduce divine guidance in an ambiguous situation.

The Rule of Three – A pivotal event or pattern occurs three times.

The People's Action – The people are made aware of the need for salvation and take action to facilitate redemption.

Salvation – Despite the reluctance of the protagonist, they serve as the vessel through which God brings about salvation.

Hidden Identity

In order to be an instrument through whom God's hand in the world is revealed, the savior must approach the mission as a servant of God, not as their individual identity. The element of Hidden Identity highlights how each savior accepts their mission as a messenger of God, leaving their personal identities behind. This process plays out differently in each story, revealing key insights about each character and about what it means to be a messenger of God.

Moshe does not choose to hide his identity; it is torn away from him. As a baby, he is set adrift on the Nile³ and refused a life among his Jewish brothers. It is clear from the start that God is orchestrating

be more cases of the reluctant savior which I have not included, and elements which are not highlighted in this article. This in no way means they are unimportant or not present, just that I have chosen not to focus on them.

³ Shemot 2:3.

the situation to work towards a specific goal.⁴ Even with the revelation of Moshe's Jewish identity, he has little control over his fate and is forced to leave the life he has known in Egypt as he flees to Midian. Moshe never has the opportunity to cultivate his own personal identity; instead, he is guided towards a life in service of God.

Yonah, on the other hand, actively works to hide his own identity, both physically and spiritually, while fleeing to Tarshish. While the other passengers beseech their gods, Yonah withdraws into the hold of the boat to sleep.⁵ Just as Yonah is reluctant to carry out his mission, he is reluctant to suppress his personal identity and become a messenger of God. The revelation of Yonah's identity forces him to accept this role saying:⁶

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם עַבְדִּי יְוֹנָתָן ה' אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם אֲנִי יִרְאָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֶת הַיָּם
וְאֶת הַיַּבֶּשֶׁה:

And he said to them, I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made both sea and land.

This statement is the only time we are given an exposition of who Yonah is, further proving that his identity as a servant of God is undeniably his true identity. Additionally, in saying "the God of heaven, who made both sea and land," he points to the reason he is avoiding his mission. He attempts to avoid it but he must acknowledge that God has a relationship with all His creations and will save whom He wants. The essential part of this element for

⁴ For more on the goal of Sefer Shemot and Yetziat Mitzrayim, see "Structure of Sefer Shemot: Knowledge of God" by Dr. Yael Zeigler. <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/studies-tanakh/structure-sefer-shemot-knowledge-god>

⁵ This action is often interpreted as a further attempt to avoid God's will. It is interesting to note that going to sleep may undermine that very avoidance, as prophecy is often manifested within one's dreams.

⁶ Yonah 1:9.

Yonah is the revelation as it is the start of his acceptance of the will of God and his true identity as a man of God.

Unlike the previous two cases, God has no active role in the story of Esther. We are first introduced to Esther as Mordechai's adopted daughter:⁷

וַיְהִי אִמֵּן אֶת־הַדָּסָה הִיא אֶסְתֵּר בְּתֻדּוֹ כִּי אִין לָהּ אָב וְאִם...

He was foster father to Hadassah – that is, Esther – his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother...

The words אֶת־הַדָּסָה הִיא אֶסְתֵּר imply that Esther is her true name, and Hadassah a secondary title. Her identity is hidden due to the circumstances of Galut along with the need for safety in the palace.⁸ Esther's ultimate revelation of her true identity as a Jew, allows her to act as a messenger of God and save the nation from the hands of Haman.

The Command

If God is all powerful, why does He act by way of a savior? If not for the savior and their testimony of the work of God, it would be easy for the people to ignore His presence and attribute the salvation to nature, to a false deity or messiah, or even to deny the fact that they had been in need of salvation. The command to a messenger associates the resulting salvation irrefutably with God.

