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Introduction

We are incredibly proud to present this year's Matmidot Torah Journal, the culmination of a year-long process of learning, research, and writing by the 5786 Matmidot Scholars at Midreshet Lindenbaum.

Matmidot Scholars can choose to participate in one or both of the Matmidot program's core components. The first offers the unique opportunity to gather in the homes of diverse educators, visionaries, and community leaders for deep learning and thought-provoking Q&A sessions. (See the inside back cover for snapshots of some of these memorable meetings.)

The second component focuses on training these talented students to research and produce high-quality Torah articles. Through a rigorous multi-draft process, students are continuously challenged to sharpen their ideas, expand their research, and hone their writing. The journal you hold in your hands is the direct result of that intensive effort.

We express our deep gratitude and admiration to Rav Yitzchak Blau, who generously shared his vast knowledge and guided each student toward additional sources tailored to her topic.

With gratitude to Hashem,

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Let My People...No: Understanding the Purpose of the Ten Plagues

Gabi Boriskin

At a glance, the story of Yetziat Mitzrayim appears straightforward: Bnei Yisrael are enslaved in Egypt, Moshe repeatedly demands, “Let my people go,” and Pharaoh continuously refuses. Hashem brings the Makkot upon the Egyptians, and after the tenth one, in which all the firstborns die, Pharaoh relents and frees the Jews. End of story.

It seems that the sole objective of the Makkot is to secure Bnei Yisrael’s freedom. However, a closer examination of the pesukim suggests that Makkat Bechorot alone would have sufficed to achieve this end. Immediately prior to this final plague, Hashem informs Moshe:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עוֹד נֹגֵעַ אֶחָד אָבִיא עַל־פְּרֹעָה וְעַל־מִצְרַיִם אַחֲרֵיכֶן יִשְׁלַח אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה כְּשִׁלְחוֹ כָּל־הָאָרֶץ יִגְרֹשׁ אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה:

And Hashem said to Moshe, “I will bring but one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; after that he shall let you go from here; indeed, when he lets you go, he will drive you out of here one and all.”¹

If Makkat Bechorot was the plague meant to free the Jews, why were the other nine Makkot needed? Furthermore, why were the Makkot needed at all? Why would Hashem bother with a

¹ Shemot 11:1. Translations throughout the paper are from *The JPS Tanakh* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2023), accessed via Sefaria.

miraculous display of strange plagues to free the Jews, when He simply could have wiped out Pharaoh and the Mitzrim with a single blow?

It seems that the purpose of the Makkot was not to free the Jews, but to teach crucial lessons to the plagues' various audiences- Pharaoh, the Mitzrim, and the Jews.

When Hashem sends Moshe to speak to Pharaoh and demand the release of the Jewish people, Pharaoh challenges Moshe and says:

וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה מִי ה' אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁמֵּעַ בְּקֻלּוֹ לְשַׁלַּח אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל? לֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֶת ה',
וְגַם אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא אֲשַׁלַּח:

Pharaoh says 1) Who is Hashem 2) that I should listen to Him to send out Bnei Yisrael? 3) I don't know this Hashem, and I will not send out Bnei Yisrael.²

The Abarbanel³ writes that in Judaism we have three core beliefs about Hashem. We believe that He is a supreme being, that He supervises and is involved in human affairs, and that He is omnipotent. The Abarbanel splits Pharaoh's response to Moshe into three separate accusations that challenge our core beliefs:

1) Hashem is not a supreme being

The Abarbanel explains that when Pharaoh asks 'מי ה', he is denying the idea of a supreme God in the world. He is asking, "Who is this Hashem, this ק-י-ו-ק? I've heard of other Gods, but this Hashem? I don't know who He is." Pharaoh believes that nature rules the universe, so why would he care about "Hashem?"

2) The concept of divine intervention (hashgachah pratit) does not exist, and Hashem does not intervene in the lives of His creations

² Shemot 5:2.

³ Abarbanel on Shemot 7:17.

When Pharaoh continues with **אָפּוּר אֶשְׁמַע בְּקִלּוֹ לְשַׁלַּח אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל**, he is denying the concept of divine intervention. Though Moshe informs Pharaoh that he was sent on Hashem's behalf to free the Jewish people, Pharaoh does not believe in this concept, so he says, "Why should I listen to this Hashem?"

3) Hashem is not all-powerful, and can be controlled by nature

When Pharaoh declares, **לֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֶת ה' וְגַם אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא אֲשַׁלַּח**, he fundamentally rejects the concept of divine omnipotence. As an absolute non-believer in Hashem, he naturally dismisses the notion of an all-powerful deity. Further, Pharaoh believes that nature itself is god, and humanity is merely an extension of that natural order – precluding the existence of any supreme ruler. Consequently, Pharaoh reasons that even if this foreign deity does exist, his own nature-based gods could easily neutralize and control Him.

These pesukim demonstrate that Pharaoh has no knowledge or fear of Hashem. He brazenly disparages and mocks Hashem in front of Moshe, His servant.

Hashem could have brought any type or number of Makkot upon Mitzrayim. Why did Hashem decide specifically on these ten seemingly random ones? It seems that Hashem designs the Makkot to have three distinct stages to counter each one of Pharaoh's three accusations against Him.

In the Pesach Hagaddah, we read that Rabbi Yehudah made an acronym for the Makkot, and split them into groups of three: **דצ"ך** **עד"ש באה"ב**. Before the first plague of each group (Dam, Arov, and Barad), God makes a programmatic statement about His purpose in sending the plagues. The Abarbanel draws a parallel between Pharaoh's three accusations and these three Divine statements.

Before Makkat Dam, the Plague of Blood, Hashem says:

בְּזֹאת תִּדְּעַ כִּי אֲנִי ה'

Through these plagues, you will know that I am Hashem.⁴

This attacks Pharaoh's first statement, claiming that Hashem is not the God of the world, and does not even exist. Hashem is not only going to use the Makkot to demonstrate that He exists, but also that He is the supreme ruler of the universe.

Hashem then says before Makkat Arov, the Plague of Wild Beasts:

לְמַעַן תֵּדַע כִּי אֲנִי ה' בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ

With these Makkot, you will know that I am Hashem in the midst of the land.⁵

This declaration directly counters Pharaoh's assertion that Hashem remains detached from His creations. Through the strategic deployment of the Makkot, Hashem demonstrates His active and dual intervention in human affairs—protecting Bnei Yisrael and punishing the Mitzrim.

Finally, before Barad, Hail, Hashem says:

בְּעִבּוֹר תֵּדַע כִּי אֵין כָּמוֹנִי בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ

Through these Makkot you will know there is none like Me in all of the land.⁶

Hashem intends to use the Makkot to demonstrate that He is all powerful, and to refute Pharaoh's claim that He is controlled by nature.

While the Makkot are utilized to teach Pharaoh and the Mitzrim about Hashem, they are also used to convey messages to Bnei Yisrael about Him. After more than two hundred years of brutal slavery, the Jews have lost their faith in Hashem and His promise of

⁴ Shemot 7:17.

⁵ Shemot 8:18.

⁶ Shemot 9:14.

redemption. Overwhelmed by their suffering, they have even sunk into Egyptian idol worship. This spiritual decline is described in Sefer Yechezkel:

וַאֲמַר אֱלֹהִים אִישׁ שְׁקוּצָי עֵינָיו הִשְׁלִיכוּ וּבִגְלוֹלֵי מִצְרַיִם אֶל־תִּטְמְאוּ אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם: וַיִּמְרֹדְבִי וְלֹא אָבוּ לִשְׁמָע אֵלַי אִישׁ אֶת־שְׁקוּצָי עֵינֵיהֶם לֹא הִשְׁלִיכוּ וְאֶת־גְּלוֹלֵי מִצְרַיִם לֹא עָזְבוּ וַאֲמַר לְשַׁפֹּךְ חֲמָתִי עֲלֵיהֶם לְכָלֹת אֲפִי בָהֶם בְּתוֹךְ אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

I (Hashem) said to the Jews, "Cast away these detestable things that you are drawn to, and do not impurify yourself with the idol worship from Egypt. I am Hashem your God." But the Jews did not listen to Me. They did not cast away these detestable things or stop idol worship. Then I resolved to pour out my wrath upon them, to vent all My anger upon them there, in the land of Egypt.⁷

The Kedushat Levi⁸ explains that the Jews are so assimilated in Egyptian idolatry and culture that they have reached the 49th out of the 50 levels of impurity. If they would reach the 50th level of impurity, they would not be able to be redeemed from Egypt. Most Jews no longer have any faith in Hashem, or even know of Him.

While Pharaoh's three accusations express that he and the Mitzrim don't believe in Hashem, His intervention, or his Godly abilities, neither do the majority of Jews. These Makkot are as much messages to the Jews as they are to Pharaoh and the Mitzrim.

Purpose #1: בְּזֹאת תִּדְעַ כִּי אֲנִי ה' - Demonstrating that Hashem Is the One True God

To demonstrate to the Mitzrim and Jews that Hashem is the one true God, Hashem must eradicate all of the other "gods" first. According to the Yalkut Shimoni, Hashem attacks the Nile first

⁷ Yechezkel 20:7-8

⁸ Kedushat Levi, Parashat Bo: 14.

because the Egyptians worship it as a god.⁹ Other sources add that Hashem uses each of the Makkot to undermine a different Egyptian deity, such as Hequet the frog goddess, Osiris, the skin god, etc.

Similarly, the Mitzrim deify animals such as goats and sheep. Consequently, Hashem targets these deities during Makkat Dever by decimating the Egyptian livestock. In order to merit leaving Mitzrayim, the Jews have to prove their allegiance to Hashem by destroying Egyptian avodah zarah themselves. Before leaving Egypt, Bnei Yisrael are commanded to slaughter a lamb—an Egyptian deity—and wipe its blood on their doorposts. By doing so, they publicly reject the idol worship surrounding them and affirm their loyalty to Hashem. Those who do not are not redeemed from Egypt. In this way, the Makkot weed out the true believers, compelling the Jews to definitively give up their devotion to Egyptian idolatry and return to Hashem.

Purpose #2: לְמַעַן תִּדַּע כִּי אֲנִי ה' בְּקָרְבַּ הָאָרֶץ - Demonstrating Divine Intervention

Hashem establishes the concept of divine intervention in three stages. He first establishes Himself as the savior of Bnei Yisrael, then claims Bnei Yisrael as His nation by distinguishing them from the Egyptians, and finally demonstrates His absolute power and justice over all other nations by punishing the Mitzrim for their cruelty.

Hashem wants to show that He is the creator of the universe and God of the Jews. According to Pirkei Avot 5:1, Hashem created the world in ten utterances. The Maharal writes that to demonstrate Himself as the master of the universe to the Mitzrim, Hashem makes ten Makkot, one corresponding to each of the utterances with which He created the world. Just as Hashem brought “x” into the world,

⁹ Other sources indicate that Hapi the river goddess was associated with flooding the Nile with waters every year.

he will now take away “x” from the Mitzrim. For example, in Bereishit, it says:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים יְהִי אוֹר וַיְהִי־אוֹר

Hashem said, “Let there be light” and there was light.¹⁰

Just as Hashem brought light into the world, Hashem says וַיְהִי חָשֶׁךְ¹¹ and brings darkness in Makkat Choshech upon the Mitzrim.¹² Similarly, it says:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים תִּדְשָׂא הָאָרֶץ דָּשָׂא עֹשֶׂב מִזֶּרַע עֵץ פְּרִי עֵשָׂה פְּרִי לְמִינֵהוּ
אֲשֶׁר זֶרְעֻבֹה עַל־הָאָרֶץ וַיְהִי־כֵן¹³

And Hashem said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation: seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so.

Just as during Creation, Hashem created produce and plants, Hashem now decimates the Mitzrim’s vegetation with the plague of Locusts.¹⁴

It also says in Bereishit:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים יְהִי רִקְיעַ בְּתוֹךְ הַמַּיִם וַיְהִי מַבְדִּיל בֵּין מַיִם לְמַיִם

Hashem said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, that it may separate water from water.”¹⁵

During Creation, Hashem separated the heavens from the seas to create the atmosphere necessary for sustaining life on earth. So too, in the plague of Hail, Hashem brings down the unnatural phenomenon of hail, overturning the very purpose of the

¹⁰ Bereishit 1:3.

¹¹ Shemot 10:22.

¹² Maharal Gevurot Hashem 57:22.

¹³ Bereishit 1:11.

¹⁴ Maharal Gevurot Hashem 57:21.

¹⁵ Bereishit 1:6.

firmament, which was meant to preserve the separation and balance between the heavens and the waters.¹⁶

Next, Hashem demonstrates His reclamation of Bnei Yisrael as His own nation. Regarding the plague of Lice, the Yalkut Shimoni notes that Hashem promised Avraham that his descendants would be “as plentiful as the dust of the earth.”¹⁷ Since the Mitzrim are trying to destroy a nation likened to dust, Hashem turns the dust of Mitzrayim into lice. Similarly, concerning the plague of Wild Beasts, the Yalkut Shimoni observes that throughout Tanach, the Shvatom are frequently compared to various animals such as snakes, wolves, and lions.¹⁸ Since the Mitzrim are attempting to destroy a nation characterized by these creatures, Hashem brings these animals to attack the Mitzrim. Through this approach, Hashem demonstrates Bnei Yisrael’s importance to Him by making clear that He is punishing the Egyptians for their appalling treatment of His prized nation.

Finally, Hashem drives this message home by punishing the Egyptians in a manner of middah kenegged middah (measure for measure). Each makkah is not only a display of divine power, but also a precise response to the cruelty and oppression the Egyptians imposed upon Bnei Yisrael. The Yalkut Shimoni explains that the Mitzrim withheld water from the Jews to prevent them from purifying themselves in the mikvah, so Hashem deprives the Egyptians of water by turning it into blood. The Mitzrim would ask the Jews to bring them disgusting bugs and creatures for their amusement, so Hashem fills the Mitzri homes with swarms of frogs. The Mitzrim would humiliate the Jews and send Jewish men to clean the houses of Egyptian women, and Jewish women to clean

¹⁶ Maharal Gevurot Hashem 57:20.

¹⁷ Bereishit 13:17.

¹⁸ Devarim 33:22, Devarim 27.

the houses of Egyptian men, so Hashem turns the dust they swept into lice for the Egyptians.

Some of these explanations from the Yalkut Shimoni seem difficult to accept, as he supports his claims with proofs drawn from events that have not yet occurred. For example, he explains that Hashem strikes the Mitzrim with wild animals because Bnei Yisrael are compared to wild animals, even though this comparison does not appear until Sefer Devarim, whereas Yetziat Mitzrayim takes place in Sefer Shemot. Likewise, he says that Hashem deprives the Mitzrim of water because they prevented Bnei Yisrael from purifying themselves in the mikvah, despite the fact that the Torah has not been given yet and so they do not yet know about the mitzvah of tevillah.

We are not meant to take these midrashim literally, rather seriously.¹⁹ In his introduction to Perek Chelek of Masechet Sanhedrin, the Rambam criticizes those who take Chazal's words literally, calling them foolish, as Chazal often speak "בדרך חידה ומשל", in a language of riddles and parables. The Makkot express messages not only to the Jews in Mitzrayim, but to all Jews throughout time. The midrashim in the Yalkut Shimoni convey that some of the messages embedded in the Makkot are meant for us—Jews who would read about the Makkot centuries after they transpired, with the entire corpus of the Torah before us. We are the ones able to make these connections and appreciate the messages hidden therein. Just like the Jews and Egyptians of the time, *we* are one of the intended audiences of the Makkot.

The message of the Makkot is in fact as relevant to us today as it was to the Jews back in Egypt. We too need to be reminded of God's involvement in our lives and of His ongoing protection. Although

¹⁹ Rav Menachem Leibtag often says this in his Torah Seminar course at Midreshet Lindenbaum.

God's intervention in our lives may not be as dramatic as the Makkot, reading the story of the Makkot helps remind us to see God's hand operating in our lives, on both the personal and national level, as well.

Purpose #3: בְּעִבּוֹר תִּדְעַ כִּי אֵין כְּמִנִּי בְּכֹל־הָאָרֶץ - Demonstrating Hashem's Omnipotence and Control over Nature

In 2006, critically acclaimed film director James Cameron partnered with Simcha Jacobovici to create a documentary called *The Exodus Decoded*, in which they act as “modern-day Pharaohs” trying to prove that the Makkot were not actually events that demonstrated God's control over nature, but rather freak natural disasters that happened to strike Egypt.

Their argument is rooted in a volcanic eruption that occurred during the second millennium BCE in Egypt. This eruption created a domino effect in nature that resulted in the ten plagues. The volcanic ash from the eruption polluted the Nile, turning it into a blood-like substance (Dam). The fish died due to the Nile's pollution, but the frogs escaped and hopped into Egyptian homes (Tzfardea). Away from their natural habitat, the frogs all died in the Mitzri homes which created perfect breeding grounds for insects, such as lice and gnats, which then infested Egypt (Kinim). The rotting bodies of the Egyptians who died from the lice, combined with the warm climate of Egypt, caused swarms of flies to attack (Arov²⁰), spreading bacteria and disease. This disease escalated, eventually killing the livestock (Dever), and the bacteria led to painful boils erupting on the Egyptians' skin (Shechin). The volcanic eruption also spewed residue and volcanic debris, causing extreme weather and violent storms (Barad). The climate disruption created

²⁰ This documentary follows the interpretation of commentators, such as the Ibn Ezra (see his commentary to Shemot 8:17) who claim that Arov was a plague of flies, not a plague of wild beasts as it is commonly understood.

perfect breeding grounds for locusts, which came and ate all of the Egyptians' crops (Arbeh). The volcanic ash blocked out sunlight, leading to extreme darkness (Choshech).

The documentary even provides two possible explanations for the Death of the Firstborn (Makkat Bechorot), which seems undeniably supernatural. The first relies on the fact that Egyptian firstborns were given the most respect in the household. This was demonstrated especially at mealtimes, as they were served first and given double portions of food. The documentary theorized that the Egyptian food supply may have been poisoned from the noxious gasses from the volcanic eruption. Since the firstborns were served first, and received the largest portion of the food, it's possible they died from food poisoning.²¹

The documentary's second suggestion is that the firstborns died from carbon dioxide poisoning. Due to the volcanic eruption, there was excess carbon dioxide in Egypt. Carbon dioxide is known to be a very heavy gas, so it tends to settle closer to the ground. The firstborns slept on the lowest level of their homes, so it is possible that they suffocated from carbon dioxide in their sleep.

While there may be some truth to the filmmakers' claims, it does not detract from the divine hand behind them. The Makkot may have begun with a volcanic explosion, but Hashem is the impetus behind it. He ensures that all of these phenomena develop exactly as they do, precisely when Bnei Yisrael need them. In fact, hundreds of years prior to these filmmakers, the Abarbanel already suggests much the same approach as them! Though he of course makes no mention of a volcanic eruption, he explains that the Nile becomes infested, which causes the fish to die. The frogs don't want to die, so they leave the Nile and take cover in the Mitzri homes. Since

²¹ An issue with this approach is that in all likelihood, not only the firstborns would have died if there was food poisoning in Egypt.

Egyptian homes are filled with frogs, they all get infested with lice, etc. The incredible point that emerges is that even a deeply pious commentator like the Abarbanel has no problem explaining the Makkot in as natural a way as possible. Whether the plagues are a supernatural display of miracles or a natural series of events, either way, they reflect Hashem's mastery and manipulation of nature. Regardless of whether Hashem miraculously turns the Nile to blood without any natural explanation behind it, or whether He manipulates nature to bring about some natural cause that leads it to turn to blood, either way, Hashem is the one behind it and directing it. Therefore, with or without scientific explanations behind them, the Makkot unequivocally demonstrate God's total control over nature.

Did the Ten Plagues “Work”?

Having explored Hashem's purposes for the Ten Plagues, the next question is: have those purposes been achieved for their intended audiences – the Egyptians, the Jews, and ourselves?

Pharaoh and the Mitzrim

Hashem's objective in bringing the Makkot is threefold: to reveal himself to Pharaoh and the Mitzrim, establish His intervention in the lives of the Jews, and demonstrate His absolute sovereignty over the universe.

The plagues successfully break down Egyptian resistance to recognizing God. Initially, Pharaoh's magicians attempt to dismiss the miracles as mere sorcery, managing to replicate the first two plagues, Dam and Tzfardea. However, upon their failure to reproduce the plague of Kinim, they are forced to concede, telling Pharaoh, **הוּא אֱלֹהִים אֲצַבֵּעַ אֶלְקִים** - *This is the finger of God.*²² Although

²² Shemot 8:15.

Pharaoh remains obstinate, the Makkot have already begun to achieve their purpose by compelling his own advisors to recognize Hashem as a higher power.

This recognition eventually spreads to the Egyptian populace. The pasuk notes that **וְגַם־עַרְבֵי רַב עִלָּה אֲתָם** - A “mixed multitude” went out with the Jews.²³ The Ibn Ezra explains that this group consists of Egyptians who, moved by awe and fear of Hashem upon witnessing the plagues, choose to join the Jewish people. This recognition culminates at Kriat Yam Suf. As Hashem hinders the Egyptian chariots, the soldiers cry out, **אֲנוֹסָה מִפְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי יִקּוּק נִלְחָם לָהֶם** - Let us flee from the Jews because Hashem is fighting for them in Egypt.”²⁴ Notably, they specifically invoke Hashem’s four-letter name, signaling their recognition of the unique God of the Jews.

Even Pharaoh is not immune to this transformation. During the plague of Frogs, he pleads with Moshe and Aharon, begging them **הֶעֱתִירוּ אֵלַי** - Entreat Hashem²⁵—on his behalf. While Pharaoh’s recognition is driven by immediate suffering rather than lasting conviction, he is nonetheless forced to acknowledge Hashem’s existence and authority. Ultimately, through the Makkot, Hashem successfully compels Pharaoh’s magicians, the Egyptian people, and even Pharaoh himself to testify to His power.

The Jews

Did the Makkot turn the Jews back to Hashem and strengthen their belief in Him?

When the Jews are leaving Mitzrayim, the pasuk states:

²³ Shemot 12:38.

²⁴ Shemot 14:25.

²⁵ Shemot 8:4.

וַיִּסַּב אֱלֹקִים אֶת־הָעָם דֶּרֶךְ הַמִּדְבָּר יַמ־סוּף וְחַמְשִׁים עָלוּ בְּיַיִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם:

Hashem led the Jews around by the way of the desert and Sea of Reeds. The Jews were חמשים as they left Egypt.²⁶

The meaning of the word וְחַמְשִׁים isn't clear. While the JPS translation renders it as "armed," Rashi explains that it signifies that only one fifth of the Jews leave Mitzrayim. While one can take a pessimistic approach, disappointed that only a fraction of the Jews participate in the Exodus, we can look at it through a more optimistic lens. During their slavery in Mitzrayim prior to the Makkot, virtually none of the Jews trust in Hashem. God's magnificent display of power through the Makkot successfully convinces one fifth of them—approximately 600,000 men and their families—to reclaim their faith in Him, and march out of Egypt into the wilderness. This represents a monumental fulfillment of Hashem's ultimate intention for the Makkot. Every year during the Pesach Seder, my family discusses how fortunate we are that our ancestors were part of that one fifth that chose to leave Egypt, enabling us to be here today.

Ourselves

In the present day, we constantly struggle against enemies who seek to harm and destroy us. Whether facing antisemitism in Chutz LaAretz or enduring rocket fire in Israel from neighboring enemies, the threat often feels immediate and overwhelming. At times, we may feel lost or even hopeless, much like the Jews during the years of Egyptian slavery. Yet the story of Yetziat Mitzrayim serves as a powerful reminder that we are the Chosen People, that Hashem is ultimately in control, and that He redeems His nation even in the

²⁶ Shemot 13:18.

darkest moments. Whether that message successfully penetrates our consciousness is largely up to each one of us.

Every Pesach we say in Mussaf:

אתה בחרתנו מכל העמים אהבת אותנו ורצית בנו ורוממתנו מכל הלשונות

You, Hashem, have chosen us from all the other nations. You loved and wanted us, and exalted us above all the other tongues.

As we celebrate Yetziat Mitzrayim, we remind ourselves how fortunate we ourselves are to belong to the Jewish nation, embraced by Hashem's eternal and unconditional love.

The Makkot themselves were a time of fear and upheaval, but they also marked the beginning of the Jews' renewed connection with Hashem. Through them, the Jewish people witnessed His power and providence, culminating in their redemption from Mitzrayim and their emergence as a great nation. In the same way, we hope that today's challenges will ultimately lead to greater unity among the Jewish people, a deeper connection to Hashem, and a lasting geulah in Eretz Yisrael.

חזק ואמא

Channah's Strength within Motherhood

Rachel Cohen

Prayer is a powerful tool through which humans can initiate direct conversation with God. This remarkable avenue for connection between us and our Creator is hinted at in Tanach as early as the birth of Enosh, the grandson of Adam.¹ Prayer serves many purposes: it can be a means of requesting, praising, exalting, and even complaining to God. Throughout Tanach, we encounter many figures who turn to prayer for a wide variety of reasons, both personal and communal.²

In addition to prayer, a common theme in Tanach is the concept of barrenness. Robert Alter, an American scholar of Tanach and comparative literature, discusses the type-scene of barrenness, noting six childless women in Tanach—Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, the mother of Shimshon, Channah, and the Isha HaShunamit.³

¹ Bereishit 4:26 relates 'אֵן הַיְחַל לְקַרְא בְּשֵׁם ה' - *It was then that God began to be invoked by name*, which is interpreted by some, such as the Ibn Ezra, as prayer.

² On the communal level, the nation asks God for help in war (for example, in Divrei HaYamim II 13:14-15) and thanks Him for national salvation (for example, Az Yashir in Shemot 15:1-18). We see individuals thank Hashem (for example, Daniel thanks God for revealing the meaning of Nevuchadnetzar's dream in Daniel 2:20) and make personal requests (for example, in Bamidbar 12:13, Moshe begs God to heal his sister Miriam's tzara'at).

³ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, New York, Basic Books, 1981.

Connecting the recurring themes of prayer and barrenness in the Tanach reveals a striking anomaly: Of the six barren women, only one is explicitly recorded as praying for a child – Channah. Not only does Channah take the initiative to pray, but she does so twice – first when she is childless and again after she has been rewarded with a son,⁴ with her exact words recorded in Tanach in both instances. Clearly, this deviation from the pattern is not to be ignored.⁵

This paper will first summarize each of the barren women's stories, focusing on whether tefillah appears in them in any way. It will then seek to develop a deeper understanding of the unique role that tefillah plays for Channah by exploring the content of her prayers, their timing, and the unexpected deeper goal she is striving to achieve with them.

Synopsis of the Six Childless Women Stories

Sarah

The first childless woman in Tanach is Sarah, the wife of Avraham. Early on in Bereishit, Sarah is described as עֲקָרָה, barren.⁶ Sarah instructs Avraham to have children with her maidservant, Hagar,⁷ then proceeds to get upset after Hagar becomes pregnant.

⁴ Shmuel I 1:10-20.

⁵ It is important to note that even if the Tanach does not record something, it does not necessarily mean it did not occur. For example, some opinions in Chazal attribute prayer to Rivkah and Rachel, which will be addressed later. Regardless of whether other characters did in fact daven, Channah's prayer is still utterly unique in that it is explicitly stated, occurs twice, and we are told the exact words of her prayer both times.

⁶ Bereishit 11:30.

⁷ It is common among the barren women to employ their maidservant in order to have children vicariously through them.

Finally, God tells Avraham that a son will be born to Sarah.⁸ In the following perek, three divine messengers arrive at Avraham and Sarah's tent, and when one of them informs Avraham that Sarah will have a son in the next year, Sarah overhears and laughs.⁹ Eventually, as promised by God, Sarah gives birth to a baby boy.¹⁰

In Sarah's story, there is no explicit reference to prayer.

Rivkah

The next barren woman in Tanach is Rivkah. The Torah tells us,

וַיַּעֲתֶר יִצְחָק לַה' לִנְכַח אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָהּ הוּא וַיַּעֲתֶר לוֹ ה' וַתַּהַר רִבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ:

Yitzchak pleaded with God on behalf of (alternatively: facing) his wife, because she was barren; and God responded to his plea, and his wife Rivkah conceived.¹¹

In Tanach, this is the first instance of explicit prayer in regard to childlessness. However, it seems that only Yitzchak prays, not Rivkah, since the pasuk only says וַיַּעֲתֶר יִצְחָק. In line with this, many mefarshim, such as the Chizkuni,¹² translate לִנְכַח אִשְׁתּוֹ as *on behalf of his wife*, indicating that Yitzchak prayed on behalf of Rivkah, but she herself did not daven. Rashi, however, interprets לִנְכַח אִשְׁתּוֹ as *facing his wife*. He cites Bereishit Rabbah 63:5 that Yitzchak and Rivkah stood in opposite corners, davening simultaneously while facing

⁸ Bereishit 17:16.

⁹ The reason for this is her old age and being past her menstrual cycle.

¹⁰ Bereishit 21:1-2.

¹¹ Bereishit 25:21. Translations throughout this paper are based on David E. S. Stein, ed., *The Contemporary Torah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006), accessed via Sefaria.

¹² The Chizkuni is addressing why Yitzchak davens only on Rivkah's behalf and not also on his own. He explains that Yitzchak is confident that he himself will have children because God promised Avraham that his line would be continued through Yitzchak (Bereishit 21:12). Within this explanation, it is clear that Chizkuni interprets לִנְכַח אִשְׁתּוֹ as *on behalf of his wife*, and thinks only Yitzchak davened, not Rivkah.

one another. According to this interpretation, Rivkah did turn to God in prayer, asking Him to end her childlessness. However, this is not the most straightforward interpretation, since the pasuk only speaks of Yitzchak praying.

God heeds Yitzchak's prayer and Rivkah conceives.¹³ Once she is pregnant, the pasuk says:

וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרֶבָהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם־כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי וַתֵּלֶךְ לִדְרֹשׁ אֶת־ה'

But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" She went to inquire of God.¹⁴

According to some mefarshim, 'וַתֵּלֶךְ לִדְרֹשׁ אֶת־ה' does not indicate prayer. For example, the Chizkuni infers from these words that Rivkah goes to prophets for an answer as to why she is having unusual pregnancy pains. However, other mefarshim, such as Ramban, understand it to mean that Rivkah davens. Either way, it is fascinating that when Rivkah experiences a difficult pregnancy, her immediate instinct is to turn to God in some way (whether through prophets or prayer), yet while she suffers through years of childlessness, that does not seem to be her response. In the peshat of this story, though Yitzchak pleads with God to end their childlessness and Rivkah seeks God when experiencing a difficult pregnancy, Rivkah does not pray to God about her barrenness.

¹³ Bereishit 25:21. The Torah uses the same language for God heeding the prayer as for Yitzchak uttering it, reflecting the reciprocal relationship that God and Yitzchak have through prayer - וַיַּעֲתֹר יִצְחָק לֵה' לִנְכַח אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָהּ הוּא וַיַּעֲתֹר לוֹ ה' וַתְּהַר רִבְקָה - *Isaac pleaded with 'H on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and 'H responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived.* (Note that this is an instance where the translation does not do justice to the original Hebrew and does not capture the parallel language. See Hila Cohen's paper on translation, "Not Just a Shortcut: Rethinking Tanach Translation" in the 5785 *Matmidot Journal*.)

¹⁴ Bereishit 25:22.

Rachel

The final Matriarch to face barrenness is Rachel. After Leah, her sister, gives birth to four sons, Rachel makes a desperate demand of Yaakov: **הָבָה־לִּי בָנִים וְאִם־אֵין מְתָה אָנֹכִי** - *Give me children, or else I die.*¹⁵ Based on the literal peshat, Rachel seems to believe that Yaakov has the power to end her childlessness, which is how several mefarshim understand this.¹⁶ Rashi, however, suggests that Rachel's demand was not literal, but rather a request for Yaakov to pray on her behalf, just as Yitzchak prayed for Rivkah.¹⁷ Yaakov gets angry at her request, asserting that he cannot take the place of God. This indicates that her request was *not* for prayer. In any case, Rachel responds by giving her maidservant Bilhah to Yaakov, in the hopes of building a family through her.¹⁸

Ultimately, while some mefarshim see a demand for prayer hinted at in her words, the text itself contains no explicit mention of prayer, and certainly no indication of Rachel herself praying to end her childlessness.

Mother Of Shimshon

In Sefer Shoftim, we are introduced to the wife of Manoach, a barren woman whose name is never revealed.¹⁹ An angel of God appears to her and announces that she will soon conceive and bear

¹⁵ Bereishit 30:1.

¹⁶ See for example, the **חומת אנוך**, a commentary written by Rabbi Chayim Yosef David Azulay (the Chida) in the late 1700's.

¹⁷ This tendency of mefarshim to insert prayer wherever possible will be discussed later in the paper.

¹⁸ The peshat indicates that Bilhah's children are viewed in some way as Rachel's because she is the one who names them. See also Shoshana Eisner's article in this Journal, "Not Just Family Drama: Sisterhood and Legacy in the Torah," where she argues that the woman who imparts her values to a child is considered its mother. See in particular footnote 22 there.

¹⁹ Shoftim 13:2.

a son. She is further instructed that this child will be a nazir to Hashem from birth; accordingly, she must adhere to certain restrictions of a nazir—refraining from drinking wine and consuming anything impure, and the child's hair must never be cut.²⁰

The woman relays the encounter to her husband, Manoach, who then prays for the angel to return and provide further instruction, despite the fact that clear instructions have already been given.²¹ When the angel reappears, he simply reiterates his original directives. Manoach and his wife attempt to offer the angel food, but he declines, instructing them instead to present an offering to Hashem. Manoach proceeds to bring a sacrifice, and as the flames rise heavenward, the angel ascends within them. Manoach fears they will die for having seen a divine being, but his wife counters that if God intended to kill them, He would not have accepted their offering or delivered the promise of a child. The woman then conceives and gives birth to Shimshon.

Although the narrative is filled with divine encounter and even includes Manoach praying for the angel's return, there is no mention of prayer in connection with the woman's barrenness.

Channah

At the beginning of the book of Shmuel, we meet Elkanah and his two wives, Peninah and Channah. We are informed that while Channah is barren, Peninah has children and frequently taunts

²⁰ Interestingly, Shimshon was permitted to become tamei le-meit (ritually impure through contact with the dead)—he killed many Plishtim—even though that is generally prohibited for a nazir. See Masechet Nazir 4b and Rambam Hilchot Nezirut 3:13 which discuss the uniqueness of Shimshon's nezirut.

²¹ Note that the word used here to describe Manoach praying, וַיַּעֲבֹד is the identical word used to depict Yitzchak davening in Bereishit 25:21.

Channah about her childlessness.²² Even before prayer appears explicitly in the peshat, Rashi inserts it into the narrative, suggesting that Peninah has good intentions behind her taunting – her goal is to provoke Channah to pray to God for a child.²³ Year after year, this pattern repeats, leaving Channah weeping and refusing to eat.²⁴ Eventually, she goes up to the Mishkan and prays earnestly, pouring out her anguish before God over her barrenness. Her prayer includes a vow: If God will grant her a child, she will dedicate him to Divine service for his entire life. Eli HaKohen, the Kohen Gadol at the time, sees her lips moving without hearing her voice and mistakenly assumes she is drunk. Channah clarifies her situation to him, and Eli accepts her explanation. She then goes home and is able to conceive, leading to the birth of Shmuel. After weaning her beloved son, she fulfills her vow and brings him to be raised by Eli in the Mishkan, declaring that this is the child she prayed for,²⁵ and she is now dedicating him to God.²⁶ The text then concludes with what is commonly known as “Tefillat Channah,” a ten pasuk heartfelt prayer that Channah pours out to God.

In Channah’s story, she prays not just once, but twice, and the verbatim words of both prayers are preserved for us in the pesukim.

Isha HaShunamit

In the fourth chapter of Melachim Bet, we are introduced to the Isha HaShunamit, the final barren woman in Tanach. She is a wealthy woman from Shunem who regularly provides

²² Shmuel I 1:6.

²³ This is the third time within childless woman narratives that Rashi inserts prayer where it is absent in the peshat.

²⁴ Shmuel I 1:8.

²⁵ Shmuel I 1:27 - אל הנער הזה התפללתי.

²⁶ Shmuel I 1:28 - וגם אנכי השאלתהו לה' כל־הַיָּמִים אֲשֶׁר הָיָה הוּא שְׂאוֹל לַה' - I, in turn, hereby lend him to God. For as long as he lives he is lent to God.

extraordinary acts of hospitality for the prophet Elisha, feeding him and even dedicating a room for him in her home. On one occasion, while he is staying in this chamber, Elisha calls her before him and asks how he might repay her kindness. After the woman declines any form of reward, Elisha's servant, Geichazi, notes that she has no child and that her husband is elderly. This causes Elisha to summon her and bless her that she will bear a son within a year. The following year, she indeed gives birth. The narrative then takes a tragic turn: the child grows up, goes out to his father in the field, suddenly experiences severe head pain, and dies. In response, the Isha HaShunamit carries him to Elisha's bed and immediately sets out to find the prophet. She and Elisha return together to her home, where Elisha prays to God on the child's behalf and performs a miraculous act of *techiyat hameitim*, reviving the boy.

Once again, despite the obvious presence of miracles and Divine intervention throughout the story, there is a striking absence of any recorded prayer to alleviate the woman's barrenness. The only formal prayer mentioned is Elisha's plea to revive the boy after his death.²⁷

Analysis Of the Six Barren Women Stories

In reviewing the stories of the six childless women in Tanach, several interesting patterns emerge. One is that many of the narratives do include explicit reference to prayer, just not prayer by the barren woman herself for the purpose of ending her childless state. Instead, we find prayers offered by others: Yitzchak's prayer for children, Manoach's prayer for the angel to return, and Elisha's prayer to revive the Isha HaShunamit's son. We even see Rivkah

²⁷ Note that this indicates that Elisha is confident he can bring the miracle of alleviating the woman's barrenness, so much so that he does not feel the need to daven prior to promising this miracle. In contrast, he is less confident about reviving the child and does daven for Divine assistance to perform that feat.

turn to God, but only in response to her difficult pregnancy, not her childlessness. Clearly, these women are situated within a world in which prayer is a known and utilized response to personal issues, making it all the more surprising that they themselves do not explicitly turn to it for children.

