Three Kings and the Problem of Evil

Reading the Talmud as Philosophy

by

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Preface: My Path into the Talmud

The bulk of this volume consists of readings of two sections of the Babylonian Talmud (the Bavli): the section on the “Three Kings” (who are excluded from the world to come), beginning at Sanhedrin 101b, and the section containing the “Evil Inclination” parable, beginning at Yoma 69a. In addition there are short pieces dealing with the “Ten Tribes” debate (Sanhedrin 110b), the discussion of the two Hebrew alphabets (Sanhedrin 21b), the interpretation of dreams (Berachoth 55a), the four men who “entered paradise” (Chagigah 15b), and the instruction to “give thanks for evil” (Berachoth 60b).

The point of view of these readings is that of a sympathetic outsider. It was my hope as I began this project that my naivete as a student of Judaism might have its own virtue, in that I could regard the texts with fresh eyes, and might see some things that piety and respect for authority tend to render invisible. Several years later, I feel as if I have uncovered treasures beyond my wildest expectations; but I don’t know who else might be in a position to see or value them as I do. Wittgenstein said that a piece of philosophy is only of use to someone if she encounters it under the right circumstances, and at the right point in her life. I have found the Talmud to be full of philosophy. It is perhaps appropriate for me to begin by sketching my own path to it.

I came to the Talmud late in life.

In my youth I preferred philosophy to religion, and thought that the primacy of philosophy was better represented in Eastern than Western religions. In graduate school my mystical tendencies were counterbalanced by modern critiques of metaphysics, and by insights into the social-historical nature of language and meaning. I came to regard interpretation as more fundamental than description, and narrative rather than propositional discourse as the vehicle of the most comprehensive understanding. When my teacher, O.K. Bouwsma, described the Bible as a narrative in which one finds oneself to be a character, I thought that I had found a modern version of the classical philosophical notion of “thought thinking itself”—an idea of wisdom embedded in history.

In the late 1980’s I began reading the Bible from the perspective of literary critics like Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg, and after awhile this led me to the study of its historical background and composition. I was trying to bring the real historical embedding of wisdom in the Biblical tradition into focus. Eventually I worked my way forward from the era of the Bible into the centuries of its final editing, when the interpretive traditions of the Talmud and New Testament were forming. It was at this point that I happened upon the Talmudic readings of Emmanuel Levinas (some of whose writings on phenomenology I had already read).

Levinas had a way of seeing past the apparent superstitions, ethnocentrisms and literalisms of the text, so as uncover a stratum that was not only psychologically and morally incisive, but also philosophically sophisticated. His method sometimes seemed like a decoding of lost intentions, sometimes like
an imposition of his own philosophy; but I noticed that the degrees of freedom he allowed himself in interpreting the Talmud seemed to mirror those that the rabbis had allowed themselves in interpreting the Biblical texts. Where the Bible exhibited the greatest problems for understanding at the literal level (the same places exploited by modern scholarship to investigate its composition and transmission), the rabbis made bold leaps of metaphor rooted more in poetry and spiritual insight than philology. And where the Talmud seemed the most dated and narrow to modern ears, Levinas often found the most striking contemporary analogies and symbolic possibilities. In both cases, the range and control of interpretive strategies impressed me as exemplifying what modern philosophy calls the “hermeneutic of existence”—the integration of past and future, conformity and individuality, that we practice in order to pursue a meaningful life.

I was surprised, then, when I encountered more conservative readings of the Talmud, and even more surprised to find that they were the norm. Of course the main interest in the Talmud over most of its history has been the halacha (the analysis and extrapolation of the law), which generally contains less ambiguity and multivalence than the aggada (the anecdotes, legends and parables that surround and infiltrate the legal discussions). Although I learned that elaborate methods of Talmudic interpretation had been developed in recent centuries, they seemed to exhaust their ingenuity on the law, rather than treating the text as an ordered sequence of philosophical reflections. When it came to passages whose purpose is not obvious on the surface, many of even the most venerated commentaries seemed to me to turn metaphors and parables into credulous reports, to explain anomalies with circular reasoning, and to avoid opportunities for creative engagement with a very creative text.

And so I was moved to try my hand at a careful and serious reading of a few Talmudic passages. My Jewish education was minimal, my Hebrew weak and my Aramaic nonexistent. But I knew something about philosophy, and suspected that the fundamental philosophical problems would be encountered in any intellectual inquiry of such seriousness and depth.

**Why Pereq Cheleq?**

*All Israel has a share toward the world to come...*  
*But the following have no share toward the world to come ...*  
qol yisrael yesh lahem cheleq l’olam haba...  
w’alo sh’eyn lahem cheleq l’olam haba...  
כל ישראל יש להם חלק לעולם הבא...  
ואלו ש’אין להם חלק לעולם הבא...

Many paths lead to the 11th chapter of the Talmudic tractate Sanhedrin, called *Pereq Cheleq* or the chapter on those who have a “share” (cheleq) in or towards the “world to come”. Sanhedrin deals with the composition and procedures of courts, especially as these procedures are correlated with the most serious types of crimes mentioned in the Torah. After discussing the crimes punishable by each of the four methods of execution (stoning, burning,
decapitation and strangulation), the text shifts, in chapter eleven, to the ultimate punishment: loss of “the world to come.” We can take this expression literally, as representing a place in heaven or the messianic age; or we can take it, in a higher sense, as the spiritual understanding and enjoyment of the divine available to the wise during life. In either case the loss of one’s share in this ultimate measure and justification of life is considered worse than the loss of life itself.

Now of course the carrying-out of this ultimate punishment is beyond the functions of the human court—indeed Sanhedrin chapter ten ended with a transitional reference to punishment “at the hands of heaven.” And yet the rabbis undertook to compile a list, both general and specific, of those who would suffer it—almost as if they were themselves deciding the eternal fates of the defendants from the past, present and future. I have become convinced that we must read these “rulings” at a deeper level, as meditations on the divine attributes of justice and mercy, and as analyses of the necessary and sufficient conditions of wisdom. But I am also convinced that the provocative character of the “judgments” here is intentional. The Talmud makes the competence of the “judges” in these ultimate cases an issue, through a complicated and self-referential series of discussions on scholarship and sin.

On the one hand, the conditions for attainment of the world to come have a tendency to be identified with learning and wisdom itself—making it look like only rabbis and scholars could really be qualified. On the other hand, the discussion portrays many of the Biblical characters condemned by the Mishnah\(^1\) as great Torah-scholars themselves; and it uses them to explore the pitfalls and insufficiencies of human/rabbinical knowledge. For the real issue here turns out to be that of religious authority per se (including the means by which I enforce my own adherence to moral and religious principles), and the avoidance of the natural tendency of authority to corrupt those who exercise it as well as those who desire it.

I am not relying here on the commonplace about political power, but on something much more fundamental: the paradox of wisdom. How is it possible to pursue wisdom successfully, since one must first be wise enough to know how to pursue it—to choose the correct path, or discipline, or … religion (that is, a particular religious community, along with their methods and doctrines)? Those in authority will of course claim to have a divine mandate; but how can we know that they do? Without being wise already, how can we evaluate the evidence offered to us as proof of where wisdom lies? Rabbi Yochanan, in tractate Berachoth, presses home the paradox with his provocative statement that God “gives wisdom only to one who already has wisdom, as is written: *He gives wisdom to the wise, and knowledge to them that know understanding.*”\(^2\) This is the problem that the self-referentiality of the “Three Kings” discussion probes in marvelous detail.

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\(^1\) The *Mishnah* is the Hebrew corpus of “oral law” compiled around 200 AD. The Talmud consists of Aramaic commentaries or *gemara* on the Mishnah, from the 3\(^{rd}\) to 5\(^{th}\) centuries.

\(^2\) Daniel 2:21 The context of this statement is examined in Interlude 1 below.
The Mishnah chapter on which *Pereq Cheleq* is based is, on the surface, simply a list of those denied the world to come: the first part mentions six general types of sin, while the second part names eight groups and seven individuals from the Bible. But the Talmud’s 17-page discussion of this list seems to touch on the most significant features in the divine ground-plan of the world according to Judaism: life after death, the coming of the Messiah, and the ultimate reward and meaning of historical existence.

At the same time it seems, in virtue of its declaration that “All Israel has a share toward the world to come”, to touch on the question of Jewish identity as a matter of faith; for those who contradict the Mishnah’s statements on these fundamental issues, and are therefore said to have no share toward the world to come, must therefore also be excluded from Israel. (Since gentiles can also have a share, this criterion doesn’t tell us who is included, just who is excluded.) Maimonides was therefore moved, in his commentary on the chapter, to list 13 principles that must be believed or affirmed by all Jews, upon pain of exclusion from Israel (and more importantly, the world to come). The most exotic of these principles, and most difficult for the modern mind to accept—such as the resurrection of the dead, or the giving of the Torah in its present form to Moses—he takes directly from *Pereq Cheleq*.

Despite this apparent insistence on faith, Maimonides uses the chapter on the ultimate reward for humans to discuss the spiritual illusion of reward-based thinking. He posits a series of inducements to learning, based on progressively more sophisticated objects of desire (food, clothing, money, power, prestige, and ultimately, immortality); and this series corresponds to the degrees of literalism he finds in the different interpretations of “world to come” and “resurrection”, ranging from notions of eating and sensuous enjoyments in a physical afterlife to the purely spiritual understanding in which the soul partakes of eternity (here and now). Rewards must be promised in order to lead people to the state in which no reward is sought. (A state dominated by gratitude.) And the supernatural—which is an improper conflation of physical and spiritual concepts—must be used to lead people to a purely spiritual understanding.—This is the level of meaning which I have tried to pursue.

My path into *Pereq Cheleq* began with an interest in the elements of Pharisaism or Rabbinic Judaism that seem clearly to conflict with the older Biblical traditions. Such historical discontinuities are pertinent to the narrative embedding of factual and historical propositions in discourse with moral, aesthetic and philosophical intentions. Some of the Rabbinic innovations, like the taboo against pronouncing the divine name represented by the letters YHWH (יהוה), or the embrace of the later Aramaic alphabet and rejection of the original Hebrew, seem mainly to be historical curiosities. Others are more consequential.

Among the more consequential of the later traditions are the belief in an afterlife in which the righteous are rewarded, the idea that the Five Books were

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3 Maimonides Commentary on Sanhedrin, trans. by Fred Rosner (NY 1981)
4 see Prelude 2: Truth, Myth and Writing
dictated to Moses, and the notion that not just practices and moral feelings but also beliefs are determinative of one’s ultimate status with God. Everything I had learned about the Bible told me that these were innovations, and yet the Mishnah here declared that one must not only believe in resurrection (for example), one must believe (against all evidence!) that it is asserted by the Torah. (Likewise one must believe that Scriptural admonitions to praise the name of the Israelite deity really mean using euphemisms like “Lord”.) The Mishnah here seemed to demand a suspension, not only of our knowledge of nature, but also of the logical and interpretive faculties that let us read the text.

This struck me as the ultimate challenge to the idea of the Talmud that I got from Levinas. One might reinterpret all kinds of seemingly mythic and legendary language metaphorically; but what about statements that clearly forbade such interpretation? Levinas had himself confronted the first section of *Pereq Cheleq* in his essay “Contempt for Torah as Idolatry”. He understood the divine origin of the Torah not in terms of its being given in its present form to Moses on Mt. Sinai, but rather in terms of the “divine” or “unnatural” quality of the moral imperatives that it contains. He looked for its unity not in the past, with Moses, but in the present and future, in the social confluence exemplified by the body of texts refined and augmented in each generation. And he understood the loss of a share toward (not “in” but “toward”) the “world to come” as exclusion from that confluence, from the process of working toward an ideal society. Whatever works against or distracts from the pursuit of such a transcendental morality he characterized as “idolatry”; and he read the Talmud so as to include among the manifestations of idolatry the merely historical or philological attitude toward the Torah.

So he didn’t deny the truth of historical criticism; he just said that it expresses the wrong attitude toward history. I can agree that the merely historical attitude, that is, confinement of one’s vision to the objective, is insufficient. But as far as I can see, it’s quite possible to take an interest in objective truth while never forgetting that, as Wittgenstein said, the facts of the world are not the end of the story—they are not what is most important. Levinas seems to follow Maimonides in taking care not to offend those whose spiritual education hasn’t yet lifted them above the literal level—who aren’t clever enough readers to recognize that he has indicated the falsity of their point of view. Maimonides’ 13 principles include those, like the resurrection of the dead, that get all their importance or interest from the literal level, no matter how easy it may be to interpret them metaphorically. And yet he has only scorn for those who take the Talmud literally, saying that

...one should pity their folly. In their own minds, they think they are honoring and exalting the Sages, but they are actually degrading them

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6 The Mishnah says *cheleq l’olam haba*, not *cheleq b’olam haba*, using the preposition “to” rather than “in”.
to the lowest depths... As God lives, it is this class of thinkers that destroys the splendor of the Torah and darkens its brilliance.⁷

Maybe it takes the brilliance of a Maimonides or Leo Strauss to navigate these different levels of meaning, where the literal understanding is both condemned and accommodated. Levinas simply ignores the unseemly questions Maimonides draws from the lower levels of understanding (“do the resurrected dead arrive naked or in their old clothes?” etc.). As for me, I begin with the assumption that the value of doctrines about the supernatural—or of legends that conflict with historical science—lies solely in their figurative reading.

**Why the Three Kings?**

_Three kings and four commoners have no share toward the world to come..._  
_Three kings: Jeroboam, Ahab and Manasseh_  
_shlosha melachim v’arb’ah hedyototh ‘eyn lahen cheleq l’olam haba..._  
_shlosha melachim: yarov’am, ach’av v’menasheh_  
שלשה מלכים וארבעה ח经纪人 אין להם חלק עולם הבא... שלשה מלכים: ירוואם, אוח’א אמןשה.

Levinas showed that the apparently literalistic discussions of resurrection and the Messiah in the first section of _Pereq Cheleq_ were balanced by its discussion of the metaphorical, creative and participatory sense of Torah as an ongoing project. (The rabbinic sayings illustrating this point insist on the ultimate importance of re-reading and reinterpreting, of perpetual teaching, single-minded concentration and other philological virtues.) Although he had addressed the question of reading, showing the openness of the Talmudic conception of it, I wasn’t really sold on the way he tried to turn the Talmudic obsession with Mosaic authorship of the Torah on its head, by saying that the apparent obsession really represents a rejection of the trivialization of religion.

That trivialization was represented in the Talmudic text by the figure of King Manasseh, who supposedly scorned Torah passages (such as the genealogies) that initially strike the reader as non sequiturs. In other words, he discriminated between significant and insignificant, edifying and obsolete, within a body of text that Pharisaic doctrine regards as perfectly unified and homogeneous. But that’s just what my study of the Bible’s composition had led me to think: that the words of holy men and poets had been mixed together with the work of bureaucrats and propagandists. For me the true appropriation of the Torah seemed to require separating wheat from chaff. I had to face up to the fact that, from the Talmud’s point of view, King Manasseh and I seemed to be in the same boat. Was I cut off from Judaism’s universal project? Could I find my way back toward the world to come, or had I lost my share?

⁷ _Maimonides Commentary on Sanhedrin_ p.140
Now the tradition about Manasseh’s scorn for the genealogies is a foretaste of the longer Talmud section to follow. Coming after the sections on the general crimes and opinions that can cost you the world to come, it discusses specific individuals portrayed in the Bible. I read that section at first because of my historical interest in the composition of the Torah. Given the association of Deuteronomy with the reign of King Josiah, and the unspecified but probably Torah-related literary activity under King Hezekiah, the long reign of Manasseh between them is intriguing. It was the time, not only of much of the Torah’s composition, but also the beginning of the great and mysterious process of its editing-together. So I was interested in the Talmud’s surprising characterization of Manasseh, along with the two kings of Israel, as learned Torah scholars.

My initial interest lay in what the statements about the kings might reveal about the textual traditions developed under their sponsorship. I didn’t really think that the kings themselves were scribes or thinkers, although I thought that the activities of their servants might be attributed to them. I soon saw, however, that if there was any generality at all to the Talmudic statements about the kings, it covered something other than the activities of ancient Israelites: it read rather as a template for the spiritual struggles of the student of the Talmud—and in fact for the struggles of the Talmudic masters themselves, who referred to the kings as their “colleagues” and even their teachers. I saw, in other words, that my possible identification with King Manasseh was something that they worried about too.

But their “worrying” became more impressive the more I looked at it. The meditation under the heading of the “Three Kings” revealed itself as a dialectical exercise, in which the necessary flaws of religion, history and humanity are thought through in a remarkable way. In this process the path to wisdom is indicated by “repentance” (or “returning”), teshuvah. Whereas conventional morality simply requires staying on the straight and narrow, I found that the Talmudic insistence on teshuvah presupposes an insight into, and identification with, the most extreme possibilities of misunderstanding and error, so as to be as realistic as possible about the religious project.