Moshe's command is the first interaction he has with God. At the burning bush, God comes to him and says:⁹

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' רֹאה רְאִיתִי אֶת־עַנְי עַמִּי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת־צַעֲקָתָם שָׁמַעְתִּי מִפְּנֵי נֹגְשָׁיו כִּי יִדְעָתִי אֶת־מִכְאָבָיו: ... וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה צָעַקְתָּ בְּנִי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאָזְנוֹ אֵלַי וְגַם רְאִיתִי אֶת־הַלֶּחֶץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם: וְעַתָּה לֵךְ וְאֶשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְהוֹצֵא אֶת־עַמִּי בְּנִי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם:

⁷ Esther 2:7.

⁸ Esther 2:10 - לֹא־תִגִּיד - אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִגִּיד

⁹ Shemot 3:7, 9-10.

And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Mizrayim, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows... Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come to me: and I have also seen the oppression with which Mizrayim oppresses them. Come now therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring my people the children of Israel out of Mizrayim.

As part of the command, God repeatedly speaks about how He has seen, heard, and knows about His nation's suffering. It is abundantly clear that they are His top priority, and why His wrath is coming upon the Egyptians. In this instance, the command also provides insight into God's reasons for bringing about the salvation.

At first glance, there may be doubt whether Yonah fits into the category of Reluctant Savior. While it is clear that Yonah is reluctant, his initial command is to bring judgment rather than redemption:¹⁰

קום לך אל־נינוּה העיר הגדולה וקרא עליה כִּי־עֲלֹתָהּ רָעָתָם לִפְנֵי:

Arise, go to Nineve, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.

In fact, when Yonah finally obeys God's instructions, the message he carries to the people of Ninveh is one of pending destruction:¹¹

וַיְהִי יוֹנָה לְבוֹא בְעִיר מֶהֱלֵךְ יוֹם אֶחָד וַיִּקְרָא וַיֹּאמֶר עוֹד אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְנִינוּה נִהפֹקֶת:

And Yonah began to enter the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Another forty days, and Nineve shall be overthrown.

It becomes clear, however, that the reason for informing the people about their judgment is to inspire their repentance so they can be saved, qualifying Yonah as a savior. Yonah must confront his

¹⁰ Yonah 1:2.

¹¹ Yonah 3:4.

own feelings about the salvation of a foreign people he deems unworthy.

Esther's command does not come by divine intervention but from Mordechai. He recognizes the need for salvation and acts upon it:¹²

וּמֶרְדֵּכַי יָדַע אֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה וַיִּקְרַע מֶרְדֵּכַי אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וַיִּלְבַּשׁ שָׂק וַאֲפֹר וַיֵּצֵא
בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר וַיִּזְעַק זַעֲקָה גְדוֹלָה וּמְרָה: ... וַיִּצְוֹת עָלֶיהָ לָבוֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהַתְחַנֵּן
לוֹ וּלְבַקֵּשׁ מִלְפָּנָיו עֲלֵעֲמָה:

When Mordechai learned all that had happened, Mordechai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes. He went through the city, crying out loudly and bitterly... and charge her [Esther] to go to the king and to appeal to him and to plead with him for her people.

The verbs **יָדַע** and **וַיִּזְעַק** used to describe Mordechai's motivation, are the same as those used when God revealed His motivations to Moshe. Mordechai plays the role of God, commanding Esther to act, while still part of the people in need of saving. Although God's hand is not obvious, Mordechai recognizes that Esther may have been divinely placed in her unique role for just this moment:¹³

וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לָעַת כָּזֹאת הִנָּעַת לְמַלְכוּת:

And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis.

Mordechai interprets God's implicit will, and conveys it to Esther.

Refusal and Avoidance

Although a savior is required to ignore personal doubts and abandon their previous life to fulfill God's mission, this is not always easy. The attempt to refuse God's will is understandable, but

¹² Esther 4:1, 8.

¹³ Esther 4:14.

it raises the question of when enough is enough. Each of our three Reluctant Saviors pushes their refusal to a different point, providing deeper insight into each one's mindset, character, and perception of their mission.