Another intriguing pattern is the tendency of some commentators to read references to prayer into verses where it is not explicitly mentioned. Rashi, for example, does this three different times within these narratives. He interprets **לִנְכַּח אֶשְׁתּוֹ** as indicating that Yitzchak and Rivkah both prayed opposite each other, he reads **הִבְהִילִי בָנִים** as Rachel urging Yaakov to pray on her behalf, and he suggests that Peninah's taunting was intended to provoke Channah to pray.

Putting these two phenomena together, I would like to suggest the following:

When Rashi infers prayer where it is not explicitly mentioned, it is not simply because he wants to make our Matriarchs look more righteous; it is because he is bothered by the very issue presented by the first pattern raised above—is it possible that these women were surrounded by prayer and yet none thought to pray for children? It is inconceivable, not only because our Matriarchs were holy, but because anyone ensconced in their world of frequent prayer would surely have turned to God when suffering an acute crisis. Certainly then, they must have davened to God to grant them a child. Hence, Rashi reads prayer into verses where it is not apparent, not because it is the peshat of those verses, but because it is the peshat of the reality – surely they must have prayed; therefore, Rashi searches for places to insert it.

Nevertheless, it remains highly significant that the Tanach chooses not to tell us about any of them praying, let alone the verbatim words of their prayers, and yet chooses to do exactly that,

twice, regarding Channah. Thus, the question shifts from: Why is Channah the only one who davened, to: Why does the Tanach choose to relate only Channah's prayer to us? Our forefathers did many things that are not recorded in the Torah; only those actions that we are meant to learn from are preserved. Thus, if the other women's prayers are not mentioned, and yet Channah's are uniquely portrayed in such detail, it must be that her prayers contain essential lessons begging to be uncovered. So let's turn to analyze Channah's prayer, how it fits in within her story, and what we are supposed to learn from her.

Analyzing Channah's Prayer

In Channah's first prayer, she makes a vow to God: If He grants her a child, she will dedicate that child to God for his entire life. This tefillah is unique among prayers in Tanach, as it reflects an unusual form of supplication. In her state of deep distress, Channah does not plead, but rather takes a proactive approach. She makes a deal with God, offering a promise to Him in exchange for His intervention.

With this vow in mind, we can turn to Channah's second prayer and understand it in a new light.

Channah's second prayer is offered while fulfilling her vow. She brings her beloved son Shmuel to Eli, entrusting him to raise her son in the Mishkan, as she promised before his conception. It is at this emotional moment that *חַנָּה - וַתִּתְפַּלֵּל חַנָּה* - Channah prayed:

(א) וַתִּתְפַּלֵּל חַנָּה וַתֹּאמֶר עֲלֵץ לִבִּי בַּה' רָמָה קִרְנִי בַּה' רָחַב פִּי עַל־אֹיְבָי כִּי שָׁמַחֲתִי בִישׁוּעָתֶךָ:

And Hannah prayed:
My heart exults in God;
I have triumphed through God.
I gloat over my enemies;
I rejoice in Your deliverance.

(ב) אֵין־קְדוֹשׁ כֹּה' כִּי אֵין בְּלִתֶּךָ וְאֵין צוּר כְּאַלְקִינוּ:

There is no holy one like God,
Truly, there is none beside You;
There is no rock like our God.

ג) אֱלֹהֵינוּ תִּדְבְּרוּ גְבוּהָהּ גְבוּהָהּ יֵצֵא עֵתֶק מִפִּיכֶם כִּי אֵל יְדֹעוֹת ה' (וְלֹא) [וְלֹא]
נִתְכַּנּוּ עֲלֵינוּ:

Talk no more with lofty pride,
Let no arrogance cross your lips!
For the Eternal is an all-knowing God,
By whom actions are measured.

ד) קֶשֶׁת גְּבוּרִים חֲתִים וְנִכְשָׁלִים אֶזְרוּ חֵיל:

The bows of the mighty are broken,
And the faltering are girded with strength.

ה) שָׂבָעִים בָּלָחֶם נִשְׁכְּרוּ וְרַעֲבִים חֲדָלוּ עֲדַעְקָהּ יִלְדָּה שְׁבָעָה וְרַבְתָּ בָּנִים
אִמְלָלָה:

The sated are hired out for bread;
The starving hunger no more.
While the infertile woman bears seven,
The mother of many is forlorn.

ו) ה' מָמִית וּמַחְיָה מוֹרִיד שָׁאוֹל וְיֹעֵל:

God deals death and gives life,
Casts down into Sheol and raises up.

ז) ה' מוֹרִישׁ וּמַעֲשִׂיר מְשַׁפֵּיל אֶף־מְרוֹמִים:

God makes poor and makes rich,
Casts down, and also lifts high –

ח) מְקִים מַעֲפָר דָּל מֵאֲשַׁפֵּת יָרִים אֶבְיוֹן לְהוֹשִׁיב עַם־נְדִיבִים וְכָסָא כְבוֹד יִנְחִלֶם
כִּי לֵה' מִצְקִי אֶרֶץ וְיֵשֶׁת עֲלֵיהֶם תִּגְבַּל:

Raising the poor from the dust,
Lifting up the needy from the dunghill,
To set them with nobles,
Granting them seats of honor.
For the pillars of the earth belong to God,
Who has set the world upon them.

ט) וְגִלִּי חֲסִידוֹ יִשְׁמַר וְרָשָׁעִים בְּחֹשֶׁךְ יִדְמוּ כִּי־לֹא בָלַח יִגְבְּרָאִישׁ:

[God] guards the steps of the faithful,
But the wicked perish in darkness –
For none shall prevail by strength.

י) ה' יַחֲתוּ מְרִיבָיו עָלָיו בְּשָׂמִים יִרְעֶם ה' יִדִּין אֶפְסֵי־אֶרֶץ וְיִתְּנָעַז לְמַלְכוֹ וְיִרָם קֶרֶן
מִשִּׁחוֹ:

God's foes shall be shattered –

Thundered against from the heavens.
 God will judge the ends of the earth –
 Giving power to the king,
 And triumph to the anointed one.²⁸

It is striking that in a ten-verse prayer supposedly thanking God for finally blessing her with a child, the alleviation of barrenness is mentioned only once in the entire prayer (in verse 5). This omission suggests that the prayer might serve a different purpose entirely. But if it isn't an expression of thanks for a child, then what is it?

Reading the prayer, it is clear that Channah is primarily focused on admiration of God, not thanksgiving to God. Remarkably, the prayer does not include any words such as “baby” or “child,” but does contain nine references to God’s name.²⁹ Throughout the prayer, many different aspects of God are mentioned and praised which have nothing to do with childbirth or the child with which Channah has been blessed. This includes God being our rock (וְיָיִן), helping the poor (מְעַפֵּר דָּל), and being the world’s judge (ה' יִדִּין אֶפְסֵי-אָרֶץ).

In addition, note that Channah does not offer this prayer to God upon the birth of her child as would be expected if her intention were to thank God for him. Rather, she waits until she has weaned him³⁰ and only utters this tefillah once she has brought him to the Mishkan and delivered him to Eli. I believe that this timing holds the key to understanding Channah’s tefillah.

²⁸ Shmuel I 2:1-10.

²⁹ In fact, Chazal derive the nine blessings of the Rosh HaShanah mussaf Shemoneh Esreh from the nine times that Channah mentions God’s name in this prayer (Rosh HaShanah 29a).

³⁰ In those days, this typically took two years. See Rashi to Bereishit 21:8, where he says that Sarah weaned Yitzchak after 24 months (citing Gittin 75b), and Shemot Rabbah 1:31 which states that Yocheved weaned Moshe and brought him to Bat Pharaoh after 24 months.

I would like to suggest that the purpose of Channah's prayer is not to thank God for blessing her with a child. Rather it is to strengthen her own determination to follow through on her vow to dedicate Shmuel to the service of God.

If one considers this moment in Channah's story, it is truly heart-wrenching. After finally being blessed with the child she has yearned for, she must bring him to the Mishkan and devote him to Godly service for the rest of his life. The only time they reconnect after this is once a year, when Channah and Elkanah go to the Mishkan to bring their annual sacrifice, and Channah brings Shmuel a new coat.³¹ The magnitude of the sacrifice Channah is making is staggering: a mother waits so long for a child, is finally blessed with one, and then, after raising him for just a short while, voluntarily gives him over to be raised by someone else.

Channah's two prayers are inextricably linked. In her first, she desperately and boldly utters a vow, offering her child to God. Her second, in its essence, is her attempt to summon her own inner strength to fulfill that vow. Channah has promised God an almost impossible commitment. She is deeply committed to fulfilling it, and yet at the same time, is overwhelmed by the excruciating sacrifice it entails, and she utters this prayer to strengthen her resolve. Prayer becomes, for Channah, a tool for drawing upon her inner reserves—helping her access the courage, faith, and fortitude she needs to be able to carry out her promise.

There are three ways this prayer helps Channah mobilize the inner strength she needs to fulfill her vow.

Firstly, just by looking at the peshat, it is clear that this prayer consists primarily of proclamations of God's power, uniqueness, and strength. I suggest that Channah is talking to herself as much as

³¹ Shmuel I 2:19.

to God. Her primary goal in uttering this prayer is to convince herself that God is worth the huge sacrifice she is making for Him, and she does so by reminding herself of His awesomeness.

Secondly, certain phrases in the text indicate that Channah is experiencing a form of nevuah regarding Shmuel's future and the pivotal role he will play for the Jewish people.³² For example, the Ralbag and Rabbi Yosef Kara both interpret her phrase, רָחַב פִּי עָלַי - *I gloat over my enemies*, as prophetically referring to future achievements over enemies by her son Shmuel. Similarly, the Radak interprets וַיִּתְּנֵהוּ לְמֶלֶךְ וְיָרָם קֶרֶן מְשִׁיחוֹ - *Giving power to the king, and triumph to the anointed one*, at the end of her prayer as prophetically hinting at the fact that her son Shmuel would anoint the first kings of Israel.³³ By viewing Shmuel as not only her child, but as a future leader of Am Yisrael whose impact will be profound and enduring, she understands that her personal sacrifice is part of something far greater. She also comes to recognize that she too has been granted a significant role in the unfolding destiny of the Jewish people through bringing this future leader into the world and especially by fulfilling her vow and dedicating him to God.

The last way in which Channah uses this prayer to strengthen her resolve to fulfill her vow is through her repeated acknowledgement of Hashem's presence in her life and of how much that means to her. By framing her gratitude around God rather than her son, she deliberately reframes her emotional attachment. The Abarbanel explains that Channah's words reorient her joy entirely toward the Divine:

והסבה בכל זה כי שמחתי בישועתך כי התשועה האלהית היא המשמחת
המכבדת המרחבת את פיה לא דבר אחר. והבן הדברים שחנה אמרה שלא

³² Note that Channah is listed in Masechet Megillah 14a as one of the seven prophetesses.

³³ See also the Abarbanel, who interprets much of her prayer as prophecy about how Shmuel will ultimately help save and guide Am Yisrael in the future.

יחשוב אדם שהיתה שמחתה וכבוד' עם הילד אינו כן כי אם בה' ובתשועתו
מאשר בא מאתו הנער, לא בבחינת הילד עצמו כי אם בבחינת הנותן אותו
יתברך

And the reason for all this is that I rejoiced in Your salvation, for divine salvation is what causes joy, honor, and expansiveness, nothing else. And the meaning of what Channah said is that no one should think that her joy and honor were in the child, but only in God and in His salvation, since the boy came from Him, not in any aspect of the child himself, but only in the aspect that he was given by the Blessed One.

According to the Abarbanel, Channah is expressing that the true source of her joy is personally experiencing God's salvation, not specifically having a child. Through her prayer, Channah reminds herself of her deep awareness of God's active involvement in her personal life and that her relationship with Him matters above all else. This helps strengthen her resolve to give her child up in service of God.

Understanding Channah Through Her Prayer, and Prayer Through Channah

By doing a deep dive into Channah's prayers, we have uncovered whole new facets of her personality. Her initial prayer, in which she vows to give up her child to the service of God, showcases her unique boldness and creative out-of-the-box thinking. She does something no other woman in Tanach has tried before by taking initiative and proposing a deal with God.

At the same time, it also highlights her selfless devotion to God. She is willing to relinquish the very child she desires in order to serve Him. It is clear that her yearning for a child does not stem from her own, selfish desires, but from a genuine craving to serve God.

Channah's second prayer contrasts with this idealistic vision, and humanizes her. Even Channah wavers when the time comes to fulfill this spectacular vow. But from this wavering emerges her

prayer of resolution, showcasing her determination to stick to her selfless vision and commitment.

Not only do we learn about Channah by delving into her prayers but we learn about prayer by delving into Channah. Now we can understand why Channah is the only childless woman whom Tanach records as having davened and why it even preserves the exact words of both her prayers. Though surely the other women turned to God in their distress, only Channah's prayers were chosen to be preserved for posterity because only Channah adds entirely new dimensions to our approach to tefillah. She revolutionizes our understanding of what prayer can be. Channah teaches us that prayer isn't simply an avenue for requesting from God; rather it can be a mechanism for us to clarify to ourselves our own priorities, goals, and values. It offers a profound opportunity to introspect and examine why we want the things we want, and to attempt to make our aspirations more God-centered. We learn from the model set by Channah that prayer can serve as a way for us to keep sight of the goals we have set for ourselves, and to strengthen our commitment to them at moments when we waver or feel uncertain. Channah illuminates the opportunity that prayer provides: to articulate our ideals, place God at their center, and then follow through with faithfulness and determination.

Not Just Family Drama: Sisterhood and Legacy in the Torah

Shoshana Eisner

The Torah is full of dramatic episodes that portray family dynamics.¹ There are numerous stories involving various types of relationships: parent-child,² husband-wife,³ brother-brother,⁴ and brother-sister.⁵ However, there are surprisingly few revolving around sister-sister relationships. In fact, there are only three relevant examples⁶ of this type of relationship present in the Torah – the relationships of Rachel and Leah, Bnot Tzelofchad, and Bnot

¹ To further explore family dynamics in the Torah, see Livi Kobrin's article, "A Psychological Study of Yaakov's Family" in this Journal.

² Examples of father-son relationships in the Torah include Noach with his sons (Bereishit 9), Avraham with Yitzchak and Yishmael (Bereishit 21-22), Yitzchak with Yaakov and Esav (Bereishit 27-28), and Yaakov with his twelve sons (Bereishit 37-50).

Examples of mother-child relationships include Chava and her children (see especially Bereishit 3:20), Sarah and Yitzchak (Bereishit 21), Rivkah and her twins Yaakov and Esav (Bereishit 25-27), and Yocheved and Moshe (Shemot 2).

³ For example, Avraham and Sarah (Bereishit 11), Rivkah and Yitzhak (Bereishit 24), and Moshe and Tziporah (Shemot 2).

⁴ Examples include Kayin and Hevel (Bereishit 4), Yaakov and Esav (Bereishit 25-27 and 32-33), and the twelve tribes (Bereishit 29-50).

⁵ For example, Lavan and Rivkah (Bereishit 24), Miriam and her brothers (Shemot 2 and Bamidbar 12), and Dinah and the shvatim (Bereishit 34).

⁶ While the Torah does mention Tzipporah's sisters, they play no active role in the story, and thus are not included in this list.

Lot.⁷ This invites us to study these sets of sisters in light of each other, to compare and contrast them, and to extract valuable lessons. With that, let's dive into each story.

Bnot Lot

The story of the daughters of Lot is perhaps the most misunderstood of all the stories of sisterhood. After Sedom gets destroyed, Lot and his two daughters run away to Tzoar and his wife turns into a pillar of salt.⁸ Lot is afraid of permanently residing in Tzoar,⁹ so he and his two daughters settle in a cave, where the infamous story of the incestual acts of Bnot Lot take place. The basic story is told over eight pesukim in Bereishit 19:

(לא) ותאמר הבכירה אל הצעירה אבינו זקן ואיש אין בארץ לבוא עלינו כדרך כל הארץ. (לב) לכה נשקה את אבינו יין ונשכבה עמו ונחיה מאבינו זרע. (לג) ותשקין את אביהן יין בלילה הוא ותבא הבכירה ותשכב את אביה ולא ידע בשכבה ובקומה. (לד) ויהי ממחרת ותאמר הבכירה אל הצעירה הן שכבתי אמש את אבי נשקנו יין גם הלילה ובאי שכבי עמו ונחיה מאבינו זרע. (לה) ותשקין גם בלילה ההוא את אביהן יין ותקם הצעירה ותשכב עמו ולא ידע בשכבה ובקומה. (לו) ותהרין שתי בנות לוט מאביהן. (לז) ותלד הבכירה בן

⁷ It is very possible that more sister relationships existed in the families that are discussed in the Torah. For example, when describing Yaakov's children getting up to comfort Yaakov while he was mourning Yosef, Bereishit 37:35 says, *וַיָּקֻמוּ כָל בְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב וְכָל בָּנוֹתָיו* - *And all of his sons and all of his daughters got up*. The pasuk references "all of his daughters" in plural, implying that Yaakov had multiple daughters, even though Dinah is the only one ever mentioned by name. Rashi on Bereishit 37:35, quoting Bereishit Rabbah 41:21, suggests two explanations. One is that *בָּנוֹתָיו* refers to his daughters-in-law. His other explanation is that each of the 12 shvatim was born with a twin, suggesting that Dinah had many sisters and there were numerous sister-sister relationships in Yaakov's family. However, the Torah does not mention any of their interactions or conversations. It does not even mention their existence through anything more than a veiled hint. This further highlights the significance of those sisters that are mentioned by name and the call to study them in light of each other.

⁸ Bereishit 19: 26.

⁹ He was scared either because it was near Sedom (Rashi on Bereishit 19:30), or because it was supposed to be destroyed but an angel prolonged the destruction so Lot could run away (Ramban on Bereishit 19:30).

וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ מוֹאָב הוּא אֲבִימוֹאָב עַד הַיּוֹם: (לח)וְהַצְעִירָה גַם־הוּא יֵלֶדָה בֶּן
וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ בְּרַעְמִי הוּא אֲבִי בְנֵי־עַמּוֹן עַד הַיּוֹם:

(31) The elder said to the younger, "Our father is old and there is not a man on earth to come to us in the way of all the earth. (32) Come, let us go and give our father wine to drink and we will lie with him so that we may preserve seed of our father. (33) They gave their father wine to drink that night and the elder came and lay with her father and he was not aware of her lying or her rising. (34) The next day, the elder said to the younger "Behold, I lay with our father yesterday. Let us give him wine to drink also tonight, and come, lie with him and maintain life via our father." (35) That night, too, they gave their father wine to drink and the younger rose and lay with him and he was not aware of her lying or rising. (36) The two daughters of Lot conceived from their father. (37) The elder gave birth to a son and named him Moav. He is the father of Moav of today. (38) And the younger also gave birth to a son and named him Ben Ami. He is the father of the Children of Ammon of today.¹⁰

In summary, since Lot's daughters believe that no other men have survived the destruction, the older suggests to the younger that they should get their father drunk so that he will sleep with them and impregnate them. The first night, the older sister carries out this plan, and the subsequent night, the younger sister does so as well. Both sisters become pregnant, and they give birth to Moav and Amnon, respectively.

At first, this story seems like nothing more than a vile and disturbing act of incest, but upon deeper examination, a new layer to this narrative is revealed.

First, we must explore the sisters' motivation. Rashi¹¹ explains that by the older sister introducing her plan by stating *וְאִישׁ אֵין בָּאָרֶץ*, she reveals that the sisters believe that the world has been utterly

¹⁰ Unless noted otherwise, all translations throughout the article are from *The JPS Tanakh* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2023), accessed via Sefaria.

¹¹ Rashi is quoting Bereishit Raba 51:9. Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, Abarbanel, and Rav Hirsch follow this interpretation as well.

destroyed as it was during the flood, and that they and their father are the last ones remaining.¹² With that, their survival instinct kicks in, and they feel it is imperative to **נָחִיָּה מֵאֲבִינוּ זָרַע**. There are two possible ways to translate this phrase. It can mean either, *Let us preserve seed of our father*, or *Let us preserve seed through our father*. The former indicates that the sisters' goal was to continue specifically their father's line, and grant their father continuity. The latter suggests that their concern was ensuring the continuity of humanity as a whole. Either way, what is incredibly significant is that it is explicit in the text that the sisters' ultimate goal is ensuring continuity, either of their father or of all of humanity. Though their plan for accomplishing this is abhorrent, it emerges that what they were aiming to accomplish was actually selfless and admirable. Thus, though this is still a story of repulsive sexual behavior, it is also a story of two sisters joining together to ensure continuity.

Bnot Tzelofchad

The story of Bnot Tzelofchad is a short yet powerful account of another group of sisters. It starts in the desert in Bamidbar 27:

(א) וַתִּקְרְבֵנָה בְּנוֹת צִלְפָּחַד בְּן חֹפֵר בֶּן גִּלְעָד בֶּן מְכִיר בֶּן מְנַשֶּׁה לְמִשְׁפַּחַת מְנַשֶּׁה בֶּן יוֹסֵף וְלֵה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֹתָיו נָעֳמִי וְחִגְלָה וּמִלְכָּה וְתִרְצָה. (ב) וַתַּעֲמִדְנָה לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה וּלְפָנֵי אֱלֹעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן וּלְפָנֵי הַנָּשִׂאִים וְכָל הָעֵדָה פָּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר. (ג) אֲבִינוּ מֵת בַּמִּדְבָּר וְהוּא לֹא הָיָה בְּתוֹךְ הָעֵדָה הַנוֹעֲדִים עַל ה' בַּעֲדַת קָרַח כִּי בִחְטָאוֹ מֵת וּבָנִים לֹא הָיוּ לוֹ. (ד) לָמָּה יִזְרַע שֵׁם אֲבִינוּ מִתּוֹךְ מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ כִּי אֵין

¹² Abarbanel on Bereishit 19:23. The Abarbanel raises an interesting question on this approach: Lot and his daughters first settled in Tzoar, a populated city which was not destroyed. If so, how could Lot's daughters have thought there was no one else left in the world? Abarbanel answers that while Tzoar stood in that moment, Lot and his daughters assumed that soon Tzoar would meet the same fate as their home city, Sedom.

It is important to note other interpretations of **וְאִישׁ אֵין בָּאָרֶץ**. The Radak on Bereishit 19:31 explains that the sisters thought no men would lie with them because they had lived in Sedom, a city with a terrible reputation. The Da'at Zekeinim suggests that the sisters thought that since Hashem had saved them, they must have a higher spiritual status than everyone else and thus there were no suitable marriage partners for them.

לו בן תנה לנו אחזה בתוך אחי אבינו. (ה) ויקרב משה את משפטן לפני ה'. (ו) ויאמר ה' אל משה לאמר. (ז) כן בנות צלפחד דברת נתן תתן להם אחזת נחלה בתוך אחי אביהם והעברת את נחלת אביהן להן. (ח) ואל בני ישראל תדבר לאמר איש כי ימות וכן אין לו והעברתם את נחלתו לבתו.

(1) Then drew near the daughters of Zelophehad, the son of Hepher, the son of Gilead, the son of Machir, the son of Manasseh, of the families of Manasseh the son of Joseph. And these are the names of his daughters: Mahlah, Noah, and Hoglah, and Milcah, and Tirzah. (2) They stood before Moses, and before Eleazar the priest, and before the princes and all the congregation, at the door of the Tent of Meeting, saying, (3) "Our father died in the wilderness, and he was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against Hashem in the company of Korah, but he died in his own sin; and he had no sons. (4) Why should the name of our father be lessened from among his family, because he had no son? Give to us a possession among the brothers of our father." (5) Moses brought their cause before Hashem. (6) Hashem spoke to Moses, saying, (7) "The daughters of Zelophehad speak right. You shall surely give them a possession of an inheritance among their father's brothers; and you shall cause the inheritance of their father to pass to them. (8) You shall speak to the Children of Israel, saying, 'If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall cause his inheritance to pass to his daughter.

The daughters of Tzelofchad appear before Moshe and make a request. They ask to be allowed to inherit the land that would have gone to their father, who has died. They explain that their father, who wasn't in the company of Korach,¹³ died without sons; therefore they, his daughters, should inherit his land. Moshe brings their case to Hashem who expresses His approval and agrees to Bnot Tzelofchad's request. He then has Moshe teach a halacha to all of Bnei Yisrael as a result of their appeal: if a man has no sons, his daughter inherits his land. The daughters of Tzelofchad are

¹³ Bamidbar 16 relates that Korach was the leader of a revolt against Moshe. His followers were punished and killed. According to Ibn Ezra on Bamidbar 27:3, since the sisters thought that those who gathered with Korach would not inherit land (correctly, it turns out – see Bava Batra 117b), they felt it was important to mention that their father had not been among Korach's followers.

mentioned one more time, in Bamidbar 36, where they are instructed to marry within their father's tribe so that their ancestral land will remain within his shevet.

What is the motivation behind Bnot Tzelofchad's petition? What is it that drives these five sisters to get up in front of Moshe Rabbeinu to make such a bold request?

The answer is found explicitly in the text. They say: לָמָּה יִגְרַע שֵׁם אָבִינוּ מִתּוֹךְ מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ כִּי אֵין לוֹ בָּן – “Why should the name of our father be lessened from his family because he had no sons?” Clearly, the primary concern of Bnot Tzelofchad is preserving their father's name through his portion in the land. Rav Elchanan Samet explores this concept in depth.¹⁴ He explains that one meaning of the word שֵׁם is “that which continues a man's existence within the human context after his death.” If a person's name disappears, he is lost for eternity, a terrible tragedy, one that the daughters of Tzelofchad do not want to befall their father.¹⁵

Rav Samet explains that during the time of Tanach, a man perpetuated his name in two possible ways – through his children and/or through his land. The complete erasure of a man's name is so terrible that the Torah has laws to prevent it. The law of yibum requires a widow to marry her deceased husband's brother if they have no children in order to ensure that the man's family name remains eternal, as it states explicitly in Devarim 25:6:

וְהָיָה הַבְּכוֹר אֲשֶׁר תֵּלַד יָקוּם עַל־שֵׁם אָחִיו הַמֵּת וְלֹא־יִמָּחָה שְׁמוֹ מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל

¹⁴ Rabbi Elchanan Samet, “Parashat Pinchas, The Daughters of Tzelofchad,” Yeshivat Har Etzion. <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-bamidbar/parashat-pinchas/pinchas-daughters-tzelofchad>

¹⁵ Rav Samet notes interestingly that these are not the only women in Tanach who are involved in stories revolving around the concept of establishing a name. Others include Rut and Tamar.

The first child that she bears shall be accounted to the dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out in Israel.

If the deceased leaves behind *any* child – son or daughter – that eliminates his widow's requirement of yibum. This indicates that daughters and not only sons perpetuate their father's name.¹⁶ According to Rav Samet, the subtext of the daughters of Tzelofchad's request is that the halacha is treating them inconsistently. If they are considered adequate in perpetuating their father's name to exempt their mother from yibum, then they should also be considered worthy enough of carrying on their father's legacy by inheriting the family land. If not, as indicated by a woman not inheriting land, then their mother should perform yibum in order to perpetuate Tzelofchad's name.

What emerges is that Bnot Tzelofchad's request is not a land grab, but is motivated by a sincere desire to preserve the legacy of their father's name.

Common Theme

When analyzing these two stories of the lesser-known sisters in the Torah, a common theme emerges as the motivation behind all the sisters' actions. The oldest daughter of Lot very explicitly states her objective in sleeping with her father: נחיה מאבינו זרע – to ensure continuity, either of their family line, or of humanity as a whole.

¹⁶ Devarim 25:5 explains the laws of yibum:

כִּי־יָשְׁבוּ אָחִים יַחְדָּו וּמֵת אֶחָד מֵהֶם וְגַן אֵינְלוּ לְאִתְּהֶיָּה אֲשֶׁת־הַמֵּת הַחוּצָה לְאִישׁ זָר יִבְמָה יָבָא עָלֶיהָ וּלְקַחְתָּהּ לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וְיָבְמָה:

“When brothers dwell together and one of them dies and leaves no offspring (alternatively: son), the wife of the deceased shall not be married to a stranger, outside the family. Her husband's brother shall unite with her: he shall take her as his wife and perform yibum.”

Rashi on this pasuk cites Yevamot 22b which explains that וְגַן אֵינְלוּ means the man had no offspring, sons or daughters. This means that the laws of yibum apply only to those without *any* children. If a man has daughters, the laws of yibum do not apply.

Similarly, the daughters of Tzelofchad clearly state the goal of their request for land: לָמָּה יִגְרַע שֵׁם אָבִינוּ מִתּוֹךְ מְשֻׁפָּחָתוֹ – to preserve their father’s name, essentially, to continue their family line. The similarity between these two stories is striking. The fact that these two sets of sisters had the very same intention suggests that the Torah wants to stress that specifically within sister stories, there is something central and vital about continuity and legacy. It is with this lens that I want to explore the story of the most famous sister duo in Tanach: Rachel and Leah.

Rachel and Leah

Rachel and Leah’s tale spans multiple perakim in Bereishit.¹⁷ Their story unfolds as follows: Yaakov works seven years to marry Rachel, only to be deceived by her father Lavan, who substitutes his elder daughter Leah on the wedding night. Lavan permits Yaakov to marry Rachel as well, but only in exchange for another seven years of labor. Yaakov loves Rachel more than Leah. Seeing that Leah is unloved, God enables her to have children, while Rachel remains barren for many years.¹⁸ Leah gives birth to Reuven, Shimon, Levi, and Yehudah, and later to Yissachar, Zevulun, and a daughter, Dinah. Rachel, distressed by her infertility, gives her servant Bilhah to Yaakov, who bears Dan and Naftali. Leah later gives her servant Zilpah to Yaakov, and she gives birth to Gad and Asher. Eventually, God opens the womb of Rachel, and she gives birth to Yosef. Later, while traveling, Rachel gives birth to Binyamin, and dies in childbirth. She is buried along the way, not in the family burial place, Me’arat HaMachpeilah. Later, Leah dies, and she is

¹⁷ Bereishit 29-35.

¹⁸ For more on the theme of barren women in Tanach, see Rachel Cohen’s excellent article, “חֹזֶק וְאַמָּה: Channah’s Strength within Motherhood,” in this Journal.

buried in Me'arat HaMachpeila, where Yaakov will eventually be buried as well.¹⁹

One question hovers throughout the whole story: What is the nature of Rachel and Leah's relationship? Is it loving or full of rivalry?

Bereishit 30:1 explicitly states:

וַתִּקְנָא רָחֵל בְּאֵחָתָהּ

And Rachel was jealous of her sister.

The Torah explicitly reveals that there is tension in their relationship. However, the midrash tries to mitigate this. Bava Batra 123a explains that Rachel and Yaakov made signs to give to each other at the wedding so that Yaakov would know he was not being fooled. When Rachel realizes that her father is in fact intending her sister to be the bride, she gives over the signs to Leah in order to keep her from being embarrassed. In midrashic lore, this empathy and care go both ways, as Berachot 60a explains that when Leah is pregnant with Dinah, the baby in her womb is originally a boy but Leah davens to Hashem begging for a girl. She knows that Yaakov is going to have twelve sons and wants Rachel to have more than one; hence she davens for her child to be female.

This approach has some difficulties. First of all, neither of the midrashim has a compelling basis in the text. Secondly, the second midrash ascribes some sort of nevuah to Leah that Chazal don't seem to think she had; Megillah 14a lists the seven prophetesses and Leah isn't on the list.²⁰ Most significantly, it does not account for the text, which explicitly states that Rachel is jealous of Leah.

¹⁹ Bereishit 29-35.

²⁰ The seven neviot listed in Megillah 14a are Sarah, Miriam, Channah, Devorah, Chuldah, Avigayil, and Esther.

The pasuk which states **וַתִּקְנָא רָחֵל בְּאָחֶתָּה** raises another fundamental question: What is the real source of the sisters' tension? Is it simply about who is most loved and who has the most children, or is there something more going on beneath the surface?

It is generally assumed that the sisters yearn for completely different things – Rachel for children and Leah for Yaakov's love. However, I'd like to propose that at the core, both Rachel and Leah's underlying wish is identical. I believe that both yearn to be *the* Mother of Israel, to be the one to continue Yaakov's primary family line, the line of Bnei Yisrael.

Rachel makes this claim obvious. The pasuk states:

וַתֵּרָא רָחֵל כִּי לֹא יָלְדָה לְעֵקֶב וַתִּקְנָא רָחֵל בְּאָחֶתָּה וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל־עֵקֶב הִבְהִילִי בָנִים וְאִם־אֵין מִתָּה אָנֹכִי:

When Rachel saw that she didn't have a child for Yaakov, she was jealous of her sister. And she said to Yaakov: Give me children or I will die.²¹

Rachel desperately wants to be a mother, and is jealous of Leah's ability to have children with Yaakov, the father of Israel. Rachel wants to be the mother of Israel – literally.

Leah is jealous of Yaakov's love. She wants her husband to love her like he loves Rachel. I would suggest that without Yaakov's love, Leah doesn't feel like the real mother of Israel, but rather simply a vessel to give birth to Yaakov's children. Being the mother of Bnei Yisrael, continuing this unique family line, doesn't just mean biologically giving birth to the children, but cultivating the values of Yisrael in the children.²² Leah realizes she can't fully do this without the love of Yaakov.

²¹ Bereishit 30:1.

²² There is further proof in Tanach that the woman who instills her values in a child is considered its mother. When Sarah is frustrated at her inability to conceive and

This is what Rachel and Leah's argument is really about: Who is the real mother of Bnei Yisrael? Who is the one who will continue the line of Yaakov – is it Leah, who is the biological mother of most of Yaakov's children, or Rachel, who instills her values thanks to her position as Yaakov's most beloved wife?

Ultimately, both sisters gain some aspect of what they want. Rachel does have biological children of her own. While not as many as Leah, she does give birth to Yosef and Binyamin.

As for Leah, Rav Hirsch claims that the names which Leah gives each of her sons reveal that with each successive birth, she gains more of Yaakov's love.²³ Leah's first son is named Reuven, כִּרְאֵה ה' - because **God** has seen my affliction. Rav Hirsch explains that this shows that before Reuven's birth, Leah's suffering was so obvious that everyone saw it, and now after his birth, the situation has improved so that now only Hashem sees it. She names her next son Shimon from the shoshon (root) ש.מ.ע. (to hear), to express her feeling that with the birth of her second son, the imbalance between Yaakov's feelings for her and Rachel can now only be heard (in the different tone he uses to speak to each of them), and can no longer be seen.²⁴ After Leah's third son, she feels that she and Rachel are loved equally. She names him Levi because יִלְוֶה אִישִׁי אֵלַי - *this time my husband will become attached to me*.²⁵

suggests that Avraham marry Hagar, she says, "בְּאִנָּה אֶלְשָׁפְתִי אוּלַי אֶבְנֶה מִמֶּנָּה" - *Consort with my maid and perhaps I shall have a child through her* (Bereishit 16:2). Sarah is expressing here that even if she will not be the one to give birth to the child, so long as she will be the one who raises the child in her tent, with her values, she will be considered the child's mother.

²³ R. Hirsch Bereishit 29:35 (Translation: David Haberman, The Rav Hirsch Chumash, 2002).

²⁴ She names her first son Reuven from the shoshon ש.מ.ע. (to see) because at that point, her suffering could still be seen (albeit only by Hashem rather than by everyone).

²⁵ Bereishit 29:34.

Rav Hirsch explains that:

With the birth of her third son, however, she felt that the imbalance had been entirely erased. She expressed her full confidence that her relationship with her husband would now be pure and true: **יְלוּהוּ אִישִׁי אֵלַי**.

Additionally, regarding the name of Levi, Leah supplies the explanation and Yaakov chooses the name for the child based on her reasoning.²⁶ This demonstrates true partnership through Yaakov's acceptance of Leah's thoughts and values. Now that Leah feels that she is loved equally, she can simply rejoice in her fourth son. She names him Yehudah because **'הַפַּעַם אוֹדָה אֶת־ה'** - *this time I will praise God* – fully and wholeheartedly, without yearning to attain more of her husband's love.

I find it difficult to fully embrace Rav Hirsch's explanation. He focuses on the fact that Leah names her first son with the shoresh **ר.א.ה.** (to see) and her second son with the shoresh **ש.מ.ע.** (to hear), and thus he argues that the situation improves with the birth of each child because after the birth of their first child, Yaakov's favoring of Rachel could even be seen, while after the birth of Leah's second son, it could only be heard. However, Rav Hirsch ignores that Leah's full explanation as to why she names her second son Shimon is - **כִּי שָׁמַע ה' כִּי שָׂנְאָה אֶנֶכִּי** - *because Hashem has heard that I am hated*.²⁷ This does not sound like an improved situation in which she has made headway toward gaining the love of her husband.

I would, however, argue that just like Rachel ultimately gives birth to children but not as many as Leah, Leah gains some of Yaakov's love but not as much as Rachel. I believe the sisters

²⁶Bereishit 29:34 - **וַתֵּהָר וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֹּאמֶר עֵתָּה הַפַּעַם יְלוּהוּ אִישִׁי אֵלַי כִּי־לָדַתִּי לוֹ שְׁלֹשָׁה בָּנִים** - *Again she conceived and bore a son and declared, "This time my husband will become attached to me, for I have borne him three sons."* Therefore **he** called his name Levi.

²⁷ Bereishit 29:33.

ultimately accept this reality, that they actually don't have to single-handedly do it all, and that they can share the role of "mother of Israel." Evidence of their growing acceptance of each other is seen when Yaakov tells his wives he wants to leave their father Lavan's toxic household. He calls Rachel and Leah together,²⁸ indicating that he views both of them as primary wives and seeks the approval of both of them. Further, the two sisters respond jointly, granting their acquiescence, without even a hint of animosity or jealousy at having been consulted together. They even refer to the children as "*our* children,"²⁹ revealing that they no longer mother their children alone, but rather together, as partners, each contributing their own strengths.

In Megillat Rut 4:11, the witnesses to Rut and Boaz's marriage give Rut a Bracha. They say:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר־בְּשַׁעַר הַזְּקֵנִים עֲדִים יְתֵן ה' אֶת־הָאִשָּׁה הַבָּאָה אֶל־בֵּיתךָ
כְּרָחֵל וּכְלֵאָה אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ שְׁתֵּיהֶם אֶת־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעָשָׂה־חֵלֶל בְּאַפְרָתָה וּקְרָא־שֵׁם
בְּבֵית לָחֶם:

All the people at the gate and the elders answered, "We are witnesses. May God make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the House of Israel! Prosper in Ephrathah and perpetuate your name in Bethlehem!"