As I began to appreciate the connectedness of the Talmudic meditations, I came to view them as tracing out an analogue of the philosopher’s path to wisdom, considered as the apprehension and taking-to-heart of the divine aspect of the world, or the way in which its ultimate meaning and value are to be appreciated. Their view of wisdom as necessarily having the character of repentance struck me as similar to that of many philosophers whose method involves thinking about the opposite of the path to wisdom—the processes by which insight decays into confusion and despair. Thinkers as diverse as Hegel and the author of the Zohar insist that the essential paradox confronting the seeker of absolute truth is to grasp how the Absolute—existing alone and perfect

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8 I will be using the word “dialectic” in this book in a broad enough sense to include both Aristotle’s notion of an investigation that begins with what is commonly believed, and Hegel’s emphasis on the resolution of opposing perspectives. A dialectical discussion requires thinking through a sequence of different positions so as to reach a successively more comprehensive understanding. (In contrast, many people regard non-legal parts of the Talmud as a mere “collection” or grab-bag of sayings relating to a topic.)
from eternity—could so withdraw into itself as to leave room for everything finite and relative...and for human confusion. “Why does God permit suffering?” and “Why is there something rather than nothing?” are two derivative expressions of this same basic paradox. (Another would be the question of suicide, i.e., “Is it better never to have been born?”)

It isn’t a matter of adopting an opinion as to God’s “immanence” or “transcendence”, or even as to the perfectibility of the human spirit. The more serious task of philosophy is to gain a sense of the rhythmic movement of life in its philosophico-religious dimension. Heraclitus said “The way up and the way down are the same.” Plato’s Republic begins with the words “I went down”, and a scene of the wise man being dragged back into the cave of opinion, to labor in the realm of parables and metaphors, and of reasoning in search of basic premises. Insight gained must be communicated to fulfill itself, but in the act of communication there is exposure to new confusion (a kind of descent); whereas reflection on the limits of knowledge is in itself illuminating and uplifting. So the way to wisdom is no linear path or ladder; or if it is a ladder, it is rather like the one in Jacob’s dream at Bethel, which the angels were ascending and descending simultaneously.

Consider again the Mishnah’s starting-point: All Israel has a share. Good news for the Israelite who reads this! With eternal paradise guaranteed, fewer the tears to be shed for this vale that soon will pass away. But by the time the Talmud is done clarifying and expanding the exceptions to this statement, the reader may well feel that getting into the world to come might not be so easy at all. It might seem too difficult for all but the most vigilant and scholarly of Israelites. And our text emphasizes that scholarship itself is no guarantee of success! The scholar can—and in one sense must—follow a downward path from wisdom and salvation to ignorance and despair.

In the “Three Kings” text, errors in theology are followed by errors of practice, and before we are done we will have plumbed the depths of incest, murder and cannibalism...ending with an apparently pessimistic acknowledgment of the supremacy of the human “inclination toward evil.” But my reading has convinced me that the rabbis are not, like “fire-and-brimstone” preachers, painting a portrait of punishment for those who don’t believe; nor are they simply warning against immoral behavior. They are rather, like the philosophers (Plotinus, Moses de Leon, Hegel) who trace the path of “emanations” from the Absolute One, engaged in a project of thought that probes the duality of the spiritual path and the essence of religion, and tries to forge language adequate to its subject. In this sense they are doing philosophy.

**Why the Parable of the Eggs?**

In the “Three Kings” gemara, Rabbi Chanina ben Papa says that whenever you enjoy anything in this world without blessing (that is, giving thanks

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9 The *gemara* is the Aramaic commentary on the (Hebrew) Mishnah. Sometimes I will use the word to indicate a unitary section of commentary demarcated by quotations from the Mishnah.
to God), it is as if you stole from God. This recalls the ideal state of gratitude to which I alluded in connection with Maimonides' critique of reward-based thinking. I had already encountered it in my philosophical studies: any attempt to think about the world as a whole requires an evaluative as well as a descriptive component, so that the goal is not only comprehensive knowledge but the kind of global gratitude that would come from appreciating the world's ultimate meaning. The age-old “problem of evil” was often posed as a question about the “reality” of evil, as if the goal were to “see through” (or recontextualize) all the apparently bad things in life, so as to justify or “save the appearances”, coming to see them “in the light of eternity.” Heidegger expressed it with a piece of Talmudic etymology: the deepest thinking is thanking. I was therefore not surprised to find that Rabbi Chanina’s remark was an echo of a more radical statement in the Mishnah: “Man is obligated to bless for evil just as he blesses for good.” (M. Berachoth 9)

The gemara (Berachoth 60b) explains this to mean that one must confront evils with gladness—even songs of praise! It ends with an account of the martyr’s death of Rabbi Aqiva, a central figure with regard not just to his teachings and behavior, but also the Talmud’s interpretive methods. My thoughts on this scene and its implications are appended in the Coda. But before looking directly at this radical teaching, I was drawn to the argument in support of it. That argument makes use of the peculiar Talmudic notion with which the “Three Kings” gemara ends: the “inclination toward evil” (yetzer haro’ah). First the Mishnah cites the familiar line from Deuteronomy, “you shall love YHWH your God with all your heart…”. I could see how this “all” might connote a unity of attitude, a resoluteness that might bear up under the weight of the world. But the text says that “all your heart” means “with both your inclinations, the good inclination and the evil inclination.” This hardly cleared things up for me. Even if we have some idea of what the “evil inclination” means, how does one use it to give thanks for evil? Is it that there’s some basic isomorphism between the moral weaknesses within us and the cruelties of men and nature outside us, such that properly accommodating or cultivating our own immoral impulses might help us achieve a more grateful perspective on the evils beyond our control? I decided that I wouldn’t be able to fully understand the Talmudic theodicy without looking more closely at how the “evil inclination” functions in Talmudic discourse.

My investigation soon fixed on the gemara from Yoma (and a variant of the same text in Sanhedrin) for two reasons. The first was the popularity of the parable it contains—what I call “the parable of the eggs.” This story seems to teach the ineradicalibility of the “evil inclination”: when it is magically subdued,
chickens cease to lay eggs, and presumably all reproduction (and much more) becomes impossible. Various lessons are drawn from this, usually along the lines of something (sexuality, desire, emotion or the “animal nature”) needing to be kept under control by something else (the will, or intellect, or study of the Torah). I was unsympathetic to such lessons, with their overtones of prudery, and their untenable philosophical assumptions (reason vs. emotion, mind vs. body, etc.). They seemed to exemplify what I considered the worst religious impulse: the tendency to denigrate and reject the natural world and historical existence (“this world”) in favor of a heavenly Beyond (“the world to come”, according to its literal sense). They also seemed to conflict with the Mishnah’s project of global gratitude—being thankful for the world.

But the gemara containing the parable of the eggs was something else again. It revealed the necessity not just of reproduction but of playfulness and risk-taking, in life and in the pursuit of wisdom. And I soon became absorbed in it for a second reason: it explicitly addressed the question of how to bless or “magnify” God—how to speak of the greatness or highest meaning of Creation (the world as a whole), and thus of the Creator. It did so with the same attention to the depths of tragedy, and the problems of education, that I had encountered in the “Three Kings” discussion. And it too was highly dialectical, attending to the interplay of literal and metaphorical, direct reference and multi-leveled evocations, and to speech between persons of unequal education and development. It pursued the pure language of gratitude and justice with a realism equal to that in “Three Kings”, which emphasized lamentation and repentance; but its realism went even further into the question of truth and its relation to the ideal. It pushed even further into the dialectic of realism and optimism. And none of this seemed to be perceived by the pious commentators and editors.

Interpretation and Dreams

The Mishnah’s dictum on “blessing for evil” comes after a list of blessings to be said when visiting certain kinds of places. The gemara takes what seems to be a big left turn when it spends several pages discussing dreams and their interpretation. But beneath a load of apparent superstition lies a meditation often more subtle than Freud, as the possibility and necessity of interpreting and reinterpreting dreams becomes a proxy for the interpretability of life itself.

Dreams stand midway between life or historical existence and texts; and thus the analysis reinforces the notion of the Bible as a story in which I discover my identity and role. In the course of my “Three Kings” study, I developed a concept of moral-historical understanding, in order to make sense of the Talmudic idea of destiny, and to characterize the larger project of pursuing meaning. When I came to the discussion of interpretation in Berachoth, it seemed even more directly concerned with such understanding. It demonstrated, through its schema of blessings, how to interpretively integrate the individual life and the historical drama indicated by the sacred literature. And more fundamentally, it showed how life is in need of interpretation. The gemara relates this existential need to the essence of morality, and to the paradox of wisdom.
(one must be wise in order to become wise) as enunciated by Rabbi Yochanan. Therefore it seemed appropriate to insert this discussion into the caesura between the radical self-criticism of the first part of the “Three Kings” and its meditation on mercy.

**Mystical Experience in the Talmud**

If we take it that the Talmudic solution to the problem of evil lies in an ideal speech called “blessing”—a discourse that would affirm and explain the ultimate value of the world—then we may ask about the experience corresponding to both the utterance and the comprehension of such speech: the *feeling* and *knowing* of the world’s ultimate value. Call it theophany, epiphany or mystical experience. But the Talmud is extremely reticent on this subject, which it refers to as the divine “chariot” (seen by the prophet Ezekiel). In a curious passage in *Chagigah* it prohibits discussion of “the chariot” except in one-on-one conversations between the most enlightened sages. What good does that do the rest of us?

Maimonides famously violated this prohibition in writing his *Guide for the Perplexed*; he argued that just as the darkness of the times had compelled Yehudah the Prince to write down the Oral Law, his even darker times required writing down the esoteric understanding of the deepest religious truths. (In this same spirit, the modern phenomenon of fundamentalism—a confusion due to viewing religion on the model of science—seems to me to require an even more explicit distinction between the esoteric and exoteric meanings of holy texts, and acknowledgment of their true historical origins.)

I wanted to examine the Talmud’s reasoning on this subject for several reasons. First was my general feeling that Judaism had been too reticent on the subject of personal religious experience, before this deficiency was addressed by the Kabbalah, ecstatic Chasidism, or the efforts of contemporary Jewish-Buddhist syncretists. So I looked specifically at the section of commentary on the prohibition, concerning four men who, the text says, “entered paradise”—the closest the Talmud comes to an explicit discussion of mystical experience.

At the same time, I appreciated the doctrine of reticence as a parallel to modern philosophical theories of the place of silence in language, and its role in the integration of the public and the private (a topic I encountered repeatedly in the “Three Kings” text). Sometimes more is said through silence and ellipsis than through voluminous explanation. And sometimes in philosophy and religion the most positive insights are conveyed in a negative modality. In the parable of the “Four Men” there were prohibitions, warnings and descriptions of disaster, all seeming to hint somehow at experiences of joy and transcendence.

Finally, the passage was another one in which Rabbi Aqiva figured as the hero—the only one of the Four Men to emerge alive and unscathed from his experience. Surely it was this experience that allowed him to “bless for evil” in the face of death. If the Talmudic masters really knew what they were talking about, if they really had a solution to the Problem of Evil, then surely this paradigm of religious understanding must be an essential part of it.
**Lost Tribes and Alphabets**

I was originally interested in the Bible because of its attitude toward history: if I can see myself as a character in an unfolding story, it is because I adopt a certain attitude toward history—I “read” history for its meaning. To do this I must find a way to integrate different types of discourse, the factual and the moral/aesthetic. And it seems to me that there are different kinds of accommodations to be made: some factual assertions lend themselves to integration into a moral narrative only if they are true; whereas the assertions in legendary stories can often be accommodated despite their literal falsity. The relations between truth and myth are far more sophisticated than the opposition assumed by the common use of the word “myth” to mean falsehood.

I agree with Levinas and Wittgenstein in distinguishing between factual knowledge and the apprehension of meaning and value; or as Wittgenstein put it, “… taking a fact seriously and then, beyond a certain point, no longer regarding it as serious, but maintaining that something else is even more serious.”\(^{12}\) The “something else” is the Mystery, the Void, the Holy One Blessed Be He. In addition, I also see another dichotomy: spiritual meaning, or the apprehension of the ideal, exists in a tension not only with factual knowledge but also with political understanding. In the project of separating wheat from chaff, we have to sort out the political distortions and contradictions in the tradition at the same time as we are correcting the historical record.

Thus I was drawn to the Jewish-Samaritan schism, an ancient event that had resulted, among other significant effects, in some pieces of demonstrable propaganda making their way into the book of *Kings*. The propaganda had in turn given birth to one of the world’s most enduring memes: the myth of the “lost tribes of Israel”, with its hundreds of variations and transpositions. In fact, the descendants of the kingdom of Israel were no more “lost” than the descendants of the kingdom of Judah. The two groups had become the Samaritans and the Jews. Both the historical record in the Bible and the political animus against Samaritans needed to be corrected. But what did this do to the mythic discourse that incorporated the history and politics?

The schism also seemed to be partly responsible for the Jewish embrace of the Aramaic alphabet. I have already mentioned this as an example of the differences between First and Second Temple Judaism that drew my attention, as I studied the evolution of (or what I thought of as the embedding of wisdom in) the Biblical tradition. Although part of my interest was no doubt due simply to the unavoidable allure of the ancient and the original—as if the older were always superior in the most important ways, as if the ideal had once existed on earth—my overriding concern was with the ways in which traditions preserve themselves through evolution, and the role played in this process by the shifts between the

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\(^{12}\) *Culture and Value* edited by G.H. Von Wright, translated by Peter Winch, University of Chicago Press, 1980 p.85
literal and figurative senses of words. Just as we must accommodate the feelings of someone who fears Darwinism by emphasizing how the uniqueness of man and the meaningfulness of life remain unaffected by the facts of natural history, so I was concerned with the delicacy of integrating archaeological and critical-historical knowledge into an understanding that preserves the spiritual values of the tradition. The histories of the Israelites and the alphabet seemed like small and manageable examples of such integration.

As it turned out, the Talmud contained meditations on these very topics. It not only discussed but demonstrated a way of subordinating facts and politics to myth and, in a subtle way, philosophy. So I thought that a quick look at these discussions would make a good warmup for the trial of the kings and the philosophy it exhibits.
Prelude 1: The Ten Tribes Today

Text (Sanhedrin 110b)

MISHNAH: The Ten Tribes will not return, as it is says: ...and cast them into another land, as this day [kiyom hazeh]. Just as the day goes and does not return, so they too went and will not return. —This is R. Aqiva’s view. R. Eliezer said: “As this day”—just as the day darkens and then becomes light, so will it become light for them.

GEMARA: Our Rabbis taught: The Ten Tribes have no share toward the world to come, as it says, And YHWH rooted them out of their land in anger, and in wrath, and in great indignation. “And YHWH rooted them out of their land” refers to this world; “and cast them into another land” — to the world to come. This is R. Aqiva's view. R. Shimon b. Yehudah, of the Kefar of Acco, said on R. Shimon's authority: If their deeds are as this day's, they will not return; otherwise they will. Rabbi said: They are coming toward the world to come [ba'im hem l'olam haba], as it is said: ...in that day, that the great trumpet shall be blown...

Text and Context

In the Preface I explained my initial attraction to the history of the Jewish-Samaritan schism, as an example of tradition in need of critical correction. My view is that historical and political matters need to be sorted out in the process of engaging with and appropriating the spiritual core of tradition. Talmud tractate Sanhedrin contains a “judgment”, attributed to R. Aqiva, upon the ancestors of the Samaritans (although the Talmud does not admit that the Samaritans are their descendants): that they “will not return.” But this judgment is contested by Aqiva’s teacher Eliezer, as well as later authorities. I took the openness of the question as an invitation to engage in the debate.

That meant jumping into the middle of the Talmud. Since one of the first things we learn in studying Talmud is that context is everything, there seems to be a problem. Of course the immensity of the Talmud makes jumping into it something of a practical necessity. But there is an even more basic rationale. Reading the Talmud is in many ways like reading the Bible. And because the

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13 Deut.29:27 Full quote: And YHWH rooted them out of their land in anger, and in wrath, and in great indignation, and cast them into another land, as this day.
14 we will use the abbreviations R. for Rabbi and b. for “ben” (=”son of”)
15 ibid. see full quote
16 Isaiah 27:13 Full quote: And it shall come to pass in that day, that the great trumpet shall be blown, and they shall come who were ready to perish in the land of Assyria, and the outcasts in the land of Egypt, and shall worship YHWH in the holy mount of Jerusalem.
rabbis share the view I attributed to O.K. Bouwsma—namely that the conceit of
the Bible is that the reader is a character in its ongoing story—it is natural to turn
their hermeneutics (their methods and principles of interpretation) back upon
them and their texts. In other words, the rabbis practice a form of interpretation—
and self-interpretation—that the Talmud lets us practice ourselves, in reading it
and in our own lives. (I call the practice of interpretation according to principles
that extend to life as a whole philosophy.) If the Talmudic text often takes the
form of a puzzle, that’s because life itself often has the character of a puzzle. If
the paths of the text have forks and branches, or if certain questions retain a
fundamental indeterminacy, that’s because life itself has this diversity and
indeterminacy. And if studying the Talmud seems to involve us in a circle,
wherein we can’t determine the foreground without having first determined the
background and vice versa, it is because life itself consists of this kind of iterative
process—Heidegger called it the “hermeneutical circle”—in which we anticipate
new experience based on context, but alter and expand our understanding of the
context in the light of new experience.

So let’s take a first glance at the context of R. Aqiva’s judgment on the
Israelites in Pereq Cheleq, before jumping into its midst.

Outline of Pereq Cheleq

Those Israelites who “have no share toward the world to come”:

general
1. those who deny that the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead is
   found in the Torah
2. those who deny that the Torah is “from heaven”
3. “Epicureans”
4. readers of “external” books
5. faith healers
6. those who pronounce the Name of God

specific
7. 3 Biblical kings: Jeroboam, Ahab, Manasseh
8. 4 Biblical commoners: Balaam, Doeg, Achithophel, Gehazi
9. generation of the flood (Genesis 5)
10. generation of the dispersion (Babel) (Genesis 11)
11. men of Sodom (Genesis 18)
12. the spies (Numbers 13)
13. generation of the wilderness (Numbers 14)
14. supporters of Korach (Numbers 16)
15. the Ten Tribes (Deuteronomy 29:27 in light of 2 Kings 17)
[16.] apostate town

We see that the treatment of the Ten Tribes comes almost at the end of
the chapter—or at the very end, if we consider that the final section as it now
stands is of a dissimilar character to the rest of the chapter, returning to details of actual judicial procedures rather than punishment “at the hands of heaven.”