The defining piece of Moshe's reluctance is his lack of confidence in himself:¹⁴

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹקִים מִי אֲנֹכִי כִּי אֵלֶךְ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם: ... וַיַּעַן מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר וְהֵן לֹא־יֵאֱמִינוּ לִי וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹלִי כִּי יֹאמְרוּ לֹא־נִרְאָה אֵלֶיךָ ה': ... וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־ה' בִּי אֲדֹנָי לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אֲנֹכִי גַם מִתְמוּל גַּם מִשְׁלֹשׁ גַּם מֵאִזְ דְּבָרֶךָ אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ כִּי כְבֹד־פָּה וְכַבֵּד לְשׁוֹן אֲנֹכִי:

But Moshe said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?" ... But Moses spoke up and said, "What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say: God did not appear to you?" ... But Moshe said to God "Please, O my lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."

Moshe clearly feels inadequate. He does not question God's ability to redeem Bnei Yisrael nor their worthiness of redemption. What he lacks is faith in himself and his own abilities. His first hesitation is, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh, and am I going to take the Israelites out of Egypt?" Next, he questions whether the nation will believe that God appeared to him, and then shifts to focus on his shortcomings, particularly his speech defect. He does not doubt the mission, only his own role in it and his own ability to do what God is asking.

Moshe's lack of confidence leads him not only to initially decline God's mission, but to actively avoid it. Instead of going immediately after the Burning Bush to face Pharaoh, Moshe returns to Yitro and

¹⁴ Shemot 3:11, 4:1, 4:10.

his family in Midian. While there, he is spoken to a second time by God:¹⁵

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֱלֹמֶשֶׁה בְּמִדְיָן לְךָ שָׁב מִצְרַיִם כִּי־מָתוּ כָּל־הָאֲנָשִׁים הַמְּבַקְשִׁים אֶת־
נַפְשְׁךָ;

God said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all those who sought to kill you are dead."

This reiteration of the original command, *after* the Burning Bush, makes it clear that Moshe is avoiding God's will in some way. Although he has accepted his role as savior, he is insecure about his place in the Jewish nation and clings to the family he has built for himself. Moshe's discomfort with his Jewish identity and with his role as leader prevents him from seeing himself as a savior and motivates his avoidance.

Even more extreme than Moshe, Yonah not only hesitates to accept and fulfill God's mission, but he flees so as to avoid it altogether. The reason for his refusal is not revealed until after he completes his mission.^{16, 17} Only then are we told:¹⁸

וַיִּתְּפַלֵּל אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר אָנָּה ה' הֲלוֹאִיזָה דְּבָרִי עַד־הַיּוֹתֵי עַל־אֲדַמְתִּי עַל־כֵּן קִדְמָתִי
לְבָרַח תִּרְשִׁישָׁה כִּי יִדְעָתִי כִּי אַתָּה קִלְחֲנֹן וְרוּחֹם אָרָךְ אִפְּיִם וְרִבְחָסְד וְנוֹחַם
עַל־הָרָעָה:

¹⁵ Shemot 4:19.

¹⁶ Although little is revealed about Yonah's character early in the story, it is evident that he is a navi. It is unreasonable to think that he actually believes he can run from God, as the pasuk suggests. One must acknowledge that Yonah is not acting out of ignorance or lack of belief, but rather, has an unexplained motivation that will be revealed at a later point in the story.

¹⁷ A potential reason why Yonah's motivations are held off until after the mission is complete may be because they are insignificant to the mission. God is the judge of His creations, and the fact that Yonah disagrees with His judgment does not alter God's will. Yonah is given an outlet to voice his opinions with God. However, those opinions and the resulting actions do not come without punishment from God.

¹⁸ Yonah 4:2.

He prayed to God, saying, "O Hashem! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment."

Yonah knew that God's intention in sending him to rebuke Nineveh was to bring salvation because God is compassionate and merciful. This infuriated Yonah because he believes that God's compassion is unearned and unjust. He was also concerned that the salvation of Nineveh, a nation Yonah deemed as deserving of punishment, would reflect badly upon the Jewish nation and upon God Himself. Even though Yonah had noble intentions, he rebelled against the will of God.