Dr. Yael Ziegler asks: Why are the only matriarchs mentioned in this blessing Rachel and Leah? Dr. Ziegler suggests focusing on the word שְׁתֵּיהֶם. Though she develops a different point, I believe that שְׁתֵּיהֶם is in fact the key to the answer.³⁰ Tanach is specifically linking

²⁸ Bereishit 31:4.

²⁹ Bereishit 31:16 - וְעַתָּה כֹּל אֲשֶׁר אָמַר - אֱלֹקִים אֵלֵינוּ עָשָׂה - Truly, all the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to *our children*. Now then, do just as God has told you.

³⁰ Yael Ziegler, *A Blessing on Both Your Houses: Rachel and Leah*, Yeshivat Har Etzion, February 8, 2020. <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/ketuvim/megillat-ruth/blessing-both-your-houses-rachel-and-leah>

Rachel and Leah, together, as the builders of the house of Israel, more than any of the other matriarchs. Because of their recognition of and ability to embrace each other's strengths, they are known as the two women "both of whom built up the House of Israel."

Differences

After understanding that the three stories of sisters revolve around the same goal of ensuring continuity, I want to explore two fundamental differences between the stories: whose continuity the sisters are trying to preserve and how that affects the nature of the sisters' relationship. In both the stories of Bnot Lot and Bnot Tzelofchad, the sisters' goal is selfless. They want to enable others to have continuity, for Bnot Lot – their father or the whole world, for Bnot Tzelofchad – their father. We see that in both of these stories, the sisters don't seem to have any tension; they are completely united in their plan. In the story of Bnot Lot, the older daughter suggests a plan and, despite the vulgarity of her idea, the younger one does not voice any objection but rather goes right along with it. In the story of Bnot Tzelofchad, other than listing their names, the Torah does not differentiate at all between the sisters. We never find out who the leader of the group is, whose idea it is to approach Moshe, or who is the oldest; they act as a group, a collective, working together seamlessly. The names of the five sisters are listed in a different order the two times they are mentioned in Torah,³¹ and Rashi suggests it is to show that they are all equal.³²

Rachel and Leah's relationship is more complicated. It is explicit in the peshat that their relationship is fraught with tension - וְיָקִינָא

Dr. Ziegler uses the word פְּתִיחָם to develop an alternate conclusion than the one I propose. However, her article is what led me to focus on the word.

³¹ Bamidbar 27:1 and Bamidbar 36:11.

³² Rashi on Bamidbar 27:2.

רָחֵל בְּאַחֲתָהּ. I suggested that the underlying cause of this tension is the competition they feel regarding their personal goal of being *the* mother of Israel. Unlike Bnot Lot and Bnot Tzelofchad, whose focus is on perpetuating someone else's line, in the story of Rachel and Leah, their focus is on their *own* line. They don't just want Bnei Yisrael to continue; they each want to be the one to provide that continuity. However, I showed that ultimately even this sister pair learns to appreciate each other, work together, and value what the other contributes.

A powerful message emerges from this. Every mother naturally wants and deserves for her values to shape her children and her home, and to feel that her voice matters. The story of Rachel and Leah adds a critical dimension: that no one person carries that role alone. Children are influenced by many people – teachers, friends, extended family and more. Those influences add invaluable elements that enrich the child's life. In a larger sense, part of life is recognizing and making space for what others can contribute, much like Rachel and Leah eventually come to acknowledge and appreciate each other's strengths.

It's the two together, our own contributions together with others', that build a child, a community, a nation—just like Rachel and Leah, not as individuals but as a team are the ones that בָּנוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁתֵּיהֶם אֶת־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל, together built the line of Israel, the line that ultimately has carried the Jewish nation throughout history until today, providing the ultimate continuity.

The Da'at Divide: Gan Eden to Eretz Yisrael

Sophie Fine

Introduction

Although we typically regard the acquisition of knowledge as admirable and inherently positive, the Torah appears to associate it with sin, punishment, and exile. The idea that obtaining knowledge of good and bad causes man to be punished appears in the very first chapters of the Torah. In Gan Eden, the one and only command that God gives man is to not eat from the **עץ הדעת טוב ורע**, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad. When man does so anyway, he is exiled from Gan Eden, marking the beginning of humanity's distance from the Divine.

Later, in Sefer Devarim, the motif re-emerges as Bnei Yisrael prepare to enter Eretz Yisrael, the nation's sacred homeland. In the first chapter, Moshe, the leader of the Jewish people, recounts the punishment that Bnei Yisrael were given after Chet HaMeraglim, the sin of the spies, namely that that generation had lost the opportunity to enter the Promised Land. They were sentenced to wander aimlessly in the desert for forty years until their entire generation would die out and only their children, the next generation, would be privileged to enter the Land. In describing those who would be allowed to enter, God says:

וּבְנֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־זָדְעוּ הַיּוֹם טוֹב וָרָע הֵמָּה יָבֹאוּ שָׁמָּה וְלָהֶם אֶתְנַנֶּה וְהֵם יִירְשׁוּהָ

Your children who **today do not know good and bad**, they shall enter it; to them will I give it and they shall possess it.¹

The Torah's language is striking, echoing the description in Bereishit, where Adam and Chava are expelled from Gan Eden specifically after eating from the Etz Ha-da'at and coming to "know good and bad."

The similar language regarding admission to and expulsion from sanctified land establishes a powerful idea: *man's ability to dwell in the land is seemingly contingent upon his lack of knowledge of good and bad.*² Once Adam and Chava obtain such knowledge, they are exiled from Gan Eden. Only those who lack such knowledge are permitted to enter the Promised Land. This parallel suggests that the Torah is establishing a broader theological principle about innocence, knowledge, and the prerequisites for living in a divinely sanctified space.

Why might knowledge be negative? Why does it preclude living in sanctified space? In order to develop answers to these questions, we must first explore the possible explanations for what exactly it is that man comes to "know" upon eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, and what precisely the consequences are of eating from it. Only then will we be equipped to address the essential question of how does the Torah use the theme of "knowing good and bad" to shape living in God's chosen places, from Gan Eden to Eretz Yisrael.

¹ Devarim 1:39. Translations throughout the paper are from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), accessed via Sefaria.

² The term "sanctified land" is utilized to signify a place that is especially connected to God.

Defining “Knowledge of Good and Bad”: Sexual Desire, Free Will, and Intellect

When examining why eating from the tree was so detrimental to man, we must first determine what “the knowledge of good and bad” really means. Although there are various proposed interpretations, this paper will focus on the three that are most widely discussed.

A Sexual Meaning

Several mefarshim, including the Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Abarbanel, suggest that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad has a sexual connotation. Ibn Ezra explains that the “good and evil” man does not know until he eats from the tree is lust and attraction; after eating from the tree, man's mind becomes open to sexual desire.³ Similarly, the Radak suggests that after eating the fruit, Adam and Chava experience a biological urge to engage in sexual relations with one another.⁴ Support for this interpretation is that prior to eating from the tree, man and woman are not ashamed of their nakedness,⁵ and yet immediately after eating from the tree, they become aware of their nakedness and feel the need to cover themselves.⁶

Along similar lines, Abarbanel believes that it is a tree whose fruit has the effect of increasing one's sexual desires and passions.⁷ In Abarbanel's view, moderate sexual desire and actions are not inherently problematic. In fact, quite the opposite; there is benefit for man to be intimate with his wife and procreate, and thus

³ Ibn Ezra on Bereishit 3:6 s.v. ונחמד העץ.

⁴ Radak on Bereishit 2:17.

⁵ Bereishit 2:25.

⁶ Radak on Bereishit 3:7 s.v. תפקחנה עיני שניהם.

⁷ Abarbanel on Bereishit 2:1.

touching and feeling the tree were never prohibited. However, the desire that results from eating from the tree causes man's passions to become excessive and lustful.⁸ According to this approach, the tree is described as the "Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad" to reflect the dual potential of sexual relations. Sexual relations can serve a meaningful and divine purpose, as reflected in the pasuk עַל יֶעֱזְב־אִישׁ אֶת־אִבּוֹ וְאֶת־אִמּוֹ וְדָבַק בְּאִשְׁתּוֹ וְהָיוּ לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד.⁹ Yet they can also deteriorate into an expression of overflowing lust, desire, and solely the pursuit of physical pleasure – something that could be categorized as a more animalistic impulse.

Further evidence that the knowledge is sexual in nature is that the very first thing that the Torah notes man and woman doing after their sin is engaging in marital intercourse,¹⁰ which the Torah has made no reference to prior to their sin. Additionally, the tree enables man to "know good and bad" and the Biblical terminology for marital relations is to "know" one's wife.¹¹ The language used is וְהָאָדָם יָדַע אֵת חוּה אִשְׁתּוֹ, indicating a direct connection between man eating from the עֵץ הַדַּעַת and this act of intimacy. The usage of the verb "yada," or "know," to describe both the knowledge gained from the tree and man engaging in relations with his wife supports the idea that sexual desire is gained from the tree. Moreover, the initial creation of woman from man is directly juxtaposed to the

⁸ Abarbanel questions why God created this tree at all if it is so bad. His answer is what is written above: in moderate amounts, such as just seeing and touching it, it is good, but when taken in excessive amounts (such as through eating it), it is problematic.

⁹ Bereishit 2:24 – *Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh.* This verse describes an intimate, physical unity within marriage—man should "cling" to his wife to create his own family. As this is something man *should* do, there must be aspects of marital relations that are positive.

¹⁰ Bereishit 4:1.

¹¹ See, for example, Bereishit 4:17 and 19:8, Bamidbar 31:17-18, Shoftim 19:25, and Shmuel I 1:19.

commandment to not eat from the tree – the creation of two creatures of different genders being placed right before the tree of “good and bad” inherently links the two. The creation of woman – an intimate act that brings forth a partner for man – models a form of sexual intimacy that is “good” in contrast to the “evil,” excessive sexual desire that emerges after eating from the tree.

However, while gaining sexual desire as a result of eating from the tree fits with much of the text, there is a pasuk that challenges this approach. In Bereishit 3:22, God says that now that mankind knows good and bad, he has become “like one of us”:

הֵן הָאָדָם הָיָה כְּאַחַד מִמָּנוּ לָדַעַת טוֹב וָרָע

Many mefarshim, including the Radak, opine that מִמָּנוּ, or “us” is to be understood as God addressing His angels, while still including Himself.¹² This interpretation presents a difficulty, as angels – and certainly God – are non-physical beings¹³ and not subject to lust or sexual desire! If one understands that eating from the tree leads to increased sexual desire, how does gaining that make man more like the angels or God? Perhaps one explanation is that the desire and ability to produce new life is one of the most, if not *the* most, God-like aspects of mankind. Indeed, God is Creator, with human life the pinnacle of creation. Procreation is arguably the single most Divine act that humans are capable of. Thus, man acquiring an increased desire for sexual relations, which leads to the birth of new life, does make him more God-like. Nevertheless, the pasuk still presents a challenge, as what increases is man’s **lust**, not his desire for children.

¹² Radak on Bereishit 3:22.

¹³ For more on the topic of humans, angels, and *b'tzelem Elokim*, look at Sforno on Bereishit 1:27.

Innate Free Will? Or an Attainment of Free Will?

An additional explanation proposes that the tree grants man free will and the ability to choose between something and its opposite, such as the good or evil inclination. The Ramban claims that “*da’at*” refers to will, or choice, saying:

והיפה בעיני כי האדם היה עושה בטבעו מה שראוי לעשות כפי התולדת, כאשר יעשו השמים וכל צבאם, פועלי אמת שפעלתם אמת ולא ישנו את תפקידם, ואין להם במעשיהם אהבה או שנאה, ופרי האילן הזה היה מוליד הרצון והחפץ, שיבחרו אוכליו בדבר או בהפכו, לטוב או לרע, ולכן נקרא “עץ הדעת טוב ורע”, כי ה“דעת” אמר בלשוננו על הרצון¹⁴

It is correct in my eyes that man’s original nature was such that he did whatever was proper for him to do naturally, just as the heavens and all their hosts do – “faithful workers whose work is truth, and who do not change from their prescribed course”¹⁵ – and in whose deeds there is no love or hatred. The fruit of this tree brought forth will and desire, that those who ate it should choose a thing or its opposite, for good or for evil. Therefore, it was called “*Etz Ha-da’at Tov V’ra*” (the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil), for *da’at* in our language is used to express will.

Originally, humans were like all other creations, whose actions follow their natural course without deliberation or conflict. For example, just as the sun naturally rises and sets when it is supposed to, without inclination to do otherwise, man acted free from conflict or hesitation. According to the Ramban, eating from the tree introduced *da’at* – will – to man, granting him the ability to choose between good and evil. Thus, the tree is referred to as “*etz ha-da’at*,” as it indicates not mere knowledge, but rather the rise of moral choice. This aligns with the pasuk that states הן האדם היה כאחד ממנו, or that humankind has become “like one of us,” knowing good and bad. Man gains the will and desire to choose, and of course God has will and choice – He created the world.

¹⁴ Ramban on Bereishit 2:9.

¹⁵ Sanhedrin 42a.

Therefore, eating from the tree does in fact make man more like God.

However, fundamentally, how can the Ramban say that man did not have free will from the start if woman and man were told not to eat from the tree and yet they did, violating the command? If they lacked free will, what was the point of the prohibition, and how could they have violated it? Additionally, according to those who propose this answer, what would have been the point of humanity if we had no free will? And why is the human's attainment of knowledge from the tree, and their consequent likeness to God, regarded as something negative?¹⁶

Losing Innocence and Gaining Intellect

The final explanation suggested by classic commentators is that prior to eating from the tree, man was child-like in his innocence and naivete. Moshe David Cassuto, a prominent Italian-Israeli Torah scholar (1883-1951), explains that God created man in a child-like state, without any feelings of fear or worry, but with the basic ability to understand and obey do or don't commands. However, after eating from the tree, man acquires a more sophisticated and complex level of *da'at*, or knowledge. Cassuto brings the following textual proof: after eating from the tree, it does not say that Adam and Chava learn to ponder or evaluate their nakedness in any complex way, rather they simply *know* (*v'yedu*) of their nakedness.¹⁷ This is analogous to a young child who runs around unclothed

¹⁶ I believe a possible answer to this question could be that God did not want man to gain moral awareness and choice through action taken in defiance of His command. By eating, man transformed the acquisition of knowledge into something more selfish and self-directed, not a means to exhale his relationship to God in any way. Lia Goldberger suggests a similar idea in her insightful analysis of Gan Eden in "Kedem and Partnership with God" in this Journal.

¹⁷ Bereishit 2:9.

unabashedly, and then, at a certain stage of development, becomes cognizant of his nakedness.

Ralbag, like Cassuto, explains the attainment of knowledge of good and bad through a more logical, literal lens. He agrees that man gains new knowledge after eating from the tree, but he defines this knowledge differently than Cassuto.¹⁸ He says:

וביאורו השגת הערב והבלתי ערב הנאה והמגונה והמועיל והמזיק

The tree gives man the ability to know **subjective** truths of good and bad and decipher between the beautiful and disgraceful, the beneficial and the harmful. While man may have known objective truth, eating from the tree causes man to understand more complex, subjective truths. I believe that this aligns with the pshat, as by defying God's command, man becomes aware of his ability to decide for himself what is good or bad. Accordingly, this approach fits with the pasuk stating that after man eats from the tree, he is "like one of us." Beforehand, man differed from God in the nature and scope of his knowledge, but by gaining more understanding, he has become more like God.

But how could it be that God's ideal plan for mankind was for them to be childlike creatures with such limited knowledge and comprehension?¹⁹ We are so accustomed to valuing the ever-increasing knowledge we have that it is almost incomprehensible to us that "regressing" to a childlike level of knowledge and understanding would be better. However, perhaps one of the

¹⁸ Ralbag Bereishit 2:9 (see Rambam's Moreh Nevuchim Chapter 2 for a similar explanation).

¹⁹ Radak on Bereishit 2:17 writes that even prior to the sin, **אדם הראשון מלא דעת היה** – Adam was full of knowledge to distinguish between good and bad. Radak lived about 700 years prior to Cassuto so he is not addressing Cassuto himself, but is merely pointing out that Adam clearly had knowledge prior to the sin, so eating from the Tree must have granted him something else. As explained above, he thinks it granted Adam sexual desire.

central messages of this narrative is that the innocence and purity of that kind of existence is in fact more ideal. Even if we struggle to comprehend it, maybe humanity was originally meant to exist in a simple, naive, harmonious state.

The Punishment of Violating the Prohibition

Having explored the possible explanations of what the knowledge of good and bad could be, as well as the difficulties within each approach, we must now examine what the consequence was of eating from the tree.²⁰

God explicitly states, **כִּי בַיּוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת**, that on the day man eats from the tree he will surely die.²¹ Yet, Adam and Chava do not die after eating from the tree. In fact, they live for centuries; Adam lives for over nine hundred years.²² However, they are exiled from Gan Eden and prevented from eating from the Tree of Life. So, how are we to understand the pasuk of **מוֹת תָּמוּת** and how it relates to what man's punishment actually was?

There is a general consensus among many mefarshim that the punishment of **מוֹת תָּמוּת** refers to man's mortality. If man had not sinned, he would have lived forever. For example, the Ramban says that **כִּי בַיּוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת** does not mean that on the day you eat from it, you will surely die, but rather, on the day you eat from it, you will become subject to death.²³ In Masechet Shabbat 55b, it says:

אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקב"ה רבונו של עולם מפני מה קנסת מיתה על אדם הראשון? אמר להם מצוה קלה צויתיו ועבר עליה

²⁰ See Lia Goldberger's article, "Kedem and Partnership with God" in this Journal for another fascinating approach to Adam's sin and its consequences.

²¹ Bereishit 2:17.

²² Bereishit 5:5.

²³ Ramban on Bereishit 2:17.

The angels said before the Holy One Blessed Be He, “Why have you inflicted death upon the first man?” And God said to them, “I commanded him one easy commandment and he violated it.”

According to this Gemara and the Ramban who quotes it, man becomes mortal upon breaking God’s will through sin.²⁴

Radak has a different yet similar approach. Unlike the midrash in the Gemara and the Ramban, he believes that man was mortal prior to the sin, but he posits that **מֵת תָּמוּת** signifies that man’s lifespan would be shorter than originally intended.²⁵ He quotes Bereishit Rabbah (19:8), which explains that **בְּיוֹם** refers to a divine “day,” which is one thousand years, meaning that Adam was originally meant to live for that long, but due to his sin, he lives for less time—only nine hundred and thirty years. Hence, man’s sin causes him to die sooner.

Within this understanding of mortality being the punishment, why could man not be immortal anymore? One possible explanation is that if eating from the tree causes man to be more God like, as God explicitly worries about in the pesukim themselves—whether through desire to be a creator, ability to choose freely, or the attainment of intellect—maybe in the wake of the sin, man needs to become mortal in order to impose greater distance and distinction between mankind and God.

Linking לִדְעַת טוֹב ורַע: A Textual Bridge Between Bereishit and Devarim

Now that we have explored the classic interpretations of what **לִדְעַת טוֹב ורַע** means in the context of the Creation story, let us consider what it might mean in the Devarim narrative, which states

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Radak on Bereishit 2:17.

that only those who do not understand **טוב ורע** may enter the Promised Land.²⁶ The interpretations discussed above do not account for this phraseology, which clearly alludes to Bereishit. However, the significance of “knowing good and bad” appearing in these two—and only these two—Biblical narratives cannot be overlooked. The Torah is begging us to notice the similarity in these texts.

In Bamidbar, where the original incident of Chet HaMeraglim takes place, God articulates Bnei Yisrael’s punishment by declaring

²⁶ Gan Eden and the first chapter of Devarim are the only two instances in all of Torah where this phraseology of “knowing good and bad” appears, and thus my paper focuses on those two instances. Similar phraseology does appear twice in Navi (Prophets) as well, once with Shlomo HaMelech and once with Barzilai, a man who provided food for David HaMelech when he was fleeing from his own son, Avshalom. Cassuto and Ralbag’s more literal approach could provide a beautiful explanation for Shlomo’s request for knowledge and understanding in Melachim I, Chapter 3. God asks Shlomo HaMelech what he would like to be gifted from God, and (in 3:9) Shlomo requests a **לֵרַע לְהִבִּין בִּיטוֹב לָרַע**, an “understanding mind to judge [God’s] people, to distinguish between good and bad,” which he is then praised for and gifted triplefold. While in Gan Eden, knowing good and bad seems to have a very negative connotation and leads to exile, here God praises and blesses Shlomo for requesting such knowledge. How can this be? There is a slight difference in the language of the text that I believe can explain the difference – *le-haveen* versus *la-da’at*: Shlomo’s request *le-haveen bein tov la-ra* reflects his desire for discernment and judgment to enable him to judge and lead the Jewish nation justly. This form of knowledge, of understanding, is praiseworthy since it may be directed towards helping others and a nation at large rather than only his own power and autonomy. Therefore, Cassuto and Ralbag’s interpretations – that the Tree of Knowledge gifts literal knowledge to man – are plausible, as here, it is referring to literal understanding. However, the first approach in this paper, which interprets “knowing good and bad” as sexual desire, would not fit in this context, as the *pasuk* here refers to literal capacity for discernment and understanding. In Barzilai’s case, which is in Shmuel II 19:32-40, Barzilai informs David that he will not go back into Jerusalem with him due to his old age, as **בְּרִשְׁמִימִים שָׁנָה אֲנִי הַיּוֹם הָאֵדָע בִּיטוֹב לָרַע** – *I am now eighty years old. Can I tell the difference between good and bad?* Some say the good and bad being referred to here is food, while Chazal say that he overindulged in sexual relations which caused old age to overtake him. Barzilai’s case, or at least the way Chazal interpret his words, supports the sexual interpretation of **טוב ורע**. For a more in-depth analysis of what Barzilai meant, look at Masechet Shabbat 152a.

that “those twenty years and older” will die in the wilderness.²⁷ In Devarim, instead of using that clear objective language, God instead deliberately uses language that mirrors Bereishit and says, “Your children who today do not know good and bad, they shall enter it.”²⁸ The linguistic parallel indicates that there is a vital and direct connection between the two narratives. What is the nature of this connection?

Addressing the Question through Rav Hirsch

Rav Hirsch presents a new approach to understanding the prohibition against and punishment for eating from the tree. Instead of explaining that the tree grants some new sort of knowledge or will, Rav Hirsch argues that the choice to eat from the tree represents the first time that man has the opportunity to actualize the free will with which he has been created. According to Rav Hirsch, free will to choose between good and bad is a fundamental aspect of human beings and thus man was created with it from the outset. The critical issue, according to Rav Hirsch, is how one defines something as good or bad – according to God’s determinations or his own human senses and judgments. The tree epitomizes this choice. God explicitly commands man not to eat from it, thereby defining the tree as “bad” in Divine terms. Yet in human eyes, the tree appears utterly good and desirable – **וְתָרָא - הָאִשָּׁה כִּי טוֹב הָעֵץ לִמְאֹכֶל וְכִי תָאוֹה הוּא לְעֵינַיִם וְנַחֲמָד הָעֵץ לְהַשְׂכִּיל** - *the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom* (Bereishit 3:6). Thus, the tree is named The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad because it represents the first time that man is faced with the choice of what to trust as his source of knowledge of whether something is good or bad – God’s judgment or his own. Ultimately, by eating from the

²⁷ Bamidbar 14:30-35.

²⁸ Devarim 1:39.

tree, Adam and Chava demonstrate that they reject God's assessment in favor of their own.

Rav Hirsch says:

There is only one condition for the earth to be able to form a paradise for us, and the condition is thus, that we only call that good, which God stamps as being good, and bad, which He declares as such...if we place ourselves under the dictate of our senses, the gates of Paradise are closed to us and only by a long way round can Man regain admittance thereto.

If man had trusted the determination of God, then he would have been worthy of remaining in a world that was a paradise for him. However, his choice creates a separation between humankind and the Divine, and leads to man's expulsion from paradise and loss of perpetual closeness to God.

Rav Hirsch's unique interpretation provides an explanation for the Torah's later statement in Devarim that only those who "do not yet know good and bad" can enter the land. According to his analysis, it is understandable why entering the Land is contingent upon such a lack. Those who do "not know good and bad" are those who do not determine good and bad based on their own human judgment but rather on God's. It is entirely logical that only someone who trusts and relies upon God's determinations is someone worthy of living close to God.

Hence, Rav Hirsch's interpretation is the only one that accounts for the connection between the two narratives and why God would echo language reminiscent of Adam's sin when describing who can enter the Promised Land. Only by linguistically linking these two seemingly disparate stories is God able to highlight that both are fundamentally addressing the same core question: who can dwell in sacred space, whether Gan Eden or Eretz Yisrael. In both cases, the conclusion is the same: only someone who trusts God's assessments over his own.

A clear proof that the Torah ties entry to the Promised Land to trusting God's determinations above one's own judgment is Chet HaMeraglim, the sin that ultimately causes the dor ha-midbar to lose the right to enter Eretz Yisrael. The essence of that sin lies in the people's failure to trust in God's assessment of the Land. God consistently declares that the land of Israel flows with milk and honey, and repeatedly describes it as "good."²⁹ Yet, when the spies return after scoping out the land, despite their halfhearted agreement that the land is "good,"³⁰ they report it as a land of giants and danger, crafting a frightening image for the Jewish nation.³¹ God declares that anyone who believes the spies' report will not enter the land of Israel, the Promised Land.³² Once again, trusting human assessment over God's is what prevents living in sacred space. Just as in Bereishit, man is exiled from Gan Eden for trusting his own senses that the Tree is good instead of obeying God's command that it is not,³³ so too here, those within the Jewish nation who rely upon the spies' assessment rather than God's are denied entry into the Promised Land.

Conclusion

The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad is linked to the story of the spies and ultimately to the right to enter the Promised Land. In all three instances – Gan Eden, Chet HaMeraglim, and the question of who may enter Eretz Yisrael – the critical factor determining the people's ability to live in closer proximity to God is whether they accept God's judgment of what is good and bad over their own.

²⁹ Shemot 3:8 and 3:17, 13:5 and 33:3.

³⁰ Bamidbar 13:27 (see also Devarim 1:25 to see how the spies use the language of טוב/good).

³¹ Bamidbar 13:28-33.

³² Bamidbar 14: 29-35.

³³ Bereishit 3:22-23.

Through these stories, we learn that knowledge brings responsibility, and that each generation has a choice: to trust God's assessments faithfully and merit the land, or sin by relying on our own senses and forfeit it.³⁴

Having established this, we may now return to the questions posed at the outset. We have explained that knowledge itself is not inherently negative, but rather that how we weigh our different sources of knowledge – our own senses versus God's commands – is what makes all the difference. This idea can initially feel unsettling, as it seems to require suppressing our own judgments. However, I believe this discovery in Torah reveals the importance of being connected to God and seeing the world and our choices through God's "eyes" and values. Rabbanit Sally Mayer suggests that one of the goals and also challenges of mankind is ensuring that the spiritual, God serving part of us directs our physical, materialistic instincts. Human beings are meant to live within the constant tension of the physical and spiritual, maintaining a balance that denies neither. Giving in to temptations signals overly physical and animalistic pursuits, while completely rejecting the physical is equally erroneous.³⁵ These moments in Torah do not condemn human senses altogether, but rather demonstrate the consequences of placing them above Divine command. We must use our human senses and opinions in tandem with God, subordinate to God. Thus,

³⁴ At first, it may seem alarming that the Torah is telling us to set aside our own judgments. However, it is not asking us to not question, explore, challenge, or seek understanding. Rather, it is asking us to remain committed to following God's guidance and assessments regardless of whether we ultimately achieve full understanding of them.

³⁵ Physical aspects of life remain essential to human existence. Basic needs such as eating, drinking, and reproducing are necessary for survival. Moreover, God deliberately created humans as physical beings, rather than angelic ones. Our potential greatness lies not in being robotic followers of Divine will, but rather by elevating our physical needs and directing them into a life of following God.

the Torah reveals that the key to living close to God is contingent upon learning to trust Him—even above and beyond our own senses.

Kedem and Partnership with God

*Exploring a theological, linguistic, and psychological
motif in Tanach*

Lia Goldberger

Introduction

The Hebrew root קדם (kedem) appears numerous times throughout Tanach, especially in Bereishit,¹ and carries a wide semantic range including *east, ancient, before, (קודם/kodem) and primordial time*. Yet it can also convey the almost opposite idea of קדימה (kadima), meaning *forward* or *advancing*. The Sons of Kedem (בני קדם)² are described as a people known for wealth, wisdom, and magic, suggesting that kedem can also connote prosperity, insight or pagan practice. Because of this ambiguity, classical commentators have debated whether kedem refers to geography, chronology, or a deeper, primordial consciousness.

Classical rabbinic thought³ understands kedem as a reference to a primordial reality, kadmono shel olam, when God alone existed prior to creation. This idea is grounded in Mishlei 8:22:

ה' קנני ראשית דרכו קדם מפעליו מאז:

¹ The word kedem appears 22 times in Bereishit. The only sefarim in which it appears more frequently are Yechezkel (55 times), Daniel (29 times) and Tehillim (25 times).

² The phrase "children of Kedem" (בְּנֵי קֶדֶם) is associated in Tanach with wealth and wisdom. Iyov 1:3 describes Iyov as "greater than all the children of Kedem," understood by commentators as wealth, while Melachim Alef 5:10 describes Shlomo as "wiser than all the children of Kedem," indicating wisdom.

³ See Masechet Pesachim 54.

The Lord created me at the beginning of His way, as the first of His works of kedem.⁴

Rashi⁵ interprets ראשית דרכו - *the beginning of His way*, as referring to a time before the creation of the world. Similarly, both Rashi⁶ and Onkelos,⁷ in their comments on Devarim 33:27,⁸ understand the phrase מענה אלקי קדם there as referring to God, who precedes all existence and by whose word the world was created. This idea is reinforced by Micha 5:1, which describes a figure whose origins are מימי עולם - *from kedem, from days of old*. The addition of מימי עולם suggests that kedem carries a meaning beyond simply “ancient times”. Accordingly, parshanim understand it as pointing to a pre-creation reality.⁹ Kedem, then, represents not just a time, but a theological concept—a return to, or recognition of, God’s absolute primacy.

This paper argues that the recurring use of kedem in Bereishit functions as a literary-theological marker of orientation. Rather than being purely spatial or temporal, kedem signals moments during which human beings define their relationship to God and their role on earth. Across Bereishit, where humanity searches to understand its role in God’s world, these moments consistently present a choice between three modes of existence: human self-exaltation, passive withdrawal, or active partnership with God in the ongoing process of creation. In this sense, kedem becomes a leitwort that frames

⁴ Mishlei 8:22.

⁵ Rashi on Mishlei 8:22.

⁶ Rashi on Devarim 33:27.

⁷ Onkelos on Devarim 33:27.

⁸ The full pasuk states: *מענה אלקי קדם ומתחת זרעית עולם ויגרש מפניך אויב ויאמר השם: - The ancient God is a refuge, a support are the arms everlasting. He drove out the enemy before you, by His command: Destroy!*

⁹ For more examples, see Melachim II 19:25 with Rashi, Yeshayahu 46:10, Tehillim 68:34, and Mishlei 8:22.

human identity as fundamentally directional: either toward God, away from Him, or alongside Him.

Gan Eden

This paper will examine five core moments in Bereishit in which the root kedem appears—Gan Eden, Kayin, Babel, Lot, and Avraham. Five additional significant episodes will be addressed in footnotes—Shem's descendants, Yishmael's descendants, Avraham's descendants, Yaakov, and Pharaoh and Yosef.¹⁰

God's creation of Man in Gan Eden—the first instance kedem appears—provides essential insight into the divine-human relationship and the deeper meaning of the word kedem.

וְכָל שִׁיחַ הַשָּׂדֶה טָרָם יִהְיֶה בָאָרֶץ וְכָל־עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה טָרָם יִצְמַח כִּי לֹא הִמְטִיר ה' אֱלֹהִים עַל־הָאָרֶץ וְאָדָם אֵין לַעֲבֹד אֶת־הָאֲדָמָה :

When no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil.¹¹

In order for the world to flourish, God and man must cooperate in a co-dependent relationship. God's role is "to send rain," initiating and sustaining growth, while humanity's role is "to till the soil," shaping and developing creation. Divine will and human creativity must function in tandem for growth to occur.

After describing the land as desolate, God creates a flow that rises from the ground and waters the earth. God then forms man

¹⁰ Of the 22 occurrences of the root kedem in Bereishit, four are not relevant to this analysis. In Bereishit 2:14, 13:14, and 28:14, kedem appears alongside other cardinal directions and functions geographically, without broader theological significance. Similarly, in Bereishit 15:19 the kadmonim are listed alongside other nations, such that this instance too is devoid of deeper meaning.

¹¹ Bereishit 2:5. All translations are taken from *The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), unless otherwise specified.

from the dust of the earth and breathes into him the breath of life.¹² Man's mixed creation emphasizes humanity's unique essence: a synthesis of the earthly and the divine.

וַיִּטַע ה' אֱלֹקִים גֶּן־עֵדֶן מִקֶּדֶם וַיִּשֶׂם שֵׁם אֶת־הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יָצָר: וַיִּצְמַח ה' אֱלֹקִים מִן־הָאֲדָמָה כָּל־עֵץ נֹחֵם לְמַרְאֶה וְטוֹב לְמַאֲכָל וְעֵץ הַחַיִּים בְּתוֹךְ הָגֶן וְעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע:

The Lord God planted a garden **mi-kedem** and placed there the man whom He had formed. And from the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad.¹³

These pesukim are puzzling. Just prior, the Torah states that the land is barren because there is no human to cultivate it; yet once man is created, God alone causes the Garden to flourish without man's participation. Moments after man is created, he appears to be superfluous. This inconsistency suggests that God places humanity in Eden not primarily to work, but to learn. This Garden is divinely planted directly after man is said to be an essential part of the planting process, indicating that the Garden of Eden is not intended to be man's final destination; rather it is the progressor (**מִקֶּדֶם**) for essential human progress. Eden thus functions as a formative stage, a kind of womb in which humanity observes the divine perfection of the garden before being tasked with transforming the world beyond it.

Man, aware of his potential but lacking an outlet, seeks to act. The serpent's argument reveals the danger of this impulse:

כִּי יֵדַע אֱלֹקִים כִּי בַיּוֹם אֲכָלְכֶם מִמֶּנּוּ וְנִפְקַחוּ עֵינֵיכֶם וְהִיִּיתֶם כָּאֱלֹקִים יֹדְעֵי טוֹב וָרָע: וַתֵּרָא הָאִשָּׁה כִּי טוֹב הָעֵץ לְמַאֲכָל וְכִי תֹאמַרְהוּא לְעֵינַיִם וְנִחְמַד הָעֵץ לְהַשְׂכִּיל וַתִּקַּח מִפִּרְיוֹ וַתֹּאכַל וַתֵּתֶן גַּם לְאִישָׁהּ עִמָּה וַיֹּאכְלוּ:

¹² Bereishit 2:7.

¹³ Bereishit. 2:8-9.

But God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and **you will be like divine beings** who know good and bad. When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, **and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom**, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate.¹⁴

The Garden of Eden, though often viewed as a paradise, is a place of unactualized human potential. Man has the divine breath of life—understanding, creativity, abstraction—but, having been placed in a garden of static, ultimate perfection, lacks the opportunity to express it.¹⁵ Surrounded by animals, man recognizes his uniqueness. In his isolation, he mistakenly concludes that he must be more similar to the Divine than he is to animals.¹⁶ His sin lies in attempting to become like God,¹⁷ and, by taking what he did not earn, displaying his failure to understand that his role is to be God’s partner.¹⁸

¹⁴ Bereishit 3:5-6.

¹⁵ For an in-depth exploration of the Tree of Knowledge, see Sophie Fine’s article, “The Da’at Divide: Gan Eden to Eretz Yisrael” in this Journal.

¹⁶ Bereishit 2:19.

¹⁷ Elokim means the sum of all power. Here Adam wants to actualize his divine knowledge and power.

¹⁸ Psychological Strain Theory also helps illuminate why Adam and Chava eat from the tree. This theory argues that when individuals are unable to fulfill meaningful goals through legitimate or available means, frustration and purposelessness can lead them to seek illegitimate alternatives. In studies of low-income communities, for example, when people feel blocked from achievement, cut off from opportunity, or deprived of motivating purpose, they are statistically more likely to turn toward disobedience or illicit behavior as an outlet. In Eden, Man is effectively unemployed, surrounded by perfection but unable to participate in it meaningfully. Man feels different from the animals that surround him, but lacking an appropriate outlet inside the Garden to actualize his creativity and agency, he turns to the only “option” he sees available, breaking the command.

For additional uses of psychological concepts to gain insight into the behavior of characters in Tanach, see Livi Kobrin’s article, “A Psychological Study of Yaakov’s Family” in this Journal.

Exile from the Garden, paradoxically, enables humanity to fulfill their intended purpose: to design, create and cultivate. However, because its origin is rooted in an attempt to match God, this autonomy carries consequences: the temptation to misuse choice, a lack of moral clarity, and a natural inclination toward wrongdoing. Both Man's pre-sin purpose and his post-sin punishment is to work the land.¹⁹ After eating from the Tree of Knowledge, however, the same job is filled with complications—toil, sweat and thistles. In addition, working the land becomes an arduous, messy task, tangled with an awareness that though Man can create, he will ultimately return to dust. This realization rebalances his sense of divine likeness, reminding him that though he is a partner in creation, he is also bound to the earth.

Leaving Eden holds the potential for positive and negative change. It transforms human life from static perfection into meaningful complexity. However, because this autonomy is realized from violating God's command, it demands caution, humility, and discipline.

The appearance of the word *kedem* in a Biblical narrative signals a moment of Divine-human interaction in which man will choose to engage in one of three ways: by promoting himself and ignoring God (man tilling the soil), by relying solely on God (God sending rain upon the earth), or—ideally—by using his creative abilities in partnership with God (God sending rain upon the earth + man tilling the soil). When this concept is integrated with classical *parshanim's* understanding that *kedem* refers to a primordial state in which God was the sole being, the term is seen to appear in Tanach at moments of human struggle to reconcile divine omni-

¹⁹ For the punishment, see Bereishit 2:17-19.

potence with human free will.²⁰ It marks a point at which one might respond in opposite but equally problematic ways: becoming jealous, angry, or distrustful of God's ultimate authority, or, conversely, becoming apathetic and passive, surrendering to the belief that fate alone governs life and thereby denying one's own agency.²¹ Tanach exposes that humans often fall into one of these problematic approaches, and exhorts that the proper path is reconciliation of divine omnipotence and human free will by partnering with God.²²

²⁰ Yaakov, *ish tam yoshev ohalim*, is the prototype of a man who struggles with free will and moral ambiguity. Bereishit 29:1 reads: וַיֵּשָׂא יַעֲקֹב רִגְלָיו וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶרְצָה בְּנֵי־קֶדֶם. In exile, hastily fleeing from Esav and attempting to repress the guilt of deceiving his father, Yaakov moves into kedem. Yaakov exists in a space of moral ambiguity, uncertain of what God expects and expected from him. Just as Yaakov deceived Esav, he himself is deceived by Lavan. This parallel forces Yaakov into a sustained confrontation with the consequences of moral complexity: actions are not isolated, and intention does not erase outcome. In the land of Bnei Kedem, Yaakov must constantly assess whether he is being guided toward or away from God, without clarity.