The most immediate contextual relation that must be considered is that of the subsection formed by the last three topics (13, 14 and 15). In each of them, unlike most of the other items, the initial condemnation (posed all three times by R. Aqiva) is contradicted (all three times by R. Eliezer). The three condemnations develop a pattern of wordplay, with the phrase “has no share toward the world to come” in 1-13 replaced by “will not rise up” (from the earth that swallowed them, from death and from “this world”) in 14, and “will not return” (from exile as well as from apostasy) in 15. What does this imply?

First Guess at the Contextual Meaning: Dialectic

The first thing to notice is that the “return” of the Ten Tribes is immediately understood (according to what “our rabbis taught” in the gemara) to be equivalent to having a share toward the world to come. The three expressions are in some way equivalent. Based on this equivalence, I’ll venture a guess that will sound like it’s out of the blue, but may be justified in the course of these readings. I suggest that the three notions of “having a share”, “rising up” and “returning” are complementary characterizations of the path to wisdom or access to the meaning of history (that is, the divine)—the meaning of the story in which I find myself.

The first expression, having a share, indicates personal belonging: that my role in history is unique and significant.

The second expression, rising up, indicates the aspect of rebirth or rejuvenation: I can only play my role in history, continuing and preserving traditional meaning, by reimagining it, making it new. (Korach’s sin wasn’t that he pointed out the spiritual authority of the individual, it was his failure of imagination, his failure to reconnect the individual to history.)

The third expression, return, indicates that the arc of history is a journey to the source, in which the alienation and duplicity of experience are overcome through the passion of repentance/returning (teshuvah).

If these three aspects belong fundamentally together, then one conclusion can be drawn: access to the meaning of life cannot be a straightforward path, but must be a zigzag sequence of movements. You can’t return without first leaving, and without an awareness of having left. This situation calls for dialectical thinking—for inhabiting a sequence of seemingly contradictory perspectives.

So this might be a good place to notice that “the world to come”, the overarching theme of our text, is an inherently dialectical concept, mediating between literal and spiritual meanings, as Maimonides realized. This is indicated by the sayings of R. Yaqov juxtaposed in Avot 4:16-17. On the one hand, the literal: he says that “this world is like an antechamber before the world to come; get ready in the antechamber, so you can go into the great hall.” But on the other hand: “better a single moment spent in penitence and good deeds in this world than the whole of the world to come”—the literal meaning is marked as

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17 see Preface
abstract, as the principle or horizon of lived experience. This back-and-forth movement characterizes the relation of real and ideal, experience and context, facts and meaning.

I used the word “ideal” repeatedly in the Preface without defining it; and now I have just used it again as an example of a dialectical term. Here I will loosely define an ideal as a principle that organizes and guides individual and communal perception and behavior. But I am especially concerned with avoiding the understanding of this term as implying a mere subjective projection. I won’t argue the case here, but will remark that even direct perception has a conceptual component. The mathematical structure of nature, as uncovered by physics, is as “real” as the data we get through our senses. And for me the ideal of a way of life is as “objective” as the mathematical structure of nature. The intelligibility of the real world is itself dependent on the ideal—which is still not to assume the existence of Platonic forms outside of history. It is in fact the inescapability of history that requires us to look for the best way through it.

As will emerge in detail throughout this book, I think that the rabbis had an understanding of historical meaning that has much in common with Western philosophy since Hegel. They understood that success in life is a contingent matter, and that we must always act and speak without any advance certainty about the ultimate value of our words and actions. The realism of their spirituality allowed the rabbis to be aware of both the material conditions of meaning and the public character of language, so that they were immune to subjectivism and nihilism. They could accept the historical character of meaning, while yet trusting in its ultimate coherence. They pursued the ideal in the texture of the everyday.

With this brief contextual orientation, let’s turn now from the big picture to the most concrete aspects of the particular question at hand.

**Factual Questions: Who are the Ten Tribes?**

“The Ten Tribes will not return...” What is meant by the “Ten Tribes”? Presumably we are talking about a subset of the “Twelve Tribes of Israel”—the members of the Yahwist confederation in Palestine, each with its eponymous son of Jacob, that existed prior to the states of Israel and Judah.

But this list of twelve is problematic for several reasons. The Bible offers multiple versions of it, possibly reflecting changing conditions in the different eras described. To make a long story short, it looks like the Twelve Tribes are twelve in number, not because they happen to have descended from twelve brothers, nor because there ever was an Israelite tribal confederation with exactly twelve

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18 Sometimes Levi is excluded as being a landless tribe, and the count of twelve is maintained by replacing Joseph with his sons Ephraim and Manasseh. (In fact there never seems to have been a territory of Joseph per se.) The tribal geography seems to have shifted over time. Some tribes migrated (Dan), some grew in prominence (Ephraim), some ceased to exist as separate entities (Shimon). The tribal lists sometimes include further “sub-tribes” such as Machir. And Judah is often named as a partner or competitor to Israel, rather than as one of its members.
member groups. Twelve is better understood as a symbolic or literary number—an important number in the base-60 Mesopotamian system, the number of months in a year, etc. Twelve connotes completeness and harmony; it is “round”, like the number ten. So saying “the twelve tribes” means at bottom: “all the tribes together”.

Then the Ten Tribes would mean—“all the tribes but two”? Strangely enough, the Bible says it means “all the tribes but one”:

However I will not tear away all the kingdom; but I will give one tribe to your son, for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem which I have chosen. 19

And it came to pass at that time when Jeroboam went out of Jerusalem, that the prophet Ahijah of Shiloh found him in the way; and he had clad himself with a new garment; and they two were alone in the field. And Ahijah caught the new garment that was on him, and rent it in twelve pieces: And he said to Jeroboam, Take ten pieces, for thus says YHWH, the God of Israel:
Behold, I will rend the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon, and will give ten tribes to you: But he shall have one tribe for my servant David's sake, and for Jerusalem's sake, the city which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel. 20

The text seems to give us the equation 12-1=10. In order to fix this, you can make Judah into two tribes in various ways: by including Levi, or Benjamin, or Reuben or Shimon. But this very excess of choices makes it difficult to rely on any particular solution to 10+Judah=12. Instead we have to treat the number ten simply as another round number. The Israelites say to Judah and to Solomon’s son Rehoboam, “we have ten times your share”—meaning not that there are eleven tribes, nor, exactly, that there are ten (in which case the “lost tribes” would have numbered nine), but more simply to indicate that they are the legitimate confederacy, and that Judah is the isolated renegade.

So the “Ten Tribes” just means the kingdom of Israel, or more precisely, the descendants of the Israelites. The discussion of their “return” presupposes, of course, that they were all exiled—which we know is not the case.

How so? Well, we know that the Assyrians, as was their habit, only deported the elite of Israel (27,290 according to their own records, almost all from the capital city of Samaria), and left the peasantry (who numbered about 350,000 according to recent archaeological surveys) mostly intact. The Biblical statement to the contrary (2 Kings 17) is typical of Biblical (and other ancient) hyperbole regarding conquests (as in the cases of Joshua’s conquest of Palestine and the Babylonian conquest of Judah, as well as many inscriptions from Egypt and Assyria). The complete deportation of the Israelites is not only implausible and contrary to external evidence, it is inconsistent with other Biblical accounts that

19 1 Kings 11:13
20 ibid. v.30-32
depict northern Yahwists still existing during the reigns of Kings Hezekiah and Josiah, long after the Assyrian conquest. And the text of 2 Kings 17, with its anachronistic use of ‘Samaria’ (שומרון) as the name of an imperial province rather than the capital city of the Israelite kings, and ‘Samaritans’ as a name for the Israelites, shows itself to critical eyes as a late insertion.

Therefore the “Samaritans”, as the northern Yahwists were called in Roman times (and as they are known to the world today), must be acknowledged as true heirs of the Ten Tribes—never “lost” at all, but rather victims of Jewish propaganda. This propaganda states that, despite their manifest observance of the Torah, they were of illegitimate blood (thus their designation as “Kuthites”, 21 descendants of immigrants from Iran brought to Samaria by the Assyrians). If I am to seek my place in history with honesty and integrity, I must correct historiography such as that in 2 Kings 17, which turns out to be propaganda.

**Political Questions: R. Aqiva and Conversion**

The number ten is associated with the question of legitimacy, of a share in the inheritance of Israel. We might suspect, then, that we are dealing with a case of prejudice on the part of rival groups, so that R. Aqiva’s condemnation of the Ten Tribes would be reduced to an implied condemnation of the Samaritans, fought on the battlefield of ancient history.

But the situation is far from this simple. In fact Aqiva is a friend of Samaritans. In the tractate Kiddushin 22, he opposes the view of R. Ishmael, who denies that Samaritans are valid “converts” on the basis of the story in 2 Kings 17, according to which the Mesopotamian immigrants embraced Yahwism in order to appease the god of the land (who happened to be YHWH, Lord of the universe), who had been sending hungry lions amongst them.

R. Ishmael holds: Kutheans are converts [through fear] of lions, and the priests who became mixed up in them were unfit priests, as it is said, *and they made unto them from among themselves [mikezotham] priests of the high places,* 23 whereon Rabbah bar bar Chanah commented: from the most unworthy [lit. thorns, *kozim*] of the people, and on that account they were disqualified. R. Aqiva holds: Kutheans are true proselytes, and the priests who became mixed up in them were fit priests, as it is said: ‘*and they made unto them from among themselves priests of the high places,*’ which Rabbah bar bar Chanah interpreted: from the choicest [*kezinim*] of the people.

Ishmael denies the validity of Samaritan priests (who, according to Josephus, actually came from Jerusalem at a much later date); and thus implicitly negates their spiritual tradition at its core. But Aqiva says that Samaritans are “true

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21 see Prelude 2
22 Kiddushin 75-76
23 2Kings 17:32
converts", and that in fact their priestly line is most noble. Aqiva accepts Ishmael’s prooftext stating that their priests were priests of “high places” (usually a term of condemnation)—but he puts a positive spin on this, as if reverting to a more ancient and figurative notion of height.

It’s not surprising that Aqiva would be generous to converts, as not only was he descended from converts himself, he personally underwent a kind of conversion in the middle of his life, from secular Jew, contemptuous of scholars, into a person totally committed to God and Judaism. In fact, by calling them converts, and by accepting the factuality of 2 Kings 17, he is in his own mind doing the Samaritans a favor: he dissociates them from the “lost” Ten Tribes. Some Samaritans may get the ultimate reward, a share toward the world to come—but not the Ten Tribes per se, who are regarded as 100% lost.

Is he being overly harsh towards this (to him) abstract historical entity? Rabbah bar bar Chana says that in this case (as well as in the previous section of Pereq Cheleq) “R. Aqiva abandoned his lovingkindness (chesed).” I will return to this objection at the end of this book. The pattern we see in the three parallel disputes of Aqiva and Eliezer in Pereq Cheleq is that Aqiva is the strict, judgmental one, Eliezer the forgiving and accepting one. This is not the norm, for Eliezer is often on the more conservative side of the argument, and his opinion is often regarded as definitive by many others. And Aqiva is usually the loosest, freest and most creative of the early rabbis when it comes to the interpretation of texts and the logic of aggadah (the non-legal portions of the Talmud, from which all the texts studied in this book are drawn). There is certainly more going on in this text that concerns R. Aqiva and his politics; I will suggest that it ultimately concerns the Romans more than the Samaritans. But what I want to do now is focus on that level of the discussion that transcends the factual and the political: I want to suggest that the discussion of the Ten Tribes and their “return” is operating on the mythic or purely spiritual level.

**Spiritual Questions**

**The Myth of the Lost Tribes and the Ambiguity of “Israel”**

The Ten Tribes, the “Lost Tribes” of Israel, retain their fascination for readers of the Bible 2700 years after the Assyrian conquest. Having been located by legend in dozens of countries and identified with dozens of ethnic groups over the ages, they are tracked today with modern means. A TV documentary uses DNA analysis to compare priestly lineages of long-scattered Israelite pretenders, even as Mormons continue to believe that the lost tribes became American Indians. Meanwhile scholars agree that the results of archaeology and modern historical research support the claims of the Samaritans, self-described descendants of Joseph’s sons Ephraim and Manasseh, the one group of alleged descendants of the Ten Tribes who were never lost to begin with.

What is the significance of this historical curiosity? I think that it is in part the appeal of the Biblical view of history itself—the idea that history can have a meaning, that I can regard it as an important story in which I myself am a
character. This idea need not be grounded in simplistic notions of divine purpose or will. On the contrary, the modern understanding of historiography has reached the point of accepting narrativity and ideology as necessary aspects of history, to be taken into account rather than naively avoided. We need to understand history as meaningful.

Therefore it seems to me, as someone who sees no conflict between science and religion, that we can investigate traditional historiography from the standpoint of contemporary knowledge (i.e. scientifically), while yet remaining open to the deeper levels of meaning (literary, moral, philosophical) in which the historiography is embedded. Even if we acknowledge the need for corrections of the Biblical account in the light of science, we might yet learn to entertain, in the same spirit as the Biblical and Talmudic authors, interpretations of the meaning of what we can now know.

This is my general goal. But I want to locate the deep significance of the question of the Ten Tribes in something more specific: the contentiousness of the very idea of “Israel”—a struggle for and against God, for and against family and country and government, for and against one’s better self. “Israel” is not a univocal designation. On the one hand it refers to the apostate kingdom of Jeroboam, destroyed by Assyria for its sins, an eternal bad example to all stiffnecked, arrogant, insincere members of the faithful; on the other hand it remains the designation of pride for all those claiming the inheritance of Jacob, the “true” or “new” Israel whom the prophets refer to as the “remnant” surviving purges of the old Israel. At the core of Judaism (and its offshoot by this very principle, Christianity) lies a restless negative, a perpetual need to reclaim lost purity, to deny easy biological inheritances and demand that each generation be as a remnant returning from exile—lest they in their conventional piety turn out to belong to the bad old Israel of the Bible.

I believe that the Talmud’s discussion of the bad old Israel under the heading of the Ten Tribes has this deeper contentiousness and dialectic in mind.

Conversion and Return: The Yerushalmi’s Discussion

The discussion is focused on the distant past, and recuperation from ancient catastrophe. But Talmudic discussion seldom concerns only the facts in question, sticking to literal meanings. It always keeps in mind that something else is more important. In this case we are in the midst of a meditation on justice and mercy.

The tension between these concepts generates the dialectical back-and-forth that is fundamental to Jewish thinking. Tradition identifies them with the two primordial names or attributes of God, Elohim and YHWH. In Perek Cheleq the demands of justice are repeatedly contested by the advocates of mercy. In this context, the meaning of “return”, beyond the literal level, is crucial. I have suggested, by way of anticipation, that to return is to turn toward the Source in repentance; and that such a return is the goal of all existence, separated from the Creator. On this philosophical level, there is a connection between “return” and
religious conversion that is intrinsic, and independent of the accidental confusion between "lost" Israelites and the allegedly converted Samaritans.

One clue to this connection is the curious commentary on "the Ten Tribes will not return" in the Palestinian Talmud (Yerushalmi). Instead of talking about Israelites, it focuses on one Antolinus (a Roman Emperor variously identified with Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius or Caracalla), and the question of whether he did or did not convert to Judaism. The basis for thinking that he did lies in the tradition that Antolinus was a friend or student of the great R. Yehudah, and the legend that at death he was found to be circumcised. What has this got to do with the Ten Tribes or their return? Either the editor had the Samaritans in mind, and this led him to include a story on conversions, or there is a deeper connection.

Let's say it's something like this: on the level of spiritual understanding, repentance and return is tantamount to conversion; with regard to the effort required, you're starting from scratch, like an outsider. And conversion is like a return—it's like coming home for the first time.

So many who have never left still need to "return" in repentance, and many who were born into the inheritance of Israel still need to "convert". How many? The general discussion of justice and mercy gives us reason to think that the answer must be: everyone. The rabbis will suggest that we might ourselves one day need whatever measure of mercy we withhold from even the worst penitent. For this reason, as will be seen below, some of them (including R. Yehudah) end up letting even King Manasseh, the greatest Biblical villain of them all, off the hook. What's more, their explicit requirements for attaining "the world to come" will be made so stringent (including, for example, mastery of the Talmud) that the ordinary person starts to look like a long shot after all.

Therefore it seems best to acknowledge in advance that we all might fail and need a second chance, that we all must return, that the whole world must return. Even the most lost. Just as Aqiva underwent a kind of conversion though already descended from (converted) Jews, every awakening to the depths of religious meaning has the character of conversion (or re-conversion). The "Israel" that we seek to inherit can only be realized in the form of a reconstituted and reconverted New Israel. Whether we are born Jews, Samaritans or pagans, we need to return to first premises and fundamental religious experiences.

When is “this day”? (Deut. 29:28)

The Talmudic argument proceeds by means of interpretations of Biblical passages. The “proof” that “the Ten Tribes will not return” is found in Deut. 29:28:

And YHWH rooted them out of their land in anger, and in wrath, and in great indignation, and cast them into another land, as [it is] this day.