Yonah also tests the reach of God's power. Without a word to God, Yonah boards a boat to Tarshish and attempts to get as far away from God and Nineveh as he can. It would be foolish to say that a true navi believes he can run from God as the phrase¹⁹ וַיִּקָּם יוֹנָה לְבָרֵךְ תְּרַשִּׁישָׁה מִלִּפְנֵי ה' suggests. Rather, it has been suggested that Yonah was running from the land of Israel, to avoid receiving prophecy which can only be received in the Holy Land. Another interpretation suggests that he would rather die than carry out his mission, setting out on rocky seas, willing to be thrown overboard. According to these interpretations, Yonah does not wish to defy God directly and does not believe it to be possible. What he is attempting with all his might is to avoid playing a role in the salvation of Nineveh.

Yonah is similar to Moshe in this regard, yet with different motivations. Both of them resist their role in God's plan. Yonah does so because he opposes the entire plan. He knows he is powerless to stop it, so he refuses to play a role at all. Moshe supports God's plan;

¹⁹ Yonah 1:3.

he just feels he is inadequate to play the role that God has laid out for him. Yonah doubts God's plan; Moshe doubts himself.

In comparison to Moshe and Yonah, Esther appears the most noble in her refusal and avoidance of her mission. She states her doubts a single time and then embraces her role with no additional protest.²⁰

כְּלַעֲבָדִי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְעַם־מְדִינוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ יָדְעִים אֲשֶׁר כָּל־אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר יָבוֹא־אֶל
הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל־הַחֹצֵר הַפְּנִימִית אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִקְרָא אַחַת דָּתוֹ לְהִמִּית לְבַד מֵאֲשֶׁר יוֹשִׁיט
לוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־שֶׁרֶבִיט הַזֶּהב וְחִיָּה וְאֲנִי לֹא נִקְרָאתִי לְבוֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ זֶה שְׁלוֹשִׁים
יָמִים:

All the king's courtiers and the people of the king's provinces know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law for him – that he be put to death. Only if the king extends the golden scepter to him may he live. Now I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days.

On the surface, Esther's reason for refusal is clear – approaching the king unsummoned is punishable by death. Mordechai's reply suggests an additional interpretation: Esther is not sure if she has divine support in her actions. She is not searching for the approval of **הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֹׁרוּשׁ** but rather of **מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמַּלְכִּים**. Like Moshe, she is unsure if she is the right person for the job. Unlike Moshe, she does not have an explicit command from God, and thus her uncertainty is appropriate. Mordechai's strong response reassures her,²¹ and she promptly pivots to embrace her role, even at risk of her life.²²

²⁰ Esther 4:11.

²¹ Esther 4:14:

כִּי אִם־הִחְרַשׁ תִּחְרָשִׁי בְּעַת הַזֹּאת רוּחַ וְהִצָּלָה נִעְמוּד לַיהוּדִים מִמָּקוֹם אַחֵר
וְאֵת וּבֵית־אֲבִיךָ תִּאֲבָדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לָקֶט כְּזֹאת הַנֶּעֱתָ לְמַלְכוּת

²² Esther 4:16:

לֵךְ כְּנוּס אֶת־כָּל־הַיְּהוּדִים הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוֹשׁן וְצוּמוּ עָלַי וְאַל־תֹּאכְלוּ וְאַל־תִּשְׁתּוּ
שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לִילָה וַיּוֹם גָּם־אֲנִי וְנִעְרָתִי אֲצוּם כֵּן וּבָכֵן אָבוֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־
כָּדַת וְכֹאֲשֶׁר אֲבָדְתִּי אֲבָדְתִּי:

Esther accepts her mission as savior, but does not go to Achashverosh immediately. She sends word to the people through Mordechai to fast for three days, and does so herself. At first glance, this may look like she is following Moshe and Yonah's playbook, both of whom delay fulfillment of their mission to the point that God needs to send each of them a second command. However, it becomes clear that this is not the case. Proclaiming the fast is Esther's appeal to God that her actions be met with divine approval; it is her spiritual preparation for the daunting task she is about to undertake. Unlike Moshe and Yonah, Esther does not receive a second command as she doesn't need one. She is fully committed to her mission. This is all the more extraordinary given that unlike Moshe and Yonah, Esther must go through her story without the certainty of God's direct command.