²¹ Kedem appears when referring to the "rejected" children of Avraham (Hagar and his concubines' descendants) to emphasize that they are not bound by cursed destinies or tumultuous pasts; they retain the capacity to move forward and cultivate divine purpose in the world. In Bereishit 25:6, Avraham gives gifts to his concubines' children and sends them to the land of Kedem. In Bereishit 25:13-15, the final of Yishmael's twelve sons is named Kedmah (קֶדְמָה). The placement of Kedmah at the end of a structured list of twelve sons may also subtly parallel the twelve tribes of Israel, hinting at the latent potential within Yishmael's lineage for greatness and divine significance. It says regarding Shem's sons, וַיְהִי מוֹשְׁבָם מִמֶּשָׁה, וַיֵּקְדְּמוּ - *Their settlements extended from Mesha as far as Sephar, the hill of Kedem* (Bereishit 10:30). In this reading, kedem serves as a reminder to Shem, survivor of the flood, that his descendants possess the potential for moral and spiritual development. Indeed, this potential is realized in the lineage of Avraham, who ultimately descends from Shem.

²² One might wonder whether the kedem framework can be applied universally, even in cases where the term itself does not appear, thus minimizing the significance of the word. This does not appear to be the case. For example, kedem is notably absent from the story of Noach, where the sin is not about how humanity defines themselves in relation to God, but instead is complete and utter depravity. The lack of the word kedem indicates that the sin here is in a completely different category than those sins that do contain this word. Kedem, therefore, is not a

Three Approaches to Choice

Self-Exaltation: Human Power Over God

Prior to Kayin's killing of Hevel, God warns Kayin, advising him to use his free will to master his inclination and refrain from killing his brother. Ignoring God's instruction and illicitly assuming God's role as arbiter of life and death, Kayin nevertheless kills Hevel. Similar to God's response to Adam and Chava's attempt to "be like God," God exiles Kayin – not from Eden, but from a sedentary life.

וַיֵּצֵא קַיִן מִלִּפְנֵי ה' וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּאֶרֶץ נֹד קִדְמַת־עֵדֶן: וַיֵּדַע קַיִן אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וַתֵּהָר וַתֵּלֶד
אֶת־חֲנוֹךְ וַיְהִי בְנָה עִיר וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם הָעִיר כָּשֶׁם בְּנוֹ חֲנוֹךְ:

Kayin left the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, **kidmat Eden**. Kayin knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. And he then founded a city, and named the city after his son Enoch.²³

Rather than accepting exile, Kayin builds a city, attempting to create stability and control. He names the city after his son, centering his own legacy. Through the use of *kedem*, the text signals his failure to recognize God's primacy. Kayin privileges human autonomy and rejects divine authority.

Similarly, the story of Migdal Bavel plays out as follows:

וַיְהִי כִּלְהָאָרֶץ שְׂפָה אֶחָת וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים: וַיְהִי בְּנִסְעָם מִקֶּדֶם וַיִּמָּצְאוּ בְּקֶעֶה
בְּאֶרֶץ שִׁנְעַר וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם: ...וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֵבָה נִבְנֶה־לָּנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרָאשׁוּ בְּשָׁמַיִם
וְנַעֲשֶׂה־לָּנוּ שֵׁם פְּרִנְפוּץ עַל־פְּנֵי כִלְהָאָרֶץ:

Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words. And as they migrated **mi-kedem**, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said, "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a

universal category; it appears specifically in moments that reflect a point of tension and choice between the human and the Divine.

²³ Bereishit 4:16-17.

name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world.”²⁴

By speaking a single language and constructing a tower intended to reach the heavens, Babel seeks God-like unity and attempts to erase human limitation. Midrash Bereishit Rabbah writes that traveling *mi-kedem*, they journey away from God.²⁵ God’s descent to examine their work²⁶ emphasizes the gap between human ambition and divine reality. Using their God-given creativity, the people attempt to replace divine authority with human collective power, compressing individuality into uniform speech and purpose. In response, God scatters them, restoring diversity so that human creativity is redirected toward its proper limits. In this episode, *kedem* similarly reflects a movement in which humanity seeks to override God, forgetting that God is the ultimate power.²⁷

Passivity: Reliance on Divine Provision Alone

Lot represents the opposite failure: withdrawal from responsibility.

וַיִּשְׂאֵלוּ אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא אֶת־כָּל־כְּכַר הַיָּרְדֵּן כִּי כָּלָה מִשְׁקָהּ לִפְנֵי שַׁחַת ה' אֶת־
סָדֶם וְאֶת־עֲמֹרָה כְּגֹרֶה' כְּאָרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּאֶחָה צֶעֶר: וַיִּבְחָרְלוּ לוֹט אֶת כָּל־כְּכַר
הַיָּרְדֵּן וַיֵּשֶׁע לוֹט מִקֶּדֶם וַיִּפְרְדּוּ אִישׁ מֵעַל אָחִיו:

²⁴ Bereishit 11:1-4.

²⁵ Bereishit Rabbah 38:7 - אָמַר רַבִּי אֱלֶעָזָר בְּרַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן הַסִּיעִי - נִסְעוּ מִן מִדְיָנָה לְמִיזֵל לְמִדְיָנָה, אָמַר רַבִּי אֱלֶעָזָר בְּרַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן הַסִּיעִי - “It was as they traveled from the east [*mi-kedem*]” – did they travel from the east to go to the east? Rabbi Elazar ben Rabbi Shimon said: They transported themselves away from the ancient One [*mikadmono*] of the world. They said: ‘We want neither Him nor His divinity.’

²⁶ Bereishit 11:5 - וַיֵּרֶד ה' לִרְאוֹת אֶת־הָעִיר וְאֶת־הַמִּגְדָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם - *God came down to look at the city and tower that the mortals had built*

²⁷ Shinar, the location of the tower, is the place where two rivers meet, a crossroads. It is an opportunity for flourishing, diversity and harmonizing culture but instead becomes a place which enforces uniformity and centralization. Throughout Tanach, Shinar is a symbol of idolatry, exile, and wickedness. See Daniel 1:13, Yeshayahu 11:11, and Zechariah 5:11.

Lot looked about him and saw how well watered was the whole plain of the Jordan, all of it—this was before the Lord had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah—all the way to Zoar, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt. So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed **mi-kedem**. Thus they parted from each other.²⁸

After Avraham and Lot's shepherds fight, Avraham proposes that they part ways. Instead of settling right or left, as Avraham proposes, Lot chooses forward, *mi-kedem*. Rashi, citing Midrash Rabbah, writes that while on the surface Lot travels geographically from east to west, *mi-kedem* indicates a spiritual rupture: Lot distances himself from *Kadmono shel Olam*, the Primordial Being of the World, ultimately declaring, "I want neither Avram nor his God."²⁹ While Avraham struggles to build a *Beit El*, a House for God in famine-prone Canaan, Lot chooses the fertile plains of Sedom, drawn to ease and abundance. Lot sees that Sedom is as well watered as the Garden of Eden and as the Nile-irrigated Egypt.³⁰ By equating Egypt with the Garden of Eden the Torah expresses that Lot believes God and Egypt's power are comparable. Lot remains reliant on the resources that are provided, allowing his creativity to lie fallow.³¹

²⁸ Bereishit 13:10.

²⁹ Rashi on Bereishit 13:11.

³⁰ Bereishit 13:10.

³¹ Eliezer Schweid argues that when water is as abundant as it is in the Garden of Eden, people experience a sense of complete security. Lush lands, he writes, foster a culture of complete mastery over the world, often leading to idolatry and tyranny. By contrast, the Land of Israel is "not like the land of Egypt from which you have come" (Deuteronomy 11:10-11), which is watered by the Nile and associated with inequality, abuse of power, and paganism; rather, it is a land where "the grain you sow" depends on human labor and divine rain. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, "The land forces us to look up at God." See Eliezer Schweid, *The Land of Israel: National Home or Land of Destiny* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985); and Jonathan Sacks, "Geography and Destiny," *Covenant & Conversation*, The Rabbi Sacks Legacy, <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant->

Kedem in Later Tanach

Throughout Tanach, kedem continues to signal orientation toward or away from God. Yeshayahu provides another example of people who corrupt their creativity, seeing themselves as godlike.

כִּי נִטְשָׁתָה עַמְּךָ בֵּית יַעֲקֹב כִּי מָלְאוּ מִקְדָּם וְעַנְיִים כַּפְלִשְׁתִּים וּבְלִדֵי נָכָרִים
יִשְׁפִּיקוּ:

For you have forsaken [the ways of] your people, O House of Jacob! For they are full of **mi-kedem** and have abundance of soothsaying, like Philistines and like alien folk.³²

Yeshayahu rebukes the nation for abandoning God and adopting the pagan practices of surrounding nations. The people, at a time of material success alongside moral decline, “bow down to the work of their hands,”³³ worshipping themselves and their wealth. Jerusalem stands, the Beit HaMikdash functions, yet society is marked by opulence and inequality, ignoring the cries of those struggling in society. Rather than using their sovereignty to sow a society of sanctity and morality, they desecrate God’s name, using their power unjustly to oppress those created in His image. Kedem indicates that man turns inwards, indulging in the creations of his own hand, forgetting that he is created to be God’s partner.

Yonah too embodies the kedem struggle, oscillating between resistance and surrender, and between divine control and human free will. Angry at God for allowing Nineveh to repent, Yonah initially protests his mission and tries to escape God’s role for him. Realizing he can’t be completely independent of God after being swallowed by a fish and being forced to tell Nineveh to repent, Yonah swings to the opposite extreme, relinquishing his sense of

conversation/eikev/geography-and-destiny/ (heard on Rabbi Alex Israel’s podcast).

³² Yeshayahu 2:6.

³³ Ibid. 2:8.

human ingenuity and free will and instead relying entirely on what is provided for him.

וַיֵּצֵא יוֹנָה מִן־הָעִיר וַיֵּשֶׁב מִקְדָּם לָעִיר וַיַּעַשׂ לוֹ שֵׁם סֹכָה וַיֵּשֶׁב תַּחְתֶּיהָ בְּצֶל עֵד
אֲשֶׁר יִרְאֶה מִהִיָּה בָּעִיר:

Now Jonah had left the city and found a place **mi-kedem** of the city. He made a booth there and sat under it in the shade, until he should see what happened to the city.³⁴

After Yonah tells the people to do teshuvah, he leaves Nineveh, distancing himself, watching from afar. When he is hot, God creates for him a castor oil plant (kikayon) to provide shade, and when it dries up, he is devastated, asking to die.³⁵

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶתָּה חֹסֶת עַל הַקִּיקָיִן אֲשֶׁר לֹא עָמַלְתָּ בּוֹ וְלֹא גִדַּלְתּוֹ שָׁבוֹן לַיְלָה הִיא
וּבֹן לַיְלָה אָבָד: וְאֲנִי לֹא אֶחֹס עַל נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר יֵשׁ בָּהּ הֶרְבֵּה
מִשָּׁתִּים עֶשְׂרֵה רְבוּ אָדָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדַע בֵּין זֵמִינוֹ לְשִׁמְאָלוֹ וּבִהְמָה רֶבֶה:

Then the Lord said: "You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well!"³⁶

This episode teaches that we cannot escape the role God has designated for us—neither by avoiding God nor by relying upon Him entirely; rather, we must actively work with God. God rebukes Yonah for grieving a plant he did not cultivate, emphasizing the importance of contributing to creation. If Yonah cares so deeply for the plant, he certainly should care deeply for the survival of the people of Nineveh. God critiques Yonah both for attempting to flee his mission—forgetting God's omnipotence—and for failing to

³⁴ Yonah 4:5.

³⁵ Yonah 4:9.

³⁶ Ibid. 4:10-11.

actualize his own creative potential – neglecting his responsibility to be an active partner.

Collaboration: God and Man Symbiosis

The paradigm for synthesizing divine and human creation is Avraham.³⁷

וַיַּעֲתֶק מִשָּׁם הָהָרָה מִקְדֶּם לְבֵית־אֵל וַיֵּט אֹהֶלָה בְּיַתְאֵל מִיָּם וְהָעִי מִקְדֶּם וַיָּבֶן שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַה' וַיִּקְרָא בְּשֵׁם ה':

From there he moved on to the hill country **mi-kedem** of Beth-el and pitched his tent, with Beth-el on the west and Ai **mi-kedem**; and he built there an altar to the Lord and invoked the Lord by name.³⁸

Preceding Lot and Avraham's split, Avraham moves **mi-kedem** to the "House of God." He uses his creativity to build an altar and call out in God's name, serving as a model who embodies both the "dust of the earth" and God's "breath of life." In the different contexts of his life, Avraham consistently finds ways to call out in God's name and open himself to divine presence – whether by educating others about monotheism, opening his tent to those who have no place to stay, or advocating for the righteous. By actualizing his creative capacity in service of God, and by recognizing that all human beings possess this divine, image-of-God creativity, Avraham teaches us how to live **mi-kedem**.³⁹

³⁷ Rambam in the *Moreh Nevuchim* presents Avraham as the foundational figure who achieved a unique synthesis of divine knowledge and earthly existence.

³⁸ Bereishit 12:8.

³⁹ Another instance of human collaboration with God appears in the episode of Yosef interpreting Pharaoh's dreams about the coming famine. Pharaoh dreams, וַהֲנֶה שֶׁבַע שְׁבָלִים יִדְקוּת וְשִׁדּוּפָת קָדִים צִמְחוּת אַחֲרֵיהֶן - *and behold, seven thin ears of grain, scorched by the kadim wind, sprouted after them* (Bereishit 41:6). Yosef works to understand this divine warning and devises a system to prepare for the years of scarcity. By combining his own ingenuity with God's warning, Yosef is able to avert disaster and sustain Egypt through the famine. Bereishit presents the personal moments of **kedem**: individuals wrestling with God's power and their

Conclusion

The appearance of the word *kedem* signals moments in which human beings define themselves in relation to God. Kayin, Migdal Bavel, and Yeshayahu's rebuke depict people attempting to disobey or overrule God's authority and supremacy, as well as disrespecting the divinity in other human beings. Lot, on the other hand, abandons his creativity, helplessly relying on what is provided for him. Yonah demonstrates humanity's confused struggle by oscillating between these two responses. Avraham offers a perfect model of synthesis between recognition of Divine omnipotence and commitment to creative human endeavor—seeing others as created in the divine image, believing in their inherent potential, and spreading God's name in the world.

Ultimately, *kedem* marks not only direction in space or time, but direction in identity. It challenges human beings to orient themselves thoughtfully, to act with humility and purpose, and to partner with God in shaping a world worthy of becoming God's Garden.⁴⁰

own free will. Yechezkel, where *kedem* appears 55 times, describes the national actualization of *Kedem*—a nation working in partnership with God to build a better world. This vision is most vividly expressed in Chapter 47, where Yechezkel describes water flowing from the Temple into the desert, transforming the Arava and Ein Gedi into flourishing landscapes filled with vegetation and life. Zechariah prophesizes similarly when Yehudah returns to Jerusalem (14:8), reinforcing this image of divine flow renewing barren space in partnership with man.

⁴⁰ A big thank you to Rabbanit Dena Rock, Rav Yitzchak Blau, Mr. Koby Itzhak, Dr. Tammy Jacobowitz and Rav Shmuel Klitsner for their invaluable mentorship and guidance in the development of this paper.

אל תגעו במשיח

Mashiach in Tanach and Chazal

Tzipora Gordon

Today, when people discuss mashiach, they usually mean either a redemptive figure or the redemptive era itself. The concept is associated with many images of redemption, such as kibbutz galuyot (the ingathering of exiles) and the Beit HaMikdash. In Tanach, however, the word has a much narrower meaning. Within the biblical text, these redemptive images and the concept of a mashiach are entirely separate—yet today, they are fundamentally intertwined. That synthesis was primarily created by Chazal, who wove together Tanach’s idea of mashiach with various features of redemption into the period we now call Yemot HaMashiach.

The Word “Mashiach” in Tanach

The word mashiach appears 39 times in Tanach, but none of the instances refer to a leader heralding the redemptive era. Four appearances are in Torah, and all four appear in Sefer Vayikra.¹ Each time, it is preceded by the word Kohen, because it is actually part of a term—Kohen HaMashiach—for a notion usually known by a different name: the Kohen Gadol. Why is he called “hamashiach”? Because the word literally means anointed, and the Kohen Gadol was anointed with oil.² In Chumash, the word mashiach never

¹ Vayikra 4:3, 5, 16 and 6:15.

² Interestingly, the special שמן המשחה (anointing oil) that had been prepared by Moshe Rabbeinu was hidden during the reign of King Yoshiyahu (Masechet Horayot 12a). From that point forward, a kohen was elevated to the status of Kohen Gadol merely by donning the additional vestments unique to the Kohen

comes up in conjunction with a future redemptive period. It refers specifically to the Kohen Gadol, anointed with oil.

All 35 times the term *mashiach* appears in Nach, it is (directly or by context) equated with the king—chosen by God and anointed with oil. But it refers to a contemporary king, not a future leader of an idyllic redemptive period. The first instance of these 35 is in Sefer Shmuel.³ The anointed king of that book is also distinct from the Kohen HaMashiach of the Torah—the king and the Kohen Gadol had very different roles, but both are referred to as “*hamashiach*” in Tanach because both are chosen by God and anointed.

The word “*mashiach*” appears once in Yeshayahu:

נָה אָמַר ה' לְמַשִּׁיחוֹ לְכוֹרֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר הִחַזְקֹתִי בְיָמֵינוּ לְרֹד לְפָנָיו גּוֹלִים וּמִתְנִי מְלָכִים
אֲפֹתָתָם לְפָתַח לְפָנָיו דְּלָתִים וְשַׁעֲרִים לֹא יִסְגְּרוּ.

Thus says Hashem to **His anointed**, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have held to subdue nations before him and to loosen the loins of kings; to open the doors before him that the gates may not be shut.⁴

Given the traditional assumption that “*mashiach*” refers exclusively to the future Davidic king of Jewish redemption,

Gadol (מְרוֹבֵה בְּגָדִים). The Mishnah in Megillah (9b) states that the only halachic difference between a *משוח* (a Kohen Gadol anointed with oil) and a *מְרוֹבֵה בְּגָדִים* is that only the former is obligated in *הַמִּצְוֹת* - *פר הבא על כל המצוות* - to sacrifice a bull as a *korban chatat* if he erroneously rules that something is permitted and then performs that action, when in fact it is punishable by *karet* if done intentionally. A *מְרוֹבֵה בְּגָדִים* would sacrifice a ewe or female goat in this situation, as would a regular person. The Gemara explains that Rabbi Meir disagrees and says that even a *מְרוֹבֵה בְּגָדִים* brings a bull because the extra “*hey*” in “*hamashiach*,” includes even the *מְרוֹבֵה בְּגָדִים* type of Kohen Gadol. Although there is at most only one halachic difference between a Kohen Gadol anointed with oil and one who is not, the term Kohen HaMashiach is used in the Torah to refer to the Kohen Gadol because he is meant to be anointed with oil.

³ It is also the book where it appears the most—18 times. Twelve of the appearances are in Shmuel Aleph—2:1, 35; 12:3, 5; 16:6; 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11, 16, 23; and six are in Shmuel Bet—1:14, 16, 21; 19:22; 22:51; 23:1.

⁴ Yeshayahu 45:1. Translations of *pesukim* are from AlHatorah.

encountering this title in reference to a foreign ruler can be initially startling. But we've already established that in Tanach, "mashiach" does not carry this meaning. It can designate the high priest, or any king chosen by God, even Shaul (whose kingship is not eternal). So it's not out of the realm of possibility that God would call even a non-Jewish king His "anointed one" if God has chosen him for some mission. Just as God calls Nevuchadnezzar, the Babylonian leader who destroyed the first Beit HaMikdash, His servant in Sefer Yirmiyahu,⁵ He designates Coresh, who will send the Jews back to their land (as Yeshayahu hints and both Ezra⁶ and Divrei HaYamim⁷ say explicitly), with an even higher title – mashiach. If God decrees something necessary, whoever acts as God's instrument in its fulfillment, be it exile or the possibility for return, is titled God's servant—or God's anointed. And that helps explain how one term can encompass both the Kohen Gadol and a king. "Mashiach" is not a word unique to either of them, rather a category that both fit into: someone chosen by God for a particular task. Anointed becomes appointed.

The word also appears once in Chabakuk (one of the books of Trei Asar):

יָצֵאתָ לַיָּשָׁע עַמְּךָ לַיָּשָׁע אֶת מְשִׁיחְךָ מִחֻצָּתָּ רֹאשׁ מִבֵּית רָשָׁע עָרוֹת יְסוֹד עָד
צָוָאר סֵלָה:

You went forth for the salvation of Your people, for the salvation
of Your anointed. You crushed the head of the house of

⁵ Yirmiyahu 25:9. He is referred to as Nevuchadnezzar, but it's the same person. God (through Yirmiyahu) is telling the people that He has sent one messenger, Yirmiyahu, but they refuse to listen repeatedly— for 23 years (25:3)! As a result, God's will is going to be carried out by a different messenger, with a very different tone. The message is changing from "fix your ways or you will face harsh penalties" to "since you have not changed your ways, you will face harsh penalties," and Nevuchadnezzar will be the instrument for that.

⁶ Ezra 1:1-4.

⁷ Divrei HaYamim 36:22-23.

wickedness. You stripped them bare from foundation to neck.
Selah.⁸

This verse appears mid-chapter in a perek that opens with, “[a] prayer of Chabakuk, the prophet, set to victorious music.” Echoing much of the language of Shemot and Tehillim, the chapter describes plagues, the terror of surrounding nations, and God’s glory and power.

Within a song centered on Yetziyat Mitzrayim, the identity of the "mashiach" (anointed one) being delivered by Hashem requires clarification. While "the anointed" could theoretically refer to Moshe, the principle of parallelism in biblical poetry suggests otherwise. Because the phrases "the salvation of Your people" and "the salvation of Your anointed" mirror each other, the implication is that the two terms are synonymous. This means that it is the people of Israel who are collectively being referred to as God's anointed.

Therefore, "mashiach" in this context does not denote a redeemer. Instead, it means that, like King Cyrus, the entire nation is being designated for a divine purpose. In Shemot 19:6, God proclaims the nation a Mamlechet Kohanim (a kingdom of priests). This does not imply that every individual possesses priestly status, but rather that God has charged the entire nation with a shared, sacred duty. Similarly, Chabakuk here indicates that the nation as a whole has been saved from Egypt to fulfill a divine task.⁹

⁸ Chabakuk 3:13.

⁹ This reading is supported by the Mahari Kra, who comments here “אלו ישראל” - this is Israel. There are other commentators who take it in a different direction, but only two of them (Malbim and Radak) connect the word to a notion of “melech hamashiach” or “mashiach ben David.”

The word *mashiach* appears another ten times in *Tehillim*.¹⁰ Many later commentaries explain *pesukim* which use this word as referring to David himself. Others link it to Shlomo or other kings. There are *psukim* that are connected by some to the notion of *the mashiach*, but for the most part, while these verses can be read as references to a future leader appointed by God in a redemptive time, it's not an overwhelmingly compelling read. It's a valid one, but not one that must be accepted, as the contexts do not unequivocally refer to the redemptive era. That does not mean that all of them are referring to David or other kings, either – that is an equally valid but not definitive read. These verses, which link the term “*mashiach*” to kings, God's protection, and prophets, continue to indicate that *mashiach* means a person (or nation) whom God has chosen for a particular task. The word also shows up in *Eichah*,¹¹ *Daniel*,¹² and *Divrei HaYamim*,¹³ referring in all of those places to a king, a leader of the Jewish people, or both.¹⁴ In *Tanach*, the term *mashiach* refers to someone whom God has singled out to fill a role or fulfill a decree – like the high priest, a king, or the Jewish nation as a whole. Chazal then concretized a connection between that idea and the redemptive era described by the *Nevi'im*.

Chazal's “*Mashiach*”

When Chazal use the word *mashiach*, they use it to refer not to the Biblical concept of appointed leadership but to a united vision

¹⁰ *Tehillim* 2:2, 18:51, 20:7, 28:8, 84:10, 89:39, 89:52, 105:15, 132:10, 132:17.

¹¹ *Eichah* 4:20.

¹² *Daniel* 9:25, 26.

¹³ *Divrei HaYamim* I 16:22, II 6:42.

¹⁴ Some are subject to dispute, hence the possibility for both interpretations existing, as commentators read them both ways. However, all seem to agree that these are the two possibilities for understanding the word in these verses.

of redemption. For example, they describe the role of the Melech HaMashiach in one place as primarily kibbutz galuyot:

כֶּבֶס בֵּינָן לְבָשׁוֹ, שֶׁהוּא מַחְזֵר לָהֶן דְּבָרֵי תוֹרָה, וּבְדָם עֲנֻבִים סוֹתָהּ, שֶׁהוּא מַחְזֵר
לָהֶם טְעִיּוֹתֵיהֶן. אָמַר רַבִּי חֲנִינִי אֵין יִשְׂרָאֵל צְרִיכִין לְתַלְמוּדוֹ שֶׁל מֶלֶךְ הַמָּשִׁיחַ
לְעֵתִיד לְבוֹא, שְׁנֵאֲמַר (יִשְׁעִיָּה יא, י): אֱלֹהֵי גוֹיִם יִדְרֹשׁוּ, לֹא יִשְׂרָאֵל, אִם כֵּן לָמָּה
מֶלֶךְ הַמָּשִׁיחַ בָּא וְיָמָה הוּא בָּא לַעֲשׂוֹת, לְכַנֵּס גְּלוּתֵיהֶן שֶׁל יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְלָתֵן לָהֶם
שְׁלִשִׁים מִצְוֹת

“He launders his garments in wine” – as [the Messiah] clarifies matters of Torah for them; “and in the blood of grapes, his clothes” – as he clarifies their errors for them. Rabbi Hanin said: Israel does not need the teaching of the messianic king in the future, as it is stated: “Nations will seek him” (Isaiah 11:10) – not Israel. If so, why does the messianic king come, and what does he come to do? To gather the exiles of Israel and to give them thirty mitzvot.¹⁵

The idea of kibbutz galuyot appears across Tanach. In Devarim 30, God promises that though exile is a potential punishment for disobedience, if the people mend their ways and return to God, they will be returned to the land. Many nevi'im¹⁶ prophesy about the return of Bnei Yisrael, some in a manner similar to Devarim (“you will be exiled for your crimes, but I will bring you back”), while others prophesy return for a people already exiled, waiting to go home. But none of them describes kibbutz galuyot as happening at the hands of a particular leader, simply as a promise that God will fulfill in an unspecified way. It is Chazal who make the connection between the leader we will have in the redemptive era and the actual gathering of exiled Jews to Israel.

Chazal refer to the king who rides a donkey in Zechariah 9:9 as “mashiach,” but more than that, they describe him as connected to miracles – and like many other elements of redemption, his arrival

¹⁵ Bereishit Rabbah 98:9. Translations of Tannaitic and Amoraic sources are from Sefaria.

¹⁶ Yeshayahu, Yirmiyahu, Yechezkel, Hoshea, Yoel, Amos.

is contingent on our behavior. However, rather than discussing *whether* mashiach will arrive, Chazal discuss *how* he will arrive:

אמר רבי אלכסנדר: רבי יהושע בן לוי רמי, כתיב: "וארו עם ענני שמיא כבר אנש אתה", וכתיב: "עני ורכב על חמור". זכו – עם ענני שמיא, לא זכו – עני ורכב על חמור. אמר ליה שבור מלקא לשמואל: אמריתו משיח על חמרא אתי? אישדר ליה סוסיא ברקא דאית לי! אמר ליה: מי אית לך בר חור גווי?

Rabbi Alexandri says: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi raises a contradiction [between two depictions of the coming of the Messiah]. It is written: "There came with the clouds of heaven, one like unto a son of man..." (Daniel 7:13-14). And it is written: "lowly and riding upon a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9). [Rabbi Alexandri explains:] If the Jewish people merit it, the Messiah will come in a miraculous manner with the clouds of heaven. If they do not merit it, the Messiah will come lowly and riding upon a donkey. King Shapur of Persia said to Shmuel mockingly: You say that the Messiah will come on a donkey; I will send him the riding horse that I have. Shmuel said to him: Do you have a horse with one thousand colors like the donkey of the Messiah?¹⁷

Chazal also refer to the same figure without using the name mashiach, usually as "ben David." Regardless of which term they use, they consider this person's arrival as either the herald of or the equivalent of the beginning of the redemptive era:

אמר ליה: הכי אמר רבי יוחנן: דור שגון דוד בא בו, תלמידי חכמים מתמעטים, והשאר עיניהם כלות בגיון ואנחה, וצרות רבות וגזרות קשות מתחדשות, עד שהראשונה פקודה, שניה ממהרת לבא.

Rabbi Yitzhak said to him that this is what Rabbi Yohanan says: During the generation in which the Messiah, son of David, comes, Torah scholars decrease; and as for the rest of the people, their eyes fail with sorrow and grief, and troubles increase. And

¹⁷ It is worth noting that Shmuel is the Amora having this conversation. Either he still believes the coming of the messiah will be miraculous; it will just not necessitate a total shift to reality. Or for the sake of this conversation, his own beliefs don't matter and it is more important to counter King Shapur's mockery entirely and fully. (See the section below "Sovereignty: The Link between the Eras".)

the harsh decrees will be introduced; before the first passes the second quickly comes.¹⁸

When discussing what will immediately precede redemption, Chazal do not relate that ‘when redemption comes,’ certain things will happen, or that ‘in the time when God redeems us,’ the world will look a particular way. Instead, they use shorthand, by using the name of the leader who is now synonymous with the period – sometimes ben David, and usually mashiach.

Similar to kibbutz galuyot, Chazal take the idea of a future Beit HaMikdash and associate it with the concept of “mashiach.” Yechezkel chapters 40-48 describe a Temple whose dimensions don’t align with those of Bayit Sheni (which was not yet built) and therefore is often cited as future-oriented architectural plans. Nevi’im like Chagai and Zechariah also discuss the building of the Beit HaMikdash, though it can sometimes be difficult to tell whether they refer to Bayit Sheni, built by the people they were addressing, or Bayit Shlishi. Throughout both Tannaitic and Amoraic literature, Chazal implicitly assume that the Beit HaMikdash will be rebuilt¹⁹ and when they explicitly discuss its construction, they describe it as being built by the mashiach:

בְּמָה מְקִיָּם רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר קִרְיָה דְּרַבִּי יוֹסִי בְּרַבִּי חֲנִינָא עוֹרִי צָפוֹן וּבּוֹאֵי תִימָן,
פֶּתֶר לִיהּ בְּגָלִיּוֹת, עוֹרִי צָפוֹן, לְכַשְׁיִתְעוֹרְרוּ הַגָּלִיּוֹת שֶׁהֵן נְתוּנוֹת בְּצָפוֹן, וְבָאוּ
וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּדָרוֹם. לְכַשְׁיִתְעוֹרְרוּ גּוֹג שֶׁהוּא נָתוּן בְּצָפוֹן וְיָפַל בְּדָרוֹם, (יִחְזָקָאֵל
לֵט, ב): וְשִׁבְבִיתִיד וְשִׁשְׁאִיתִיד וְהַעֲלִיתִיד מִירְכָתִי צָפוֹן, לְכַשְׁיִתְעוֹרְרוּ מֶלֶךְ הַמַּשִּׁיחַ

¹⁸ Sanhedrin 97a. This entire daf is spent discussing what will occur “in the generation when ben David comes,” which is primarily that things will get worse.

¹⁹ The Mishnah in Ma’aser Sheni 5:2 states, “When the Temple should be rebuilt, the arrangement would be restored.” The Tosefta Menachot 13:4 discusses why each preceding house for Hashem (the Mishkan in Shiloh, Bayit Rishon, and Bayit Sheni) was destroyed, and concludes by describing “the final building which will be built in the future.” Many also see the detailed discussions Chazal undertake about the intricacies of Temple service and sacrifices as proof of their belief that these laws will once again be applicable someday.

שְׁהוּא נִתּוֹן בְּצִפּוֹן, יָבוֹא וַיִּבְנֶה אֶת בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ שֶׁהוּא נִתּוֹן בְּדֶרוֹם, כְּמָא דְאַתָּה
אָמַר (ישעיה מא, כה): הַעִירוּתִי מִצִּפּוֹן וַיָּאֵת וְגו'.

How does Rabbi Elazar establish the verse of Rabbi Yosei ben Rabbi Ḥanina: “Arise, north, and come, south”? He interpreted it regarding the exiles. “Arise, north” – when the exiles that are located in the north arise, they will come and encamp in the south. When Gog, who is located in the north, will arise, he will come and fall in the south; “I will lead you astray and I will entice you, and I will take you up from the ends of the north” (Ezekiel 39:2). When the messianic king, who is located in the north, will arise, he will come and build the Temple that is located in the south, just as it says: “I roused one from the north, and he came” (Isaiah 41:25).²⁰

There are also a number of places where Chazal do not explicitly describe ideas from Tanach as being performed by the mashiach, but still refer to the time in which they occur as the time of mashiach—such as the resurrection of the dead,²¹ Gog U'Magog,²² and others. This is because the synthesis of the ideas of redemption and appointment from Tanach led to the chosen leader becoming the symbol of the redemptive future.

Sovereignty: The Link Between the Eras

The idea of renewed sovereignty as a result of redemption appears across Nach, from Hashem's promise in Shmuel Bet²³ to “establish the throne of [David's] kingdom forever” to God's words to Yirmiyahu²⁴ that “[i]n those days, and at that time, I will cause a

²⁰ Bamidbar Rabbah 13.

²¹ Probably the most famous nevuah about the resurrection of the dead is Yechezkel's “dry bones” vision in perek 37. However, that is not really the most straightforward one. Yeschayahu 26:19, for example, says “[y]our dead shall live,” while Daniel 12:2 reads “[a]nd many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake.” Specifics of Teshiat HaMeitim have long been debated, but revival of the dead is definitely a part of the redemptive era.

²² Perakim 38 and 39 of Yechezkel.

²³ Shmuel II 7:13.

²⁴ Yirmiyahu 33:15.

branch of righteousness to grow up to David.” Long after King David's reign, Yechezkel says that “David shall be king over them,”²⁵ while in Daniel's vision of one who “came with the clouds of heaven one like a son of man,” he says “he was given dominion, and glory, and a kingdom.” Additionally, Zechariah 6 describes the person who will build the Beit HaMikdash (or Heichal) as ruling “on his throne.”

While the word *mashiach* is not used in the *pesukim* describing this future king, these sources are almost certainly the reason it becomes ubiquitous in later discussions of redemption, as the future king is understood to be anointed and appointed by God. Because sovereignty is an element of redemption, redemption becomes connected to leadership, and the idea of an appointed leader naturally leads to the concept of *mashiach*. In Tanach, the redemptive era arrives, and as a result of that redemption, we merit a king and sovereignty. To Chazal, however, this figure is the herald—someone whose arrival marks the beginning of the redemptive period, and whose leadership is synonymous with it.

Jewish sovereignty is even described as the essence of the redemptive era by some Amoraim:

דָּאָמַר שְׁמוּאֵל: אֵין בֵּין הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה לְיָמֹת הַמָּשִׁיחַ אֶלָּא שִׁיעָבוֹד גִּלּוּת בְּלָבָד,
שְׁנֵאמַר: "כִּי לֹא יִחַדֵּל אֲבִיוֹן מִקְרֵב הָאָרֶץ."

As Shmuel said: The only difference between this world and the messianic era is subjugation of the exiles to other kingdoms, as it is written: “Because the poor will not cease from within the land” (Devarim 15:11).²⁶

Shmuel's view of *mashiach* is very simple: the end of Jewish subjugation to foreign rule. If Jewish sovereignty is potentially the primary element of what redemption is, then it is unsurprising that

²⁵ Yechezkel 37:24.

²⁶ Shabbat 63a.

the heralding “melech hamashiach” that Chazal discuss would become shorthand for the entire era.

Conclusion

People mean many different things when they say, “Mashiach is coming,” and it’s important to understand where these ideas come from. Many of the ideas currently associated with the period of redemption originate in Tanach, but the word mashiach itself in Tanach means a God-chosen leader, not a future figure whose appearance will herald the ultimate redemptive era. In the writings of Chazal, redemptive elements such as the ingathering of exiles and the building of the third Beit HaMikdash are drawn together with the notion of an anointed figure to create an image of a chosen leader who is almost synonymous with the redemptive era.

It’s possible that the idea of a particular individual heralding the redemption was a mesorah, which, despite the lack of written evidence, stretches as far back even as Moshe. Alternatively, it’s possible that Chazal took the prophecies of redemption in Tanach and braided them together with the idea of appointed leadership found throughout Tanach, perhaps based on the idea of redemptive sovereignty. Together, these ideas create the image of a particular figure initiating a redemption, characterized by elements found throughout various prophecies—what most people today typically mean when they use the word “mashiach.”

Ultimately, no one fully knows what redemption entails. We do the best we can to imagine with the sources and tools we have, and we try to bring it about by following Hashem’s instructions. But that lack of knowledge isn’t a tragedy—it just means that the primary focus of what God wants us to know about redemption is less about the era itself and more about how to make it happen. The idea of mashiach might be unclear and complicated, but it also gives us an

incredible opportunity—to help make our world a better place through our own choices. It is perhaps the greatest appointment to responsibility of all.

A Psychological Study of Yaakov's Family

Livi Kobrin

Our family has a dramatic impact on us—on our experiences, actions, decisions, and personalities as a whole. Many different aspects of our family play a role, including the number of siblings we have, the personalities of our parental figures, and the nature of the relationships between all of the members of our family. There's an entire branch of psychology dedicated to analyzing these familial relationships, unsurprisingly called Family/Sibling Psychology.