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24 Rabbi Yehudah the Prince, leader of the Jews of his day; also compiler of the Mishnah.
The contradictory opinions hinge on interpretations of the phrase “as [or until] this day” (kiyom hazeh—כִּיּוָם הָזה). Sometimes the Bible is clearer in saying ad hayom (אֲדַ֖וּ הָיֹֽום), “until today”; but “as this day” is a favored idiom in the books of Deuteronomy, Samuel, Kings and Jeremiah. R. Aqiva makes a sort of pun by reading ki literally, as “like”, rather than idiomatically, as “until”; and using “day” as a metaphor for transience. But first he had to connect the quotation with the Israelites. How did he do that?

If we follow in the tracks of the rabbis, we will be examining many of the same textual contours, the same seams in the editorial structure of the texts, that we would have traced in the course of simple critical-historical interpretation, because these are the very things that the rabbis seized upon as challenge and opportunity. Such is the case with “this day” in Deut.29:28.

The quotation is from the third of Moses’ three orations in Deuteronomy. It is known as the Covenant of Moab.

These are the words of the covenant that YHWH commanded Moses to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant that he made with them at Horeb.25

The speech takes up chapters 29 and 30. It contains many different elements—historical surveys, profound spiritual exhortation, threats and curses, promises of redemption. These disparate elements are not set out without a logical structure. First of all, they exemplify the general tone and purpose of Deuteronomy, which is one of exhortation: remember and obey. Second, the section follows the theme of blessings and curses, which were already the subject of the two preceding chapters. And third, thanks to 20th-century archaeological and historical research, the Covenant of Moab (as well as other sections in Deuteronomy and Exodus) has come to be recognized as exhibiting the classical treaty structure found in Hittite documents from the second millennium BCE and still followed by Assyrians of the Biblical period. This structure requires such items as the historical prologue, blessings and curses attendant on obedience or disobedience, and the swearing of oaths before supernatural witnesses.

Nevertheless these elements have not been woven seamlessly together. The “curse” passage of ch. 29, from which the Mishnaic quotation is taken, is introduced in verses 17-20.

In case there will be among you a man or woman or family or tribe whose heart is turning today from YHWH our God, to go to serve those nations’ gods…

…that person, though only thinking about sinning, will not be forgiven by God, and will be separated from Israel in order to endure “all the curses of the covenant that is written in this scroll of instruction.”

25 Horeb is the name of the holy mountain where the Torah was given, as it appears in the source-texts originating in Israel. In the texts originating in Judah, it is called Mt. Sinai.
So far, so good. We see here Deuteronomy’s distinctive approach to religion as a matter of the heart, focusing the seriousness of the covenant on individual intention more than ritual and mythic elements. But then verses 21-27 shift abruptly to the viewpoint of a “later generation” observing the utter desolation of Israel! There is no longer any question of separating out wicked individuals. Not merely an individual, family or even tribe, but the whole people (or a critical portion) has sinned, and accordingly the whole land has been punished and vandalized. The future observers note that the punishment is still in effect “as this day”, that is, up through their own time.

Although this is not a clear-cut case, the shift in verse 21 is at least inelegant, and most likely a seam where an editor has pasted together different texts (or oral sermons) by one or more authors, on the theme of curses coming to pass. The first part only seeks to warn, and assumes general obedience; whereas the second part, extending into chapter 30, seems to assume that the curses are inevitably to be carried out—that one party to the contract lacks the strength or will to keep it. The sense of warning has been lost. The most likely explanation is that different authors wrote these passages. The author of the second might have believed he was describing what had happened since the first was written. When Aqiva and Eliezer read the passage as looking back on the fall of Samaria, they are noticing the same thing we notice, even if they take it as the rhetorical shift of an omniscient Narrator.

Swayed by the Lost Tribes myth, Bible scholars of the last two hundred years assumed that the exile in question is the Babylonian exile, so that the second passage was written either in Babylonia or, even later, in Persian Jerusalem. On the other hand, Aqiva and Eliezer think that it refers to the Assyrian exile, a century and a half before. And they might well be right.

Biblical writers of the 7th century not only had the fall of Samaria in recent memory; they also had Sennacherib’s campaign of 701 BCE, which devastated Judah, destroying the biggest city, Lachish, and leaving little more than Jerusalem intact. So it was easy for them to feel (especially after Assyrian power began to collapse with the death of Assurbanipal in 631 BCE) that the curses had already been carried out, that they themselves were “the remnant”, and that it was now time for redemption. Thus the passage and “this day” could as easily refer to the 7th century as to the 6th or later.

Scholars have long noticed that Deuteronomy has a lot in common with northern Israelite writings such as Hosea, as well as being focused on Shechem and other Israelite locations. If there was an Israelite hand at work there, it could have been an immigrant to Judah after 722 BCE, possibly bringing older material with him. If that’s true, “this day” might closely follow the Assyrian conquest after all.26

26 Rashi gives another argument in support of the earlier reference: he says that the term “another land”, being singular, can’t refer to the Babylonian exiles, because the latter went to many lands. This argument is unfortunately weak, since 2Kings17 says the Israelites went to “Halah and in Habor [by] the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.”
The Metaphysics of the Day

The gap of time between the punishment and “this day” is the key to the argument. Of course one would expect that the gap would be small, that the observers of God’s anger would be speaking about an event within their lifetime (at most a few decades after 722 or 587 BCE). But the “future generation” may only have heard about the events, in which case “this day” could be much later—perhaps R. Aqiva’s time, or ours. This possibility is suggested by both the Torah context and the Talmudic commentary, wherein R. Shimon ben Yehudah of Acco adds a qualification mediating the disagreement between Aqiva and Eliezer:

If their deeds are as this day, they will not return; if not, they will return.

Shimon further extends the play on the word ki, in its meaning of “like” or “as” rather than the more obvious contextual sense of “until”. Aqiva and Eliezer compare the fate of the Israelites to characteristics of either a single day or multiple days, in the abstract. Shimon emphasizes particularity: the deeds of this day are immoral; repentance requires changing so as to be able to see a different kind of day.

Now Deut.29:28 surely indicates that the punishment has already occurred, so Shimon’s reference cannot be to the conduct of the Israelites prior to 722 BCE. It must refer to the time of their exile. And the reason that the rabbis think the text is referring to Israelites rather than Judeans is that the exile of the former is, on their view, still in effect. In other words, they are relying on the possibility of reading “today” in the text as their own day. If when I read the Bible story I take it as my story, then when I read “today” I can take it literally as my today. The immoral character of Shimon’s “this day” is specific to the Roman Empire. But in a deeper sense, it is similar to that decried by Cicero and conservatives of every generation, who contrast today with the good old days.

So the Ten Tribes are in no worse a position than the rest of us—as we have already surmised. We all wait for “that day” which the prophets described. That will be better than this (if only we have the understanding and will to follow God’s way). Therefore in the Babylonian Talmud, R. Yehudah, the sage so revered that he is commonly referred to simply as “Rabbi”, sides directly with Eliezer. He says “they are coming to the world to come”, and points to Isaiah 27:13:

…in that day the great trumpet shall be blown, and they shall come who were ready to perish in the land of Assyria…

The choice of Isaiah 27:13, with the words “in that day” (b’yom hahu—בְּיָם הָאָוָדָה), provides a perfect counterpoint to “this day”, and proves the case of R. Eliezer. The Bible has already spoken on the return of the Ten Tribes: here and elsewhere it states that the reconciliation of Israel and Judah will be one of the miraculous events of the messianic era.
What we have in the interpretive leaps and countermoves of Aqiva, Eliezer, Shimon and “Rabbi” is a kind of implicit *metaphysics of the day*, suggesting alternative orientations toward everyday experience in its particularity and its universality. They are dealing with the basic dialectic of time, which unfolds from the simple act of saying “now”, and seeing that the “now” that was named is no longer now.

- Aqiva emphasizes the uniqueness and unrepeatability of the “now” and today, and the dimension of moral responsibility that attaches to it: *there isn’t always a second chance*.
- Eliezer views time as essentially circular (day, night, and day again). We learn and grow, day by day. And even if an individual doesn’t get a second chance at the crucial actions of his life, there is the chance of setting things right in the next generation. (The Samaritans might yet atone for the sins of 2900 years ago!)
- Shimon in effect asserts that the character of the future depends on one’s moral understanding and behavior, and on the moral level of society. *Whether time has the character of decay and loss or repetition and return depends on us, and the kind of life we are able to imagine and to lead together.*
- “Rabbi” reminds them all that “this day” is always balanced by “that day”—that everyday suffering is promised a redemptive future in the messianic age (or in the sage’s intimations of eternity).

Each step is dialectical. The focus on the uniqueness of the present, or presence as such, involves an abstraction from the connectedness of time. It provokes a counter-movement, a reversion to a wider context, focused on the fact that a “day” only has meaning in relation to the nights and days preceding and following it, which provide both the historical and the moral dimension of life. This very fact, however, shows that outcomes are contingent on both the individual and society—the sinner *might* get a second chance, which might or might not do any good. The contingency of value then invokes an even wider (perhaps the widest) context—the ideal—in which all failures are ultimately redeemed. The ideal language that philosophy and religion pursue would make manifest that the world is ultimately good.

**Hermeneutics in the Covenant of Moab**

Did all this philosophical interpretation arise out of nothing but a willful misreading of *kiyom hazeh*? Is it really just an imposition upon the text? On the contrary, the Covenant of Moab (the context of Aqiva's quotation) is itself an

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27 The Talmudic concept of qualitative time and “destiny” are examined at length below in “Three Kings” part 1, section B.
28 The pursuit of such language may be seen as the fundamental theme of this book, which will come progressively to the fore, culminating in the final reading and Coda.
unparalleled assertion of the importance of re-interpretation, and is itself built on different uses of the word “day”, which occurs 16 times in its 48 verses. 12 times it appears as “today”, twice as “this day”, and twice in the expression “extension of your days”. Through this repetition the oration builds from a surprising beginning—

YHWH did not give you a heart to know and eyes to see and ears to hear until this day (29:3)

— to the final exhortation to

choose life … because He is your life and the extension of your days…

In between, the primary connotation of “today” is established through the central verses (14-15):

Nor is it with you only that I make this sworn covenant— with him who stands here with us today before YHWH our God—but [also] with him who is not here with us today.

Jews have always thrilled to the idea that God makes/renews a covenant with us, today; that the essence of religion is found in the living present, not in the distant past. Of course this present is only possible through education and tradition; indeed the expression “extend your days” recalls the 5th commandment:

Honor your father and mother, so that your days will be extended on the land that YHWH your God is giving you.

The covenant with God is essentially intergenerational. But it only succeeds if each generation renews it in the same spirit of novelty and history-making as those who stood before Moses in Moab.

The surprising beginning of the Moab speech, the assertion that the Israelites did not understand the meaning of the Exodus and the giving of the Law, even when they entered the covenant at Mt. Horeb, is a clever presentation of this paradox of intergenerational discourse, in which the central meaning is both old and new, universal and particular. From the standpoint of today, the tradition appears to be encased in a block of ice—its rituals in some ways mere habit, its language littered with dead metaphors, its texts fixed in a historically arbitrary form—and the core can only be reclaimed by shattering or melting the ice.

—Not that this is ever completely true. It is rather that the understanding of previous generations always appears more literal-minded, more mundane and less spontaneous than it really was. But if it didn’t appear so, the transmission would lack that revolutionary spirit—the spirit of contention and dialectic—which is actually a precondition for entering the covenant (and indeed, the world to come). The saying of Deuteronomy 29:3 (God didn’t let you understand until
today) recognizes that as times change, language loses its original intelligibility, and must be reanimated dialectically. God Himself provides the inspiration—the heart, eyes and ears—for drawing out of tradition the meaning that lies uncomprehended within it (uncomprehended because only now have its historical conditions of intelligibility come into existence). Unlike mere factual knowledge, which can be passed on in a fixed form and built upon through the generations, the pursuit of wisdom involves an essential element of creativity and personal decision.

In sum, just as the Ten Tribes would have to “return” in the double sense of teshuvah—that is, they would first have to atone for their conduct in the kingdom of Israel and receive divine forgiveness, before they could enjoy the world to come (or be allowed to see the messianic age from Samaria and Galilee)—so, say the rabbis, must each of us repent, return and be reborn into the possibility of divine favor and wisdom … into the world to come.—This is the conceit of their writing, which lets us practice the movements of teshuvah.

The “Three Kings” gemara, with its long excursus on Lamentations, will present a most vivid example of this practice. But first let’s take another practice run through the dialectic of history and myth, and begin to consider the sophisticated conception of language that the rabbis seems to share with the philosophers.

Prelude 2: Truth, Myth and Writing

Saving the Myth: God’s Own Writing

Many Jews and some Christians have long been enamored of the myth that Hebrew is the original language of God and man, before the event of Babel; and that the so-called Hebrew alphabet (א ב ג ד ה ו … ק ר ש נ) is likewise original and divine. But before the return of the Jews from Babylonia, and the incorporation of Judea into the Persian Empire (around 500 BC), the Hebrew language was written in the script (א ב ג ד ה ו … פ צ ו ת) that modern scholars call “Paleo-Hebrew” or “Phoenician”. (Some also know it as “Samaritan”.) The later “Hebrew” alphabet is more properly called Aramaic, the variation developed in Syria (Aram) and later used throughout the Assyrian/Persian Empire. So the myth contains a glaring factual error.

Now as it happens, the original Phoenician/Hebrew alphabet really is the forerunner of all the modern alphabets (Greek, Roman, Arabic, Cyrillic, Sanskrit, etc.). (You can confirm this in a few seconds with Google.) But would it make sense to “correct” the myth by transferring long-cultivated feelings for the “square letters” to the older alphabet? This question is an instance of a more general and fundamental question: what is the relation between truth and myth? Granted that myths can possess a kind of “truth” or meaning of their own, what is the relationship between that kind of meaning and historical truth?
To begin with a simple problem we would encounter in the case of the myth of Hebrew: although there is something to the claim about the originality of the Hebrew alphabet, it by no means extends to the origins of writing in general. Cuneiform and hieroglyphic writing systems are a couple of millennia older. And the claim about the historical originality of the Hebrew language has no scientific support whatsoever. Someone might assert that the Paleo-Hebrew alphabet was used to write the first copies of the Torah. But was that in the time of Moses, or as historical criticism has it, some time after the Babylonian Exile? It looks like the alphabet wasn’t fully developed by Moses’ time, let alone the technology to write out a book of 80,000 words. On the other hand, if the Torah in its present 5-part form didn’t exist until the 5th century BCE—that’s just when the Aramaic alphabet began to be adopted in Judea! Is any of this relevant to the meaning of the myth about Hebrew? It at least helps us to focus on the myth as myth—as having its meaning in a logical space other than the historical.

Another kind of problem with correcting the myth isn’t so much a matter of archaeology or other sciences as it is a matter of politics. As I said, Paleo-Hebrew is sometimes called “Samaritan”. That’s because for the last 2000 years or so, the only people to use it were the so-called Samaritans, the descendants of the Israelites of the northern kingdom, which was conquered by Assyria in 722 BC. After the return from Babylonia, the Judeans rejected their co-religionists to the north, and intensified a hostile rivalry that had been going on since before the time of King David. The Samaritans of Talmudic times took pride in the archaic character of their writing, which represented their general religious conservatism. (They not only rejected the “new” alphabet, they rejected the “new” Biblical books of prophetic, poetic and historical writings, considering only the Torah to be holy.) If Jews were to suddenly embrace the old alphabet, it would be giving their ancient enemies too big a propaganda victory. The question about truth and myth is also a question about truth and tradition.

So the idea of correcting myths might look doubly misguided. But it still strikes me that there is a virtue (and perhaps ultimately a necessity) in approaching religious language with an awareness of the relevant facts, including the political background. This isn’t because I have any interest in “debunking” religious language—a thoroughly pointless exercise—but because I think that it is inevitably entangled with historical understanding, and that working through the details of this entanglement is therefore part of the task of appropriating the poetic and spiritual intentions of the traditional material. To “correct” a myth most sensibly means: to translate it into contemporary form, with awareness of current scientific, historical and spiritual realities. In contrast, looking only at objective facts (thinking that they are “the end of the story”) is a way of avoiding the demands of history and the spirit.

Myths often express insights regarding perennial issues in the form of accounts of origins. For example, the Greek myth that man and woman were originally joined as a single animal, before getting split apart, expresses something about our interdependence and incompleteness. And the myth about Hebrew expresses something about the nature of language and symbolism, and the mystery of finite, material signs that convey transcendent, universal
meanings. Origin myths often represent the future in the form of the past, that is, they project what is really a goal or ideal back into a golden age or cosmic pre-history. So the myth of the holy signs can be viewed as symbolizing the ideal state of language that religion and philosophy contemplate and pursue: language that would adequately describe and address the world as a whole, expressing its transcendent beauty while making manifest the requirements of justice.

The Talmud contains a discussion of the Hebrew alphabets, within a meditation that both aims at and tries to demonstrate what such language might be like.

**The Talmudic Discussion**

The rabbis also assumed that the deeper meanings conveyed in myth can be explored in connection with factual history. The Talmud is careful about facts while yet remembering that something else—interpretive understanding on a par with the myth of divine writing—is even more important. They were unafraid of historical knowledge, and they certainly knew about the priority of the Phoenician over the Aramaic script. They explicitly call the older letters “Hebrew”, and refer to the Aramaic alphabet as “Assyrian”, in memory of the empire that made Aramaic so prevalent. At the same time, the general opinion of these rabbis, in keeping with the myth, is that a Torah written in “Assyrian” letters has a uniquely holy status, infinitely preferable to the status of the Torahs of the Samaritans. How can this be, if the rabbis recognized that the Phoenician/Hebrew alphabet preceded the Aramaic, being used in the First Temple and earlier?