Lottery

Lotteries are often perceived as instruments of pure chance. Yet, in Tanach, lotteries often call upon God Himself to determine the outcome, as in the division of the tribal lands²³ or the selection of the scapegoat in the Yom Kippur service.²⁴ So, too, in Reluctant Savior type-scenes, the lottery establishes a clear link with God.

When the boat Yonah boards is struck by harsh seas, there is an immediate association with higher powers. The sailors choose to cast lots in order to determine whose god is responsible for the storm:²⁵

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ לְכוּ וְנַפִּילָה גּוֹרָלוֹת וְנִדְעָה בְּשִׁלְמֵי הָרָעָה הַזֹּאת לָנוּ וַיַּפְּלוּ
גּוֹרָלוֹת וַיַּפֵּל הַגּוֹרָל עַל־יוֹנָה:

²³ Bamidbar 26:55-56.

²⁴ Vayikra 16:8-10.

²⁵ Yonah 1:7.

Those aboard said to one another, "Let us cast lots and find out on whose account this misfortune has come upon us." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

They acknowledge that God has a relationship with His creations and can communicate with them. Moreover, after deriving whose God is causing the storm, they ask Yonah what God's will is. They are reluctant to throw Yonah overboard, even at his own request, and they ask God for forgiveness when they accept that they must. The sailors acknowledge God's power and connection to all His creations, in direct contrast to Yonah, who tries to flee God's power in protest over Him caring about the people of Nineveh.

When Mordechai does not bow before him, Haman decides to seek retribution not only against Mordechai, but against the entire Jewish nation:²⁶

וַיִּבֶז בְּעֵינָיו לְשַׁלַּח יָד בְּמֶרְדֵּכָי לְבַדּוֹ כִּי־הִגִּידוּ לוֹ אֶת־עַם מֶרְדֵּכָי וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הָמָן
לְהַשְׁמִיד אֶת־כָּל־הַיְּהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל־מְלָכוֹת אַחַשְׁוֵירוֹשׁ עִם מֶרְדֵּכָי:

But he disdained to lay hands on Mordechai alone; having been told who Mordechai's people were, Haman plotted to do away with all the Jews, Mordechai's people, throughout the kingdom of Achashveirosh.

It seems that the word לבדו in this pasuk refers to Mordechai – Haman disdains to lay hands on his nemesis Mordechai alone, but rather will annihilate the entire Jewish nation. However, the word לבדו could be interpreted as referring to Haman.²⁷ Haman does not believe that he can achieve this objective on his own (לבדו), so he

²⁶ Esther 3:6.

²⁷ The continuation of the pasuk seems to suggest that the subject is Mordechai, as Haman decides to destroy the entire Jewish nation as opposed to just eliminating Mordechai. However, the second interpretation, which translates לבדו to mean by oneself, is supported by the word's parallel usage in Shemot 18:14.

seeks support. He pursues political support from Achashverosh, and divine support by way of lottery:²⁸

בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן הוֹאִיחֹדֶשׁ נִסָּן בְּשָׁנַת שְׁתַּיִם עָשָׂרָה לְמֶלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵירוֹשׁ הָפִיל פּוּר
הוּא הַגּוֹרֵל לִפְנֵי הֶמֶן מִיּוֹם לְיוֹם וּמַחֲדָשׁ לְחֹדֶשׁ שְׁנַיִם-עָשָׂר הוֹאִיחֹדֶשׁ אָדָר:

In the first month, that is, the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Achashveirosh, pur – which means “the lot” – was cast before Haman concerning every day and every month, [until it fell on] the twelfth month, that is, the month of Adar.

Haman is answered by God, and the lottery falls out on the farthest possible date. The pasuk goes out of its way to tell us that Haman casts the lot in the first month, Nissan, and it falls on the twelfth month, Adar. Haman might have interpreted this as a divine message to forestall his plan, but he merely accepts the date, seeing the lottery’s choice of it as a form of divine support.