Why am I bringing this up? What does this have to do with Judaism and Torah? Simply put, issues relating to Family Psychology appear throughout Tanach. Psychology is a very new area of study, but its findings are applicable throughout all time. That includes, of course, Biblical times. Many of the seemingly inexplicable actions taken by figures in Tanach can be understood in a new light when analyzed through the lens of Family Psychology and the insights it provides.

While I would love to delve into all of the family relationships that appear in Tanach,¹ I will be focusing on the largest immediate family in Bereishit: Yaakov, his four wives, and his twelve sons (and one daughter). It is evident that this is not the typical contemporary family, especially when you look at its structure. A family of one husband and several wives, each of whom has multiple children,

¹ To explore specifically sister relationships in Tanach, see Shoshana Eisner's essay in this Journal, *Not Just Family Drama: Sisterhood and Legacy in the Torah*.

adding up to thirteen altogether, is not exactly conventional nowadays. It is easy to see how this unique familial setup could lead to the formation of unusual relationships.² I am going to examine the relationships in this famous family, and how the theories of Family Psychology help us understand some of the shocking episodes in which they are involved.

Dr. Diana Baumrind, a mid-20th century psychologist, famously posited that there are three distinct types of parenting styles (one of which has two sub-categories):³

Parenting Style	Description	Outcome
Authoritarian	Parents give harsh rules, extreme punishment	Fear, dislike, negative relationship
Permissive	Parents aren't physically around, neglectful	No connection, insecurity
	Parents spoil their child, give them whatever they want	Reckless, lack of authority, over-indulgent
Authoritative	Parents set rules while showing love	Healthy, loving relationship, secure attachment

It is quite evident that Yaakov's style of parenting falls into the "Permissive" category. Toward his beloved Yosef, Yaakov is the first type of Permissive parent: He is warm, loving, and nurturing,

² See the family tree on page 96 for reference.

³ Diana Baumrind, "Child Care Practices Antecedent Three Patterns of Preschool Behavior," *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, vol. 75, no. 1, 1967, pp. 43-88.

with no regard for discipline towards his favorite son.⁴ In the beginning of perek 37, we see the preferential treatment that Yaakov showers upon Yosef and the upset that it causes the brothers:

וְיִשְׂרָאֵל אָהַב אֶת־יוֹסֵף מִכָּל־בָּנָיו כִּי־רָזָקְנִים הוּא לוֹ וְעָשָׂה לוֹ כְּתֹנֶת פָּסִים:
וַיֵּרְאוּ אָחָיו כִּי־אֹתוֹ אָהַב אָבִיהֶם מִכָּל־אָחָיו וַיִּשְׁנְאוּ אוֹתוֹ וְלֹא יָכְלוּ דַּבְּרוֹ לְשָׁלָם:

Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him an ornamented tunic. And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him.⁵

Toward his other children, Yaakov seems to be the Permissive-neglectful type, acting inattentively towards them. For example, when the brothers are upset at Yosef because of his dreams, Yaakov takes note but does nothing to intervene:

וַיִּקְנָאֲרִבוּ אָחָיו וְאָבִיו שָׁמַר אֶת־הַדָּבָר:

So his brothers were wrought up at him, and his father kept the matter in mind.⁶

The story of Dinah and Shechem is one of many other perfect examples of Yaakov's passive, lax parenting:

וַיַּעֲקֹב שָׁמַע כִּי טָמְא אֶת־דִּינָה בְּתוֹ וּבָנָיו הָיוּ אֶת־מִקְנֶהוּ בַשָּׂדֶה וְהַחֲרָשׁ יַעֲקֹב
עַד־בָּאָם:

Jacob heard that he had defiled his daughter Dinah; but since his sons were in the field with his cattle, Jacob kept silent until they came home.⁷

⁴ It is important to note that in Bereishit 37:10, Yaakov *does* rebuke Yosef for his dream. I would suggest that what makes Yaakov veer from his usual parenting pattern here is concern for his reputation—Yosef is going around telling everyone that Yaakov, the patriarch, will bow down to his son. See footnote 16 where I elaborate on why Yaakov's reputation is critically important to him.

⁵ Bereishit 37:3-4. Translations throughout the paper are from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), accessed via Sefaria.

⁶ Bereishit 37:11.

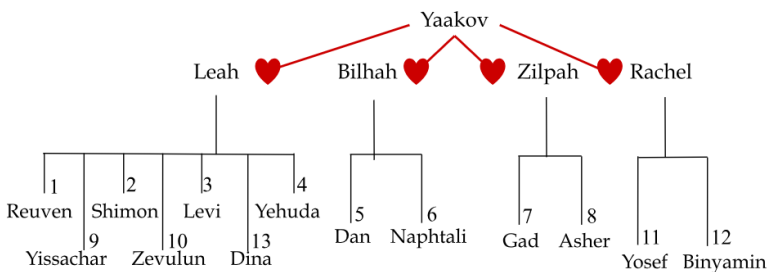
⁷ Bereishit 34:5.

In this story, the pasuk deliberately points out Yaakov's silence and lack of action, even upon hearing of something as horrifying as the rape of his daughter. Later on, when Shechem asks both Yaakov and his sons for Dinah's hand in marriage, it is the sons who respond in their father's place:

וַיַּעֲנוּ בְנֵי-יַעֲקֹב אֶת-שֵׁכֶם וְאֶת-חָמוֹר אָבִיו בְּמַרְמָה וַיִּדְּבְרוּ אֲשֶׁר טָמְא אֶת דִּינָה אֲחֵיהֶם:

Jacob's sons answered Shechem and his father Hamor – speaking with guile because he had defiled their sister Dinah⁸

In addition to Yaakov's Permissive parenting style, the unconventional size and make-up of this family also have significant impact on the children. Here is Yaakov's family tree:



As one can see, there's a clear imbalance in the distribution of the children. According to most interpretations, Yaakov's one true love is always Rachel,⁹ which is why he favors Yosef and Binyamin. However, Leah bears the eldest children, not to mention the most children, out of all of Yaakov's wives. There's a clear divide between each wife's sons, at least between Rachel's sons and the others. The

⁸ Bereishit 34:13.

⁹ Rav Shimshon Refael Hirsch (on Bereishit 29:35) claims that with the birth of each child, Leah gains more of Yaakov's love until, with the birth of Levi, she finally achieves the same degree of adoration as Rachel. However, this does not seem to be the peshat. See Shoshana Eisner's essay, "Not Just Family Drama: Sisterhood and Legacy in Tanach" in this Journal for further discussion of this Rav Hirsch.

name Leah bestows upon her firstborn, Reuven, reveals her pain over feeling unloved:

וַתֵּהָרָה לֵאָה וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ רְאוּבֵן כִּי אָמְרָה כִּי־רָאָה ה' בְּעֵינַי כִּי עָתָה יֵאָהֲבֵנִי אִישִׁי:

Leah conceived and bore a son, and named him Reuben; for she declared, "It means: 'The Lord has seen my affliction'; it also means: 'Now my husband will love me.'"¹⁰

The weight of Leah's loneliness isn't put solely on Reuven's shoulders, as Shimon's and Levi's names reflect her longing for her husband's love as well.¹¹ The competition between the sister-wives escalates when Rachel gives Yaakov her maidservant Bilhah as a concubine, prompting Leah to give *her* maidservant Zilpah to him as well. This feud is not just a popular understanding of the text; it is explicit in the peshat:

וַתֵּרָא רָחֵל כִּי לֹא יֵלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב וַתִּקְנֶה רָחֵל בְּאִחֲתָהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל־יַעֲקֹב הִבְהִילִי בָנִים וְאִם־אֵין מִתָּה אָנֹכִי:

When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children, she became envious of her sister; and Rachel said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die."¹²

The intense competition between Yaakov's wives plays out in the next generation as well. The children's very names carry the weight of their mothers' competition, and the clans of brothers continue the jockeying of their mothers. Understanding this, combined with their father's Permissive parenting, sheds light on the sons' later troubling behavior.

¹⁰ Bereishit 29:32.

¹¹ Leah's explanation of Shimon's name is: כִּי־שָׁמַע ה' כִּי־שִׁנְאוּהָ אָנֹכִי וַיִּתְּנִי לִי גַם־אֶת־זֶה - "Because the Lord heard that I was hated and has given me this one also" (Bereishit 29:33). Her explanation of Levi's name is: עָתָה הַפַּעַם יִלְוֶה אִישִׁי אֵלַי כִּי־לָדְתִי לוֹ שְׁלֹשָׁה בָנִים - "This time my husband will become attached to me, for I have borne him three sons" (cf. Rav Hirsch to Bereishit 29:35 who explains otherwise).

¹² Bereishit 30:1.

The parenting style of even just *one* parent can have a huge influence on the children's character and behavior. Yaakov's Permissive Parenting diminishes his authority over his children, as he doesn't act as the authority figure. It also passes premature responsibility onto his sons, and forces them into a paternal role that ought to have been filled by Yaakov himself. This causes the hierarchy of responsibility among the siblings to shift, most likely with the older brothers acting collectively to fill the role of the patriarch, which impacts how they face the world later on, once they reach adulthood and start their own families.

Yaakov's parenting has additional impacts on his children's development as well. In Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, the fourth stage of development, which he dubs Industry vs. Inferiority, occurs between the ages of 5 and 12. During this stage, children become intensely focused on learning structured tasks. When they successfully complete tasks and receive positive feedback, they develop a sense of pride and confidence in their capabilities, and become industrious and diligent. If a child repeatedly experiences failure, receives harsh criticism, or is constantly compared unfavorably to peers, they may develop a pervasive sense of inadequacy. They begin to believe that they do not measure up, which can lead to low self-esteem, self-doubt, and reluctance to try new challenges.¹³

Due to Yaakov's Permissive Parenting, his sons most likely develop an inferiority complex. Because of the way Yaakov favors Yosef, the other brothers feel they can never measure up. They never receive a special garment to prove their father loves them and believes them worthy. Presumably, they also miss out on the kind

¹³ Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1950), 258-261.

of praise and encouragement every child needs to flourish.¹⁴ This lack of recognition leads them to feel inadequate and to doubt their own worth, ultimately driving them to lash out at Yosef.

The brothers also likely develop an insecure attachment to their father, a concept in developmental psychology proposed by Mary Ainsworth.¹⁵ Her theory is that in the early stages of development, children form either a secure or insecure attachment with their parental figures, which then affects them throughout their life. Insecure attachments develop when children are neglected by a parental figure at a young age, and secure attachments develop when children are well-treated by a parental figure. There are many different forms of insecure attachment, and those who develop insecure attachments struggle to develop healthy relationships and healthy lifestyles later on.

I believe that the confusion of roles and authority that Yaakov's Permissive Parenting causes in the family can serve as the key to understanding his sons' behavior in a number of disturbing instances. First, there is the incident with Shechem, in which, as mentioned above, Yaakov's failure to step up and respond to the rape of his daughter leaves a vacuum that two of his sons, Shimon and Levi, fill in his place. They convince the men of the city to undergo circumcision, pretending that this will enable them to willingly give their sister to Shechem in marriage. However, when all the men are weak from the procedure, Shimon and Levi attack and decimate the entire city. This is a powerful example in which

¹⁴ We see an example of this later, in 42:37-38, when Yaakov dismisses Reuven's attempt to persuade him to send Binyamin down to Egypt with his brothers.

¹⁵ Mary D. Salter Ainsworth et al., *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1978), 59-64, 95-144.

Yaakov's failure to respond leads his sons to step into what ought to have been their father's role, with complicated results.¹⁶

Following the incident with Shechem, there are a number of other episodes in which Yaakov's sons behave in bizarre and troubling ways. One such example appears in Bereishit 35:22:

וַיְהִי בִשְׁכֹן יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֶרֶץ הַחֵלֶב וַיֵּלֶךְ רְעֻבֵן וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֶת־בִּלְהָה פִּלְגֶשֶׁת אָבִיו וַיִּשְׁמַע
יִשְׂרָאֵל:

While Israel stayed in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine; and Israel found out.¹⁷

A son sleeping with his father's concubine is an extremely horrifying act. It seems almost incomprehensible that Reuven could do such a thing.¹⁸ However, in light of the historical reality of the

¹⁶ In Rabbi Menachem Leibtag's Torah Seminar class (taught in Midreshet Lindenbaum, Fall 2025-Spring 2026), he repeatedly asserted that Yaakov's big goal is to build Beit El into a grand city for Hashem. Without a distinguished reputation, Yaakov cannot achieve this goal. Rabbi Leibtag suggested that Shimon and Levi's violence brings shame upon Yaakov's family name, hindering his ability to transform Beit El into a city of God. This seems to be the reason why Shimon and Levi are repeatedly referred to as "Bnei Yaakov" - *Yaakov's children*, throughout the episode (Bereishit 34:13, 25, 27) – because their actions have an impact on their father's reputation. However, while Yaakov may place the blame for his diminished reputation on his sons, he is the one who chose to take a passive role in Dinah's story, creating the opportunity for Shimon and Levi's violence against Shechem.

¹⁷ Bereishit 35:22.

¹⁸ In fact, Rashi, citing Masechet Shabbat 55b, claims that Reuven does not actually engage in such an appalling act. Rather, what he does is move his father's bed. While Rachel was alive, Yaakov's bed was set up in her tent. After her death, Yaakov moved his bed to her maidservant Bilhah's tent. Reuven feels that this is an affront to his mother Leah, and therefore moves his father's bed from Bilhah's tent to Leah's. This interpretation does not detract from my argument above. First, *אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו* - *a verse does not depart from its literal meaning* (Masechet Shabbat 63a; see Ayelet Solomon's article on peshat in this Journal). Therefore, the fact that the Torah chooses to describe the episode as it does carries inherent significance. Second, in line with my analysis, Rashi's interpretation (based on Chazal) sees this episode as an outgrowth of the complicated family dynamics – the competition between the mothers and Yaakov's repeated slighting of Leah in favor of Rachel. Finally, even Rashi's understanding sees Reuven acting in a

times together with the family dynamics we have explored, it begins to make sense. In Shmuel Bet, Avshalom sleeps with David's concubines to prove that he will be the next king.¹⁹ It is a strategic move to overshadow his father and claim his place as the rightful heir to the throne. I would suggest that this is exactly what motivates Reuven to commit such a sickening act. As the eldest son, Reuven steps into the power vacuum created by his absentee father because somebody has to do something to take the helm of the family. With the vacancy of the role of patriarch due to Yaakov's Permissive Parenting, Reuven attempts to step into a patriarch-adjacent role. Thus, this is not a random act of rebellion nor of yielding to an uncontrollable desire, but rather an intentional act on Reuven's part to establish order and hierarchy in the family.

An additional dimension of Reuven's motivation for sleeping with Bilhah is the inferiority that his mother and her branch of the family, including himself, constantly feel. Reuven's entire existence is based on Leah's desire to be loved by Yaakov as much as Rachel, and Reuven therefore carries that inferiority with him. His act of sleeping with Bilhah is also an attempt to assert superiority over at least *some* of the other brothers, over Bilhah's sons, by sleeping with their mother.

Another disturbing episode involving one of Yaakov's sons is that of Yehudah and Tamar.²⁰ After Yehudah's oldest son Er marries Tamar and passes away without children, and then his second son Onan does the same, Yehudah sends Tamar back to her father's

manner entirely inappropriate for a son; he has no business getting involved in his father's marital intimacy with his wives. Thus, Rashi's interpretation aligns with my contention that this episode represents a clear example of Yaakov's children inappropriately stepping into the patriarchal vacuum left by their father.

¹⁹ Shmuel II 16:22 - וַיִּטּוּ לְאַבְשָׁלוֹם הָאֶהָל עַל-הַגִּי וַיָּבֵא אַבְשָׁלוֹם אֶל-פְּלִגְשֵׁי אָבִיו לְעֵינֵי כָל-יִשְׂרָאֵל: - *So they pitched a tent for Absalom on the roof, and Absalom lay with his father's concubines with the full knowledge of (literally: before the eyes of) all Israel.*

²⁰ Bereishit perek 38.

house, hesitant to marry her off to his third son, Shelah. In the unusual situation in which Yehudah finds himself, it is his role as the patriarch to take action and ensure that his bloodline continues. However, he follows in his father's footsteps, and neglects his responsibility, forcing Tamar to take matters into her own hands. Tamar tricks Yehudah by disguising herself as a prostitute and seducing him, in order to do yibum and ensure the continuation of Yehuda's family. It is almost frightening to see the pattern of neglectful patriarch continue into the next generation.

However, Yehudah differs from Yaakov in how he handles the situation after he is called out for his negligence. After Tamar hints that Yehudah himself is the guilty party,²¹ Yehudah acknowledges his mistakes, steps up, and takes responsibility. It seems that while Yehudah is still deeply impacted by the way Yaakov parented him, he sees the error of his ways and learns both from his own mistakes and from those of his father. Even though Yehudah is heavily impacted by his upbringing, he is able to redeem himself, break the pattern, and change his ways. This highlights that even when there are dysfunctions in a family, the situation is not hopeless; people can overcome the behaviors that have been ingrained in them, rise above, and take responsibility for their actions.

These episodes – Dinah and Shechem, Reuven and Bilhah, and Yehudah and Tamar – illustrate how the dynamics within Yaakov's family haunt his sons into adulthood, leaving them plagued by insecure attachments, inferiority complexes, murky authority roles, and cycles of neglect.

²¹ הוא מוצאת והיא שלחה אֶל־חַמִּיהָ לֵאמֹר לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־אֵלֶּה לוֹ אֲנִי הָרָה וְתֹאמַר הַכֹּרֶנָּא לְמִי:
הַחֲתָמָה וְהַפְתִּילִים וְהַמָּטָה הָאֵלֶּה: - *As she was being brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law, "I am with child by the man to whom these belong."* And she added, "Examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?" (Bereishit 38:25).

Each problematic aspect contributes a critical piece toward the narrative's climax: the brothers' sale of Yosef. Only when understanding and synthesizing all of the distinct psychological elements does this seemingly inexplicable episode begin to make sense.

Let's review the factors that drive the brothers to feel and act the way they do: First, Yaakov's Permissive-Neglectful parenting of the brothers leads them to feel it is their responsibility to ensure that justice and punishment are meted out, just as when Dinah was raped by Shechem. This is exacerbated by Yaakov's Permissive-Spoiling parenting of Yosef, who is certainly never punished by his father. Furthermore, the competition between Yosef and his brothers is much larger than conventional sibling rivalry; it stems from the foundational feud between Rachel and Leah. Finally, Yaakov's blatant favoritism of Yosef significantly reinforces the brothers' insecurity, turning Yosef into their ultimate scapegoat.

Consequently, intense Groupthink²² and In-Group Bias²³ take over when the brothers see Yosef approaching. These psychological phenomena occur within homogenous groups, essentially turning the brothers into each other's "Yes Men." The more they agree, the more self-assured and confident they become in executing their thoughtless plan. Tellingly, up until this point, the only unity the brothers display is in their shared hatred of Yosef, demonstrating the power of scapegoating as a defense mechanism. Ultimately, the brothers project their anger at Yaakov onto Yosef and his dreams to gain a sense of superiority. Tracing this back to the intergenerational

²² Jeffrey Sanford Russell, John Hawthorne, and Lara Buchak, "Groupthink," *Philosophical Studies* 172, no. 5 (2015): 1287-1309.

²³ Marilyn B. Brewer, "In-Group Bias in the Minimal Intergroup Situation: A Cognitive-Motivational Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin* 86, no. 2 (1979): 307.

feud, the sons of Leah may also be projecting their rage because Yosef represents the product of Yaakov's ultimate love for Rachel.

Turning to the actions the brothers take as their anger grows, their history of neglect, insecure attachments, and feelings of inferiority provide a powerful motive to find a target. To deflect these insecurities, they look to Yosef as their ultimate scapegoat. It's the classic bully backstory.

וַיֵּרְאוּ אֹתוֹ מֵרֶחֶק וּבְטָרֶם יִקְרַב אֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּתְנַקְלוּ אֹתוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־
אָחִיו הִנֵּה בָעַל הַחֲלָמוֹת הִלְזָה בָּא: וְעַתָּה לְכוּ וְנַהַרְגֵהוּ וְנַשְׁלֹכֵהוּ בְּאֶחָד הַבְּרוֹת
וְאָמְרָנוּ חַיָּה רָעָה אֲכָלָתָהוּ וְנִרְאָה מִהֵיָּהּ חֲלָמָתִיו:

They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes that dreamer! Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, 'A savage beast devoured him.' We shall see what comes of his dreams!"²⁴

This excerpt captures the brothers planning to kill Yosef. While sibling tension is common, it rarely motivates brothers to plot the murder of one of their own. Ultimately, all of the psychological factors that we have explored culminate in the final catastrophe, the brothers' sale of Yosef.

At the end of Bereishit, when the brothers arrive in Egypt to beg for food during the famine in Canaan, evidence suggests that after Yosef's disappearance, the brothers remain united and care deeply for both Yaakov and Binyamin—the latter being all that remains of Rachel. However, because Yosef does not grow up alongside them, he favors only Binyamin, his full brother, and continues to hold a grudge against the others. In fact, the text states that when Yosef sees Binyamin, he is overcome with emotion and rushes from the room on the verge of tears.²⁵ Only later, when the brothers step

²⁴ Bereishit 37:18-20.

²⁵ Bereishit 43:29-30.

forward to defend Binyamin and risk their lives for him, does Yosef see that they have truly grown. Yehudah speaks on behalf of the group, offering himself as a slave to protect Binyamin and spare their father further grief.²⁶ This is what finally breaks Yosef's resolve and triggers the brothers' emotional reconciliation.

Repeatedly throughout this section of Bereishit, Yaakov chooses a passive role in his patriarchal duties and neglects the needs of his children. The feud between his wives — who are sisters — only causes a greater separation between his sons, thereby engendering severe role confusion for each of them from their youth throughout their adult lives. The actions Yaakov takes as a father, patriarch, and leader of a large family result in his children experiencing insecure attachments and deep-seated inferiority. According to developmental and familial psychology, Yaakov's behaviors have a profound impact on his children and how they navigate their lives, all of which culminates in the sale of Yosef.

Ultimately, this all demonstrates that thousands of years before the formal study of psychology came to be, the Torah was already sensitive to domestic dynamics — portraying them honestly, without shying away from the imperfections of the forefathers or the inherent complexities of family life. Consequently, modern psychology provides a lens to understand these Biblical figures and their behaviors in ways that would be impossible without psychological insights. Applying the findings of modern psychology to Biblical stories opens up another layer with which we can understand the behaviors and moral lessons that are learned from Tanach.

²⁶ Bereishit 44:34.

A Name of One's Own: Reclaiming the Identity of Rav Chisda's Daughter

Elana Max

“Women in the Talmud are notoriously nameless,” writes Gila Fine in the introduction to *The Madwoman in the Rabbi’s Attic* — a sentiment that closely mirrored my own experience.¹ These historic women, in my first educational encounters, lacked not only names, but stories. Learning about women in the Talmud was not an experience that was conducive to feeling ‘seen’ by the text. As Ilana Kurshan explains, the women in the Talmud seem an extinct species.² They were not among the characters in the Talmud whom I learned from or related to, but I found myself viscerally wanting to defend them. It was only when I became aware of the various methods of analysis of Talmud that I began to understand its depth, in large part due to Fine. Her premier work shows the multifaceted nature of Gemara by applying a literary revisioning to the six named heroines of the Talmud. Her work analyzes each woman, the focal point of her own narrative, and reveals in her hidden dimensions and nuances that have long been overlooked. Each sugya included in her work is incredibly layered.

“Every one of these heroines seems, at first reading, to embody an anti-feminine archetype...once the heroine’s story is reread,

¹ Gila Fine, *The Madwoman in the Rabbi’s Attic* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2024), xii.

² Ilana Kurshan, Conversation about women in the Gemara, Matmidot Session, 13 Mar. 2026.

more closely and in context, her archetype systematically breaks down, and in its place emerges the character of a complex, extraordinary woman, as misunderstood by her own world as by generations of readers.”³ Ultimately, “[w]omen, for the rabbis, are the paradigmatic Other.”⁴ They are foils that allow one to learn a lesson thoroughly, characters that exist not within themselves, but as external markers. To see the multifaceted nature of such figures emerge, Gila Fine’s method requires a two-step process – a zoom in and close reading, and a zoom out with the story’s context examined.⁵ Along with more typical manners of analyzing aggadah, Fine applies archetypal criticism, which assumes that if a character type is found in many divergent cultures, it must be due to deeply rooted human psychology, often primal fears and fantasies.⁶ Fine begins analyzing the Talmud’s named heroines through defining their story archetype, which is built by the relationships around her, key moments in her stories, and her defined character traits.

Fine analyzes the six named women in the Talmud, and I will be applying her methodology to one of the unnamed women, namely Rav Chisda’s daughter. Rav Chisda’s daughter appears in the Talmud at least thirteen times, both directly and indirectly.⁷ She is always referred to as her father’s daughter, never by her own name, or as the wife of either of her husbands, though they were great

³ Fine, *The Madwoman in the Rabbi’s Attic*, pg. xiii.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, pg. xxiv.

⁶ Ibid, pg. xxviii-xxix.

⁷ For an example where she appears indirectly, see Berachot 56a. Most of the sugyot in which she appears directly will be analyzed here in this paper.

rabbis as well.⁸ Uniquely, Rav Chisda is known to have said, **בְּנֵתוֹ** "בְּנֵתוֹ" ¹⁰ ¹¹ "as for me, I prefer daughters to sons."⁹

Rav Chisda's daughter is best known not for her own family¹² or story, but for the role she plays in Choma's story. Choma, one of the six named heroines in the Talmud, is the subject of one of Fine's most captivating analyses: the femme fatale, "a seductive and beautiful woman who brings disaster to anyone with whom she becomes romantically involved."¹³ ¹⁴

Ketubot 65a

Choma, Abaye's wife, came before Rava [to receive her widow's allotment]. She said, "Grant me an allowance of board," and he granted her.	חומא דביתהו דאביי אַתאי לקמיה דרבא, אַמרה ליה: פסוק לי מזונאי! פסוק לה.
"Grant me an allowance of wine," she said. Said he, "I know that Nahmani did not drink wine."	פסוק לי חמרא! אַמר ליה: ידענא ביה בנחמני דלא הוה שתי חמרא.
"By the life of the master," she replied, "he would give me to drink in horns as large as this." As she was showing it to	

⁸ "Daddy's Girl - Hadran." Hadran.Site, hadran.org.il/beyond-the-daf/daddys-girl/. Accessed 7 Apr. 2026.

⁹ Bava Batra 141a.

¹⁰ On this line, the Hagahot Ya'avetz explains that his daughters were wise and learned women, and describes Rav Chisda's daughter as **גדולה חכמה** הוא - a very wise woman.

¹¹ Rav Chisda had many sons, including Rav Nachman, Rav Chanan, Mar Yenuka, Mar Keshisha, and Rav Pinchas (Bava Batra 8a, Avodah Zara 16a, Moed Katan 25a, Bava Batra 7b, and Bava Kamma 117a). This makes his declaration even more significant, as it was not due to lack of sons for comparison.

¹² On Berachot 44a, the Gemara says that Rav Chisda had a pair of daughters who married Rami bar Chama and his brother Mar Ukva bar Chama. It also says that Rav Chisda was a kohen, but his daughters married men who were not kohanim.

¹³ Femme Fatale | Definition, History, Characters, Movies, & Facts | Britannica, www.britannica.com/topic/femme-fatale. Accessed 7 Apr. 2026.

¹⁴ For a detailed close reading of her story, read Fine's book, *The Madwoman in the Rabbi's Attic*, which I will continue to reference throughout this paper.

him, her arm was uncovered and a light shone upon the court. Rava rose, went home, and solicited Rav Chisda's daughter. "Who was in the court just now?" she said. "Choma, the wife of Abaye," he replied. Thereupon Rav Chisda's daughter went after her, striking her with the lock of a chest until she chased her out of all Mehoza. "You have," she said, "already killed three men and now you come to kill another!"¹⁵	אָמרה ליה: חיי דמר דהוה משקי לי בשופרוי כי האי. בהדי דקא מחויא ליה איגלי דרעא, נפל נהורא בבי דינא. קם רבא, על לביתיה תבעה לבת רב חסדא. אָמרה ליה בת רב חסדא: מאן הוי האידנא בבי דינא? אָמר לה: חומא דביתו דאבוי. נפקא אבתרה, מחתא לה בקולפי דשידא עד דאפקה לה מכולי מחוזא. אָמרה לה: קטלת לך תלתא, ואַתת למיקטל אַחרינא!
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Many contemporary readers analyze Rav Chisda's daughter in the context of this sugya only, and contrast the two women. Doing so, however, reduces each woman to an archetype. If Choma is a femme fatale, then Rav Chisda's daughter is a proper matron. If Choma is not a femme fatale, Rav Chisda's daughter is a prude afraid of her own sexuality. In these readings, both women cannot be redeemed. One is made virtuous through the vices of the other.

In the traditional interpretation of this sugya, Choma, the widow of Abaye, is cast as femme fatale, coming before the court of Rava with the underlying motive of seducing him. An allotment of wine was only granted if a woman was known to have drunk regularly with her husband before he passed away, and Choma tells Rava that she did, and in demonstrating, intentionally performs a seductive action.¹⁶ Her very request is audacious, since the reason an allotment of wine was atypical was due to the risk of it leading to promiscuity. To avoid his temptation to sleep with her, Rava leaves immediately,

¹⁵ Translation taken from *The Madwoman in the Rabbi's Attic*.

¹⁶ Ben Yehoyada explains that the light upon the court was the radiance of Choma's beauty that she revealed to Rava.

and improperly (during daylight) solicits his own wife.^{17]} ¹⁸ Upon discovering that what had aroused her husband was Choma's presence in his court, Rav Chisda's daughter chases Choma out of town with the lock of a chest, where she will not be able to tempt any men into sleeping with her or marrying her.¹⁹ This would endanger men, as Choma was an *isha katlanit*, a "black widow," a woman who had already lost three husbands²⁰ and no one else is permitted to marry.²¹

Fine calls one to examine the *sugya* with the awareness that the archetype of the *femme fatale* exists as the aggregation of society's sexual projections – it is not her seductive power that society is fearful of, but their own desires. Those who adopt the traditional interpretation are unable to see Choma as anything but sexuality personified. In Fine's revisionist reading, she recasts Choma as simply a grieving widow seeking to secure for herself means by which to live. She does not do anything intentionally provocative. Her request for wine is innocent, as the settlement she receives from

¹⁷ Shita Mekubetzet explains that after seeing Choma's beauty, Rava goes home and demands relations with his wife because the sight of Choma caused him to have improper thoughts.

¹⁸ Ben Yehoyada asserts that Rava does not solicit Rav Chisda's daughter due to improper thoughts, as the Gemara would have criticized him for this. Rather, Rava is concerned that Choma might come to him again with other demands, in order to display her beauty once more and attempt to seduce him. To prevent this, he solicits his wife to alert her that he experienced desire upon seeing Choma's face, so that his wife would feel great anxiety over this and would chase Choma away from the city.

¹⁹ Ben Yehoyada explains that Rav Chisda's daughter chases Choma specifically with a lock as Choma is an *isha katlanit* and is forbidden to any man (more explanation on this term is below). The symbolism is that it is necessary to lock her door from now on so that she will not be intimate with any husband.

²⁰ Choma had previously had three husbands who died - Rechava of Pumbedita, Rav Yitzchak the son of Rava, and Abaye.

²¹ Yevamot 64a-b.

Rava is all society will give her, and she wants to maintain the life she once had as much as possible.

Fine points out that the judge that Choma is coming before, Rava, is none other than her deceased husband's former chavruta, a man with whom her husband also shared an intimate friendship.²² The tension underlying the court case is not merely about what Choma should receive as her widow's allotment, but rather about who better understood Abaye—his chavruta or his wife. Rava confidently asserts that Abaye was not a man who indulged in drinking wine. Choma counters that he most certainly did—together with her, his wife. In this one statement, Fine claims, Choma is challenging not only Rava's assumptions about how well he knew his chavruta's drinking habits, but also his assumptions about his chavruta's marriage.²³ She is unwittingly revealing to Rava a glimpse into the passionate, intimate marriage she shared with Abaye. As Fine describes it, "Rava is suddenly struck by the thought that Abaye, the man he'd been studying with for so many years, might have been a great, solemn sage by day, and a passionate lover by night."²⁴ Fine claims that Rava and his wife do not have such an erotic marriage, and rather maintain a prudish relationship. She continues, "This is what he wants. It isn't Choma at all; it's the alternative kind of marriage she suggests."²⁵ It is only upon grasping the kind of experiences that Choma and Abaye had shared, intimated by their wine consumption, that Rava realizes he too could maintain such a dichotomy. Rava returns home to his wife, hoping to implement this new concept. However, she refuses, questioning his shocking behavior, as she is a proper woman. "Rav Chisda's daughter is set up as a foil to Choma; where the latter is

²² Fine, *The Madwoman in the Rabbi's Attic*, pg. 42-43.

²³ *Ibid*, pg. 43.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

fiery and sensual, Rav Chisda's daughter comes across as almost frigid."²⁶

Fine bolsters her assertion that Rava and Rav Chisda's daughter have a prudish marriage by exploring the sugya where Rav Chisda dispenses advice on the proper way one should be a wife. Rav Chisda speaks to his daughters, Rava's future wife among them, and instructs them not to consume bread before their husbands, or dates or beer at night, to answer the door asking who is there using the feminine form, and relieve themselves in a different place than their husbands.²⁷ He teaches them that a woman ought to be modest, appropriate, and respectful in every possible way. Fine submits that knowing the marital advice with which Rav Chisda's daughter was raised gives credence to the claim that Rav Chisda's daughter was conservative and restrained in her marriage to Rava.

However, I contend that when one explores the Talmud, this is not the picture that materializes of Rav Chisda's daughter. In contrast to Fine, I believe that Rav Chisda's daughter emerges as a strong character who is opinionated, is engaged in the halachic process, and has an intimate relationship with Rava.

In Eruvin 65a, there is a discussion about the purpose of night. Rav Chisda's daughter sees that her father is up late studying, and asks him if he wants to go to bed. He answers her in typical rabbinic language, telling her that days are busy and right now is a time for Torah and mitzvot. Two things are atypical of this interaction. The first is that Rav Chisda's daughter interrupts her father to give her opinion, and the latter, that he answers her question seriously, imparting a moral lesson about using one's time well. He does not treat his daughter as frivolous, nor does he scold her for disturbing

²⁶ Ibid, pg. 44.

²⁷ Shabbat 140b.

him. Clearly, there is nuance in how Rav Chisda raises his daughters, as here he is encouraging her to challenge and question rather than telling her to be discreet.

In fact, in other interactions recorded in the Gemara, Rav Chisda even seeks out his daughter's opinion. Bava Batra 12b discusses how prophecy is transmitted after the fall of the Beit HaMikdash, and relates how it is given to children. It then brings an example of a child prophet—Rav Chisda's daughter, underscoring the high regard with which she is viewed. The story describes how when Rav Chisda's daughter was a child she used to sit on his lap while he taught.²⁸ In this incident, Rava and Rami Bar Chama²⁹ are learning from Rav Chisda and he turns to his daughter and asks, "Which of them would you want as a husband?" She answers: "I want both of them."³⁰ Rava responds that he wants to go second, realizing the first marriage must end in divorce or death.³¹ Ultimately, this is exactly what transpires: Rav Chisda's daughter first marries Rami bar Chama, and after his passing, she weds Rava. Rav Chisda's daughter clearly believes in her prophetic statement. She later

²⁸ Bava Batra 12b.

²⁹ The two men were likely chavrutas. "Throughout the Talmud, Rami bar Chama poses these inquiries and Rava resolves them. It isn't the teacher, Rav Chisda, who resolves the inquiries, as you might find when Rava inquires of his primary teacher, Rav Nachman." Rabbi Dr. Joshua Waxman. "Rami Bar Chama, the Query Master." The Jewish Link, 15 Oct. 2024, jewishlink.news/rami-bar-chama-the-query-master/#:~:text=Rav%20Chisda%20folded%20Rami%27s%20scarf,relationships%20in%20the%20Babylonian%20Talmud.

³⁰ The exact words of the Gemara are: אָמַר לָהּ: מֵאֵן מִיְיָהוּ בְּעִיתָ אֶמְרָה לִי: תְּרֻיָּהּ

³¹ Ben Yehoyada suggests many explanations of Rava's statement. The Maharsha explains that Rava was not cursing Rami bar Chama to die, but rather that Rami bar Chama would divorce her, and then Rava would marry her. Divorce, especially of a first wife, is serious. However, if Rami bar Chama was already married previously, such that Rav Chisda's daughter was not his first wife, then divorcing her would not be as tragic. Ben Yehoyadah also offers a second answer - maybe Rami bar Chama was a Kohen, forbidden to marry a divorcée. If Rami bar Chama had said that he would go last, he would be wishing Rava's death.

expresses³² that, although she was single for ten years between Rami Bar Chama's death³³ and her marriage to Rava, and Rava was married throughout that time to someone else,³⁴ she always had in mind to marry Rava.³⁵

Rav Chisda's daughter's opinions are taken seriously not just in personal settings, but even where they have halachic bearing. When the Chachamim are discussing why a rapist must compensate his victim for her pain, yet a seducer does not, Rava answers³⁶ that Rav Chisda's daughter told him that consensual first-time sexual relations are not particularly painful for a woman, only "like the prick of a bloodletting lancet."³⁷ Though Rav Chisda's daughter does not directly take part in the discussion in the Beit Midrash and is cited not for a halachic opinion but a medical or physical one, her view has halachic bearing. Rava quoting her demonstrates that he respects what she says and trusts that her descriptions are valid and reliable, even in the world of halachah.³⁸

³² Yevamot 34b.

³³ It is interesting to note that we learn this as the Chachamim are 'gossiping' about Rav Chisda's daughter and her sexual behavior.

³⁴ Tosafot s.v. דעתאי עלך הואי.

³⁵ The words of her response are אָנא דְּעֵתַי עֲלֶךְ הוּאִי – My mind was on you. The context of the statement is that a woman who is abstinent for a ten-year period after divorce or the death of her husband will no longer be able to bear children unless she keeps in mind throughout the ten years that she intends to still have more children. The Chachamin are discussing how Rav Chisda's daughter and Rava have been able to have children even after a decade of her being unwed, and she answers that throughout the ten years, she had her mind on Rava. Tosafot (s.v. דעתאי עלך הואי) explains that this was due to her childhood prophecy that she would marry both men.

³⁶ Ketubot 39a-b.

³⁷ Rashba says, "The sharp-minded among them say that a seduced woman has no distress worth even a perutah, only a slight distress, like the pain of bloodletting." This is notable as he is complimenting the intelligence of Rav Chisda's daughter.