The question is addressed in the passage of Sanhedrin starting at page 21b. It may help us explore the possibility of ascending from the letter to the spirit in the context of tradition.

Once again I am plunging into the middle of a wider discussion. Consider it practice for the main study of this volume, in which the complete sugya of the “Three Kings” will be examined.

**The Chiasm**

The subject of the alphabets appears as a digression from the topic of the laws pertaining to the kings of the Israelites, as sanctioned by the Torah. (The relevant text is brief, taking up only part of one chapter, the 17th chapter of Deuteronomy.) The discussion begins with restrictions on the king’s wealth (his money, horses and wives), then moves on to his obligation to write out his own copy of “this teaching” (hatorah hazoth הָתּוֹרָה הָזֹאת), which the rabbis take to mean the whole 5-part Torah.

And he [the king] shall write in his own name a Book of Instruction (sefer torah).
The discussion takes a left turn when the question is raised as to whether the
duty of copying the Torah applies not just to kings but also to commoners
(hedyototh). Instead of answering, the discussion continues with an interpretation
of the phrase “he shall write for himself a copy of this teaching” (w’katav lo eth
mishneh hatorah hazoth) as meaning that not
one but two “copies” (or if you like, an original and a copy) must be written.

He shall write for himself two copies, one which goes in and out with him and the
other to be placed in his treasure-house.

The editor follows this with what appears to be a tangent occasioned by the topic
of writing Torah scrolls:

Mar Zutra or, as some say, Mar ‘Ukba said: Originally the Torah was given to
Israel in Hebrew characters and in the sacred [Hebrew] language; later, in the
times of Ezra, the Torah was given in Assyrian [ashurith] script and Aramaic
language. [Finally], they selected for Israel the Assyrian script and Hebrew
language, leaving the Hebrew characters and Aramaic language for the “idiots”
(hedyototh). Who are meant by the hedyototh? —R. Chisda answers: The
Kutheans. And what is meant by Hebrew characters? —R. Chisda said: The
libuna’ah [baked, as clay tablets] script.

One rabbinic authority (Mar Zutra) says that the Torah was given in
Hebrew (language and script), then changed during the Babylonian Exile to
Aramaic (language and script), before finally being divided and dispersed into
two forms: one using Hebrew characters to represent Aramaic speech, the other
using Aramaic characters to represent Hebrew. Since speech takes precedence
over writing, the latter is to be preferred. Only “idiots” would prefer the form over
the content.

Who are the “idiots”? he asks, and answers: Kutheans. This is the term
used everywhere in the Talmud for Samaritans. It is a slur based on the story in
2Kings17, which says that the conquering Assyrians deported the entire
population of Israel and replaced them with people from, among other places,
Kuthah in Mesopotamia. (The Samaritans, needless to say, reject the denial of
their Israelite heritage in 2Kings 17.)

Mar Zutra says much that is true: Aramaic was indeed introduced into
Judea after the exile; and its alphabet was used there even for the Hebrew
Scriptures. He is also politically frank: he implies that part of the purpose of using
Aramaic writing was simply the desire of Jews to separate themselves from the
Samaritans. Both the change of writing and the shunning of the Samaritans are
credited to the Jewish hero (and Samaritan arch-enemy) Ezra.

29 see Neh.8:1ff.
30 After the Jews destroyed the Samaritan Temple and slaughtered thousands in 113 BCE, the
two groups became locked in a pattern familiar to us from Protestants and Catholics, Sunnis and
Shiites, et. al.: neighboring groups divided by a nearly-common tradition, telling jokes and lies
On the other hand, the idea that the Torah was translated into Aramaic and back again is far-fetched; and the insinuation that the Samaritan Torah is in Aramaic is a kind of slanderous poetic license. Both Jews and Samaritans had Aramaic translations (called Targums) in circulation, and both regarded only their Hebrew versions as sacred. It is true that the Samaritans use a form of the original Hebrew alphabet. But the assertion that Samaritans only use it to represent the Aramaic language is false, despite the elegance of Mar Zutra’s chiasmus: in fact, both Samaritans and Jews spoke Aramaic in everyday life, and Hebrew in prayer and religious study (if they were educated enough). So the snide implication is that all Jews are educated and no Samaritans are. But the Talmud itself takes the form of Aramaic commentaries (Gemara) on Hebrew pronouncements (Mishnah).

But by stretching things into this elegant chiasm of switched alphabets, Mar Zutra has created an image or template that will take on deeper meanings. (It is rather like the yin/yang symbol: a spot of yang within the yin, and yin within the yang.) Within its space, three attempts are made to preserve the mystique of the written Torah and the now-traditional Aramaic alphabet, against the knowledge of its historical secondariness.

Three Solutions

1. Identity through Change

The first attempt tries to make a virtue out of secondariness. It says that the change to Aramaic writing was a divine gift, bestowed on and through the saintly Ezra; and that it was pre-ordained.

It has been taught: R. Jose said: Had Moses not preceded him, Ezra would have been worthy of receiving the Torah for Israel. […] And even though the Torah was not given through him, its writing was changed through him, as it is written:

And the writing of the letter was written in the Aramaic character and interpreted into the Aramaic [tongue].

And again it is written, And they could not read the writing nor make known to the king the interpretation thereof.

Further, it is written: And he shall write the copy [mishneh] of this law, — in writing which was destined to be changed. Why is it called Ashurith? — Because it came with them from Assyria.

The effusiveness of the acclamation of Ezra as a second Moses raises the suspicion that the rabbis knew more than they let on about the late date of the

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about each other, committing the occasional massacre when it served somebody’s political purposes.

31 Ezra 4:7
32 Daniel 5:8
33 Deut.17:18
editing of the Torah. Historical criticism indeed points to the 5th century BCE—the time of Ezra—as the likely time for this event. R.E. Friedman, in *Who Wrote the Bible?*, guessed that Ezra himself did the job. So the project of valorizing changes in the tradition might apply to the content as well as the form of the Torah.

The discussion returns to *Deut. 17:18* (“he shall write for himself a copy [מִשְׁנָה mishnah of this teaching”) in order to derive the interpretation that the Hebrew script was “writing destined to be changed” (*katav hara’oi l’hishtenoth* חֲבֵּל הָרָאֹר לַהַיסְּתַנֶּה). This, like the earlier interpretation that the king must write two copies, is a kind of word-play based on the ambiguity of the root *shanah* (שָׁנָה), which can connote both change and repetition or copy. We may wonder about the validity of such reasoning; but we can see that the seemingly random digression from the king’s Torah(s) to the two alphabets has now been at least partly justified. In fact *shanah* forms the semantic backbone of the whole discussion; the field of demonstration is primarily provided by Biblical quotations involving it. *Shanah* itself has a meaning that relates to both concepts: “year”.

Because of this ambiguity, the word is useful for representing continuity through change, and the interdependence of unity and duality. This is the subtle topic beneath the outward topic. The subtle topic is a matter of philosophy and tradition. It is a question of identity through repetition and change, or the necessity of duality: the duality of old and new, Israel and Judah; of the written Torah and the “oral” Torah (Mishnah); of the letter and the meaning beyond the letter. Seeing all this, we may also see the logic of the first apparent digression, from the question of whether everyone has to copy (or change) the Torah, and how the rights and duties of the individual relate to those of king and High Priest—in other words, the question of *how the actual relates to the ideal*.

R. Yose emphasizes continuity through change, in tradition or life in general. Not only is growth and innovation necessary for survival; sometimes the spirit is preserved through a complete reversal of outward form. The new always claims to be the truth of the old. When we judge that God intended or foresaw the change, we are acknowledging the claim of continuity, saying that we can see things that way.

The *Mishnah*, the originally-oral “repetition” of the Torah that is the core of the Talmud, is of course another derivative of *shanah*. It was edited by our third authority.

2. Dialectical Return

The second response to the problem of the two alphabets turns doubling into redoubling. It makes use of the principle of dialectic that was manifest in the “Ten Tribes” discussion: the principle that complete or authentic understanding requires both the negation of an original position (“exile”) and the negation of the result thus obtained (“return”), so that the original position is embraced in a new way.
If the philosophers who deem this a basic feature of human nature are correct, there is no need to wonder about whether the rabbis read Greek philosophy, for we are dealing with something universal. Even Zen Buddhism makes use of the principle, as quoted in the 1960’s pop song: “First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is.” In the more eloquent words of T.S. Eliot, the goal of wisdom is “to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time”.

It has been taught: Rabbi said: The Torah was originally given to Israel in this [“Assyrian”] writing. When they sinned, it was changed into ro’az.34 But when they repented, the [Assyrian characters] were re-introduced, as it is written: Turn to the stronghold, you prisoners of hope; even today do I declare that I will restore to you double [mishneh].35 So why was it named ashurith? — Because its script was upright [me’ushshar].

“Rabbi” (Yehudah the Prince, leader of Palestinian Jewry at the end of the 2nd century, and final editor of the Mishnah) is a great authority, but his claims seem fantastic. They stretch back into the mist of antiquity, and may hang on nothing more than the obscure remark of Deut.26:5 (“a destitute Aramean was my father”). He says that the “Assyrian” alphabet had actually preceded the “Hebrew” letters used in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, so that the post-exilic adoption of the former was actually a return to the original. Not one, but two changes were destined.

Surely Rabbi Yehudah, who lived long before Mar Zutra, and was therefore closer in time to the historical realities in question, knew the facts as well as he. Is he just creating a myth to solve the problem (and to score a point of propaganda against the Samaritans)? Or is his eye on something else? I think he tips his hand when he asserts that Jewish memory is wrong in thinking that the term “Assyrian” applied to the Jewish alphabet reflects its use in Assyria. His derivation of ashurith from me’ushshar (מע”ש) meaning “upright”—a word with both spatial and moral connotations—shows that the real topic of discussion is the moral above the historical.

More often than not, the keys to puzzles in the Talmud are given in the Biblical quotations it offers as proof. Here we have Zechariah 9:12, “I will restore to you double” (mishneh ‘ashiv lecha). Zechariah lived in the early days of Persian Judea, urging the very repentance that is supposed to have brought about a return of the alphabet. But Zechariah chapter 9 is the beginning of a later appendix; it speaks about the Greeks, who arrived much later. More time has elapsed without the restoration of a Jewish king; the prophet’s eyes are on a more ideal future, when the promised king will rule not just Palestine but the whole world, and Israel and Judah will be reconciled (unlike the Samaritans and Jews of Talmudic times).

34 ro’az = “broken” or “rugged”-looking letters, appropriate to chiseled inscriptions, as opposed to the flowing Aramaic characters, more appropriate to pen and ink
35 Zech.9:12
For I have bent Judah as my bow, I have made Ephraim its arrow… I will strengthen the house of Judah, and I will save the house of Joseph, I will bring them back because I have compassion on them, and they will be as though I had not rejected them.

It will be as though history had never occurred. Rabbi Yehudah looks to the distant past and the messianic future. History, stretching out between them, looks like a time of error and sin, a nightmare from which we are trying to awaken. But in another sense his hope has, as in Christianity, already been realized; we may regard the elements of our tradition as “original”, to the extent that we also “return” in repentance to the Origin. Here the “already” (already promised, already saved) is strangely dependent on the “not yet” (of ultimate reconciliation). Our human condition is an oscillation between these two perspectives, the standpoint of the practical and the standpoint of the ideal from which the practical gets its meaning. Meaning is the “double”, the mishneh that religious insight “restores” after the “destined” or necessary changes of practical existence have rendered it absurd.

Dialectical thinking requires that change be understood as a return. The new is compelled to present itself as the truth of the old. Continuing a tradition, a family or a life at the most authentic level requires an exile from what is merely familiar but unexamined. This makes it possible to know our familiar environment “for the first time”—know it, that is, as truly our own. In this way we understand being human not as the expression of a static personal essence, implanted at conception, but as a creative achievement out of material and cultural elements. Our truest, most sacred “home” is only reached through such creation.

“Rabbi” characterizes the exile as a time of sin. In one sense this refers to the time before the Second Temple, but in another sense it refers to all history, in between Genesis and the messianic end. All our efforts at renewing/preserving culture and making it our own are caught in this duality as well: they aim at an ideal that exists only at the horizon of historical experience. This interdependence of the real and the ideal is reflected in Rabbi’s blending of the factual and the mythic in his account of the alphabets.

3. As If

But the ideal must also be sufficient unto itself, or it is not ideal. The third response articulates this point of view.

R. Shimon b. Eliezer said on the authority of R. Eliezer b. Parta, who spoke on the authority of R. Eleazar of Modin: This writing [of the law] was never changed, for

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36 Ephraim, the most prominent of the northern Israelite tribes, is often used by Biblical writers to stand for those tribes as a whole
37 Joseph, the father of Ephraim and Manasseh, is also frequently used to stand for all Israel in opposition to Judah.
it is written: *The ‘wawim’ [hooks] of the pillars*. As the word ‘pillars’ had not changed, neither had the word *wawim*. Again it is written, *And unto the Jews, according to their writing and language*. As their language had not changed, neither had their writing. Then how shall I interpret the words, *and he shall write for himself a copy [mishneh] of this teaching?* — As indicating the need of two written Torahs; the one to go in and out with him; the other to be deposited by him in his treasure-house. The one that is to go in and out with him, he is to write in the form of an amulet and attach to his arm, as it is written, *I have set God always before me*. But how does the other [who maintains that the writing was changed] interpret *I have set [etc.]*? — He employs it as R. Hanah b. Bizna, who said in the name of R. Shimon the Pious: He who prays should regard himself [i.e., behave] as if the *Shechinah* were before him, as it is written, *I have set God always before me*.

The final account of the history of Hebrew writing abandons factuality completely. It claims that the Israelites never used anything but the “Assyrian” characters. The author of this account, another Rabbi Shimon (ben Eliezer), did not expect that his audience would take him literally. If they did, they would be missing his point. He expresses a different attitude toward the facts, or toward the relationship between the real and the ideal. The ideal doesn’t exist at the horizon of experience, but alongside it, as its meaning and possibility.

*waw* is both the 6th letter of the alphabet and a common word meaning “hook”. In its earliest form it was [graphic:Sinaitic waw] which became [graphic:Phoenician waw] or [graphic:Phoenician waw variant] in Phoenician/Hebrew. Sometimes the “arms” of this form lost their symmetry [later Hebrew waw]; down this path lay the Greek letter digamma [digamma] and the Roman F. In the Dead Sea Scrolls it has become [graphic:DSS waw] which looks like a transition to the Samaritan [graphic:Samaritan waw]. Aramaic simplified it early on to the 1 of Modern Hebrew. Rabbi Shimon’s argument makes the most sense if he is looking at the un-hook-like Samaritan version, but loses its force if we look back to the versions of the 11th-7th centuries BCE. Indeed, the hooks needed to hang curtains from pillars were probably more like [graphic:Phoenician Waw variant] than 1.

Although they can be forgiven for lack of familiarity with the evolution of the *waw* (not to mention their failure to consider the possibility that the Priestly text in *Exodus* was actually written after the Exile, as most 20th century critics believed), their second argument is simply weak: in the text from *Esther*, “their script” and “their language” may simply mean the script and language that they currently use, not what they once used. King Ahasuerus’ order is that his message be sent “to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language”. Since the province is an imperial administrative unit, “its script” probably means the script used for local government business, which extended

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38 *Shechinah* = the divine presence, God’s manifestation to humans
to industry and commerce. With a largely illiterate populace, this would have constituted the bulk of the writing in the province. So the script might well have been Aramaic, even while most of the inhabitants of Judea still spoke Hebrew.

We may assume that the more far-fetched claim is offered in this way to make it even easier for us to pass on to the subtle meaning. R. Shimon’s Biblical quotations pertain to the construction of the Tabernacle, the portable prototype of the Temple used by the Israelites under Moses (Ex.27:10); and to the salvation of the Persian Jews from antisemitic purges. Here again, as with “Rabbi”, we see a confrontation of the ideal and the historical; but now the ideal shows itself to be, not the distant-past-and-future boundary of history, but rather its eternal truth.

R. Shimon’s argument takes a literal attitude toward the interpretation of mishneh, and the quotation “I have set God always before me”—as if a copy of the Torah were God Himself. But the editor explains it with the words of Rabbi Chana: “He who prays should regard himself as if the Shechinah were before him.” When we are focused on God, it is as if God were present to us. God is not present to us in the normal course of things, in the everyday and the factual. Religious meaning is like a coded message running through the shapes of historical events and our everyday experience. But in a sense it is at odds with them.

Wise Guys and Idiots

MISHNAH: And he [the king] shall write in his own name a Book of Instruction (sefer torah).

GEMARA: A Tanna taught: And he must not take clothe himself with one belonging to his ancestors.

Rabbah said: Even if one's parents have left him a Sefer Torah, yet it is proper that he should write one of his own, as it is written: Now therefore write this song for you.40

Abaye raised an objection: ‘He shall write a Sefer Torah for himself, for he should not clothe himself with one belonging to others:’ [This applies] only to a king, but not a commoner [hedyoth]?