Although it is so prevalent in the other cases of this type-scene, the use of a lottery is notably missing in the story of Moshe. God is so directly present that there is no room for guesswork. Since each part of the salvation is carefully crafted by God, and His presence is obvious, the use of a lottery would be utterly redundant.

The Rule of Three

In each Reluctant Savior narrative, some aspect repeats three times. Throughout Jewish thought and law, there is an idea that the number three is a חֻזָּקָה, from the root חֻזַּק, literally meaning strong. In halachic terms, a chazaka is the status of permanence or commitment that is established once an action has been repeated three times. Correspondingly, the Rule of Three serves to strengthen some aspect of each savior’s story. What exactly requires strengthening in each one is quite telling.

²⁸ Esther 3:7.

God responds to Moshe's question about how to address the nation's skepticism by providing three signs – his staff turns into a serpent, his hand becomes covered with tzara'at, and water from the Nile turns to blood. The signs that God gives Moshe are to strengthen his self-image and confidence. The fact that these signs are what receive the Rule of Three highlights that Moshe's confidence is what most requires strengthening in his narrative.²⁹

After being swallowed by a fish sent from God, Yonah spends three days contemplating repentance. Although he is forced into this situation, Yonah takes initiative to reflect, and accepts his obligation to fulfill God's mission. The three days he spends doing so are what allow him to build the strength he needs to go against his intuition and fulfill his role.

In Esther's story, the Rule of Three appears twice. First, she imposes a three-day fast to strengthen her bond with the people as well as with God, whom she fervently hopes is on her side. Then, she strategically uses three visits with Achashverosh to plant seeds in his mind. By deliberately inviting Haman, she prompts Achashverosh to question both the reason for Haman's inclusion and where his true loyalties lie.³⁰ Once Achashverosh has become

²⁹ There is a clear distinction between the first two signs and the third. The first two are performed as signs for Moshe at the Burning Bush and are enacted again in Egypt. The third sign, the transformation of the water to blood, is not performed in the moment at the Burning Bush, but is commanded to be done if the people are still unreceptive even after the first two. The third sign is also differentiated in that it is the only one not referred to as an **אוֹת**, a sign (see Shemot 4:8 where only the first two are referred to as signs). This division of the chazakah into two and one, rather than an indivisible group of three, leaves Moshe lacking the resolve he needs to overcome his doubts. Even after seeing the signs, Moshe still raises additional attempts to avoid his divine calling. Perhaps this is because he did not experience the third. The full power of the strengthening lies in the number three.

³⁰ This likely explains the reason Achashverosh can't sleep (Esther 6:1). Troubled by fears of betrayal by his closest advisors, he revisits the story of Bigtan and

wary of Haman, it is easy to orchestrate his downfall, and Esther ensures the safety of her people.³¹ Since unlike Moshe and Yonah, Esther must act without God's explicit guidance, she must utilize the power of three to strengthen her own plan.

The People's Action

As one of the final steps in the salvation process, the savior prompts the people to take action to trigger salvation. There is an accepted principle that a people must be deserving in order to merit redemption. Whether this merit may be intrinsic or require action³² – there seems to be a divine threshold that needs to be met prior to the realization of salvation. Until this point in the type-scene, the path to salvation has been trodden by the reluctant savior alone. Now, the savior must rally the people to act, for salvation cannot be achieved by the savior alone.

During the early stages of Yetziat Mitzrayim, the people are not ready to take an active role as they have yet to relinquish their slave mentality. The initial command does not include the people, and when they are approached by Moshe, they rebuke him and Aharon for increasing their workload, demanding they stop. It is only at the final stages of salvation, after seeing God's might and devotion, that

Teresh, searching for other individuals with similar motives of treason. This anxiety is heightened when Haman appears in the courtyard and speaks of wearing the king's clothes and riding the royal horse.

³¹ Haman's fate is sealed when Achashverosh reenters the room to find Haman on Esther's couch. Whatever doubts he had about Haman's ambitions, the minister's compromising position confirms the king's suspicions. This allows Achashverosh to embrace Esther's plans to thwart Haman's plot.