³⁸ This interaction is all the more significant given that Rava is her second husband. Rav Chisda's daughter has to be very comfortable and open with him to share with him what her first experience with her previous husband felt like.

She is also respected as someone who can faithfully transmit her father's halachic opinions. In Chullin 44b, Rava permits eating from a possible treifa³⁹ and then purchases meat from it himself. Rav Chisda's daughter protests, saying that her father wouldn't have bought the meat, lest it look like he permitted it for the express purpose of purchasing it himself. She then asks why Rava is willing to do so. Rava responds by distinguishing the case at hand from the case in which Rav Chisda would not buy the meat. It is notable that she feels able to challenge her husband's halachic ruling, and that Rava respects her ability to do so as well. He does not chastise her for disrespect, nor does he dismiss her challenge. Rather, he accepts that her recollection of her father's practice is reliable, and takes her question seriously, responding in the same manner as he would to any serious scholar. In fact, he responds to her using the same *הני מילי* formulation used throughout the sugya to respond to other halachic challenges.⁴⁰ ⁴¹ In another occurrence, Rava explains that one should not send his wife meat that has not yet had the prohibited sciatic nerve removed on Erev Shabbat, as she may come to rush and accidentally cook it.⁴² The Gemara challenges that Rava himself would do this, and answers *שאי בת רב חסדא דקים ליה בגוהה דבקיאה* – "The daughter of Rav Chisda is different, as he was certain about her that she was an expert in this matter."

³⁹ A treifa is an animal with a fatal defect that will cause it to die imminently. Such an animal is not kosher.

⁴⁰ Wendy Love Anderson, "'Rav Chisda's Daughter Is Different': The Bavli's Exemplary Rabbinic Woman."

⁴¹ Rava answers that in this case, the weight of the meat proves that he is paying the standard price and not unfairly deriving benefit from his judgment. Chidushei Halachot explains that Rav Chisda likely did not buy the meat not because of suspicion but due to personal stringency and so as not to appear as a "priest who is assisting in the threshing floors."

⁴² Chagigah 5a.

Contrary to Fine's contention that Rava and his wife had a prudish marriage in which they never deeply connected or understood each other, I believe the evidence in the Gemara indicates that the two were very close. Brachot 62a relates how Rav Chisda's daughter would protect Rava from demons the people at the time believed preyed upon people in the privy.⁴³ Prior to his promotion to head the yeshiva, she offered him protection by rattling a nut in a copper vessel to fend off demons.⁴⁴ After his promotion, as he was now spiritually elevated and thus in more danger, she constructed a window in the privy so that she could place her hand on his head while he was there, as her presence protected him.⁴⁵ His presence protected her as well. The Gemara relates that a woman should not go to a mikvah within thirty days of childbirth, as she is weak and particularly sensitive to the cold.⁴⁶ Rava qualifies this halachah, saying that it applies only when her husband is not around, but if her husband is available, he will warm her.⁴⁷ This is illustrated through a sad (possibly tragic) incident in

⁴³ Brachot 62a.

⁴⁴ Ben Yehoyada says that making a sound drives away harmful spirits, and cites the Maharsha on Arvei Pesachim and Midrash Rabbah at the beginning of Parashat Kedoshim. "This is an ancient custom, and it is also done in order to drive away harmful spirits by means of sound, just as Bat Rav Chisda did."

⁴⁵ This idea is likely a driving force behind Rav Chisda's daughter being an enchantress in the series about her by Maggie Anton. "If we accept the rabbis' explanations that sorcery is the province of women," she says, "who are the women who could write these spells" that quote Torah and Mishnah and use scholarly terms in Aramaic? This required "a tremendous amount of intellectual activity, and clearly the women who were doing it would be quite highly regarded. Obviously, they must be from rabbinic families, and that explains why the rabbis would be able to consult them so easily: They were their wives, their daughters, their sisters." Lyn Davidson, "Do You Believe in Magic? Maggie Anton Does." J., 29 Dec. 2016, jweekly.com/2014/12/02/do-you-believe-in-magic-maggie-anton-does/.

⁴⁶ Shabbat 129a.

⁴⁷ Rashi explains that he will warm her through intimate relations, and "the body is warmed from the body." For our purposes, it is significant that at least according to Rashi's interpretation, Rava assumes that of course spouses will be physically

which Rav Chisda's daughter immerses within thirty days of giving birth when her husband is away, and does in fact get very ill.⁴⁸

Ketubot 85a cites another case that demonstrates the degree to which Rava trusts Rav Chisda's daughter. A woman comes before Rava's court to give testimony that will exempt her from needing to render a payment.⁴⁹ Rav Chisda's daughter warns him that the woman in question is suspected of taking false oaths. Rava goes against the traditional ruling and reverses the oath so that the obligation falls onto the other party, who now has the option of taking an oath that the woman owes him money and collecting his debt from her.⁵⁰ The fact that Rava deviates from the usual halachic

intimate after the wife goes to the mikvah, and that this will warm the wife. This supports my contention that Rava and his wife had a beautiful, passionate, intimate marriage, and challenges Fine's assertion that Rav Chisda's daughter was "almost frigid" (*Madwoman*, pg. 44).

⁴⁸ This sugya provides a powerful example of the interpretative nature of translation and of how different translations can yield radically different understandings of the text. After relaying that Rav Chisda's daughter caught a chill after immersing within 30 days of childbirth when Rava was away, the concluding line of the story states: **וְאִמְטִיָּהָ לְעֶרְסָה בְּתַרְיָה דְּרַבָּא לְפֻמְבִּדִּיתָא**. This literally translates as: "And they brought her bed (ערסה) after Rava to Pumbedita." The Artscroll translation renders this line: "They transported her in her *sickbed* in pursuit of her husband Rava all the way to Pumbedisa" and adds (in non-bold) "so that she could be warmed up by him." A footnote there cites Tosafot to Niddah 15b (s.v. **אִמְלִי**) which explicitly states that she is brought to Rava and is healed (**וְאִתְשִׁיחָת**). In stark contrast, in the Steinsaltz translation (The William Davidson Edition) available on Sefaria, this line is translated: "and afterward they brought her *funeral bier* after Rava to Pumbedita," which indicates that in Rava's absence, she died from the chill!

⁴⁹ The interpretation above is according to Rashi, who says the woman's oath is to exempt her from rendering payment. The Ritva (s.v. **רַבָּא אִכְשָׁנְגֵרָה**) contends that her oath is to enable her to collect payment from the opposing party. The Ritva explains it this way due to proofs that when an oath is flipped onto the opposing party in an extra-legal manner, such as here where it's based merely on the daughter of Rav Chisda's claim, it is not strong enough to extract payment from someone else but merely to exempt the oath-taker from paying.

⁵⁰ Rashi fills in that transferring the oath to the opposing party when the party who is supposed to swear is not trustworthy is based on Shavuot 44b.

ruling based on his wife's assessment is a remarkable display of trust and respect, showing the high regard he has for her.

The sugya goes even further and continues with a similar case. A document is brought to Rava's court to be examined, and Rav Pappa claims that he knows the document records a debt that has already been paid. Rava asks if there is a second witness to provide halachic eidut (testimony) and when Rav Pappa says there is not, Rava does not give credence to his lone testimony.⁵¹ Rav Adda bar Matna then asks Rava, shouldn't Rav Pappa be trusted like Rav Chisda's daughter, whose lone testimony was accepted without a second witness to corroborate her claim? Rava replies: **בֵּת רַב חֲסִידָא קִים לִי בְּגוּוּיָהּ, מָר לֹא קִים לִי בְּגוּוּיָהּ** - "Regarding the daughter of Rav Chisda, I am certain about her [trustworthiness]; regarding the Master [Rav Pappa], I am not certain about him." Not only is it demonstrated here that Rava trusts his wife, but that he trusts her even more than he trusts his contemporary Rav Pappa, even in a matter that has halachic ramifications. Rashi notes that the language of **קִים לִי בְּגוּוּיָהּ** translates roughly to mean, "It is established for me about her, I know with certainty about her, I am positive about her." This verbiage appears only 12 times in the entire Talmud, suggesting that such complete trust is quite remarkable.⁵²

It is clear that Rava and Rav Chisda's daughter have a strong relationship based on trust, respect, and communication. This stands in contrast to Fine's analysis of our key sugya. As explained previously, she asserts that, unlike Abaye and Choma's passionate

⁵¹ **לֹא יָקוּם - דֵּבַר אֶחָד בְּאִישׁ לְכָל עֵין וּלְכָל חֲטָאת בְּכָל חֲטָא אֲשֶׁר יִחֲטֵא עַל פִּי שְׁנֵי עֲדִים אוֹ עַל פִּי שְׁלֹשָׁה עֲדִים** - *One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sins. By the mouth of two witnesses, or by the mouth of three witnesses, shall a matter be established.*

⁵² Tal Ilan. "Female Personalities in the Babylonian Talmud." My Jewish Learning, 31 Aug. 2022, www.myjewishlearning.com/article/female-personalities-in-the-babylonian-talmud.

marriage, something fundamental is missing in the marriage of Rava and Rav Chisda's daughter, which likely contains an element of frigidity. In correspondence with Shulie Mishkin, Fine acknowledges, "There was no shortage of respect and genuine affection between the two."⁵³ However, despite their emotional relationship, she maintains that this close connection did not extend to their intimate life. She continues, "given her rather repressive upbringing, Rav Chisda's daughter didn't enjoy the same kind of sexual passion and intimacy as Choma enjoyed with Abaye."⁵⁴ When I challenged her based on the evidence of their strong relationship,⁵⁵ she responded that it was my modern sensibilities that were making me presume that since Rava and Rav Chisda's daughter had such a beautiful marriage, then they must surely have had a satisfying physical relationship as well. She argued, however, that in rabbinic times, the emotional and physical components were not intrinsically connected. Rava and Rav Chisda's daughter may have had a strong marriage, but that does not necessarily mean they had a passionate intimate life.

Despite Fine's compelling argument, I maintain that the evidence suggests that Rava and Rav Chisda's daughter had an ardent marriage not just emotionally but physically as well.

Fine argues that when Rav Chisda's daughter questions Rava's daytime solicitation, she does so out of shock and disdain at the improper behavior. However, it is not clear that daytime solicitation is new or out of the ordinary for Rava and Rav Chisda's daughter. In Masechet Niddah 17a, it is none other than Rav Chisda who asserts that it is prohibited for a couple to engage in intercourse by

⁵³ Correspondence from Shulie Mishkin to Gila Fine about Rav Chisda's Daughter, shared with me in an interview with Shulie Mishkin.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ This conversation took place at a Matmidot session on December 29, 2025.

day. Gila Fine cites this as explanation as to why Rav Chisda's daughter is so clearly taken aback by Rava soliciting her during the day, leading her to question who has just been in Rava's court to tempt him to sin. However, what Fine does not mention is that Rav Chisda's disputant is none other than Rava himself. Rava does not see relations by day as prohibited, and responds to Rav Chisda: ואם היה בית אפל - מותר, ותלמיד חכם - מאפיל בכסותו ומשמש. "And if the house is dark, it is permitted to engage in intercourse by day there. And in the case of a Torah scholar, he may cause darkness with his garment."⁵⁶ ⁵⁷ There is no reason to believe that Rava does not rely on his own ruling, especially since he seems to have been the dominant approach; it is the one later codified in the Rambam,⁵⁸ Tur,⁵⁹ and Shulchan Aruch.⁶⁰ We have no evidence as to whether Rav Chisda's daughter sided with her father or her husband.⁶¹ It is quite

⁵⁶ This would be done by covering the light source, such as the window, with his garment. A talmid chacham would be trusted to act with modesty.

⁵⁷ Fine does not mention that on Niddah 17a, it is Abaye who explains the opinion of Rav Chisda that intimacy is forbidden during daylight hours: אמר אביי: שמה יראה - Abaye says that if one engages in intercourse by day, perhaps the husband will see some repulsive matter in his wife and she will become repugnant to him. This further proves that it is not likely that Rava sought to emulate the sexual behavior of Abaye and Choma, as it is not evident that their intimate life was actually so erotic. It is Abaye who sides with Rav Chisda and defends the more restrictive opinion. In addition, it seems that Fine comes to the conclusion that Choma and Abaye had marital passion due to them having drunk wine together. While her interpretation is plausible, the evidence for it is not definitive.

⁵⁸ Rambam, Hilchot Issurei Bi'ah 21:10.

⁵⁹ The Tur in Orach Chayim 240:11 rules that relations during the day are assur, but in a dark house it is permissible, and a talmid chacham may intentionally darken the house with his tallit.

⁶⁰ The Shulchan Aruch in Orach Chayim 240:11 says that relations are prohibited during the day unless it is a dark house; clearly, if the house is dark, it is permissible. The Rama adds Rava's point that a talmid chacham can purposely darken the house with his garment and then relations are permissible.

⁶¹ Fine claims that her questioning Rava regarding who was in his courtroom that day reflects derision, but it can just as easily be read playfully or even flirtatiously, as will be addressed later.

possible that Rav Chisda's daughter agreed with Rava that daytime intimacy was permissible, and this is why we do not hear that she refused or was upset by his actions.⁶²

When examining the broader sugyot of Rav Chisda's daughter, it is clear that she was not an overly restrained individual. She felt comfortable asking questions, offering her opinion, and even challenging her husband. Logic would dictate that she likely followed this approach in regards to her sexual behavior as well, and there is no explicit indication otherwise. Additionally, it is clear from the peshat of the Gemara that the couple was not wholly prudish. In the sugya mentioned above, on Ketubot 39, we are given clear evidence that the couple conversed about relations. Rava reports in the name of his wife what a consensual sexual encounter feels like to a woman. Clearly, it is something the couple had discussed.

How then do we explain the sugya of Rav Chisda's modesty advice to his daughters, which Fine uses to prove that Rav Chisda's daughter is likely a restrained and prudish individual? One possibility is simply that as the strong, confident woman we have come to know, she disregards her father's advice and develops her own opinion as to how to act as a wife.⁶³ A second possibility is to reinterpret⁶⁴ the sugya and Rav Chisda's advice. As Fine herself suggests, when analyzing a sugya, it is essential to "zoom out" and do a contextual reading, examining where the scene being analyzed

⁶² Rav Chisda's daughter does not get upset at the daytime solicitation, but rather only when Choma is mentioned, as will be explained later.

⁶³ It is also possible that even though she was raised to be more discreet by her father, her behavior and outlook are influenced by her husband, who clearly does not agree with her father in this area.

⁶⁴ Revisioning, to use Fine's methodology.

is placed.⁶⁵ In the sugya immediately prior to his advice on wives, Rav Chisda gives a list of domestic advice to Torah scholars. His guidance includes tips on household purchasing, washing, and other domestic tasks.⁶⁶ Later commentators take for granted that Rav Chisda's advice cannot be literal, and instead interpret each piece as imparting moral lessons.⁶⁷ Fascinatingly, though his advice to wives is listed immediately following it, none of these commentators interpret his counsel to wives in such a fashion.⁶⁸

I would like to suggest that this is due to reception history – "the different ways that people have received, appropriated, and used texts throughout history."⁶⁹ Everyone approaches the texts and traditions passed down to them through their own sociocultural lenses. It was inconceivable to the commentators, Torah scholars

⁶⁵ "The stories of the Talmud do not appear in isolation, but within a unit of talmudic discussion (or sugya). They frequently come on the heels of a halakhic debate, clarifying, illustrating, or—as mentioned—subverting it. Other times, they follow a narrative, as part of a cluster of tales on a single theme..." Fine, *The Madwoman in the Rabbi's Attic*, pg. xxv.

⁶⁶ For example, Rav Chisda suggests scholars should buy long bundles of reeds, buy meat from the neck of an animal, and wash their linen shirts every thirty days so it should last a year, etc.

⁶⁷ To explain the selected advice above, the Chatam Sofer says: One should be gentle and flexible like a reed, and pursue a goal that may take a while. His efforts will 'lengthen' his days. Meat should be bought from an animal's neck, as there are three types of meat there, representing the three areas of Torah study a scholar should endeavor to master. A person should always divide his years, spending a third in Tanach, a third in Mishnah, and a third in Talmud. A scholar washes his shirt every thirty days so as to cleanse his sins, and so he establishes for himself good traits every year.

⁶⁸ In fact, the Meiri specifies that it is appropriate for a woman to be modest and to act in every possible way to avoid being perceived as disrespectful or inappropriate. והו משל שאף הכעורה שבכעורות אם עומדת בצניעות ומיקרת עצמה אצל בעלה אף היא חשובה בעיניו – "Even an ugly woman, if she stands with modesty and positions herself modestly before her husband, is valued in his eyes and not reproached."

⁶⁹ What Is Reception History? - Bible Odyssey
www.bibleodyssey.org/articles/what-is-reception-history/. Accessed 29 Apr. 2026.

themselves, that Rav Chisda was merely instructing scholars on domestic matters, so they interpreted the advice as allegories for other messages. However, when it came to his advice on being a wife, those commentators believed Rav Chisda was merely expressing that his daughters should act modestly, without any deeper meaning. The commentary that we have is shaped by sociocultural context, and just as we confront texts with contemporary sensibilities, so too did the mefarshim.⁷⁰ However, I would like to suggest that, just as his advice to scholars has traditionally been interpreted figuratively, so too his advice to wives can and should be. Even Rav Chisda himself possibly did not intend to provide prudish advice; as shown above, he clearly also raised his daughters to be knowledgeable and did not reprimand them for being opinionated. He intended his daughters, and all those who would hear his words, to realize that he meant his advice to be plumbed for the deeper messages embedded within.

When we return to our primary sugya, it is no longer obvious that Rav Chisda's daughter sees her husband's daytime solicitation as negative. If this is true, why does she respond to her husband's solicitation by asking him who has just come before him in court? This seems to indicate at least some level of surprise. One possibility is that even if they have a passionate marriage and both think such activity is permissible, it was likely uncommon for practical reasons. Rather than asking out of disgust, as Fine reads it, the question may have been asked playfully or even flirtatiously. Only after Rava answers her that Choma was in his court does Rav Chisda's daughter become alarmed and express displeasure.

⁷⁰ "We should confront the theological rabbinic texts on their own terms, without the guiding hand of either [rational or mystical] medieval Jewish framework." - Professor Dov Weiss. Blog, Kotzk. "229) Reading Talmudic Texts through Modern 'Filters.'" 1 Jan. 1970. www.kotzkblog.com/2019/06/229-reading-talmudic-texts-through.html.

Why does Rav Chisda's daughter react so viciously to Rava's answer? Fine's revisioning of Choma as showing Rava a glimpse of a sensual marriage that offends his wife's sense of propriety does not persist, as it seems that Rava and his wife have such a marriage themselves. Rather, I suggest that Rav Chisda's daughter is worried about Choma harming Rava. Choma is an *isha katlanit*⁷¹ – a woman who has been married to three husbands, all of whom have died, and is now prohibited to remarry, as she is seen as a cursed or dangerous individual. Rav Chisda's daughter is not worried that her husband will be unfaithful to her, as the traditional reading claims, or that Choma is imparting to Rava wild sexual notions as Fine asserts, but rather she is superstitious that all men who come in contact with Choma are in mortal danger. To our modern sensibilities, Rav Chisda's daughter's reaction seems extreme and unwarranted. However, in that time, everyone was superstitious and believed that demonic forces were potentially lethal. In that context, Rav Chisda's daughter's concern for her husband's life was entirely reasonable, and she is known to take extreme measures to protect Rava. Just as she safeguards him from the demons of the privy, so too she chases out of town a woman she perceives as cursed and dangerous. Rav Chisda's daughter and Rava have such a significant and fulfilling marriage that she can't imagine living without him and is terrified of any harm coming his way.

Yet my revisioning of this sugya shows that, as passionate and opinionated as Rav Chisda's daughter is, she falls folly to her own time as well. In seeking to protect her husband, she causes harm to Choma. Choma, who tragically lost three husbands, does not

⁷¹ Yevamot 64a-b. The Gemara here cites a machloket about whether or not the status of an *isha katlanit* takes effect after a woman has lost two husbands or three. It specifically says that Abaye relies on the opinion which claims three in order to marry Choma, who had previously lost two husbands (Rechava of Pumbedita, and Rav Yitzchak, son of Rabba bar bar Chana). Upon the death of Abaye, Choma becomes an *isha katlanit* according to all opinions.

deserve communal ostracism because of superstitious fears that she will harm others.

In my re-reading of the sugya, both women are sympathetic characters. Rav Chisda's daughter is a dedicated wife who seeks to protect her husband. Choma is an ill-fated woman seeking to maintain what is left of her former life. Neither woman is overly sexual, as the traditional reading sees Choma, nor inadequately so, as Fine imagines Rav Chisda's daughter. Choma is not a seductress wooing another's husband, and neither is Rav Chisda's daughter a repressed wife afraid of eroticism. When each woman is portrayed as a polar value, she is cast as the villain of the sugya. Only when her depiction is moderated do we learn a lesson from her individual character.

So too, I believe we can learn to view others in our contemporary times through this lens. People are not simply a composite of extremes; everything contains nuance. We stand to learn much more from each other when we acknowledge that, in life, there is not always a heroine and a villain. As Fine notes in her own moral:

"Anyone who rejects another as flawed... has the same flaw" (Kiddushin 70a). Rejection is born of projection. We project onto the Other our deepest flaws, our most shameful secrets, and then we ostracize them, unable to bear in them that which we cannot acknowledge within ourselves...it's that we must be especially careful, especially compassionate, toward the Others in our midst. For those who appear dangerous are usually just different. And those who appear different are probably more like ourselves than we suspect."⁷²

So often, Rav Chisda's daughter and Choma are made virtuous through the vices of the other. It is by casting Choma as a seductress that we validate Rav Chisda's daughter chasing her out of town, and by making Rav Chisda's daughter afraid of sexuality that we

⁷² Fine, *The Madwoman in the Rabbi's Attic*, pg. 50.

rehabilitate our image of Choma. I believe that, instead, we should be willing to confront both women as they were, and treat them with kindness, for only then do we learn the most we can from them.

I do not intend to discount the traditional reading or Fine's revisioning. I believe in the concept of *shiv'im panim laTorah* (there are 70 facets to the Torah) and that there are merits to each explanation. Torah is broadened when we consider it from many perspectives. It is in this vein that I sought to learn a lesson from the various interpretations of the key sugya and their binary framing of Choma and Rav Hisda's daughter. I believe that not only does the diametric affect how we judge the women themselves, it also shapes the broader lesson the sugya can convey about marriage. As Gila Fine says, Rav Chisda's daughter and Choma are designed as each other's foil. I would like to suggest an alternative kind of foil the women are to each other: a subtle foil. Subtle foil characters share similarities, but "one key difference reveals deeper truths. These foils tend to explore themes rather than just personality traits."⁷³ Rav Chisda's daughter and Choma need not live in an inverse relationship with each other. Perhaps, the dichotomy between the two women does not exist as a commentary on their characters, but rather to impart a lesson about marriage. Essentially, this sugya, read through the balance of the traditional interpretation and Fine's revisionist reading, teaches the necessity of balance in marriage. If we are to accept either reading on its own, we are left with one woman representing a polar value that makes her a villain, showing that the opposite value must be wholly virtuous. Yet this is not so – each characterization finds its value in balance with the other.

⁷³ "What Is a Foil Character and What Role Do They Play? (With Examples)." Literature & Latte, 9 Oct. 2025, www.literatureandlatte.com/blog/what-is-a-foil-character.

According to the traditional reading, Choma represents sensuality and eroticism. When we read her as only this, she becomes a character that must be driven out. Thus, we would come to presume that the opposite value is the correct one – sexuality is negative, and lack thereof is a virtue. According to Fine’s reading, Rav Chisda’s daughter represents sexual repression and restraint in marriage. Yet, when we read her as such, we cast her as a character with a passionless marriage that can only be maintained when competition is eliminated. The reader then assumes that sexuality is essential, and its lack is wholly bad. Taking these contradictory conclusions together, we find a much more complex sugya than either provides on its own. Our sugya finds merit and danger in both the contrasting lifestyles of our two heroines. Neither is entirely valorized nor entirely villainous. Ultimately, it presents a concept of marriage that lies in moderation: a balance between sexuality and restraint. Our sugya is not a character study so much as it is philosophical instruction towards the Jewish ideal of married life and its complexities. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein writes, “We assert the value of romantic love, its physical manifestation included, without flinching from the prospect of concomitant sensual pleasure, and we do so without harboring guilt or reservations.”⁷⁴ From Choma, we learn that “[intimacy] is a fundamental component of a comprehensive relationship.”⁷⁵ We need not shy away from this aspect of marital life, for when we do, we make women an object of our own repression, projecting what we wish to suppress. Yet, so too, the Rav Chisda’s daughter of Fine’s reading reminds us the importance of restraint, propriety and emotional intimacy. “Marriage redeems the productive urge from its animal

⁷⁴ Lichtenstein, Aharon. “Of Marriage: Relationship and Relation.” *Tradition*, no. 39.2, 2005, <https://doi.org/https://traditiononline.org/of-marriage-relationship-and-relations/>. pg. 26

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 29.

species orientation and turns it into a spiritual tragic longing of man for his origin or source.”⁷⁶ A marriage built only on sexuality is one that lacks a proper foundation. “Every Jewish home should be grounded upon the centrality of Torah, avoda (Divine service), and gemilut chasadim (acts of kindness), and dedication to these cardinal values must be assured in the structuring of its lifestyle.”⁷⁷ All of these aspects are vital to a fully comprehensive Jewish marriage. We find here that our modern conceptions and expectations of married life and the tension felt in the Jewish world between sexuality and conservatism have ancient roots.

In both of the previously established readings I’ve explored in this paper, one woman is uplifted at the cost of the other. As understood by the traditional reading of the sugya, Choma is an overly-sensual character whose sexuality is too much. So too, in Fine’s revisioning, the prudishness of Rav Chisda’s daughter is too much. Whichever woman is read positively or negatively, they are positioned on opposite sides of a moral scale. Both cannot appear sympathetic. Yet, when one looks deeper, we gain so much insight, not only into the necessary duality of Jewish marriage and into this particular sugya, but also into understanding Gemara as a whole.⁷⁸ One sugya can be read, learned, and taught in a myriad of ways,

⁷⁶ Ibid, pg. 10.

⁷⁷ Ibid, pg. 9.

⁷⁸ Gemara can also be analyzed mystically. In Sha’ar HaGilgulim Rav Chaim Vital elucidates the reasoning behind the order of Rav Chisda’s daughter’s marriages. Rav Chisda’s daughter symbolizes the sefirah of Malchut (kingship/Divine Presence) and is associated with divine kindness descending from Abraham (“Rav Chesed” - abundant kindness). Each of her marriages symbolizes a type of divine union (zivug) in the spiritual world. Rami bar Chama represents the higher union, connected to Da’at (higher consciousness/spiritual knowledge) while Rava represents the lower union, connected to Yesod (foundation/channeling divine flow into the world). Her marriages were ordered by the spiritual hierarchy, with the higher union preceding the lower one. When one truly examines Gemara, they can find a myriad of lenses to provide greater depth.

some of which we still have not yet discovered. Modern sensibilities themselves produce a wealth of new scholarship. It was because of mine that I began to discover the true character of Rav Chisda's daughter. Fine asserts, "As opposed to Choma, one of the few named women of the Talmud, Rav Chisda's daughter is nameless. She is, significantly, Rav Chisda's daughter—forever subsumed under a man."⁷⁹ While she is nameless, Rav Chisda's daughter is certainly not without her own identity. Understood in her entirety, she is a passionate woman, one unafraid to share her opinions, who engaged in the halachic process, and who maintained a deep and intimate relationship with her husband Rava. She, and her fellow women of the Gemara, do not have to remain the paradigmatic Other. Rav Chisda's daughter deserves to have her identity reclaimed and be the heroine of her own story. Here, and in every sugya, there is always more to learn from Gemara.

Author's Note:

This paper would not have been possible without the care, guidance, and scholarship of many wonderful women.

First and foremost, I owe deep gratitude to Rabbanit Dena. Matmidot the way I have experienced it exists because of her. From the logistics of planning sessions with leading scholars to the hours she has spent commenting on every paper, the intensity of her dedication to not only Torah, but to each and every one of us, is clear. She has spent countless days helping me amass and understand sources, acting as a sounding board for ideas, and helping me develop into the kind of passionate and halachic Jew I want to be.

⁷⁹ Fine, *The Madwoman in the Rabbi's Attic*, pg. 46.

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This paper would also not exist if not for all of the experts who eagerly answered my messages, happy to share their knowledge and thought processes. Dr. Wendy Love Anderson, Ilana Kurshan, and Shulie Mishkin all answered my questions without hesitation, shared sources, and encouraged me on my quest for understanding. It is because of Dr. Anderson that I delved into historical revisioning and due to the guidance of Shulie Mishkin that I considered the women as subtle foils. Many other insights in this paper were shaped by my conversations with all of these incredible women.

It was Gila Fine's book that brought me to this topic and to my fascination with women in the Talmud. It is because of her brilliance and years of dedication that I was exposed to new talmudic analysis. My deepest gratitude for how she has encouraged me to never threaten to leave, but always threaten to stay.

Thank you for allowing me to stand on the shoulders of giants.

Rabbi Yehoshua and the Paradigm Prizefight: Halachic Humanism Triumphs!

Adiel Ramirez

If I could be best friends with any figure in Gemara, it would be Rabbi Yehoshua. Growing up as a Levi in the second Beit HaMikdash, Rabbi Yehoshua was an avid learner from birth. One story in the Talmud Yerushalmi relates that Rabbi Yehoshua's mother regularly carried him in a cradle to the synagogue so that his ears might become accustomed to the words of Torah.¹ Developing into one of the four preeminent students of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, Rabbi Yehoshua's expansive Torah knowledge and logical adeptness helped him win many philosophical and halachic arguments. Rabbi Yehoshua worked as a needler,² and often took into account the hardships of average, working Jewish men when his wealthy Rabbinic colleagues overlooked them. Rabbi Yehoshua was funny too, and often delivered his logical arguments with sharp wit and timeless humor. As a recurring figure throughout Talmudic stories, his worldview is an important one to study in order to understand the philosophical landscape of the Talmudic era.

Aggadah is the collection of stories that are recorded in the Talmud. While the halachic parts of the Talmud relate legal discussions, aggadot describe the cultural discussions of the Rabbis

¹ Jerusalem Talmud Yevamot 1:6:5-8.

² A needler is a metal craftsman who manufactures sewing needles.

through the narrative medium. How these Rabbis thought about life events, related to Jewish history, and confronted the issues of their times is interspersed with legal arguments about related topics throughout the Talmud. Often, aggadot were the Rabbis' literary means for transmitting religious *yesodot* (foundations) and moral lessons. They are rich with layers upon layers of symbolism, exegesis, and intertextual allusions, conveying their lessons through involved storylines, polemic dialogue, and sharp wit. Therefore, aggadot illuminate the cultural spirit of the Talmudic age. While one can hardly ever describe how "Judaism" as a whole thinks about an issue (everything is a *machloket*!), these stories offer important insights into how the Rabbis prioritized and defined different values.

An aggadeta in *Masechet Bechorot* 8b relates how Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananiya took a trip to Athens and bested the Athenian sages in a series of intellectual tests. The story is riddled with trickery, subversion, and puzzles. It starts with a disagreement between Rabbi Yehoshua and the emperor of Rome on the basis of an Athenian science experiment. Confident in his position, Rabbi Yehoshua goes to Athens to prove his intellectual superiority to the emperor. He finagles his way into their secluded school and the Athenian sages challenge him with twelve riddles that cover a range of topics from pregnant mules to floating wells. After besting the Athenians at each riddle, Rabbi Yehoshua tricks them into captivity and brings them to Rome to cement his victory.

The story illustrates a powerful clash between the opposing worldviews of Rabbi Yehoshua and the Athenians. Throughout the story, these two paradigms battle for superiority, their mutual exclusivity apparent as their respective representatives challenge each other in an epic battle of the wits. Throughout this war, Rabbi Yehoshua wins each battle by undermining the Athenians'

presumptions. This strategy of subversion is Rabbi Yehoshua's signature tactic throughout the entirety of the Talmud. In this story, by subverting the legalist assumptions of the Athenian Sages, Rabbi Yehoshua demonstrates the necessity of humanism in intellectual discourse.

Rabbi Yehoshua: A Halachic Humanist

To better understand Rabbi Yehoshua's worldview and tactic of subversion, we must dive deeper into Rabbi Yehoshua's character and the philosophy he represents in Talmudic literature.

Rabbi Yehoshua's worldview is fundamentally humanist. In his book, *Values in Halakhah: Six Case Studies*, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein defines humanism as "a worldview which values people highly."³ Indeed, Rabbi Yehoshua deeply understands his obligations to his fellow humans—he is a champion of the Jewish value of *derech erez*. In his relationships to other humans and to God, he acts out of an obligation founded in love, not transaction. In other words, he does not act because he feels that he owes something or because he is trying to prove something, but because his sincere conviction and care compel him. Rabbi Yehoshua's humanism also shapes his intellectual perspective. He is intellectually humble, meaning he understands the fallibility of his own perspective and therefore sees the value in other people's perspectives. Similarly, he wins most arguments because he is able to evaluate the status quo based on how it actually manifests, without taking his own preconceived notions into account. These parts of his worldview enable him to deeply understand his opponents' points of view and win debates by subverting their perspectives. These forensic skills shine in

³ Martin Lockshin, "'Values in Halakhah': Lichtenstein's Views on Humanism in Jewish Law—Review." *The Jerusalem Post*, 16 June 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/judaism/article-746454>.

halachic debates with fellow Rabbis and in philosophical debates with non-Jews. In this essay, the term “halachic humanism” will be used to describe Rabbi Yehoshua’s worldview in which humanism informs his logical and halachic ethos.

In perhaps the most famous aggadeta in all of Shas, the Oven of Achnai, Rabbi Yehoshua prioritizes human involvement in halacha over divine revelation. Disagreeing with the majority of the Beit Midrash about the ritual impurity of a certain kind of oven, Rabbi Eliezer repeatedly receives divine vindication for his position through multiple miracles and ultimately a bat kol announcing, “The halacha follows Rabbi Eliezer in every case.” At every miracle, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananiya asserts that God does not decide halacha, but humans do. At the announcement of the bat kol, Rabbi Yehoshua exclaims, “**וְלֹא בְּשָׁמַיִם הִיא**” – “It is not in heaven!” At the very end, God’s evaluation of the story is revealed, affirming Rabbi Yehoshua’s position: “**נִצְחֹנִי בְּנִי! נִצְחֹנִי בְּנִי! נִצְחֹנִי בְּנִי!**” – He smiled and said, “My children have triumphed over me! My children have triumphed over me!”⁴

In this story, Rabbi Yehoshua ardently defends halachic humanism, arguing that halachic debates demand human reasoning. Rabbi Yehoshua wins the debate by subverting Rabbi Eliezer’s assumption that divine revelation irrefutably bolsters his side of the argument. The former argues that miracles are in fact worthless proofs because they are not derived from human agency. In this human system of halacha, a proof from a bat kol is not only irrelevant, but antithetical to the fundamentally human process at hand. Furthermore, where Rabbi Eliezer discounts human involvement, Rabbi Yehoshua, with his halachically humanist worldview, sees it as essential. For Rabbi Yehoshua, the goal is not merely to arrive at an answer; it is to engage humanity in the divine.

⁴ Bava Metzia 59b.

Ironically, Rabbi Yehoshua's halachically humanist worldview is itself divinely corroborated at the end of the story when Hashem says, "My children have triumphed over me! My children have triumphed over me!" This paternal vision of God's relationship to the Jewish people reflects Rabbi Yehoshua's perspective: it is a relationship based in love and therefore God is not jealous of man's achievement, but proud of it. By subverting Rabbi Eliezer's anti-humanist argument, Rabbi Yehoshua demonstrates the criticality of human logic in halachic arguments.

In Eruvin 53b, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananiya relates the three times he was ever defeated in an argument — by a woman, a young girl, and a young boy. He is only ever defeated by the least educated at the time, not by intellectual elites or religious leaders. The symbolism of these being the only victors illustrates how Rabbi Yehoshua judges the people around him based on their real insights rather than the hypothetical expectations placed on them. This realist outlook is a marker of his halachic humanism.

The first victor, a woman, is an innkeeper. According to Rashi, leaving some food over for the innkeeper used to function as a sort of tip, and was the proper, "menschy" thing to do. When Rabbi Yehoshua eats his entire plate two days in a row, the innkeeper oversalts his meal the third day, effectively forcing him to leave a large "tip" to make up for the meals he ate completely. Asked why he didn't finish his plate, Rabbi Yehoshua says that he already ate, so as not to insult her oversalted food. The innkeeper responds that proper etiquette would demand that he should have left room for the dinner he knew he was set to have. She then asks him if he knows of the famous sagely etiquette he skirted the previous evenings by emptying his plate completely, and thus defeats Rabbi Yehoshua. In this story, Rabbi Yehoshua thinks a half-effort excuse is enough to let him get away with his rudeness, but the woman

subverts his excuse to show that it makes him twice as impolite as he originally thought. Since his lack of *derech eretz* is what leads to his downfall, this story shows its necessity even in logical arguments. As such, this story underscores the importance of the halachically humanist paradigm.

In the second story, a young girl scolds Rabbi Yehoshua for taking a short cut through a private field. Rabbi Yehoshua argues that the path is well-trodden. The girl retorts that it is only well-trodden because people excuse their trespassing with the same logic of Rabbi Yehoshua: "Everyone does it." Again, Rabbi Yehoshua's effort to flout *derech eretz* is foiled by someone who uses his own method against him. The girl takes Rabbi Yehoshua's usual role in this narrative: subverting her opponents' claims to demonstrate the importance of halachic humanism.

In the last story, a young boy gives obscure directions to Rabbi Yehoshua. The first path he describes is a hazardous short cut, the second is a longer path. Rabbi Yehoshua tries to take the short cut and is unable to get to his destination, as the boy had cryptically warned. Here, Rabbi Yehoshua tries to game a system and fails because he ignores the warning of the young boy. Recognizing this, he praises the wisdom of Jewish youth. At the end of the story Rabbi Yehoshua says, **אֲשִׁירְכֶם יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂכוּלְכֶם חֻכְמִים גְּדוּלִים אַתֶּם, מְגֻדְלְכֶם וְעַד קִטְנְכֶם** "אֲשִׁירְכֶם" - "Happy are you, O Israel, for you are all exceedingly wise, from your old to your young."⁵ Rabbi Yehoshua is proud of, not affronted by, an uneducated youngster for teaching him a lesson. This exemplifies Rabbi Yehoshua's intellectual humility, an essential aspect of his halachic humanism.