Because my topic was the alphabet, I jumped into the middle of the Talmudic discussion. There the consideration of the alphabet was subsidiary to the problem of universal education (or educability), framed as the question of whether everyone has to write his own copy (mishneh) of the Torah. (The Torah itself assigns this duty to the Israelite king, in Deut.17:18.) Not only does this task presuppose a good education, it also symbolizes the creative aspect (shanah as change) of human identity and continuity that emerges in the subsequent discussion. The scribe, after all, has the power to revise.

39 Psalms 16:8
40 Deut.31:19
Given this context, the chiasm of the switched alphabets, which appeared as the culmination of the first and most factual account, now reveals its deeper meaning. The clue is that in the question about writing one’s own Torah, the uneducated masses are referred to as “idiots”—just like the users of the old alphabet. The Samaritan, regarded (by the rabbis) as a kind of false or outmoded Jew, bears much the same relation to the rabbis as does the unobservant or uneducated (or young or poor or handicapped or female) Jew—in other words, the average person.

Judaism, like all philosophies of moral perfectionism, compares everyone to the ideal—king, priest, prophet, sage. The downside is that everyone comes up short; but in practice a certain class of people is considered good enough to stand in for the ideal. What the chiasm represents is the distribution of wisdom between these wise guys and all the rest of the idiots. The former do not have a monopoly that shuts out the latter (there’s some yin in the yang), and the latter may have virtues all their own (yang in the yin). For even the wise are compromised by the use of language, and by all the other contingencies of life standing between intention and outcome. And even the most humble has not only a unique history, and a private joy and terror in the face of existence, but also the power to make a moral claim on everyone else (especially the wise).

The symbol of the chiasm works on both the moral and factual levels, because factuality and moral imagination themselves reflect the crossed relationship. The most objective historical knowledge is still formed by a story-like recounting of events, whose horizon is tied to the interests of the historian. And even myth aims at a kind of truth.

More generally, the chiasm represents the relation between speech and writing themselves. We tend to think of this relation in a way that emphasizes the priority of the former over the latter: speech seems spontaneous, lively and close to the mind or spirit; writing seems fixed, mechanical and unresponsive, and its interpretation can stray far away from the writer’s intention. This was Plato’s complaint in the Phaedrus, and Mar Zutra probably had something like this in mind.

But the gap between writing and speech can sometimes work in our favor. We can give an example from the history of the alphabet itself. The consonant nature of Semitic languages (where grammatical conjugations are mostly indicated by vowel patterns) led naturally to a consonantal alphabet; but this ensured ambiguities (words with same consonants but different vowels) from the beginning. For a long time nobody had a solution; then the vowels started suggesting themselves by virtue of linguistic processes going on beneath the surface, as it were. Some words that ended in ya or wa—thus spelled with final yod (י) or waw (ו)—lost their final syllable. Then the final consonant merged into a diphthong with the preceding vowel—aya, for example, became ay; and after

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41 I borrow the term from Stanley Cavell, who defines it in Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome (U. of Chicago Press, 1990) as “not a competing theory of the moral life, but something like a dimension or tradition of the moral life…a tradition that places tremendous burdens on personal relationships and on the possibility or necessity of the transforming of oneself and of one’s society…”
awhile the diphthong become a monophthong—ay became i, aw became o. At this point a final yod or waw was in effect a vowel, and could be recognized as such; so people started using these letters as vowels inside words as well as at the end. The same process was repeated with hay and aleph.

The emergence of unambiguous writing was slow and fortuitous. It depended on the gap between speech and writing, and on their tendency to slip apart over time. But there is a more general reason to doubt the position of Plato and Mar Zutra. The fact is that writing can be as creative, spontaneous and self-revelatory as speech. And speech is often subject to the same slippery interpretability, and can even have many of the same “mechanical” features, as writing. All language brings with it the problems of education and moral leadership, of preservation through creation.

For it is as if language—or even thought itself—were a material medium against which we must struggle, always threatening us with the possibility that what we say comes out as inappropriate, misleading, insincere, mere mimicry or nonsense (which is equivalent to silence). We can transcend the material level through creative attention to the uniqueness of the present (the focus of Aqiva’s statement in the “Ten Tribes” ruling), and to its eternal meaning. But this effort is always fallible—there are limits to creativity and interpretation— and in a sense has already failed. The old had to be untrue for the new to be its truth. Israel had to fall for Judah to become the New Israel. Our language was formed by, and thus reflects our historical or fallen state. Language itself calls out for the rectification of what has been skewed, the unification of expression and intention, the proper balance between old and new, and a dialectical appropriation of the alien world in which we find ourselves.

The Two Copies

No, it is necessary here to teach the need for two Books of Instruction, even as it has been taught: And he shall write him the copy [mishneh] of this law⁴² [w’katav lo eth mishneh hatorah hazoth]— he shall write for himself two copies, one which goes in and out with him and the other to be placed in his treasure-house. The former which is to go in and out with him, [he shall write in the form of an amulet and fasten it to his arm, as it is written, I have set God always before me, surely He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.]⁴³ He may not, while wearing it, enter the bath house, or the closet, as it is written: And it shall be with him and he shall read therein⁴⁴ — in places appropriate for reading it.

The sugya is framed by two iterations of a peculiar interpretation: in accordance with the meaning of mishneh as “copy” or “second”, it is said that the king in Deut.17:18 is actually commanded to write two copies of the Torah. One

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⁴² Deut.17:18
⁴³ Psalm 16:8
⁴⁴ Deut.17:19
stays at home, and one goes out with him to war. One is studied and interpreted; the other is carried like a talisman. The latter is connected with the idea that there are limits to understanding; reason, it is said, can even get in the way of understanding.\footnote{The example given is King Solomon, who is said to have ignored the commandment prohibiting many wives because that commandment (unlike many others) comes with a rationale, explaining that its purpose concerns the psychological attitude of the king (he must not get a swelled head). Solomon mistakenly thought that he could control his attitude despite the wives, so that everything would be okay.} Explanations, as Wittgenstein said, always come to an end somewhere. But in ritualistic behavior there is an “as if”: although we are not whole, although we don’t have the time or skill to copy the Torah, and things are skewed, and reality is harsh and distracting, it is as if we were in God’s presence. It is as if the reconciliation of myth and history can be accomplished by our efforts in the next moment, hour or year. And ritual, in this sense of living and acting in God’s presence, can extend everywhere—even to the worst of human situations, war.

To sum up, the Talmud shows us how myth and parable can envelop factual and literal meaning without seriously falsifying or violating it. The history of the alphabet may have been misunderstood, but understanding it correctly can still be done in such a way as to remind ourselves of what is most important. The mutually implicated structure of myth and history reflects the relationship between the old and the new—between habit, upbringing and the trans-generational reality of culture, on the one hand, and objective observation, calculation and logic on the other. We have to apply reason to that which is initially learned by rote or absorbed through cultural osmosis. We have to make a dialectical turn. But it would be foolish to wish for nothing but the literal facts, for the letters always point beyond themselves.

Both writing and language can be perceived as holy through creative understanding that transcends their materiality. This transcendence is a change of perspective from natural to moral: the “original” we seek to see “for the first time” is everyday reality considered as a field of moral and aesthetic possibility, where we who consider ourselves non-idiots are responsible for educating the idiots, even as we realize that the teacher must learn from the student, and that both scholar and idiot are present in varying ways and degrees in us all.

We need to atone for the propaganda against the Samaritans, but without losing sight of the great innovations of the rabbinical tradition. We can recognize that moral feeling naturally grows out of love of one’s own, while heeding the imperative to extend our moral horizon to the widest possible circle of humanity and other feeling creatures. And we can understand the material basis of speech and thought without losing sight of its infinite potential: the potential for pure “blessing”, which the rabbis will pursue in the following readings.
MISHNAH: And he [the king] shall write in his own name a Book of Instruction (sefer torah).

GEMARA: A Tanna taught: And he must not clothe himself with one belonging to his ancestors. Rabbah said: Even if one’s parents have left him a Sefer Torah, yet it is proper that he should write one of his own, as it is written: Now therefore write this song for you.\(^{46}\)

Abaye raised an objection: ‘He shall write a Sefer Torah for himself, for he should not clothe himself with one belonging to others.’ [This applies] only to a king, but not a commoner [hediyoth]? —No, it is necessary here to teach the need for two Books of Instruction, even as it has been taught: And he shall write him the copy [mishneh] of this law\(^{47}\) [w’katav lo eth mishneh hatorah hazoth — he shall write for himself two copies, one which goes in and out with him and the other to be placed in his treasure-house. The former which is to go in and out with him, [he shall write in the form of an amulet and fasten it to his arm, as it is written, I have set God always before me, surely He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.]\(^{48}\) He may not, while wearing it, enter the bath house, or the closet, as it is written: And it shall be with him and he shall read therein\(^{49}\) — in places appropriate for reading it.

Mar Zutra or, as some say, Mar 'Ukba said: Originally the Torah was given to Israel in Hebrew characters and in the sacred [Hebrew] language; later, in the times of Ezra,\(^{50}\) the Torah was given in Assyrian [ashurith] script and Aramaic language. [Finally], they selected for Israel the Assyrian script and Hebrew language, leaving the Hebrew characters and Aramaic language for the hedyotth. Who are meant by the ‘hedyotth’? —R. Chisda answers: The Kutheans. And what is meant by Hebrew characters? —R. Chisda said: The libuna'ah [baked, as clay tablets] script.

It has been taught: R. Jose said: Had Moses not preceded him, Ezra would have been worthy of receiving the Torah for Israel. Of Moses it is written, And Moses went up unto God,\(^{51}\) and of Ezra it is written, He, Ezra, went up from Babylon.\(^{52}\) As the going up of the former refers to the [receiving of the] Law, so does the going up of the latter. Concerning Moses, it is stated: And YHWH commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments;\(^{53}\) and concerning Ezra, it is stated: For Ezra had prepared his heart to expound the law of YHWH [his God] to do it and to teach Israel statutes and judgments.\(^{54}\) And even though the Torah was not given through him, its writing was changed

\(^{46}\) Deut.31:19  
\(^{47}\) Deut.17:18  
\(^{48}\) Psalm 16:8  
\(^{49}\) Deut.17:19  
\(^{50}\) see Neh.8:1ff.  
\(^{51}\) Exodus 19:3  
\(^{52}\) Ezra 7:6  
\(^{53}\) Deut.4:14  
\(^{54}\) Ezra 7:10
through him, as it is written: *And the writing of the letter was written in the Aramaic character and interpreted into the Aramaic [tongue].*\(^5\)\(^5\) And again it is written, *And they could not read the writing nor make known to the king the interpretation thereof.*\(^5\)\(^6\) Further, it is written: *And he shall write the copy [mishneh] of this teaching,*\(^5\)\(^7\) — in writing which was destined to be changed [l’hishtenoth]. Why is it called Assyrian? — Because it came with them from Assyria.

It has been taught: Rabbi said: The Torah was originally given to Israel in this [Assyrian] writing. When they sinned, it was changed into *Ro’az* [broken, rugged]. But when they repented, the [Assyrian characters] were re-introduced, as it is written: *Turn to the stronghold, you prisoners of hope; even today do I declare that I will restore to you double [mishneh].*\(^5\)\(^8\) So why was it named *ashshurith*? — Because its script was upright [*me’ushhar*].

R. Shimon b. Eliezer said on the authority of R. Eliezer b. Parta, who spoke on the authority of R. Eleazar of Modin: This writing was never changed, for it is written: *The ‘wawim’ [hooks] of the pillars.*\(^5\)\(^9\) As the word ‘pillars’ had not changed, neither had the word *wawim*. Again it is written, *And unto the Jews, according to their writing and language;*\(^6\)\(^0\) as their language had not changed, neither had their writing. Then how shall I interpret the words, and he shall write for himself a copy of this law? — As indicating the need of two written Torahs; the one to go in and out with him; the other to be deposited by him in his treasure-house. The one that is to go in and out with him, he is to write in the form of an amulet and attach to his arm, as it is written, *I have set God always before me.*\(^6\)\(^1\) But how does the other [who maintains that the writing was changed] interpret, *I have set [etc.]?* — He employs it as R. Hanah b. Bizna, who said in the name of R. Shimon the Pious: He who prays should regard himself as if the Shechinah were before him, as it is written, *I have set God always before me.*

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\(^5\)\(^5\) Ezra 4:7  
\(^5\)\(^6\) Daniel 5:8  
\(^5\)\(^7\) Deut.17:8  
\(^5\)\(^8\) Zech.9:12  
\(^5\)\(^9\) Exodus 27:10  
\(^6\)\(^0\) Esther 8:9  
\(^6\)\(^1\) Psalm 16:8
Three Kings part one: Jeroboam and Ahab

R. Abbahu used to make a practice of lecturing on the Three Kings. Falling sick, he undertook not to lecture [on them anymore]; yet no sooner had he recovered, than he lectured [on them] again. They [his disciples] remonstrated with him: Didn’t you undertake not to lecture on them? He replied: Did they abandon [their ways], that I should abandon [lecturing on them]?

—Sanhedrin 102a

A. How Religion Fails

1. Jeroboam’s name: boundaries, conflict and dialectic

MISHNA: Three kings and four commoners have no share toward the world to come… Three kings: Jeroboam, Ahab and Manasseh
GEMARA: Our rabbis taught: “Jeroboam” (Jeroboam) denotes that he debased the people (riba’ ‘am). A further meaning: he caused strife amongst the people (meribah b’am). A further meaning: he caused strife between Israel and their Father in Heaven.

Jeroboam led the rebellion of the northern tribes against the son of Solomon, and became the first king of independent Israel. In some sense he is to the Israelites as David is to the Judeans (except that his dynasty was replaced, and no one regards him as the prototype of the Messiah). Thus there is from the outset a political dimension to his sin, which the text will give us ample opportunity to explore: he represents the bad old Israel, which is the shadow of the good, new Israel. But we must first locate his symbolic value in our text.

Jeroboam is the first of the condemned kings, not just chronologically, but in a logical order: for he personifies a general principle that is antecedent to the principles represented by Ahab and Manasseh. R. Yochanan will tell us below that Jeroboam’s worst sins are equal to Ahab’s most minimal. In other words, the three syndromes represented by the kings are interlocking pieces of a downward
progression, the process by which religion (or the institutionalization of the ideal) goes wrong, and access to historical truth (or the applicability of the ideal) is lost.

If we need confirmation in advance of the pedagogical function of the kings in the analysis of the Bavli, we might look to the treatment of the kings in the earlier Talmud, the Yerushalmi. Its first sentence about them is: *they all invented new kinds of transgression*. By considering the “histories” of the “inventors” of the successive patterns of error, we are in fact analyzing general principles of human nature: inevitable pitfalls on the path to wisdom, which are not only to be avoided, but also to be made familiar, even confessed as our own. (I reiterate that these “general principles” are fully historical.)

Our text begins with the name Jeroboam (*yarov’am* יָרֹבָּם), and three interpretations of its meaning. Here a skeptical modern commentator might see the ancient view of names as the direct expression of a thing’s essence and destiny. But I would be no more dismissive of that view than I was of the mythic view of writing. What I want to emphasize instead are the methodological implications of the starting-point. In this etymological speculation there is no question of objective proof, nor any notion that one opinion is true while the others are false. Whereas it is often easy to get lost in surface details and apparently literal-minded concerns, the simple assertions about the name should let us proceed straightaway to the underlying issues that the Talmud wants us to contemplate.

It will be important to keep this beginning in mind as we deal with many of the historical and linguistic puzzles the text presents—puzzles that traditional commentary tends to resolve by fleeing from the general into the particular, and reducing the Talmudic text to a compendium of odd facts, and warnings about crimes you or I would never think of committing.

I have relied on both the Soncino English edition of the Bavli (*Sanhedrin* ch.11 translated and annotated by Dr. H. Freedman) and on the Schottenstein edition (notes and translation by Rabbis Joseph Elias and Dovid Katz). For the most part, both sets of comments (and those of the classical commentators cited therein) fall into the category of the conservative, literalistic and thus disappointing readings I have mentioned. Their treatment of the Talmudic name-analysis is a case in point. They wonder how the names of Biblical figures can express their spiritual destinies, since their parents surely didn’t think of the names in such negative ways when they named them. So one speculation is that the Bible records not their birth-names, but names later given to them by their subjects. This is highly implausible, and unilluminating in any case. The more serious explanation they offer is that the behavior of the kings determined which etymological connections would be true; if their behavior had been different, different etymologies would have been applied to the same names.

But this is just another way of saying that the interpretation of the name is *creative*. The Talmudic rabbis aren’t transmitting historical information, they are using linguistic associations to shape a moral teaching. Their creativity is justified by the universality of the problems they seek to address—problems in the nature of a community that seeks to get its direction from an ideal, or from the Divine.
The three interpretations all read the last two letters \( am \) of \( yarov'am \) as a separate word: ‘\( am \), the people. The remaining letters are variously manipulated to derive another term indicating what happened to the people through Jeroboam’s kingship.

I take it that the kingship represents a general principle: the authority or constancy necessary for the community to pursue the ideal together. If religion were a purely personal matter, as is often said in modern contexts, then it would not essentially involve the imposition of one view over another, or require any authority. Nor would it matter if its expressions changed without any continuity. These things are irrelevant to the soul’s silent conversation with the divine. In fact the whole paradox of wisdom to which we have referred—the problem of how to pursue wisdom without first being wise enough to choose the right path—would not be an issue, since in eternity there is no path.