³² When Avraham attempts to save the people of Sodom, he seeks to demonstrate their worthiness of salvation by highlighting the righteous few among them. Although there are none so righteous, this encounter underscores the theological principle stating that the merit of a few righteous individuals can bring about salvation for an entire population regardless of their past actions or the knowledge of the impending damnation.

the Jews are commanded to prepare the Korban Pesach. The action that they are commanded reveals the message of Yetziat Mitzrayim. In a public display of their belief in God, the people tie up and sacrifice a lamb, openly spurning the gods of the Egyptians. Further, the lengthy and specific process serves to prepare the nation for the laws and restrictions that are to come post salvation.

The repentance of the people of Nineveh is a direct proof that the people's involvement and worthiness are required in order to bring about salvation. Although most of the sefer focuses on Yonah's reluctance to act as a savior, his role in salvation is minor. Once rebuked, the people take action to overturn the decree and bring about their own salvation, with no additional guidance from Yonah.³³

וַיֵּרָא הָאֱלֹקִים אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם כִּי־שָׁבוּ מִדֶּרֶךְם הָרָעָה וַיִּנָּחֶם הָאֱלֹקִים עַל־הָרָעָה
אֲשֶׁר־דָּבַר לַעֲשׂוֹת־לָהֶם וְלֹא עָשָׂה:

God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment that had been planned for them, and did not carry it out.

The people's acknowledgement of their need for repentance and their actions are what overturn the decree of destruction and allow for redemption. Unlike Moshe and Esther, Yonah does not have to engineer the path to salvation; Nineveh is saved due to their own actions and relationship with God.

Prior to approaching Achashverosh, Esther realizes that she is central to the Jews' salvation, yet she does not rely on her merit alone. Esther prompts the people to fast for three days to spiritually prepare for what she is planning.³⁴ Perhaps more significantly, all

³³ Yonah 3:10.

³⁴ It can be assumed that just as Esther used the three fast days to prepare herself spiritually to bring her nation's salvation (Megillah 15a), she intended for the Jewish people to beseech God and act likewise, by also fasting for three days' time.

Esther secures from Achashverosh is permission for the Jews to fight back.³⁵ He does not rescind Haman's decree nor prohibit his constituents from attacking the Jews.³⁶ Salvation and victory are up to the Jews themselves, and they fight valiantly to achieve it.³⁷

Salvation

In all three stories, although there is a triumphant moment of salvation, if one zooms out, it becomes clear that the redemption is not complete.

At face value, Moshe has completed his mission as savior once the people have escaped from Egypt. However, at the beginning of his mission, God had revealed to him His grand plan:³⁸

לְכֹן אָמַר לְבְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנִי ה' וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִתַּחַת סִבְלַת מִצְרַיִם וְהַצַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מֵעַבְדֵּתָם וְגֵאלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּזִרְעוֹ וְטוֹיָהּ וּבִשְׁפָטִים גְּדֹלִים: וְלִקְחֹתִי אֶתְכֶם לִי לְעָם וְהִיִּיתִי לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים וְיָדַעְתֶּם כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הַמוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם מִתַּחַת סִבְלוֹת מִצְרַיִם:

Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am God. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, Hashem, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians.

These pesukim present the four expressions of redemption: "I will take you out," "I will save you," "I will redeem you," and "I will take you." Although only one phrase directly expresses redemption, it is important to note that they are all aspects of the redemptive process. The splitting of the sea does not complete the people's

³⁵ Esther 8:11, 13.

³⁶ Esther 8:8.

³⁷ Esther 9:5:

וַיָּכֻז הַיְּהוּדִים בְּכָל־אֲיָבֵיהֶם מִכַּתִּיבָהּ וְהָרָג וְאֶבְדָּן וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְשֵׁנֵאֵיהֶם כְּרָצוֹנָם:

³⁸ Shemot 6:6-7.

salvation. The process includes the entire journey in the desert, with its ongoing challenge to follow in God's path. Therefore, even after the Exodus, Moshe's role is far from over but merely shifts to a new challenge - leading the people through the desert.