In the narrative style of this sugya, Rabbi Yehoshua tells all these stories in first-person. He himself is telling the reader about his

⁵ Eruvin 53b.

failings, further demonstrating his humility. Furthermore, the closing sentence echoes a paternal affection for the Jewish people, similar to God's at the end of the Oven of Achnai story. Rabbi Yehoshua's approach to relationships—both between humans and between man and God—emphasizes love and humility.

This trilogy of stories exemplifies the halachically humanist qualities of realism, *derech eretz*, subversion, intellectual humility, and relationships founded on love. As we will see, these qualities are highlighted in stark contrast to the Athenians' cold legalist qualities of judging based on expectation, hierarchy, stubbornness, arrogance, and relationships founded on transaction.

Rabbi Yehoshua's halachically humanist worldview is highlighted by its contrast to the Athenian, legalist paradigm in the story in Bechorot. Where Rabbi Yehoshua has an innate love of all of humanity, the Athenians operate on a hierarchy of excellence. Where Rabbi Yehoshua deploys critical thinking skills, the Athenians adhere in blind obedience to their preconceived notions of the world. Where Rabbi Yehoshua is compassionate and feels a sense of obligation to others out of love, the Athenians are competitive and transactional and feel obligated to defer to hierarchy. They pay more attention to their expectations than to the reality in front of them. Whereas Rabbi Yehoshua is able to enter his opponents' perspective, question assumptions, and travel the world gaining exposure to different perspectives, the Athenians are untrusting of anything outside their own worldview, never question their own understanding, and sit sequestered in their academic echo-chamber. The Athenians are arrogant, exclusively logical, and treat human relationships as mechanical systems.

The Aggadeta in Bechorot

The story takes place less than 100 years after the destruction of the Second Temple. Israel is ruled by the Romans, and Rabbi Yehoshua and other rabbis of his time are always negotiating with the Romans for peace and rights, all while trying to define their identity as a religious nation after the Churban. At this time, many factions, such as the Pharisees and Essenes, split off from the mainstream Jewish authorities in Yavneh and develop their own approaches to Torah study and practice. Even within the mainstream, different paradigms of Jewish learning battle for supremacy, as seen in the Oven of Achnai story.

Rabbi Yehoshua himself grew up as a Levi in the Beit HaMikdash and witnessed the Churban. There are many stories of Rabbi Yehoshua explaining Judaism, Jewish practices, and Jewish theology to the Roman emperor. In the story found in Bechorot 8b, the Roman Emperor is presumed by most rabbis to be Hadrian, who ruled from 117 to 138 CE.

I will first present the story as it appears in the Gemarra. I have separated it into three acts, plus an epilogue, and I have numbered each riddle for later reference.

Bechorot 8b-9a

Act I

With regard to the gestation time of a snake, the Gemara relates that the Roman emperor said to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥanania: In the case of a snake, after how long a period of gestation does it give birth? Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥanania said to him: After seven years. The emperor said to him: But the elders, i.e., the sages, of the school of Athens bred snakes and they gave birth after three years. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥanania responded: Those snakes were already pregnant from beforehand for four years. The emperor asked: But they engaged in intercourse, and

animals do so only in order to give birth, not when they are already pregnant. Rabbi Yehoshua responded: Snakes also engage in intercourse like people, i.e., they do not do so solely for reproduction.

The emperor said to him: But how can you disagree with the sages of Athens? Aren't they wise? Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya responded: We are wiser than they. The emperor said: If you are wiser than they, then go defeat them in debate and bring them to me. Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: How many are there? The emperor answered: Sixty men. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya said to him: Construct a ship that has sixty rooms for me, and each room should have sixty mattresses [*bistarkei*] in it.

The emperor constructed it for him.

Act II

Rabbi Yehoshua then set out on the ship for Athens. When he arrived there, he entered a butcher shop and found a certain man, the butcher, flaying an animal. Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: Is your head for sale? The butcher said to him: Yes, it is. Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: For how much is it being sold? The butcher said to him: For half a dinar. Rabbi Yehoshua gave him the money. After Rabbi Yehoshua paid the butcher, he said to him: Did I say to you that I wanted the head of the animal? I was referring to your head, and you must now keep your word and give me your head. Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: If you wish for me to let you be, go and show me the entrance to the school of the sages of Athens. The butcher said to him: I am afraid, as they kill anyone who shows its location to another. Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: Carry a bundle of reeds, and when you arrive there, stand it up like one who is resting, to mark the location. The butcher did this, and Rabbi Yehoshua successfully found the entrance.

Rabbi Yehoshua found guards stationed on the inside and guards stationed on the outside to ensure that no one could enter or exit. They also spread sand on the ground in the entranceway so that they could detect if anyone entered or left. If they saw footsteps that were entering, they would kill the outer guards for allowing people to enter, and if they saw footsteps that were exiting, they would kill the inner guards for allowing people to

leave. Rabbi Yehoshua reversed his sandal so it was facing away from the entrance, walked on the sand, and snuck away, thereby creating the appearance of someone who had left the building. When the authorities saw the footsteps, they killed the inner guards. Rabbi Yehoshua then returned, reversed his sandal, and made footsteps in the sand indicating that someone had entered the building. They then killed all the guards, including the outer ones, and Rabbi Yehoshua succeeded in entering the building.

Act III

Rabbi Yehoshua found the younger sages sitting in the upper, more prominent section, and the elder ones in the lower section. He said to himself: I must first greet the younger sages, as they are sitting in the upper section, prior to the elder sages; but if I greet these younger sages first, those elder sages will kill me, as they maintain: We are better, because we are older and they are children. Rabbi Yehoshua said: Greetings to you, but did not directly address either group.

They said to him: What are you doing here? Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: I am a Sage of the Jews, and I desire to learn wisdom from you. They said to him: If so, we will ask you questions and see if you are worthy of this privilege. Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: Very well. If you win, you may do to me anything you wish, and if I defeat you, then eat with me on my ship.

(1) The sages of Athens said to him: In the case of a certain man who goes and asks to marry a woman and her family does not give her to him, why would he see fit to go to a family that is greater than the first?

Rabbi Yehoshua took a peg and stuck it into the lower part of the wall, but it did not go in. He then stuck it into the upper portion of the wall where there was a hole, and it went in. He said to them: In this case too, where he goes to a more distinguished family than the first, perhaps he will find the girl destined for him.

(2) The sages of Athens asked him another question: In the case of a man who lends money to an individual and the borrower does not repay the loan, and the lender repossesses the borrower's property as payment instead, why would he see fit to lend to others again?

Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: This is what people do: If a man goes to the pond, initially cuts a bundle of reeds, but finds that he cannot lift it, he does not stop cutting wood. Instead, he cuts more wood and places it upon the first, until a person happens to pass by and helps him raise it upon his shoulders, so that he can carry it home. So too, a person continues to lend based on the assumption that he will eventually find an appropriate borrower.

(3) The sages of Athens said to him: Say to us a matter of nonsense.

Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: There was a certain mule that gave birth, and a note was hanging on the newborn mule's neck and on it was written that it is owed 100,000 dinars by its father's household.

They said to him: But can a mule give birth?

Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: This is why it is a matter of nonsense, as it is impossible for a mule to give birth.

(4) The sages of Athens then asked another question: When salt is spoiling, with what does one salt it to preserve it?

Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: With the placenta of a mule.

They said to him: But is there a placenta of a mule?

Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: And does salt spoil?

(5) They said to him: Build us a house in the air of the world.

Rabbi Yehoshua uttered a Name of God and hovered between the sky and the earth. He said to them: Bring up to me bricks and mortar and I will build you a house here.

(6) They asked him: Where is the center of the world?

Rabbi Yehoshua raised his finger and said to them: Here.

They said to him: And who says that you are correct?

He said to them: Bring ropes and measure.

(7) They said to him: We have a pit in the field; bring it to the city.

Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: Braid ropes made of bran for me and I will bring it to the city with them.

(8) They then said to him: We have a mill that broke; sew it back together.

Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: Pull out threads from the mill for me and I will sew them together.

(9) They asked him another question: With what does one harvest a field of knives?

Rabbi Yehoshua answered: With the horn of a donkey.

They said to him: But is there such an item as a horn of a donkey?

He said to them: But is there such a thing as a field of knives?

(10) They brought him two eggs and said to him: Which is the egg of a black hen and which is the egg of a white hen?

Rabbi Yehoshua brought them two cheeses, and said to them: Which is the cheese from the black goat and which is from the white goat?

(11) They asked him: And in the case of a chick that dies inside the egg, from where does its spirit exit?

Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: From where it enters, it departs.

(12) They said to him: Show us a utensil that is not worth the damage that it causes.

Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: Each one of you bring a mat and spread it out.

When they did so, each mat did not enter the gate due to its size.

Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: Bring axes and break the gate so that you can bring it inside. This is a utensil that is not worth its damage.

Epilogue

After Rabbi Yehoshua defeated the sages of Athens in debate, he brought them to his ship as they had agreed. He then brought each one to a different room. When each one saw the sixty mattresses in his room, he said to himself: All of my colleagues

are coming here, and waited for them without attempting to leave. Rabbi Yehoshua said to the sailor: Release your ship, i.e., begin sailing.

While they were coming to the emperor in Rome, he took out some dirt that he had taken from the dirt of Athens.

(9a) When they reached the House of the Swallowed, a location in the sea where the water absorbs everything in its vicinity, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananya filled up a small jug of water from the House of the Swallowed.

When they arrived, he presented the sages of Athens before the emperor. The emperor saw that the sages of Athens were suffering due to their having been taken captive. He said to Rabbi Yehoshua: These individuals cannot be the sages of Athens, because those sages are strong and arrogant. Rabbi Yehoshua took some of the dirt that he had taken from Athens and threw it upon them. When they smelled the scent of their own soil they began to act like themselves again, and they spoke with arrogance before the king. Upon hearing them, the emperor said to Rabbi Yehoshua: You may do with them whatever you wish. Rabbi Yehoshua brought the water that he had brought from the House of the Swallowed and poured it into a utensil [*betigada*]. He said to the sages: Fill it up and go on your way. They filled and poured one by one, i.e., they filled the utensil by pouring in water numerous times, and each time the utensil swallowed up the water. They continued to fill it until their shoulders became disjointed. In this manner, the sages of Athens were defeated.⁶

Act I: Competing Sources

The story begins with Hadrian presenting an experiment done by the Sages of Athens that contradicts Rabbi Yehoshua's assertion that the gestation period of a snake is seven years. This results in a wager between the two: Rabbi Yehoshua has to bring the Sages of Athens to Hadrian in order to prove his intellectual superiority to the emperor. This opening signals that the rest of the story will

⁶ The Steinsaltz Talmud, Bechorot 8b.

center on the competition between Rabbi Yehoshua's and the Athenians' worldviews.

Hadrian bases his opinion on empirical evidence: an experiment conducted by the intellectual elite of the era. Conversely, Rabbi Yehoshua comes by his view by an exegesis cited in the text of the Gemara. In an episode of TEXTing, a podcast by the Shalom Hartman Institute, Dr. Elana Stein Hain points out that Rabbi Yehoshua does not cite this derivation of Bereshit to the emperor; he does not give a source at all for his view that the gestation period of a snake is seven years. Rabbi Yehoshua recognizes that his opponent would disregard the exegesis as an invalid proof, so he finds other means of proving his point. Here, Rabbi Yehoshua's halachic humanist worldview allows him to enter the perspective of his opponent and respond accordingly with an argument that Hadrian finds meaningful.

Rabbi Yehoshua requests a very particular ship for his voyage and sets out on his mission.

Act II: Nonsensical Systems

Rabbi Yehoshua meets a butcher when he arrives in Athens. Rabbi Yehoshua asks the butcher to sell him his head, and the butcher agrees, assuming Rabbi Yehoshua must be referring to the head of the animal the butcher is flaying. When Rabbi Yehoshua insists on receiving the butcher's own head, the butcher feels beholden to Rabbi Yehoshua, so when Rabbi Yehoshua asks him to illicitly show him where the School of Athens is found, he agrees, even though doing so is punishable by death. The butcher is our introduction to the strict legalism of Athens: instead of insisting that he obviously meant to be selling the animal's head and not his own, since he had responded yes when asked if his head was for sale, he feels he legally owes Rabbi Yehoshua his head and thus is willing to risk his life to show Rabbi Yehoshua the location of the school. The

butcher's loyalty to the system trumps his own intellect. His inability to rebut or question Rabbi Yehoshua's ridiculous claim indicates an intellectual stubbornness that is a hallmark of the legalist paradigm. Furthermore, such a severe punishment for revealing the school's location demonstrates how the Athenian Sages separate and elevate themselves above the rest of the world.

Next, Rabbi Yehoshua is confronted with the security system of the school: a sand-covered floor tracks the comings and goings of illegal visitors, where outer guards are put to death for allowing anyone in, and inner guards are put to death for allowing anyone out. Rabbi Yehoshua cleverly wears his shoes backwards on his way in, making it seem as if someone exited, leading to the deaths of the inner guards. He then does the opposite, thereby eliminating the outer guards. This ordeal expands the picture of Athenian legalism as seen with the butcher. The guards are disposable to the system: if they do not perform, they die, presumably replaced by the next group of guards prepared to die. This confirms the legalists' distinct lack of care for humanity. The fact that the guards actually carry out this deranged system exemplifies how, like the butcher, they are more committed to the system than to their own lives. The Athenian lack of appreciation for humanity and individual intellect is clear in this episode.

Then Rabbi Yehoshua is faced with another challenge: whom to greet first, the older sages or the prominent sages? This challenge represents the Athenian's hierarchical view of the world: people are not evaluated based on their real merits but rather on the group they belong to. Some rabbis understand the seating chart of the Athenian sages to be purposely confusing: they want people to squirm in their presence. This again exemplifies how they aim to isolate their knowledge from the rest of the world. Here, Rabbi Yehoshua is confronted by a dichotomy of etiquette. According to the Athenians'

design, he has to choose to insult one group. Instead, he chooses to greet everyone at the same time, rejecting their challenge and leveling their stature. The Athenians order themselves hierarchically. Rabbi Yehoshua rejects rank in favor of equality.

Throughout this second act, the humanist and legalist paradigms are contrasted with each other. The Athenians stay stubbornly loyal to ridiculous systems despite their own judgment. Rabbi Yehoshua subverts each of these systems. Since Rabbi Yehoshua represents a paradigm of human agency in legal systems, his very method of subversion by which he defeats them proves the superiority of his worldview.

Rabbi Yehoshua's intellectual humility is highlighted against the Athenians' intellectual arrogance in this act. The Sages isolate and elevate themselves above the rest of the world, discounting the wisdom the public may offer them. This is in contrast to what we know about Rabbi Yehoshua, who stands for the democratization of knowledge and admits intellectual defeat to children. Throughout this act, the Athenian legalist paradigm highlights Rabbi Yehoshua's halachic humanism by contrast.

Whereas Rabbi Yehoshua begins this act journeying across the world, the Athenians remain seated in their isolated ivory tower. Their minds are, quite literally, isolated from the rest of the real, breathing, human world. As we will see, their detachment from reality makes them unable to see perspectives that differ from their own and causes them to overvalue their own intellect.

Act III: Riddles

The Athenians ask Rabbi Yehoshua twelve questions to decide whether he is worthy to learn from them. Being a human with intellect is not enough for the Athenian Sages; Rabbi Yehoshua must prove on their terms that he is worthy to learn from them.

Conversely, in many stories, Rabbi Yehoshua gives intellectual credence to many different kinds of human knowledge.

The twelve riddles presented in this competition are very strange. The Maharsha tries to explain strange, illogical portions of aggadeta in the Talmud in a logical way or else interprets them metaphorically as moral lessons.⁷ In this story, the Maharsha offers valuable insights into the meaning behind each riddle, often interpreting them as parables for the relationship between God and the Jewish people. According to the Maharsha, the Athenians often present a strict, transactional view of God's relationship to his chosen nation, while Rabbi Yehoshua subverts their view to assert a loving conception of God's regard of the Jews.

Let us look at three representative riddles.

In the sixth riddle, the Athenians ask Rabbi Yehoshua where the center of the world is. When he points to where he currently is, the Athenians ask him to provide material evidence for his claim. Rabbi Yehoshua responds by asking them to collect material data to prove that he is wrong. According to the Maharsha, the Athenians posit through this riddle that God's bounty of wisdom exists only in Jerusalem, from which the Jews were just exiled. Rabbi Yehoshua's initial answer, pointing to where he stands, is therefore an assertion that God's bounty is spread unbounded over His world. Asked to prove his stance, Rabbi Yehoshua says that he will gladly measure the center of the world, but that regardless of whatever material experiments the Athenians conduct, the Jews believe in God's unbounded Shechina. By asking for ropes and measures, Rabbi

⁷ The Maharsha, Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer ben Yehudah ha-Levi Edels, was born in 1555 in Krakow. A very prominent teacher throughout Poland, he wrote *Chidushei Halachot* and *Chidushei Aggadot*, which were both later added to the end of all printed editions of the Talmud. He died in 1631 (The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe).

Yehoshua subverts the Athenians' base understanding that theological claims can be proven materially. He shows that, in theological debates, religious maxims are not only equally valid, but more compelling than the scientific "evidence" the Athenians propose. By subverting the basis of the Athenians' riddle, he reveals the inadequacy of their intellectual arrogance: they are unable to genuinely examine the issue at hand.

In the eighth riddle, the Athenians ask Rabbi Yehoshua to sew a millstone back together. Rabbi Yehoshua asks them to provide the threads of the millstone, and he will gladly comply. Even from a basic reading of this riddle, it is clear how Rabbi Yehoshua subverts their challenge. According to the Maharsha's less intuitive reading, the millstone represents the relationship between God and the Jewish people, and the Athenians are positing that this relationship is broken in galut. In the Maharsha's reading, Rabbi Yehoshua counters with the parable of a son who breaks his father's millstone, and his father restores it. Rabbi Yehoshua is not only rejecting the Athenians' insistence of God's abandonment but replacing it with his vision of God's paternal relationship to the Jewish people. With Rabbi Yehoshua's victory in this riddle, relationships built on love are validated over relationships built on expectation.

In the eleventh riddle, the Athenians ask Rabbi Yehoshua to find the exact point at which the soul of a dead chick leaves the egg. Rabbi Yehoshua responds, "From where it enters, it departs." Rabbi Yehoshua turns their question on its head, showing how ridiculous and meaningless it is. Dr. Christine Hayes points out in the TEXTing podcast, "[Rabbi Yehoshua] deflates this high sounding, high-minded conversation, and exposes it as sort of pseudo-wisdom, speculating on things that we can never know about. In truth, the rabbis say there are certain things we really can't know about. Just concern yourself with what we actually can." Rabbi Yehoshua

reminds the Athenians, through his tactic of subversion, to focus on what is in front of them rather than indulging their logical talents towards no end. The Athenians' misconstrued esoterism highlights Rabbi Yehoshua's holistic view of the reality at hand. It is by this realist focus that Rabbi Yehoshua wins this riddle.

Rabbi Yehoshua's victories in each riddle cement halachic humanism as superior to the worldview of the Athenians. Rabbi Yehoshua's intellectual humility and realism win out over the Athenians' intellectual arrogance and judgment based on expectations. The Athenians also concede to his assertions of the cruciality of *derech erez* and relationships based on love rather than expectation. In many riddles, he promotes his viewpoint by subverting rather than refuting the Athenians' challenges. Through these riddles, Rabbi Yehoshua demonstrates the triviality of Athenian legalism and affirms halachic humanism as the superior worldview.

Epilogue: Rabbi Yehoshua Vindicated

Rabbi Yehoshua tricks the Athenians into getting on his ship by exploiting their assumption that 60 beds in one room must be for 60 Sages. This unquestioning spirit illustrates the Athenians' legalist worldview.

Hadrian does not recognize the Sages of Athens after their tiring, humiliating journey, because they are known for being stubborn and arrogant. Here, Hadrien outlines the Athenian fatal flaw: arrogance. Arrogance is thinking your perspective is flawless and complete, that no one else has any wisdom to offer you, that you know all. Humility is recognizing the limits of your perspective, appreciating the wisdom of people that are different from you, being open and excited to learn as much as you possibly can. The Athenians' intellectual arrogance makes them vulnerable to Rabbi

Yehoshua's tactic of subversion, a skill that comes out of his intellectual humility.

In the end, Rabbi Yehoshua sprinkles Athenian soil over their heads, and they return to their original, arrogant state. This is the moment that the Gemara announces their defeat, conclusively showing that the Athenian worldview is inferior.

Conclusion

In promoting the halachically humanist paradigm, the story aims to impart certain moral lessons on the reader that persist in contemporary times. The first is to be open to all knowledge from all people. The Athenians lock themselves in their ivory tower, preventing themselves both from sharing their knowledge with the world and also from learning from outside perspectives. Conversely, in many stories throughout Shas, Rabbi Yehoshua travels far and wide, sharing his perspective and learning from people from different walks of life—both inside and outside the Jewish community. In this story in Bechorot, he fights for his own perspective more than he learns from the Athenians, but he does so by entering their perspective and identifying exactly why he disagrees with it. In doing so, Rabbi Yehoshua shows that being open-minded is not only compatible with, but necessary to being strong in one's beliefs.

This story also emphasizes the importance of perceiving the world as it really is. The Athenians consistently judge the world based on arbitrary preconceived notions of hierarchy and transaction. In his rebuttals, Rabbi Yehoshua repeatedly demonstrates that this impairs their perception of reality. Furthermore, in the Maharsha's reading of the riddles, the Athenians present their crude, transactional view of God's relationship with the Jewish people as more logical and therefore

accurate. Rabbi Yehoshua puts God's love and kindness in the same evidential category as their logical proofs, asserting that love and kindness can be just as true as logic.

Throughout Shas, Rabbi Yehoshua represents the halachically humanist paradigm. In the Oven of Achnai and Eruvin stories, his worldview allows him to appreciate many forms and sources of knowledge, recognize when he's wrong, develop relationships of love, and evaluate the people around him based on their actual merits. In these stories, the effectiveness of subversion as an argumentative tactic proves that there is not only room for humanism in logical debate, but that it is necessary. Through these stories and others, Rabbi Yehoshua becomes the representative of the halachically humanist paradigm.

In the Bechorot story, this paradigm is challenged by the Athenian legalist worldview. The Athenians counter Rabbi Yehoshua's intellectual humility with their own intellectual arrogance, trying again and again to prove their superiority, only to be defeated by Rabbi Yehoshua. With Rabbi Yehoshua's triumphant victory at the end of the story, this aggadeta argues that the halachically humanist paradigm is superior to the legalist paradigm.

My Bubby always says, "Being smart is less important than being good." The morals imparted by Rabbi Yehoshua throughout this aggadeta are crucial lessons for any intellectually curious person. He teaches us to be open-minded, to see the world for what it is, and to value love and kindness as truth. It is with these aspects of his worldview that he defeats the intellectual elite of his time. Rabbi Yehoshua teaches us that a sharp mind is nothing without a warm heart.

The Nusachim of Jewish Prayer

Barbara Sasson

I grew up surrounded by different nusachim of tefillah. My father is Syrian and my mother is Ashkenazi, and I was raised attending Ashkenazi, Syrian and Spanish Portuguese synagogues and schools. This meant that I was exposed to and at times confused by the differences between Nusach Ashkenaz, Sefard, Edot HaMizrach, and Spanish Portuguese. I wrote this paper because I wanted to understand the differences between these nusachim, both in their content and in their meaning.

Introduction

Over the last few millennia, Jews have been spread across the Earth, starting with the Galut after the destruction of the First Temple. The Jews brought with them their traditions, which continued to develop as the different groups moved around and interacted with each other. Among these traditions were their various nusachim, their prayer liturgies. For most of history, nusachim varied by region, with different regions developing unique traditions. However, today, as many Jews have gathered into larger communities and live near Jews from different geographical origins, nusachim more often vary between local Synagogues. Within the same area, there may be both an Ashkenazi and a Sephardic Synagogue, or separate minyanim within the same synagogue. Some even changes from one nusach to another within the same minyan, depending the chazan. This paper will be a study in the history, development, and differences between nusachim, including Ashkenaz, Sefard, Sepharadi/Edot HaMizrach and

Yemenite. I will first present the early history of standardized prayer, then discuss the development of the specific nusachim, and finally examine the reasoning behind different textual choices and Biblical quotations in different prayers and religious ceremonies.

History of Standardized Prayer

During the Biblical period, God was worshipped either through sacrifices, personal and communal, or shorter spontaneous prayers, as seen in the stories of both Moshe¹ and Channah.² Though some contemporary scholars question how much of the liturgy was actually set before the destruction of the Second Beit HaMikdash (70 CE), by the time of the Mishnah (~0-200 CE), there was definitely a basic liturgy, which the Gemara attributes to the Anshei Keneset HaGedolah. The Mishnah discusses the recitation of Shema and its blessings, the Amidah (Shemoneh Esrei), the reading of Torah, and various rituals around meals. Pesukei DeZimra and Tachanun were likely added a little later, at the time of the Gemara (~200-500 CE). During the times of the Mishnah and Gemara people also began writing and singing piyyutim (liturgical poetry), though this was mostly in the Land of Israel, as the rabbis in Babylonia were more resistant to adding extra passages into the mandatory prayers. Although prayer was becoming more official, very few rabbinic tefillot were written down until later.³

¹ Moshe prayed for his sister Miriam in his own words when she had tzara'at, וַיִּצַק מֹשֶׁה אֶל יְהוָה לֵאמֹר אֵל נָא רַפָּא נָא לָהּ - *And Moshe cried out to Hashem, and said, "God, please heal her"* (Bamidbar 12:13).

² Channah prayed for a son in the first chapters of Sefer Shmuel in her own words (Shmuel I chapters 1-2). To learn more about Channah's prayers, read Rachel Cohen's article, "חִזּוֹק וְאִמָּה: Channah's Strength in Motherhood" in this volume.

³ Ernst Daniel Goldschmidt and Ruth Langer, "Liturgy," Encyclopedia Judaica, edited by Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 13, Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, pp. 131-139. Gale eBooks (accessed May 6, 2026). link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX2587512641/GVRL?u=para69536&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=a7997982.

Entering the Geonic period (~500-1000 CE), there were two basic versions of Jewish prayer, known as the Palestinian and Babylonian nusachim. Anything known about other areas of the diaspora are from correspondence between those communities and the Geonim in Bavel. Soon after this period, due in part to the push of the Geonim to establish one correct text based on their Babylonian customs, most Jewish communities followed some version of the Babylonian rite. The Palestinian rite has various differences from the Babylonian one, but the piyyutim are this only element of the rite that made it into Medieval European prayers.⁴

During the time of the Geonim (9th century CE), Rav Amram Gaon wrote what is now the oldest surviving complete siddur, called Seder Rav Amram Gaon. This siddur reflects the Babylonian rite, and contains both the text of the prayers and their rules. Most medieval siddurim follow this siddur, though sometimes copyists replaced the original text with their own. Nonetheless, the siddurim of today still follow the basic order of Rav Amram Gaon.⁵

During medieval times, there were many liturgies in use across the Jewish world, with local customs often shading into one another like linguistic dialects. Throughout the Middle Ages, the movement of Jews between communities and areas also contributed to the changing and mixing of the nusachim. The expulsion of Jews from Spain⁶ in the 15th century caused full communities to move together

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ What I refer to as the Spanish Expulsion, also includes the expulsion of Jews from Portugal, which happened in the same place around the same time but is lesser known because it affected fewer Jews. My family was expelled from Portugal during this time.

with their customs to other areas, effectively ending the era in which nusachim were strictly regional.⁷

The introduction of the printing press also had an impact on the development of the nusachim. The printing of prayer books led to the loss of nusachim that were not printed. As typesetting and printing new variations of similar books was expensive, there would often be one siddur printed for a large region with very similar nusachim, even though in reality there was often more variety of nusachim within the region. Therefore, the widespread printing of prayer books led to two dominant nusachim in the world: Nusach Ashkenaz and Nusach Sepharadim (later referred to as Edot HaMizrach). There are also still a few regional nusachim, such as those of Italy and Yemen.⁸

Nusachim

Nusach Ashkenaz

One of the most well-known nusachim is Nusach Ashkenaz. This nusach is based on Seder Rav Amram Gaon, and includes the piyyutim of the Amoraim of Israel. The Nusach developed in France, which was a center of Western Jewish life during the Middle Ages, before becoming an official text in Germany, after the time of the Tosafot. After this point, the nusach experienced only minor changes with additions from Kabbalah, though Nusach Ashkenaz has considerably less Kabbalistic influence than other nusachim.⁹

Some of the key characteristics of Nusach Ashkenaz include: Baruch She'amar before Hodu, Shir Shel Yom after Aleinu, no

⁷ Ernst Daniel Goldschmidt and Ruth Langer, "Liturgy," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., 13:131–39.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, *Ha-Siddur v'ha-Tefillah* (Tel Aviv: Miskal, 1994), 63–69 [Hebrew].

Ketoret after Shacharit or before Mincha, an absence of the line **משיחיה ויקרב פורקניה ויצמח** in Kaddish and differences in piyyutim. The piyyutim of Nusach Ashkenaz are mostly from Israel, though some later additions are also from Italy, France, and various other locations, and are said specifically on holidays.¹⁰

For many years, before the time of the Chasidim and Nusach Sefard, Nusach Ashkenaz was the most common nusach of both Eastern and Western Europe. Even after the formulation of Nusach Sefard, Nusach Ashkenaz remained the common Nusach of Germany, the Netherlands, Lithuania, much of Hungary and parts of Poland. Despite its wide geographical use, Nusach Ashkenaz stayed mostly the same, with only minor variations, such as piyyutim commemorating local events.¹¹

There is also a branch of Nusach Ashkenaz called Nusach HaGra. Rabbi Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, commonly known as the Vilna Gaon or the Gra, lived in the 18th century in Lithuania, and is famous for his contributions to Halachah and Lithuanian Kabbalah. The Gra went through the text of Nusach Ashkenaz and took out anything he thought had no basis in halachah, often piyyutim. Since many of his students made aliyah together in the early 19th century, there are some congregations in Israel that use the Nusach of the Gra.¹²

Nusach HaSepharadim/Edot HaMizrach

Another well-known nusach is the nusach of the Sepharadim, now referred to as Nusach Edot HaMizrach.¹³ Nusach

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Nusach HaSepharadim means the nusach of the Jews of Spain. This nusach ultimately spread to the Mizrahi Jews of the Middle East, and took on the broader name Edot HaMizrach, reflecting its use among those communities.

HaSepharadim is separate from Nusach Sefard, which will be discussed later. Nusach HaSepharadim is based on the nusach of the Jews of Spain before they were expelled in 1492. Spanish Jews relied on the Babylonian nusach during the times of the Amoraim and Geonim, and they, too, incorporated Rav Amram Gaon's Siddur into their liturgy. The Tur HaZahav, the Golden Age for Jews in Spain between the 10th and 13th century, saw the creation of many beautiful Jewish songs and poems. The poets of the Tur HaZahav wrote poems which were in some ways similar to older piyyutim, but gave them a new form in language and content. These poems were written to be used in the synagogue, and many were added to the liturgy.¹⁴

After the Spanish expulsion, most Jewish exiles moved to the Ottoman Empire. Since the local communities already shared a similar Babylonian influence, the Spanish Jews easily merged their nusachim with the existing ones or persuaded locals to adopt the Spanish rite entirely. Some of the displaced Spanish Jews continued to live amongst other Jewish communities, but kept their traditions, remaining separate from the local communities. Still others moved to places where there were no local Jewish communities. Such a group came to the Americas in the 16th-17th century. They used Nusach HaSepharadim, now known as the Western Sephardic Nusach, which is still used by Spanish Portuguese Jews and Synagogues around the world today.¹⁵ The influence of Kabbalah after the expulsion helped unify and spread the nusach, even to places the Spanish Jews themselves did not reach, such as Iraq and Iran.¹⁶

¹⁴ Steinsaltz, Ha-Siddur v'ha-Tefillah, 63–69 [Hebrew].

¹⁵ This is the origin of the nusach of the Spanish Portuguese Synagogue in New York which my family attends, as well as various other synagogues in America, such as the Spanish Portuguese Synagogue in Philadelphia.

¹⁶ Steinsaltz, Ha-Siddur v'ha-Tefillah, 63–69 [Hebrew].

Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, the Ari, founder of Lurianic Kabbalah in the mid-16th century, used Nusach HaSepharadim when he compiled his own siddur, adding Kabbalah into the liturgy. This nusach of the Ari is different from the Nusach Ha'Ari of Chabbad, which will be discussed later. The Ari did not like the Sephardic piyyutim, either preferring the Ashkenazi piyyutim or no piyyutim breaking the flow of the fundamental prayers, so he took many of them out. The piyyutim that remain in Nusach HaSepharadim are usually placed where they do not interrupt the flow of the set prayers, such as in slichot, kinot, tachanun and zemirot shabbat, or reserved for the chagim.

More recently, Nusach HaSepharadim has been impacted by Rabbi Yosef Chayim (1832-1909), often known as the Ben Ish Chai of Baghdad, whose authority meant the prayers he wrote became part of the liturgy. Today, Nusach HaSepharadim is used not only by the descendants of the Spanish Jews who have been spread all over the world, but also to most of the Jews of the Muslim world and former Ottoman lands, except for Yemen, hence taking on the broader name Nusach Edot HaMizrach. Nusach Sefard borrowed aspects of this nusach, though Nusach Edot HaMizrach maintains some differences because its origin is Babylonian and it was not impacted by Christian censorship as other nusachim were.

Some of the key characteristics of Nusach Edot HaMizrach are that there are different texts for Birkat HaShanim in the Amidah for the summer and winter¹⁷ and that minchah starts with the mizmor הגיתית למנצח על הגיתית (Tehillim 84). These aspects also exist in the

¹⁷ The 9th bracha of the Amidah, Birkat HaShanim, is different in the summer and winter. While Nusach Ashkenaz and Sefard change only a few words, saying וְתֵן בְּרִכָּה in the summer and וְתֵן טַל וּמָטָר לְבִרְכָּה in the winter, Nusach Edot HaMizrach changes the entire brachah.

Yemenite nusach. There are also differences in Kaddish and Kedushah, and Hodu is before Baruch She'Amar.¹⁸

Nusach Sefard

Another common nusach is Nusach Sefard. Despite its name, this is a nusach used by Ashkenazim, not Sefaradim, though it does contain elements of both Nusach Ashkenaz and Nusach HaSefaradim/Edot HaMizrach.

Nusach Sefard is the nusach of Chasidim and followers of Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, commonly known as the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of the Chasidic movement in the 18th Century. Nusach Sefard is based on Nusach Ashkenaz with changes in the order of prayers, and various deletions and additions based on the Kabbalistic Nusach Ha'Ari, which makes it a nusach meshulav, a combined nusach. Because of the way the nusach was formulated, sometimes there are נוסחות כפולות or a double nusach, meaning the same thing is said twice in an effort to respect both the Ashkenazi and the Ari's way of saying it. There are even some who will say two versions of the same blessing as long as it does not change the meaning. This nusach is less fixed than other nusachim, so some siddurim of this nusach are more like Nusach Ashkenaz while others are more like Nusach Edot HaMizrach.¹⁹

Since Nusach Sefard is the nusach of the Chasidic Movement, it spread with the movement, becoming the dominant nusach in Eastern Europe. Some of the identifying aspects of this nusach are that Hodu is said before Baruch SheAmar, Ketoret is said three times a day, and there are differences in Kaddish and Kedushah. There are fewer piyyutim, but this nusach includes various kabbalistic prayers, such as paragraphs starting with "Yehi ratzon," "Le'shem

¹⁸ Steinsaltz, Ha-Siddur v'ha-Tefillah, 63–69 [Hebrew].

¹⁹ Ibid.

yichud,” some passages from the Zohar and many brachot. There are also some chasidic additions, like saying *לה' כי טוב הודו* on Friday night.²⁰

Within Nusach Sefard, there is also what is now known as Nusach Ha'Ari, the liturgy used by the Chabad movement. This is distinct from the original Nusach that the Ari himself wrote many decades earlier. Notably, this version of Nusach Sefard is one of the only siddurim compiled directly by a major religious leader. It was compiled in the 18th century by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, otherwise known as the Ba'al HaTanya or the "Alter Rebbe." This specific text is exceptionally careful with grammar, eliminates all double brachot, and aligns more closely with Nusach Sepharadim. Furthermore, much like the nusach of the Gra, Nusach Ha'Ari strictly omits anything deemed halachically questionable. For example, it skips most of the “Yehi ratzon” and “Le'shem yichud” paragraphs, and many of the piyyutim.²¹

Nusach Teiman (Yemenite)

Nusach Teiman is unique in that it does not quite fit under the umbrella of either Nusach Ashkenaz or Nusach Sepharadim. Jews have been in Yemen for a very long time, perhaps as early as the time of the first or second Beit HaMikdash. The Yemenite Jews were largely isolated from other Jewish communities, but did have some connections.²² They were largely influenced by the Siddur of Rav Saadia Gaon, who lived in the 10th century CE in Babylonia, and use some of his piyyutim. Nusach Teiman was also affected by the Rambam (Rav Moshe ben Maimon) who lived in the 12th century, by both his siddur and his halachot. This Nusach also shows

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

influence of Sephardi elements, specifically in the piyyutim in selichot, the avoda on Yom Kippur, and hoshanot.²³

Differences

Nusachim were usually developed with intention, which means that the differences between nusachim reflect distinct understandings of the goals for prayer and of prayer itself. While there are many differences that can be explained, the focus here will be on a few choices which are among the most interesting and well-known.

All versions of Jewish prayer contain chapters and verses of Tehillim, though different nusachim sometimes choose to order them differently. An interesting example of this is in the three verses of Tehillim said after the amida in minchah on Shabbat:

Tehillim 36:7:

צְדִקְתְּךָ כְּהַרְרֵי־אֵל מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ תְּהוֹם וְרַבָּה אָדָם וְיֹבֵהֶמָה תוֹשִׁיעַ ה':

Your beneficence is like the high mountains; Your justice like the great deep; human and animal You deliver, O Eternal One.²⁴

Tehillim 71:19:

וְצִדְקָתְךָ אֱלֹקִים עֲדָמְרוֹם אֲשֶׁר־עָשִׂיתָ גְדֻלוֹת אֱלֹקִים מִי כְמוֹךָ:

Your beneficence, high as the heavens, O God, You who have done great things; O God, who is Your peer!²⁵

Tehillim 119:142:

צְדִקְתְּךָ צֶדֶק לְעוֹלָם וְתוֹרָתְךָ אֱמֶת:

²³ Ernst Daniel Goldschmidt and Ruth Langer, "Liturgy," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., 13:131–39.