But the kind of religion that concerns itself with history and its meaning is essentially something public. And the need for public agreement entails limiting both the freedom and the purity of religious expression, establishing a “solution” to the paradox of wisdom that nevertheless remains paradoxical. I suggest that Judaism narrates this paradox in the form of the king, who circumscribes and defends the boundaries of Israel from “the nations”—not in order to constitute Israel as a nation, however, since “the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations.” And yet by imposing these very boundaries the people does take on the aspect of a nation, a fact recorded explicitly in 1 Samuel 8:19 (But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel, saying “No! We will have a king over us, that we may be like all the nations…”)

Judaism recognizes, in other words, that by the very act of establishing its worldly presence, religion is already losing its transcendence. In pursuing any established historical path to wisdom, I must begin in some degree of error. The job of philosophy and religion is not simply to offer truth, but to find “the road from error to truth.”

a. Debasement

Thus the first interpretation, contemplating a first emanation out of the ideal: “he debased the people” (\( ri'ba \ 'am \) of \( yarov'am \))—can be understood to imply that the very forces that make the people a people are responsible for error and confusion. The goal of a religious community is, in a sense, self-contradictory. But this contradiction isn’t a simply destructive one; on the contrary, it is a contradiction in the productive, dialectical sense that the Talmud embraces, as we will see.

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63 remember that Hebrew is written from right to left, and also that the vowels are mostly implicit; \( \mathfrak{m} \) = final m; and \( \mathfrak{n} \) is not a vowel but a guttural consonant ignored by English speakers

64 Numbers 23:9

65 Wittgenstein, LudwigRemarks on Frazer’s “The Golden Bough”. We will return to this point in the final reading of this book, “The Problem of Evil and the Parable of the Eggs”, section B(3)b(2).
The self-contradictory status of the king, or of a religious community constituted as a nation, can also be seen in the the prooftext given for the opening statement of *Pereq Cheleq*, *All Israel has a share toward the world to come*. The prooftext is *Isaiah* 60:21:

Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever, the shoot of my planting, the work of my hands, that I might be glorified.

On the surface, the Mishnah’s reasoning would seem to be that you can only own land forever if you live forever—even though this pretty clearly confuses the mortal individual with the self-renewing community (despite the text’s explicit reference to "your people"). But I have learned from Levinas that when the Talmud quotes a Biblical verse, the context of that verse must be taken into account. *Isaiah* 60 begins:

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of YHWH has risen upon you.

... And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

The context of the assertion that Israel has a share toward the world to come is thus the mandate given it to be a light to the nations. We can’t pursue the ideal without making it universal; the shining of the divine in us is tied to its reflection in others. And in so far as the people has itself become a nation, the mandate is to bring light to itself as well. Religion must reform its own “kingship”, must try to dissolve the boundary between the sacred and everyday reality or historical existence.

Of course this boundary, the contrast between the real and the ideal, only vanishes at the horizon or in eternity. That is to say, it belongs essentially to the future, for our efforts can’t stop until “all your people will be righteous.” The ideal character of the vision of Isaiah is clearly indicated in lines like “violence shall be no more” and “the sun shall no more go down.” So the king, and the Law, and the Sanhedrin—all the material aspects of religion—are “temporary” devices awaiting their own eradication at the end of history. We are exploring this temporariness, which is the dynamism of religion.

b. Social strife

The second interpretation takes the first three letters יר of meaning “strife” or “dispute”, and poses not a contradiction but an amplification of the first point: the debasement of the people, the loss of their special status, is due to the alienation of individuals from each other, and the formation of mutually hostile alliances such as those of the northern and southern tribes (Israel and Judah). The controlling principle in religion should operate purely to facilitate human rapprochement; and yet the mechanisms of control themselves engender resistance and disputation. Whenever one person claims to know the way, he
necessarily engenders skepticism on the part of others (for they should and must be skeptical).

c. Alienation from the divine

The third interpretation sticks with the word בְּרִים, which is also used in the specific sense of a legal dispute, a lawsuit brought by an aggrieved party. The prophets of Israel used it in their metaphor of a lawsuit brought against the people by or on behalf of God. Jeroboam not only took the people out of touch with God by putting them in conflict with each other, he put the people in active conflict with God.

But the use of the same word for the second and third interpretations indicates a further underlying continuity: to be in conflict with one’s neighbor is to be in conflict with God—it is something deeper and worse than it appears to be on the surface.

This shows us that the relation between the three moments is not one of causality or simple identity; it is a dialectical relation, in which the sequence has a progressive and cumulative effect. We are not dealing with an assortment of “opinions” collected at random, but with an editorial process operating at a very high level.

2. Spiritual Blindness

The son of Nebat denotes that he beheld but did not see.

As our text will discuss in detail, Jeroboam was both studious and well-intentioned; he illustrates the heights as well as the depths, and thus their hidden interplay. By tracing a downward path through the kings, the Talmud is analyzing the essential basis of religious authority—of the possibility, that is, of religion itself. Jeroboam is by no means evil, and we are not concerned with results of evil—rather with its causes and genesis out of good intentions.

It is easy to say that the enabling condition of religion is God and the Torah—certainly. But if someone has good intentions, studies the Torah and risks his life fighting injustice (all of which pertains to Jeroboam)—and still fails in eternity—then this possibility of failure must be built into the basic structure of the relation between God and man. The faculty God has placed in us for apprehending Him is, so to speak, defective; the search for wisdom exists in a perpetual tension with spiritual blindness.

Thus the alienation and conflict in the people’s relationship with the divine is expressed in terms of another creative etymology: “The son of Nebat denotes that he beheld but did not see.” Jeroboam was the son of Nebat, and nabat נבאט is a verb meaning to see. Jeroboam’s mission was engendered by a certain vision, and not a mean or self-interested vision at that; neither was his vision simply false.
And yet an essential level of meaning eluded him. This will be the fundamental determination of the failure modes of wisdom.

One could interpret “beheld but didn't see” more narrowly, as simply a reference to section 4 below, wherein Nebat is said to have misinterpreted a supernatural sign. But that would explain nothing. It is Jeroboam who is blind here, not his father. We will see that the sayings of section 4 are built on the more general theme of misinterpretation, and its association with the problems of social and spiritual conflict.

3. Dimensions of Spiritual Blindness

A Tanna taught: Nebat, Micah and Sheba the son of Bichri are one and the same. Nebat, because “he beheld but did not see.” Micah, because he was “crushed in the building.” And what was his real name?—Sheba son of Bichri.

The text repeats the connotation of nebat as spiritual blindness, but now makes an identification with two other Biblical characters, Micah and Sheba. These figures are the progenitors of Jeroboam’s sins against God and man respectively—that is, his establishment of the golden calves and his division of the kingdom.

Please note again the poetic license, if you will, of which the sages avail themselves. It is unlikely that the three characters—Micah who built a shrine in the time of the judges (and was contemporary with Moses’ grandson), Sheba who incited rebellion against David, and Nebat whose son reigned until the end of the 10th century BCE—can be fit into a single lifespan. The literal-minded commentators have tried to believe that this person lived a supernaturally long life; but this has them puzzled because they regard this as something that could only happen to saintly characters. Some then allow that the three figures are only the same in sharing the same sin; but they fail to explain how this advances the argument.

So we will assume that the rabbis are again speaking creatively and with an eye on something else. They are making a point about the nature of our spiritual blindness, in a way that relates to the dialectical pattern of alienation, human conflict and conflict with God.

a. Micah: Commodification and Dissemination

Although the derivation of “micah” from נכיים 메וכן “crushed in the building” may refer to a legend about the Israelites in Egypt, we will follow Rashi in assuming that the building in question is simply the shrine or beth elohim

\[66\] a sage from the age of the Mishnah, i.e. before 200 A.D.
(בית אלוהים) of Micah, described in Judges 17. (A few pages hence, Micah’s offense will be specifically connected with the silver statue in that shrine.) Micah here stands for any establishment of religion that falls outside the controlling authority—that drifts, without knowing it, beyond the way of God.

Now the story of Micah raises a number of questions for us which may not have concerned the rabbis, starting with the issue of religious centralization and the origins of Deuteronomy. Historical criticism tells us that the idea of a single Temple that renders all other shrines and altars anathema is a phenomenon from the 7th century; it is impossible that it was simply forgotten between the time of Joshua and Josiah. Thus we have to look beyond the prohibitions of Deuteronomy for an explanation of Micah’s crime, and to distinguish his shrine from the legitimate religious constructions of figures like Abraham, Jacob and Joshua.

Furthermore we cannot ignore, as the rabbis do, a striking detail at the end of the story: that Micah’s shrine, stolen by a band of warriors and set up as the forerunner of Jeroboam’s northern sanctuary, was maintained until the Assyrian conquest by the descendants of Moses. This detail—the only remaining reference in our Bible to the Mushite priesthood!—appears to be a piece of propaganda by the rival Aaronites in Jerusalem. This cannot help but color our understanding of Micah.

So where does Micah’s guilt lie? The first and most literal point to be considered is that Micah was a thief. He stole 1100 pieces of silver from his mother; and the creation of the shrine sprang from his repentance and his mother’s gratitude. To the literal-minded, or at the level of propaganda, it may be possible to discredit a religious endeavor by associating its origins with a crime. But surely works of repentance can’t be disqualified simply on the basis of there having been something to repent. On the contrary, our text will imply that the pursuit of righteousness presupposes a fundamental context of sin, just as the search for wisdom presupposes a basic state of confusion. The fault must rather pertain to the carrying-out of repentance.

A more promising clue to the story lies in its mention of a curse that Micah’s mother had put on the thief. The Deuteronomistic editor seems to have chopped off the beginning of the story, so that the curse itself is missing; but we can imagine that it originally fit the pattern of stories found throughout world

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67 Because “beth elohim” recalls “beth-el”, which is translated “house of God”, and the two expressions differ by a plural ending, “beth elohim” in this verse is often translated as “house of gods”; and this seems to be in keeping with the attitude of the text. But of course elohim is translated as “God” 99% of the time. Its plural-singular construction lends an air of abstraction that contrasts with the name “El”, known then and now as the Zeus of the Canaanite pantheon. So to translate “house of God” is both more favorable to Micah and a fair reflection of his intentions. It also conforms to the standard translation of the last sentence of the story as it stands: So they set up Micah’s graven image which he made, as long as the house of God (בית אלוהים) was at Shiloh.

68 But even this reference is obscured by an extra letter nun — see similar typography with ‘ayin below (part 2) — that makes “Moses” into “Manasseh”

69 A basic result of Biblical criticism is that there are linguistic and ideological connections between Deuteronomy and the editorial framework holding together the books of Joshua through Kings.
literature, in which a vow or curse ends up targeting a family member but tragically cannot be revoked. One good example is only a few chapters away from Micah in Judges, the story of Jepthah. Another is Saul’s curse that falls upon his own son Jonathan, which will be relevant below.\textsuperscript{70} The same general principle is found in the story of the blessing given as a result of deception to Jacob, and in the Talmud’s discussion of Jehu, awaiting us below.\textsuperscript{71} Like the notion of the Divine Name, this idea of the vow can be treated very literally (as a magic force attaching to things), or else in terms of dramatic proportion and the philosophy of language. We will return to this shortly; here we will simply notice that this tragic perspective, far from explaining any guilt, makes the illegitimacy of the shrine seem to be a matter of fate.

Besides the stolen silver made into statues, the next most promising feature of the story is the Levite attached to the shrine. Here we start to see something essential about the roots of spiritual blindness and conflict in the essence of religion itself. It was foreshadowed by the appearance of the 1100 pieces of silver: \textit{Micah’s family was wealthy}. Not only could they afford the statues, all the paraphernalia and a shrine to house them, Micah’s sons had the leisure to act as priests, and Micah was able to provide a salary to hire a Levite as his own personal priest. This Levite is already removed from the original, devotional form of the institution, as evidenced by his willingness to sell his services to one family rather than teach and counsel the whole community. When he betrays Micah and goes with the Danites, might he not rationalize it on this very basis? The pay was undoubtedly better as well.

So we can say that it is \textit{religion treated as a commodity} that is being seen as a cause of spiritual blindness. Micah says “\textit{now I know that YHWH will make me prosper, because I have a Levite as priest.}” He doesn’t understand that it isn’t the hereditary status of the priest but \textit{the content of his teaching} that matters. And the Levite doesn’t understand that his vocation is not a job, but a commission to spread Torah. But let us not forget that teachers too must eat; and even when they go around with begging bowls, the bowl itself becomes a sign indicating the terms of a contract. (The one who gives will feel cheated if the beggar is not really following a godly path.) If religion is to maintain any coherence, if it is to have authority, then the difference between teachers and students must be fixed in an economic structure.\textsuperscript{72} Thus the permanent exposure to blindness and misunderstanding on the part of teachers and students—the possibility of distraction by the conventions and mediating terms of divinity.

It is easy to see that religion as a commodity, as magic and power, must lead to human conflict between haves and have-nots. The Danites, 600 armed men, steal Micah’s religious equipment and convince the Levite to leave him. But an even deeper theme than that of violence might be in play here: in Biblical language it is called \textit{dispersal}; recent philosophy uses the term \textit{dissemination}. (Both words use the metaphor of seeds.) It refers to the fact that once a word is

\textsuperscript{70} part 2 R. Yochanan on the “mouthful”
\textsuperscript{71} section 8
\textsuperscript{72} And that structure in turn is grounded in morality: Micah and his Levite were generous — see part 2, sec.15 “Why did they not count Jehoiakim…”
out of my mouth, or I set down a work of my hands, anyone else can appropriate that work or word; and whether through violent hostility toward my intentions or simple misunderstanding, they can turn my acts toward consequences I never envisioned. Micah’s works are taken from Ephraim to Laish, to serve other interests than his. And more basically, the importance of his mother’s vow now comes to light: it illustrates the unintended consequences of religious expression—a permanent possibility that lays the groundwork for the economic deployment of religion, and thus for spiritual blindness.

Consider first how a successful or blessed vow, for example Hannah’s\(^\text{73}\), comes to fruition: Samuel’s righteousness perfectly reflects and corresponds to the intentions of his mother. Micah’s mother’s vow, by contrast, drifts away from her and becomes something else. It is cast in silver, enmeshed in a series of clerical contracts, and eventually plunged into the fate of Jeroboam. And while we may aspire to realizations of intention as successful as Hannah’s, we are perpetually exposed to the possibility represented by the case of Micah. By being represented, meaning becomes subject to limitless drift and distortion. This was already alluded to in the preceding gemara (and mentioned in my introduction). Here it becomes a determination of spiritual degradation, and we again see how human conflict is rooted in Babel, in the nature of language itself. Judaism is a battle against language, by means of language.

b. Sheba: The Dialectic of Wisdom and Authority

We know, of course, that Judaism forbids the representation of the divine. This is implicit in calling Micah’s statues “idols”. It is often understood in a peculiarly literal way, as the prohibition of images (of animals, humans or natural objects like the sun) in a religious context. The rationale here is either that someone might think that the image “is” a god (although this belief is usually only attributed in a polemical context, and can only describe the most superstitious), or that God Himself has the form of the image (as for example an enormous bovine entity in the sky). But more serious reflection soon forces the realization that religious language is itself a representation of the divine—whether this has the abstract form of metaphysics (e.g. theories of divine emanations, or even the statements of a “negative theology”) or the vividly anthropomorphic quality of the “J” source in the Torah. The cherubs in the Temple were certainly images; and even a ritual, such as the burning of flesh for a “pleasing odor”, implies the representation of God. Even more seriously: the Torah itself is a kind of representation of the divine.

— All this is not to accuse Judaism of being “self-contradictory”. It would be more accurate to say that Judaism, at its best (such as here in the “Three Kings”), has faced up to the essential contradictions in the nature of religion and language itself—which is to say again that it has grasped the dialectical nature of thought. Meaning slides away and must be reined in; but each exercise of

\(^{73}\) 1 Samuel 1:11
control, of bringing the meanings of a sign into conformity, gives rise to new reactions and divergences.

Now the Deuteronomistic editor had a simple concept of authority: the Judean king, protector of the Temple and enforcer of orthodoxy. After reporting Micah’s institution of his house of God, he inserts the refrain “in those days there was no king in Israel; a man would do what was upright in his own eyes.” (hayasher y’aseh b’ eyneyo דְּרוּשַׁר יָשָׁרְנָה בְּאֵין יוֹבָהּ) The implication seems to be: it was terrible—anarchy!—everybody just did whatever they felt like doing. And if we look at how the Bible uses the expression “in his own eyes”, we will indeed find that it is consistently disparaging. Proverbs alone contains five instances, and the notion of not trusting in one’s own intuition or judgment is central to the Biblical “wisdom” literature. (And it is a theme much exploited by leaders of all kinds ever since.)

But to say “a man did the upright thing as he saw it” is hardly the same as saying that people were simply immoral or self-interested. These were the Israelites, after all, whose great-grandparents knew Moses. But they, like us, didn’t have Moses, and they didn’t have a king. History suggests that the very existence of the Israelites goes back to a movement of self-governance and resistance to the predations of local “kings” in Palestine. They might well have used the expression “upright (yashar יָשָׁר) in one’s own eyes” in a positive sense, which the Deuteronomist simply quoted with withering irony. In any case, the Israelites’ anti-authoritarian sentiment, originally buttressed by faith in the individual, can be seen in the Bible—in Samuel’s speech to the people when they ask for a king, for example.

And logical analysis shows that the expression “upright in one’s own eyes” is inherently dialectical, echoing the paradox of wisdom: just as I need enough wisdom to first recognize the wise and their sayings, I must make an upright effort, as best I can see, to follow the way of God. The “solution” of the paradox requires an iterative movement of successive mistakes and corrections, of personal judgments and submission to the authority of tradition.