According to the simple reading of the text, Nineveh followed the ideal course to reaching salvation:³⁹

וַיֵּרָא הָאֱלֹקִים אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם כִּי־שָׁבוּ מִדֶּרֶכָם הָרָעָה וַיִּנָּחֵם הָאֱלֹקִים עַל־הָרָעָה
אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת־לָהֶם וְלֹא עָשָׂה:

God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment that had been planned for them, and did not carry it out.

However, we have no information regarding how Nineveh's story plays out after this episode. There is nothing in the text to suggest that it leads to a better life for the people or to them permanently changing their ways. In fact, the next thing Tanach reveals about Nineveh is that Sancheirev the King of Ashur dwells there, who brings about the exile of the Ten Tribes of Israel.⁴⁰ Thus, it seems that their repentance was not permanent or lasting.

There is no doubt that Esther aided the bringing of salvation, yet it is only a partial salvation. She, the savior, remains in the palace married to a non-Jew, and the Jews of Shushan remain in Galut, still fighting to survive in an antagonistic world.

All of this highlights that redemption is not a one-time event. Rather it is a continuous, ongoing process that we as a nation and as individuals must constantly be working and striving toward. It is never fully achieved; it is always a work-in-progress.

³⁹ Yonah 3:10.

⁴⁰ Melachim II 19:36; Yeshayahu 37:37.

Conclusion

Analyzing the stories of Moshe, Yonah, and Esther through the unique lens of a type-scene allows for comparisons and contrasts that might not otherwise emerge. This approach helps identify common elements and themes found in all the narratives, and highlights the distinctive ways each story employs them. An overarching theme that emerged from all three is that salvation is the focal point between God's will and the actions of the people. The Command, Lottery, and Hidden Identity elements found in the three Reluctant Savior narratives emphasize the divine aspect of salvation, attributing key factors to a higher power. In contrast, the elements of Refusal and Avoidance, The People's Action, and the Rule of Three highlight the role of human agency; God provides people the space to hesitate, resist, or respond.

Taken together as a whole, the Reluctant Savior type-scene models that hesitation can be an integral part of the redemptive process. Although it does not come easily, the people must work to meet God, just as God stretches out a hand to meet humanity. Salvation is the actualization of the combined work of divine intervention and human action.

Matmidot Monday Nights

Matmidot Scholars have the unique privilege of spending some of their free Monday nights travelling to the homes of different figures who have made a significant impact on Am Yisrael in some way. This year's Matmidot learned and conversed with a wide variety of educators, visionaries, and leaders, including:

Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander - President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone

Dr. Yael Ziegler - Torah scholar, educator, and author

Rabbi Dr. Joshua Berman - Professor of Bible, author

Rabbanit Laurie Novick - Creator of Deracheha

Rav David Stav - Founder of Tzohar and Rav of Shoham

Ms. Nitsana Darshan-Leitner - President of Shurat HaDin

Dr. Avivah Zornberg - Torah scholar, educator, and author

Prof. Moshe Koppel - Founder of Kohelet Policy Forum and Dicta

Rabbanit Neima Novetsky - co-creator of AlHatorah

Ms. Shayndi Raice - Wall Street Journal Deputy Bureau Chief of the Middle East and North Africa

Participants in the 5785 Monday night Matmidot sessions were:

Aliza Spizzichino

London, UK

Ariella Susman

Englewood, NJ

Arielle Bronstein

Westhampton Beach, NY

Aviva Kessock

Oceanside, NY

Baila Melamed

Toronto, ON

Dina Kolodny

West Hempstead, NY

Eliana Waghalter

Los Angeles, CA

Emma Loshin

Silver Spring, MD

Hila Cohen

Bronx, NY

Illana Nathan

Hertfordshire, UK

Isabel Linsky

Scarsdale, NY

Elizabeth Kohl

Englewood, NJ

Naomi Zaider

New Milford, NJ

Sarah Schafer

Teaneck, NJ

Hayden Linsky

Scarsdale, NY