²⁴ Psalms 36:7. All translations of pesukim are from *The JPS Tanakh* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2023), accessed via Sefaria.

²⁵ Psalms 71:19.

Your righteousness is eternal; Your teaching is true.²⁶

While Nusach Edot HaMizrach and Nusach Sefard choose to say the three verses in the order in which they appear in Tanach, the Ashkenazim say them in the reverse order. This might be to end with God's name or to say the verses in ascending order of holiness based on where God's name is mentioned. This phenomenon of Sepharadim ordering verses and chapters based on the order in which they appear while Ashkenazim order them in a thematic way can also be seen in Pesukei De'Zimra Shabbat mornings.²⁷

A more conspicuous difference between nusachim is their ordering of Baruch She'Amar and Hodu. While Nusach Ashkenaz puts Baruch She'Amar before Hodu, Edot HaMizrach and Nusach Sefard place it after. The choice of placement reflects the different ways the nusachim view the prayer. Hodu has been said since the time of the Savora'im, in the 6th Century CE. It is from Divrei HaYamim,²⁸ and is the song that King David sang when the aron was returned from the Pelishtim.²⁹ It was later sung in the Beit HaMikdash during the service of the korbanot tamid, part in the morning and part in the afternoon. The different nusachim reflect different aspects of the song's history. Nusach Ashkenaz views Hodu as a song of praise, and thus places it after Baruch She'Amar in Pesukei De'Zimra, a section of prayer filled with praise of God. Rather than focusing on its content, Nusach Sefard and Edot HaMizrach emphasize the role that the chapter played in the Beit

²⁶ Psalms 119:142.

²⁷ Hayyim Angel, "A Study of Sephardic and Ashkenazic Liturgy," Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals (accessed May 16, 2026) https://www.jewishideas.org/article/study-sephardic-and-ashkenazic-liturgy-rabbi-hayyim-angel#_ednref10.

²⁸ Divrei HaYamim I 16:8-36.

²⁹ This story can be found in Divrei HaYamim I chapters 15-16, where the song is written, and also in Shmuel II chapter 6.

HaMikdash. In the Temple, Hodu was recited while bringing the korbanot tamid, so they place Hodu immediately after the korbanot section, before Baruch She'amar. Both choices make sense, each reflecting a different aspect of the passage.³⁰

Another difference between these nusachim that I would like to discuss is the opening of the second bracha of Kriat Shema – Ahavah Rabbah or Ahavat Olam. Nusach Ashkenaz places the former at Shacharit and the latter at Arvit, while Edot HaMizrach always has Ahavat Olam, and never Ahavah Rabbah, and Nusach Sefard sometimes follows Nusach Ashkenaz and sometimes Edot HaMizrach.³¹ The different nusachim express different sides of the machloket in the Gemara in Masechet Brachot 11b:

ואידך מאי היא אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל אהבה רבה וכן אורי ליה רבי אלעזר לר' פדת בריה אהבה רבה תניא נמי הכי אין אומרים אהבת עולם אלא אהבה רבה ורבנן אמרי אהבת עולם וכן הוא אומר ואהבת עולם אהבתך על כן משכתיך חסד

Which is the other bracha [said before the morning Shema]? Rav Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel: 'With abounding love [Ahava Rabbah]'. And Rabbi Elazar also instructed his son, Rabbi Pedas to say: 'With abounding love'. It has also been taught in a baraisa: We do not say, 'With everlasting love', but 'With abounding love'. The Rabbis, however, say: 'With everlasting love [Ahavat Olam]' is said; and so it is also said, 'I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with affection I have drawn you.' [Jer. 31,3]³²

The sugya is discussing the second brachah before Shema. The blessing is about the love between the Jewish people and Hashem,

³⁰ Eliezer Melamed, "What Are Pesukei DeZimrah?" *Peninei Halakha: Prayer*, trans. Moshe Rapps, Peninei Halakha (accessed May 16, 2026) [https://ph.yhb.org.il/en/02-14-02/#:~:text=During%20the%20era%20of%20the,offering%20\(Eshkol%2C%20Kol%20bo\)](https://ph.yhb.org.il/en/02-14-02/#:~:text=During%20the%20era%20of%20the,offering%20(Eshkol%2C%20Kol%20bo).).

³¹ As mentioned earlier, Nusach Sefard has more variety within the nusach than others do, and different siddurim of the nusach can look different.

³² Translation from Mercava

and there is an argument about how it should begin. Rav Yehuda, Shmuel, Rabbi Elazar, and Rabbi Pedat open this bracha with the words Ahavah Rabbah, translated as “with great love,” while the majority of the Rabbis open the bracha with the words Ahavat Olam, translated as “with everlasting love.” This machloket is reflected in the liturgical choices made by the different nusachim still used today. Nusach Edot HaMizrach definitively sides with the majority position of the rabbis, and thus exclusively uses their formulation of Ahavat Olam. Nusach Ashkenaz compromises, and uses one formulation in the morning (Ahava Rabbah), and the other at night (Ahavat Olam). Nusach Sefard has the most variability, using either, based on custom.

Conclusion

Despite the differences between them, all the nusachim of today come from the same basic sources, making the words of the nusachim much more similar than they are different. For example, all nusachim include Shema with the same number of brachot, brachot of the Amidah with the same topics, and Pesukei De’Zimra. However, the nusachim often seem less similar than they actually are due to the distinct tunes used by the different communities.

Rav Eliezer Melamed writes in his work, *Peninei Halachah*, that one is supposed to pray in their family’s nusach because no nusach is preferable to another.³³ In fact, the Chatam Sofer says that all nusachim are equal.³⁴ Even if one nusach is found to be more precise than the others, individuals should continue to use their own, as each tradition possesses its own unique advantages. Establishing a

³³ Eliezer Melamed, “01 – The Differences in Nusach,” in *Peninei Halakha: Prayer, 06 – Nusach: Wording of Prayer*, trans. Moshe Rapps, *Peninei Halakha* (accessed May 16, 2026) <https://ph.yhb.org.il/en/category/tefila/06-nusach-wording-of-prayer/#halacha1>.

³⁴ Responsa Chatam Sofer, Orach Chayim 15:20.

single, universal nusach would require a Sanhedrin; should that occur, the court would likely integrate the most valuable aspects of all the various nusachim. Even under a universal framework, communities would undoubtedly retain the right to utilize their own tunes or make minor additions to their prayers.³⁵

The general similarity of Jewish prayer between communities means that any Jew can walk into any synagogue and feel somewhat familiar with whatever prayer book they pick up. The general prayer structure, and the messages and ideas of the prayers are the same across all the nusachim. Although each community developed their own valuable and beautiful customs and tunes during the many years of exile and isolation, Am Yisrael remains deeply united through prayer and connection with Hashem.

³⁵ Eliezer Melamed, *Peninei Halakha: Prayer*, "The Differences in Nusach."

Not So Peshat: How an Age-Old Word Changed, Then Changed Again

Ayelet Solomon

“If we take a closer look at the peshat...” is a phrase heard often in batei midrash, Tanach classrooms, and parashah shiurim. However, in these spaces, the meaning of “peshat” is often assumed but not articulated. Certainly, its etymology is rarely discussed. In fact, although the interpretive method that it now symbolizes has likely existed in some way for a millenia or two, the word “peshat” itself has not always represented the same meaning it does today.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the developing meaning of peshat, and how — at least for a time during the era of the Rishonim¹ — it intertwined with a new commentary discipline. We will see peshat go from a Biblical Hebrew root, to an expression of an abstract exegetical approach, to a precise formula for an interpretative movement — one which fundamentally transformed how we approach parshanut.² Knowing peshat’s full range of meaning empowers one to study Torah with more intention and understanding.

¹ The Rishonim era comprised Jewish commentators who lived from the eleventh to fifteenth centuries.

² Parshanut is the interpretation of Torah.

Definitions and Non-Definitions of Peshat

While the root פ.ש.ט. exists in Biblical Hebrew, it most often means to remove clothing. We can see a clear example of this in the Yosef story:

וַיְהִי כִּאֲשֶׁר בָּא יוֹסֵף אֶל אָחָיו וַיַּפְשִׁיטוּ אֶת יוֹסֵף אֶת כְּתֹנֶתוֹ אֶת כְּתֹנֶת הַפָּסִים
אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו.

When Yosef came to his brothers, they **stripped** Yosef of his tunic, the long sleeved tunic that was upon him.³

Additionally, פ.ש.ט. is used in Torah to describe skinning an animal for a burnt offering,⁴ while in Nevi'im and later texts, it evolves into a verb meaning to raid.⁵

Sometime between the end of Tanach and the periods in which the Mishnah and Gemara were compiled, the meaning of peshat underwent a subtle, yet mystifying, change. Chazal⁶ applied the verb to Biblical exegesis, but did not explain what it meant in this new context. The rabbis' preferred technique when interpreting pesukim (whether for legal or homiletical purposes) was derash. Yehuda Brandes defines derash as a kind of creative reading, an attempt to "infuse the text with additional meanings." It is founded upon the assumption that "the Torah was given for this very purpose – so that its students will reveal the various possible perspectives within it, and even read external insights and ideas into its verses."⁷

³ Bereishit 37:23. All translations credited to Alhatorah.org unless otherwise stated.

⁴ For example, in Vayikra 1:6.

⁵ As early as Shoftim 9:33.

⁶ More specifically the Tannaim and Amoraim, the rabbis who lived and taught between approximately the first and sixth centuries CE.

⁷ Yehuda Brandes, "The Sages as Bible Critics," *The Believer and the Modern Study of the Bible* (Academic Studies Press, 2019), pg. 211.

While Chazal exhibited a strong grasp of derash, nowhere in the Talmud do we find an explicit definition of peshat. According to Sarah Kamin, Chazal thought it meant something akin to “the text itself,”⁸ an expression they used to indicate the most faithful way by which one could understand a pasuk.⁹ However, the rabbis did not seem to mind if this was achieved through a literal, contextual interpretation, or a midrashic one.

Mostly, peshat makes its appearance in this era within limited phrases: either the Hebrew “peshuto shel mikra” (פשוטו של מקרא), or the Aramaic “pashtei de’kra” (פשטיה דקרא). It is unclear exactly which method of exegesis these phrases indicated. For example, in Ketubot 111b,¹⁰ when the Gemara asks for the “meaning of the text itself” (pashtei de’kra), Rav Dimi’s answer is undeniably midrashic. In another case in Shabbat 63a, the rabbis engage in a curious discussion of the “peshat” of a pasuk:

אמר ליה אבבי רב דימי... מאי טעמא דרבי אליעזר דאמר תכשיטין הן לו? דכתיב: “תגור חרבך על ירך גבור הודך והדרך”. אמר ליה רב כהנא למר בר רב הונא: האי בדברי תורה כתיב! אמר ליה: אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו. אמר רב כהנא: כד הוינא בר תמני סרי שנין והוה גמירנא ליה לכוליה תלמודא, ולא הוה ידענא דאין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו עד השתא.

Abaye said to Rav Dimi...: What is the reason for the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer who said: These weapons are ornaments for him? As it is written: “Gird your sword upon your thigh, mighty one, your glory and your splendor.”¹¹ Rav Kahana said to Mar, son of Rav Huna: This verse is written in reference to matters of Torah (and should be interpreted as a metaphor). He said to him: A

⁸ Sarah Kamin, *Rashi’s Exegetical Categorization in Respect to the Distinction Between Peshat and Derash* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 1986), pg. 27–31. Sarah Kamin (1938–1989) was a famous scholar of Rashi and senior lecturer of the Bible Department at Hebrew University. She presented definitions of peshat from its many different eras, which are generally the most agreed upon by modern scholars. Her work has greatly influenced this paper.

⁹ Brandes, “The Sages as Bible Critics,” pg. 211.

¹⁰ The discussion is about the meaning of Bereishit 49:12.

¹¹ Psalms 45:4.

verse does not depart from its literal meaning (although there may be additional homiletical interpretations). Rav Kahana said: When I was eighteen years old, I had already learned the entire Talmud, and yet I did not know that a verse does not depart from its literal meaning until now.

Derash was the tool that best served Chazal's goal of teaching moral lessons from the Torah; they had no need to formulate another mode. The rabbis therefore did not routinely categorize how they derived God's word—at least not as neatly as one might expect today. While Chazal were sometimes interested in the literal meaning of Tanach apart from creative takeaways, and while they consistently employed certain expressions including "peshat," they would not be the ones to connect the two. Such a change would come centuries later, when a new way of understanding Tanach emerged at the forefront of Jewish scholarship.

The "OG" Pashtanim of Medieval Northern France

Between the time of the Talmud and the medieval period, the cutting edge of Jewish thought migrated from Israel to Babylonia to, eventually, Western Europe. This was the era that would see the birth of perhaps the most famous parshan and the flowering of a new school of interpretation. Before we delve into the effects of either, it is essential to first explore what Charlemagne, Christian Bible scholars, and a reading revolution have to do with the origins of both.

Christian exegetes had been contributing to a gloss commentary genre to varying extents since antiquity. This was opposed to the system exemplified by Chazal, in which rabbis orally passed down their interpretations and then compiled their discussions into literature on a more topical basis, meaning they did not address the text in any consistent pattern. Some writings of Chazal did follow

Tanach in a gloss fashion, pairing a pasuk with an explanation, and, periodically, a lesson, but works such as the Midreshei Halachah and Midreshei Aggadah were exceptions and not at all systematic. Commentary was rarely the star of the show.¹² Nevertheless, both cultures' approach to, and characterization of, exegesis would be revolutionized in similar ways by the Frankish king Charlemagne.¹³

Having conquered most of Europe by the turn of the ninth century, Charlemagne planned to strengthen religious involvement and establish a literate caste (to administrate his government) in the name of imperial development. *The Epistle on the Cultivating of Letters*, the legislature outlining these reforms, proclaimed that the foundation of a good Christian kingdom was the study of literature, or "letters."¹⁴ In the resulting schools established by the Carolingian administration, a curriculum was employed that consisted of Christian liturgy, Greco-Roman literature, and the liberal arts discipline of *trivium*: grammar, rhetoric, and logic.¹⁵

The efforts of one politically savvy ruler eventually resulted in something of a literary renaissance across Europe. Not all scholars agree on the label, but at least something can be said for the fact that there remains at least four times the amount of books written during this period than before.¹⁶ Particularly what this renaissance meant

¹² Robert Harris "On the Origins of Peshat Commentary." *TheTorah.Com*, 06.11. 2021, www.thetorah.com/article/on-the-origins-of-peshat-commentary.

¹³ Charlemagne (748-814 CE) ruled Western Europe as a united empire for the first time since the Western Roman Empire fell, and is often titled "The Father of Europe."

¹⁴ Originally *Epistola de Litteris Colendisi*, cited in Harris, "Origins of Peshat Commentary."

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Robert Harris, "From פשוטו של מקרא to פשטיה דקרא: The Origins of Peshat Commentary in Eleventh and Twelfth Century Rabbinic Exegesis," *Reading: Performance and Materiality in Hebrew and Aramaic Traditions* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2025), pg. 454.

for Christian scholars was a resurgence of the *ad litteram*, or to the letter, technique. While until then Christians upheld allegorical interpretation, the monks of the Abbey of St. Vincent in the twelfth century began to study the Bible *ad litteram* as well as by the customary approaches. They espoused the importance of using multiple techniques in order to gain a whole understanding of Scripture.¹⁷

How did one group's revelations spread to the other over such a wide cultural gap? Nowadays one tends to view the two populations as having been in conflict over the entire medieval period, but at least earlier on, Jews and Christians interacted often in a number of common settings. This was mostly because they were connected socio-economically as industry developed in the eleventh century. From the responsa of Gaonic rabbis, we know of Jews and Christians in tenth-century Persia who regularly employed each other, and much of the same in early twelfth-century France and Germany from *Machzor Vitry*. Though Jews did often have to defend their beliefs against Christian persecution, "close and cordial relations" existed between the two populations until the mid-twelfth century.¹⁸ It is reasonable to assume that while the European rabbis weren't necessarily studying under Christian masters of rhetoric,¹⁹ they were as likely to be inspired by these scholars as by their Christian neighbors. Even then, there was knowledge to be gained simply from living within the zeitgeist of an increasingly literate Europe.

There are differing opinions as to what degree Christian exegesis is to thank for the innovations we will soon see in the Jewish

¹⁷ Avigail Rock, *Great Biblical Commentators* (Maggid 2023), pg. 153.

¹⁸ Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (Atheneum, 1896/1975), pg. 424.

¹⁹ And if they were, there are literally no records of such a thing, at least from the rabbis. See Harris, "Origins of Peshat Commentary."

approach. That is to say, there is debate as to whether those innovations began internally or externally. Robert Harris is of the opinion that Jews learned directly from Christians,²⁰ while Michael Segal thinks they took inspiration from their own techniques for studying Talmud. Since it was sensible to learn the most efficient meaning of the Talmud in order to make halachic rulings, and since it was natural to see Tanach as the other side of the same coin, one might apply the methods from one to the other.²¹ Ora Limor posits more of a mix of the two theories: Christianity supplied the inspiration, but the tools used were of Jewish invention.²²

The Innovations of Rashi

Whether or not one considers Rabbeinu Shlomo Yitzchaki, better known as Rashi, as the greatest Jewish commentator, he was unequivocally the most instrumental in creating the commentary form we are most familiar with today.²³ Because he only lived until the early twelfth century,²⁴ Rashi did not experience the peak of medieval exegesis, but he certainly saw the fruits of Charlemagne's reforms. At age 18, he came to study at Rabbeinu Gershom's yeshiva in Mainz, Germany, and later the yeshiva of Worms. Rashi mastered a wide variety of Jewish literature and became proficient in the whole of Tanach and Talmud.²⁵ When Rashi was 30, he returned to

²⁰ Harris, "From פשטיה דקרא to פשוטו של מקרא," pg. 459.

²¹ Michael Segal, *Parshanut Ha-Mikra*, pg. 61-62. Segal also points out that Rashi was the first pashtan of both Tanach and Talmud.

²² Ora Limor, "Parshanut Ha-Mikra Ba-Mei'a Ha-12," *Bein Yehudim Le-Notzerim* (Open University: Tel-Aviv, 1993), vol. IV pg. 61.

²³ Rock, *Great Biblical Commentators*, pg. 34-38.

²⁴ From 1040-1105, to be exact.

²⁵ Though Rabbeinu Gershom was not alive at the time Rashi studied in his yeshiva, Rashi benefitted from his pedagogy. Namely, Rabbeinu Gershom believed that the best way to understand Talmud was to have mastered Tanach beforehand. He also took pains to establish a standardized version of the Talmud, upon which his students would then write commentary.

his hometown of Troyes, France, set up his own school, and began writing commentary.

Rashi's commentaries occupy a special pedestal in Jewish literature. His work on Torah was included in the first printed Hebrew book in 1469.²⁶ Hundreds of manuscripts of his commentaries remain due to the simple fact that Rashi became the most popular parshan among the entire Jewish community.²⁷ What made Rashi's works so enticing?

Rashi could be credited with changing how commentary interacted with text. The commentary which he wrote on Tanach is the earliest evidenced one that is ordered verse-by-verse. It is a direct companion to the Biblical text, rather than appearing in an independent volume to be learned in a separate place. What truly made Rashi such a gamechanger is that, while neither he nor Chazal supplied an exhaustive definition, Rashi, yet again, evolved the meaning of "peshat."

A considerable inspiration for Rashi's work is Menachem ben Saruk's *Machberet*, a lexicon of Hebrew grammar written in tenth-century southern Spain. Rashi probably adopted Menachem's idea of context-based interpretation, which is modeled in his phrase פתרונו לפי ענינו, or "its explanation follows its context."²⁸ In the end, Rashi took the Hebraized phrase "peshuto shel mikra" from the Talmud's rare usage to personify his approach to Biblical exegesis. However, to Rashi it did not indicate "the text itself" (as it would have to Chazal), but rather an interpretation that aligned with both

²⁶ Rock, *Great Biblical Commentators*, pg. 34.

²⁷ There are in fact many versions of Rashi's commentaries among these manuscripts, which has created some confusion among Rashi scholars. See *ibid.*, pg. 38-39.

²⁸ Harris, "From פשוטו של מקרא to פשטיה דקרא," pg. 444-445.

its content and context. The most notable instance of his new use of the expression can be found in his explanation of Bereishit 3:8:²⁹

יש מדרשי אגדה רבים וכבר סדרים רבותינו על מכוונם ב"ר ובשאר מדרשות;
ואני לא באתי אלא לפשוט של מקרא ולאגדה המישבת דברי המקרא דבר
דבור על אפניו:

There are many midrashic explanations, and our Rabbis have arranged them in their appropriate places in Bereishit Rabbah and in other midrashim. I, however, am only concerned with the simple meaning of Scripture and with the aggadah that explains the words of Scripture and its simple meaning and understanding, expressed in its proper context.

In Rashi's eyes, the "simple meaning" was the one that made the most sense when considering both the pasuk being studied and the text surrounding it: in other words, the *straightforward* meaning, whether gleaned from linguistic or textual clues, or Chazal's teachings. This is the reason why, though Rashi is remembered as the ultimate parshan, his commentary is in fact about three-quarters derash — because one did not need to cut out midrash entirely to interpret like Rashi.³⁰ Instead, Rashi only used midrashim he considered "harmonious" with the linguistic and thematic content of the pasuk.³¹ In doing so, Rashi distinguished midrashim that aligned with his approach and midrashim that did not.

Rashi's true innovation was his use of "peshuto shel mikra" to signal a form of straightforward, or plain-sense, exegesis, which had before now only existed anonymously within the traditional approaches. By giving the style a name, Rashi gave it individuality,

²⁹ While many Sephardi commentators wrote clear introductions to their works, when it comes to Ashkenazi parshanim, we must look at statements which have been made in more arbitrary places within their writings in order to understand their approaches.

³⁰ Harris, "From פשוטו של מקרא to פשטיה דקרא," pg. 452.

³¹ Rock, *Great Biblical Commentators*, pg. 41.

and its own place in the mind of a Torah student. But I will leave it to Rav Amnon Bazak to describe it best:

Rashi lays the foundations for the simultaneous parallel existence of different levels in Biblical exegesis, and the legitimacy of independent exegesis on the level of peshat. His basic assumption is the polysemous nature of the text: i.e., it contains multiple meanings accessible through different levels and modes of interpretation, without one level cancelling out the significance of another. For this reason, the level of peshat has value and significance in its own right.³²

Expansions on Rashi's Methodology Among Contemporaries and Students

Within a generation, Rashi's so-called movement had progressed by leaps and bounds with the help of followers such as Rabbi Yoseph Kara, Rashbam, and Rabbi Yosef Bechor Shor. These scholars showed an awareness of literary structures within Tanach and the grammatical or rhetorical meaning of its words. All of them would use Rashi's exegetical model as a jumping-off-point to develop their own interpretation of peshat.

The first such rabbi we will examine is R. Yosef Kara, also known as Mahari Kara.³³ R. Kara was a close student of Rashi and transcribed many of his commentaries. What survives of R. Kara's own commentary mostly concerns Nevi'im and Ketuvim but is more than enough to enable us to grasp his approach to Tanach in general. R. Kara was a trailblazing commentator for the fact that he

³² Amnon Bazak, *Fundamental Issues in the Study of Tanach Lesson 42: "Peshat" and "Derash"* (2), The Israel Koschitzky Yeshivat Har Etzion Virtual Beit Midrash (01.12.2014), <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/studies-tanakh/core-studies-tanakh/peshat-and-derash-2>.

³³ R. Kara lived from 1060 to 1130 in Rashi's city of Troyes (See Rock, *Great Biblical Commentators*, pg. 88-89).

was the first (in Ashkenaz) to write explicit exegetical rules, which could explain the structure of the text anywhere in Tanach.³⁴

R. Kara followed Rashi's aspiration to write a peshat commentary to a harsher degree than Rashi himself. To that end, R. Kara exclusively employed peshat readings and seemed to reject using derash. He believed that the Torah can be entirely explained through itself, needing no outside illumination. Therefore, he claimed, even Chazal must have understood peshat to be the essence of the Torah, while derash was only valuable for homiletical purposes.³⁵ R. Kara's claim in his commentary on Shmuel I 1:17 illustrates how critical he was of those who learned through derash:

אבל כל מי שאינו יודע פשוטו של מקרא ונוטה לו אחר מדרשו של דבר דומה
לזה ששטפתהו שבולת הנהר ומעמקי מים מציפין ואוחז כל אשר יעלה בידו
להינצל

However, anyone who does not know the simple meaning of the verse and instead inclines after the midrashic interpretation of the matter is similar to one swept away by the surging river, whom the depths of the ocean flood — he grabs anything which may come to hand in order to save himself!³⁶

Rather, in R. Kara's eyes, if one were to simply reach for the peshat reading of a pasuk, they could understand the truth of God's word. R. Kara, like Rashi, did not just define his interpretive model — he defined what his commentary was *not*. In doing so, he further solidified his teacher's approach and differentiated it from what had come before.³⁷

³⁴ An example of this is R. Kara's belief that superfluous narrative in the text serves to preface later events, such as the introduction of Doeg (servant of Shaul) in the middle of Shaul's chase of David in Shmuel I 21:2-10. See Rock, *Great Biblical Commentators*, pg. 95-98.

³⁵ Ibid., pg. 90-91.

³⁶ Translation from *ibid.*, pg. 91-92.

³⁷ From the difference between the hundreds of remaining manuscripts of Rashi's works versus the single measly manuscript that is attributed to Mahari Kara, Rock

Another commentator who took the same lessons from Rashi was his grandson Rashbam.³⁸ Rashbam apparently wrote commentary on all of Tanach, but unfortunately parts of it went the way of R. Kara's work. (Like his grandfather, Rashbam also wrote Talmudic commentary.) Rashbam was known to debate contemporary Christian scholars and also understood Latin. What is interesting about Rashbam's ideology is that he understood peshat to mean not only a contextual explanation, but one that also considers realistic convention, or "common sense."³⁹

Though a well-known pashtan, Rashbam did not turn from the idea of derash. Far from it — Rashbam regarded Chazal's traditions highly, and viewed them as not just accurate, but as more essential to learning Torah than peshat:

אף כי עיקרה של תורה באת ללמדנו ולהודיענו ברמיזת הפשט וההגדות וההלכות והדינים... והראשונים מתוך חסידותם נתעסקו לנטות אחרי הדרשות שהן עיקר, ומתוך כך לא הורגלו בעומק פשוטו של מקרא.

Although it is still true that in essence the Torah's purpose is to teach us and relate to us teachings, rules of conduct and laws which we derive from hints [hidden] in the plain meaning of Scripture... *Due to their piety, the earliest scholars tended to devote their time to midrashic explanations, which are the essence of Torah; as a result they never became attuned to the profundities of the plain meaning of Scripture.*⁴⁰

Rashbam only combated commentaries that were ostensibly peshat-based but were actually at least partially midrashic, such as Rashi's.

infers that R. Kara's commentaries may not have been popular among his contemporaries.

³⁸ R. Shmuel ben Meir lived from 1080 until 1160 in Ramerupt, France. See *ibid.*, pg. 101-132.

³⁹ Rock, *Great Biblical Commentators*, pg. 107.

⁴⁰ Rashbam on Bereishit 37:2.

At the same time, Chazal themselves, in saying that “a verse does not depart from its literal meaning,”⁴¹ acknowledged peshat as true and valid. Not only that, but peshat must therefore be considered distinct from Chazal’s conventional, midrashic approach: two exegetical methods able to be in conversation with each other, not conflict.⁴²

The French school of peshat, as it has come to be known, only lasted around a century. Jewish persecution in France rose through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries until the Jews were expelled in 1306.⁴³ While the continuation of this school was cut short, the legacy of Rashi and his students would have far-reaching effects both within their time and long after.

A Quick Look Beyond Ashkenaz⁴⁴

While we are primarily focused on the innovations made in peshat exegesis in medieval France, it would be regrettable not to mention parallel or even earlier developments that took place among Sephardi scholars.

In the early 8th century, southern Spain came under Muslim rule; the result was a period of stability typically called the Golden Age, which lasted until the mid-twelfth century. Spanish-Jewish scholars, who were generally more enfranchised than their French counterparts, learned Greek-inspired Arabic philosophy, philology,

⁴¹ See discussion of Shabbat 63a.

⁴² Rock, *Great Biblical Commentators*, pgs. 106-107.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pg. 154.

⁴⁴ For the purposes of this paper, I am including both France and Germany under the label of Ashkenaz, even though only Germany was referred to as such during this time period.

and sciences. Besides parshanut, they also engaged in poetry, halachah, philosophy, kabbalah, and Hebrew grammar.⁴⁵

The other development of this time that influenced Biblical commentary was actually the beginning of the Halachic code genre. In pure Halachic literature, one could engage with the legal bottom line without necessarily understanding the entire discussion that it resulted from. This uncoupling between Talmudic exegesis and halachic psak allowed students to turn more attention towards studying Tanach. Truly, the rabbis of this era showed an impressive knowledge of textual minutiae and were able to integrate Biblical language into their commentaries.⁴⁶

Exegetical practice among the Rishonim of southern Spain developed along a different path than those of France. The Sephardi rabbis took more direct inspiration from the Muslim culture that suffused their lives, which can be seen in the structures of their poetry and the linguistic leanings of their commentaries. Still, there is one notable commentator who learned in the Spanish style yet was also exposed to the French school of peshat, whose work melds both influences and in turn influenced both cultures: Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra, the most famous of the Spanish exegetes.⁴⁷

Ibn Ezra began his career in Muslim Spain, having been educated in disciplines ranging from medicine to poetry to astronomy. Until 1140, when the coming of the extremist Almohads spelled the end of the Golden Age for Spanish Jews, he mostly wrote secular poetry. Afterwards, he wandered through Europe, writing most of his books in that time; in 1152 he came to France and caught the eye of

⁴⁵ This is the period that enjoyed the work of Menachem ben Saruk, who so inspired Rashi. Other leaders of the new field of Hebrew grammar included Dunash ben Labrat and Rabbi Yonah ibn Janach.

⁴⁶ Rock, *Great Biblical Commentators*, pg. 155-157.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 159-160. Ibn Ezra lived 1089-1164.

Rashbam and the great Tosafist Rabbeinu Tam. Ibn Ezra himself was not very pleased with the wisdom of Ashkenaz. He criticized Ashkenazi Jews' grasp of the Hebrew language and was even less appreciative of what he considered their inferior poetry.⁴⁸ Ibn Ezra, a clever writer, wrote riddles and books of mathematics even throughout his commentating career, and he gave credence to both the logical and the spiritual.

To understand Ibn Ezra's philosophy towards interpretation, it is most helpful to look at his introduction to his commentary on Tanach.⁴⁹ Ibn Ezra details five approaches of parshanut, four of which he rejects: 1) The style of philosophical commentators (such as Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon) whom he exhorts to focus purely on peshat as they promised. 2) Denying Chazal's tradition, which is the approach of the Karaites, and one which Ibn Ezra wholeheartedly opposes. 3) Metaphorizing Torah, which he believes leads to Christian belief. 4) The homiletical "midrash" style of Christian exegetes, which he calls redundant.

The fifth and last approach is Ibn Ezra's own, which he describes as the one that strikes the target's center where all others fall short:

הדרך החמישית, מוסד פירושי עליה אשית, והיא הישרה בעיני, נכח פני ה',
אשר ממנו לבדו אירא, ולא אשא פנים בתורה, ואחפש היטיב דקדוק כל מלה
בכל מאדי, ואחר כן אפרשנה כפי אשר תשיג ידי.

The fifth method is the one upon which I will base my commentary. It appears to me to be correct in the presence of God whom alone I fear. I will not show favoritism to anyone when it comes to interpreting the Torah. I will, to the utmost of

⁴⁸ One may find in Ibn Ezra's comment on Kohelet 5:1 detailed instructions for writing proper poetry. See *ibid.*, pg. 160-166 for more on Ibn Ezra's travels through Europe.

⁴⁹ Titled *Peirush HaKatzar* (*The Short Commentary*). His second work, *Peirush HaAroch* (*The Long Commentary*), which he composed later on during his time in France, only survives in fragments.

my ability, try to understand grammatically every word and then do my best to explain it.⁵⁰

Ibn Ezra refers to his commentary as “The Book of the Straight,” which is “bound by ropes of grammar.” It is not bound to the teachings of Chazal; rather, Ibn Ezra set himself to rely on the grammar of the text to determine its meaning. Moreover, he highly disapproved of Rashi for thinking himself a *pashtan* yet using *derash* far more often.⁵¹ Considering his opinion of Rashi, it is surprising that Ibn Ezra was so open to the quintessential users of *derash* — Chazal. It may be even more surprising to learn that the following statement, among Ibn Ezra’s most famous, can be found in the very same essay in which he explains the superiority of his plain-sense interpretation:

ובעבור הדרש דרך הפשט איננה סרה, כי שבעים פנים לתורה.

No harm was done by this [midrashic interpretation] because the literal meaning of a verse is never negated by midrashic interpretations for there are 70 faces to the Torah.⁵²

Ibn Ezra was not against *derash* in the slightest, but only against those who were not clear about which method they were using. Like Rashbam, he saw *derash* as a distinct approach that should not be treated as interchangeable with *peshat*. Yet, he believed in the value of both when used in balance with each other. To Ibn Ezra, plurality was not just a reality, but the objective.

Peshat Through the Ages

We have followed “*peshat*” as it evolved from a Biblical Hebrew verb, to a noun in rabbinic literature, to an adjective for the methods of certain Rishonim, becoming more defined with each step.

⁵⁰ Ibn Ezra on Bereishit, Introduction.

⁵¹ He wrote as much in his book of grammar, *Safah Berurah*.

⁵² Ibid.

Interestingly, today, the meaning of peshat varies between Biblical scholars as much as it did a thousand years ago. Though the plain-sense exegesis which so characterized the Rishonim period went into decline over several centuries, in the mid-twentieth century, pashtanut experienced yet another renaissance and evolution. This manifested as gradual shifts away from linguistic and historical interpretation (the higher criticism tools favored by the secular academic world), and towards literary interpretation pioneered by Modern Orthodox thinkers.

Figures such as Nechama Leibowitz⁵³ and Rav Yoel Bin Nun⁵⁴ were at the forefront of the movement. Moreover, publications ranging from the *Da'at Mikra* volumes of Tanach⁵⁵ to Rav Menachem Leibtag's online parashat ha-shavua articles⁵⁶ are dedicated to excavating what the text itself means through careful attention to its language, its context, parallels to other Biblical narratives, and how it fits within larger themes that span Tanach. These scholars do look broader than simply the literal meaning of the word in front of them, based on its grammar and etymology, yet they remain committed to an interpretation that emerges from the text itself.

In contrast, Sarah Kamin supplies a modern definition of peshat, one that is perhaps most relevant to the academic world:

⁵³ Leibowitz's focus was more on parshanut than peshat. Within that realm, she brought students' attentions to what a commentary said to how the commentator was reading the text. See Yaakov Beasley, "Review Essay: Return of the Pashtanim," *Tradition*, Spring 2009 Issue 42.1 (Rabbinical Council of America, 2009), pg. 69.

⁵⁴ He urged his students to begin their study of Tanach with a plain volume rather than one covered in additional sources. See Yaakov Beasley, Asher Y. Manning, "Inspired by a True Story – The Exegetical Approach of Rav Yoel Bin-Nun," *Migadim* Number 63 (Herzog College Press – Tevunot, 2024), pg. 14.

⁵⁵ Published by Mossad Harav Kook from 1971-2003.

⁵⁶ Published on The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash of Yeshivat Har Etzion since the 2000s.

An interpretation according to peshat is an interpretation that considers all of the linguistic foundations in its literary composition, and assigns to each of them an understanding within a complete reading.⁵⁷

By Kamin's definition, a peshat reading is not necessarily the most literal one, but one that is most realistic within its original context.⁵⁸ Still, the presentation of peshat as purely linguistic, as solely dependent upon what exists on the page, does not fully reflect its immense history. Rashi – or Chazal, for that matter – might not have agreed with this definition, and neither might some of the modern-day literary pashtanim.

It should be noticeable that an overwhelming majority of the commentators I have mentioned in the whole of this paper did not believe one should exclusively use peshat, especially at the expense of the authority of Chazal. In that vein, Rabbanit Avigail Rock relates the following on the topic of Biblical translation, which I think is applicable to our own discussion on interpretation:

A precisely literal translation of the text cannot encompass the conceptual truth of scripture, and is likely to lose its message. Conversely, a rendering of the message without the literal translation may succeed in transmitting the idea hidden in the verses, but ignores the fact that this is a sacred text in which every word carries meaning."⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Sarah Kamin, *Rashi's Exegetical Categorization in Respect to the Distinction Between Peshat and Derash* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 1986), pg. 14. Translated and edited by Robert Harris.

⁵⁸ An alternate formulation: "Peshat assumes that 'the Torah speaks in the language of human beings,' and that it should be understood in the same manner in which human speech is usually understood – i.e., in accordance with the rules of grammar and syntax, with consideration for textual context, and within the framework of that which human rational thought deems plausible, of social convention, and of the laws of nature." See Bazak, "Peshat" and "Derash" (2).

⁵⁹ Rock, *Great Biblical Commentators*, pg. 3.

Torah study is incomplete without peshat, and yet peshat is incomplete without the millenia of rabbinic tradition that accompanies Torah study. Rashi and his contemporaries did not “invent” the discipline of peshat as the end-all-be-all of Biblical exegesis, but rather to be another tool to use in the multifaceted and never-ending study of the Torah.

Matmidot Monday Nights

Matmidot Scholars have the unique privilege of spending many Monday nights meeting and learning with educators, visionaries, activists, journalists, scholars, and leaders who have made a significant impact on Am Yisrael. Sitting around their dining room tables and perched on their living room couches, we had the extraordinary opportunity to hear about their life journeys, schmooze with them, soak up their Torah, and pose the pressing questions on our minds. The pictures on the opposite page offer a glimpse into some of these remarkable sessions.

Participants in the 5786 Monday night Matmidot sessions included:

Yardena Franklin

Riverdale, NY

Lia Goldberger

New York, NY

Tzipora Gordon

Teaneck, NJ

Hinda Gross

Phoenix, AZ

Livi Kobrin

Riverdale, NY

Aliza Lesser

Washington, DC

Elana Max

Plainview, NY

Adiel Ramirez

Teaneck, NJ

Lilah Rosenberg

Teaneck, NJ

Barbara Sasson

New York, NY

Ayelet Solomon

Silver Spring, MD

Tali Weiss

Skokie, IL