The dialectical character of “upright in one’s own eyes” is ignored by the Deuteronomistic editor, who in positing the king as God’s instrument of instruction and salvation seems to forget the grave responsibility so often imposed on the individual, the family and the community by the book of Deuteronomy. Similarly he recalls an old slogan—“to your tents, O Israel!”—which he puts in the mouths of Sheba and Jeroboam, as if it were nothing more than a call for sedition; when in fact the slogan seems to have a history involving the Rechabites and other political movements, perhaps going all the way back to rebellions against the warlords and Egyptian surrogates who controlled the cities of Iron Age Palestine.

But from the Talmudic point of view, Sheba’s utterance has as context the story of the end of Absalom’s rebellion in 2 Samuel 20. The main character in this story is really Joab, the great general of King David. First he confronts his rival Amasa, who had recently been appointed in his place by David, after Joab had criticized the king for mourning Absalom. Amasa had been slow to pursue Sheba
after the latter’s call for Israel to reject David. Joab approaches him with friendly gestures and disembowels him; then marches on to besiege the city where Sheba is hiding. There he negotiates with a “wise woman” to have Sheba (actually just his head) handed over, and returns to power in Jerusalem. It is a story of political intrigue and self-interest. When these pervade religion, the degradation is nearly complete. And yet we know that the story of David is full of them from start to finish, and that Joab was essential to his success. How can we reconcile this with the divinity of the Davidic dynasty, which is inseparable from the messianism of Judaism and Christianity? How is a religious authority possible?

4. Spiritual Blindness and Fate

Our rabbis taught: three beheld but did not see: Nebat, Achithophel and Pharaoh’s astrologers.
Nebat—he saw fire coming out of his penis. He interpreted it as signifying that he would reign, yet that was not so, but that Jeroboam would issue from him.
Achithophel—he beheld leprosy breaking out on his penis. He thought that it meant that he should reign, but it was not so, but referred to Bathsheba his daughter, from whom issued Solomon.
Pharaoh’s astrologers—even as R. Chama son of R. Chanina said: What is meant by “This is the water of Meribah”?74 “This is” what Pharaoh’s astrologers saw, but misinterpreted. They saw that Israel’s savior would be smitten through water: therefore he ordered, “Every son that is born you shall cast into the river.”75 But they did not know that he was to be smitten on account of the water of Meribah.

Three more examples of unintended consequences, of dramatic displacements, meaning gone astray due to misinterpretation. Can they still teach us something positive about wisdom?

a. Narcissistic interpretation (fire from his penis)

Jeroboam is not only blind, he is a son of blindness, of misinterpretation. The divine fire again indicates that Jeroboam’s kingship is a matter of destiny—or from our point of view, that the characteristics of spiritual blindness are grounded in the path to wisdom itself. But the institutionalization of the ideal is corrupted in advance by self-interest—the father’s assumption that spiritual meaning pertains to the present rather than the future. Even a mystical experience, once subject to interpretation, tends to be seen as a benefit storing up credit for the one who experiences it, rather than simply as a token of higher meaning. It signifies “I am God” rather than “the world contains divine possibilities.” Self-interest transforms

74 Numbers 20:13
75 Exodus 1:22
spiritual truth into a political message. And excessive attention to the present at the expense of the future distorts the field of historical understanding. But how to transcend self-interest in interpreting the divine?

It is clear that we cannot evade the paradox of interpretation by appeal to the miraculous character of events—all three cases show that the supernatural is just as subject to misinterpretation as the natural (and in any case interpretation is required to identify and characterize the miracle). Perhaps we need an appeal to other people to transcend self-interest.

b. Achithophel: the fallibility of spiritual advisors

Once again the text uses a common term to indicate that the next saying advances an argument. Nebat and Achitophel both receive signs through their penises. Both think it means something about the present rather than the future. The pursuit of a meaning in history undoubtedly has a social dimension, but the problem of self-interest affects even decisions made in concert. Even the king, the controlling principle, needs advisors to broaden his perspective and give him a sense of what the people are thinking. But how can these advisors be trusted? Have we not simply shifted the paradox onto them? Achithophel was an advisor to King David with impeccable credentials: in those days the counsel which Achithophel gave was as if one inquired of the word of God.76 We can try to improve our chances on the path to wisdom by trusting only those whom others also trust—won’t that get us out of the paradox?

Apparently not. Achithophel’s advice to Absalom (whom he encouraged to rebel) is taken by the rabbis as another case of self-interest. (The Bible doesn’t say this explicitly, but perhaps it may be inferred from his suicide at the end of the story.) At any rate he betrayed David, thereby making the Mishnah’s list of the four commoners who have no share in the world to come (along with Balaam, Doeg and Gehazi.) The rabbis studiously discover a link between Achithophel and Solomon—thus confirming at one level the basic soundness of his vision, which might have been deduced more directly from the fact that his ultimate advice to Absalom is said by the Biblical narrator to have been wise, though it was rejected, “because YHWH had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Achithophel, so that YHWH might bring evil upon Absalom.”77 Because God was on David’s side, he caused everyone to accept the bad advice of Hushai (David’s mole in the Absalom organization)—not quite as David had prayed: “YHWH I beseech you, turn the counsel of Achithophel into foolishness.”78 The counsel itself was wise, but it was perceived as foolishness.

So there are cases of spiritual blindness where neither one’s own intentions nor the advice of others is adequate: God himself sometimes causes misinterpretation, just as he hardened Pharaoh’s heart and caused him to ignore the overwhelming evidence of the plagues. Neither miracles nor the words of the wise are enough to guarantee true understanding, because the ultimate test of

76 2 Samuel 16:23
77 2 Samuel 17:14
78 2 Samuel 16:31
truth is: conformity with God’s Way, with destiny, with history. Religious truth is not simple correspondence between meanings and things, nor is it a property of a whole system of meanings. Religious truth is 

historical truth: it is the morally correct evaluation of the past, present and future circumstances of a human project. It is beyond human control because meaning depends on more than the intention, it also depends in a peculiar way on the interpretations of others. And simple verbal agreement with those considered wise is never a guarantee of success.

We cannot move on without considering another aspect of Achithophel’s guilt, apart from the outcome of his final advice. His previous advice to Absalom was to have sex with David’s harem, as a sign of his usurpation. He is thus entangled, in a rather ambiguous manner, with the whole royal sex business that began Absalom’s story, when he killed the royal heir for raping his sister Tamar. We could even follow the entanglement further back, to the similarly incestuous story of Tamar and Yehudah (whose connection with David’s children has long caught the eye of historical critics). In the rape case Absalom took justice into his own hands; and later his political rise would be based on David’s failure to provide justice. (Absalom said “O that I were judge in the land! Then every man with a suit or cause might come to me, and I would give him justice.”79) Should we say that this is another case of “doing the upright thing in his own eyes”? Or should we say that here even justice is treated as a commodity and a means to power? As good intentions may be out of joint with destiny, and those acclaimed as wise may turn out to be merely clever, so even the administration of justice, although formally correct, may turn out to be selective and self-interested.

c. Technicians of the Sacred

R. Chama connects Meribah, scene of Moses’ “sin” when he struck the rock to produce miraculous water, and Pharaoh’s charaimim (חרמים), his magician-astrologers. This connection is tenuous at best, but a sequence is noticeable: from political activist (Nebat/Sheba) to high-level advisor (Achithophel) to what we may call technicians of the sacred. These are the guys who could duplicate some of the miracles of Moses and Aaron, but at a weaker level—for example, both sides could turn sticks into snakes, but YHWH’s magic snakes devoured the Egyptian magic snakes. The story of Joseph shows that the job of charam also or originally involved dream-interpretation (where again the Egyptian professionals came up short when compared with Hebrews).

Whether or not we are dealing with a progressive literalization of an essentially hermeneutical process, from a modern point of view the charaimim may be compared to natural and social scientists, as well as to the experts on economics, counterintelligence and all the others who counsel those in power. And from the standpoint of the pursuit of wisdom they must represent all technical or instrumental approaches—from psychotherapy to scientology to kabbalah. Perhaps even philosophy. No technique or body of knowledge.

79 2 Samuel 15:4
(scientific or pseudoscientific) can solve the problem that remained unsolved by the intentions of a leader (or the clarity of a principle) and the consensus of trusted advisors (or opinion supported by everyday acceptance). Destiny outstrips science as well as politics.

Did Moses’ “sin” relate to this same issue? The only thing clear from the enigmatic story of Meribah is that in some way Moses failed for a moment to trust in God. Whether it had more to do with his reliance on the rod with which he struck the rock, with his making it seem to the Israelites as if he, rather than God, were working the miracle, or whether it only had to do with his anger, his internal state—all this has been bequeathed to eternal debate. But the interpretation favoring the rod does make it look like the idea of anti-instrumentalism is very old. At any rate, the reference to Moses’ ultimate fall reminds us that all leaders and religious principles are flawed; and this may apply as well as to the understanding within me that leads me toward the upright thing, as best I can see it.

5. Prophecy and Propaganda

Now how do we know that he is not coming to the world to come? Because it is written And this thing became sin unto the house of Jeroboam even to cut it off, and to destroy it from off the face of the earth. To cut it off” [implies] in this world; “and to destroy it” in the next.

The Talmud’s productive literality—the way in which it seems to stick fiercely to the surface, and yet is really focused on the depths—here takes one of its favorite forms: pretended blindness to the poetics of the Bible, a major aspect of which lies in repetition, parallelisms, chiasms, etc. Because every word is, to the hyperliteral sensibility, necessary—necessary, that is, as information, not just for reasons of sound and rhythm—the two terms “cut off” and “destroyed” must refer to different things. In fact the text takes them as referring to the ultimate duality: between this life, or the everyday reality of history, and the world to come or the presence of the divine.

But perhaps the initial reading of “cut off” and “destroyed” as ostensibly synonymous was hasty. The straightforward reading of the text is that two things are described after all: the utter annihilation of the people of the kingdom of Israel, and their exclusion from the congregation of YHWH. Now what sense does this exclusion make (after they’ve been annihilated)? It is explained by the two worlds, says the Talmud. But modern scholarship knows another explanation. The statement about destroying Israel “from the face of the earth” is a lie; it is part of the anti-Samaritan propaganda of 2 Kings 17, discussed in the two Preludes. And just because the Yahwists of Israel were not all destroyed or even exiled, it made sense to say that they (the remaining Israelites) were “cut off” from the divine presence … in Jerusalem.

80 1 Kings 13:34
Does this scientific cavil with reference to the Samaritans miss the import of the citation? Let us examine the proof-text (1 Kings 13) further. It is the story of Jeroboam at the altar of Bethel, confronted by the anonymous\textsuperscript{81} “man of God from Judah” who prophesies the destruction of Bethel and the massacre of its priests by Josiah 300 years later. Here we do confront a point of scientific embarrassment, as the text seems so clearly to be a self-serving invention by the Josianic scribes (and not a miraculously specific prophecy by a prophet nobody had ever heard of). But this should not lead us to minimize the story. There are two other elements we need to notice in the story of the “man of God from Judah” and his nemesis the equally anonymous “old prophet of Bethel”. Both elements recur throughout the “Three Kings” gemara.

One is the theme of hospitality and hunger, or “the mouthful” as it will be called below.\textsuperscript{82} The “man of God” has as a condition of his mission that he must not eat or drink, but he is tricked by the “old prophet”\textsuperscript{83} (who falsely reports a vision from God) into eating at his house. The faker is then granted a real vision, directed at the “man of God”, who must die for believing the false prophecy and thus violating his original commission.

Thus the second theme of the story: false prophecy, which can fool even a genuine man of God; whereas the true word of God may come even to one who has fallen away, if it suits God’s purpose. But what is God’s purpose here? Did he put the “old prophet” up to his deception in the first place, just as he hardened Pharaoh’s heart and caused Achithophel’s words to fall on deaf ears? (Here again we verge on fatalism.) Or can we not avoid reverting to the propaganda of the Deuteronomist, who clearly wants to impute a history of evil at Bethel going back as far as possible? (Only Abraham’s and Jacob’s founding of the altar there remained above reproach, although its connection with the shrine of later days was obscured.) The old prophet of Bethel ends the story in repentance, asking for his bones to be buried alongside those of the Judean. For the Judean writer, Israel exists only as a failure of the past, whose divine blessing has passed on to Judah (just as Christians would choose to view the Jews in turn). And the rabbis accept this view, colored no doubt by their own attitudes toward the Samaritans (which continued to deteriorate through the centuries of the Mishnah and Talmud).

But for us the massacre of the priests at Bethel and the “high places” of Samaria remains a moral enigma. Knowledge of the Samaritans and the antiquity of the Bethel shrine, together with our disbelief in the “prophecy” of 1 Kings 13, leaves us with revulsion at Josiah’s military campaign—the book of Deuteronomy notwithstanding.

Now our reading has been guided by the failure modes of wisdom and the inevitability of degrees of errancy in its pursuit. We have seen how the Talmud implies the inadequacy of good intentions, authoritative teachers and good deeds for securing wisdom, while further stressing the dangers of instrumental and

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\textsuperscript{81} the Talmud will identify him below with Iddo, author of lost books mentioned in Chronicles\textsuperscript{82}
\textsuperscript{82} part 2, sec. 18
\textsuperscript{83} the Talmud will characterize him as a prophet of Baal
economic approaches to the divine, as well as reliance on the supernatural. All these elements come together in the story of the two prophets.

The lying prophet, using hospitality and the hunger of the Judean to make him fall, is almost a caricature of the problems we saw in connection with Micah and Achithophel. I believe that the pathos of the “old prophet” must be seen in his sincere attraction to the “man of God”. Perhaps he too had been given a divine message in the old days, and it was his longing to experience it once again that drove him (a longing soon to be satisfied!). In any case we need not doubt that his hospitality was genuine. Even at the very heights of religion, in fellowship and generosity and praising God, the conditions of spiritual blindness, of self-interest and the drift of meaning, are especially present.—Thus far we can follow the Talmud; but our attitude toward the ideology of 1 Kings 13 means that so far Jeroboam has not been convicted to our satisfaction.

B. Language as Destiny and Contract

6. Religion and the Public

R. Yochanan said: Why did Jeroboam merit sovereignty? Because he reproved Solomon. And why was he punished? Because he reproved him publicly. As it is written, And this was the cause that he lifted up his hand against the king: Solomon built Millo, and repaired the breaches of the city of David his father.”

He said thus to him: Your father David made breaches in the wall, that Israel might come up [to Jerusalem] on the festivals; while you have closed them in order to exact toll for the benefit of Pharaoh’s daughter. What is meant by And this was the cause that he lifted up his hand against the king? R. Nachman said: He took off his tefillin in front of him.

Our text emphasizes the basic virtue of Jeroboam and the justice of his cause, which of course lay in the oppressiveness of the reign of Solomon—the heavy taxation to support his lavish lifestyle, the forced labor comparable to that which the Egyptians had imposed, and the temples for all the gods of his foreign wives. 1 Kings 11 states that the word of God came to Ahijah of Shiloh, conditionally promising Jeroboam a status equal to David for championing the people against the king. Somehow it all got away from him—how?

The causes emphasized by the Deuteronomist include: institution of improper shrines at Bethel and Dan to compete with Jerusalem, approval of the “high places”, innovation regarding the timing of festivals, and appointing non-Levites to be priests. But the first three things are just retrojections from the new 7th century orthodoxy of Deuteronomy back to a period in which they cannot have been perceived as faults (except in terms of politics and the competition of

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84 1 Kings 11:27
priestly families). And if he stepped on the toes of the Levites, returning to an earlier conception of priesthood as a personal vocation, we can hardly fault him either.

But our gemara looks in a completely different direction: it says Jeroboam was punished (on earth and in eternity) for reproving Solomon publicly. Strange charge indeed! Can we imagine a revolutionary leader who only communicates his message in private to the government? Such a person would not even be a prophet. The text implies, moreover, that Jeroboam addressed the particularly grievous issue of charging fees for access to the Temple, making it unavailable to the poor—the commodification of religion at its most intolerable! How can we understand a fault that lies precisely in defending the religious rights of the people publicly?

Note that the occasion here is another Biblical obscurity. It is not at all apparent why Solomon’s strengthening of the fortifications of Jerusalem should have been what motivated Jeroboam. The rabbis solve this with the idea that the problem was a toll imposed on religious pilgrims. (Rashi has other creative but unilluminating theories.) Then they move on to a characteristic literalism: “raised his hand” taken not in the obvious sense of armed revolt, but as removing his tefillin to address the king. Jeroboam is imagined as essentially challenging Solomon’s religious leadership. This leadership cannot in any way be a democratic structure; it must come from God alone. And this makes the most sense if we think, again, not in terms of the actual Temple and king, but in terms of the controlling principle in religion generally, and the directionality of the path to wisdom.

Discord within that which guides us—whether it is an institution or our holy text, or the light of reason within us—introduces erratic movements into our spiritual progress. Even when it is a matter of denouncing false religion, the idea arises that religion is a human creation, and thus is subject to manipulation. At some level within the community, and at some level within ourselves, there must be continuity in the tokens and representatives of religion, so that the impression of subjectivity can be overcome. For the continuity of religion (or even more generally: the public character of language, as we will see in the next section) is the real ground of the transpersonal and the necessary. In other words, God speaks through tradition.—This is not a “conservative” proposition but rather is based on a profound philosophy of language. (And one may recognize this public character of meaning while yet working critically upon the tradition.)

7. “Out of the world”—Public and Private Language

R. Nachman said: The conceit which possessed Jeroboam drove him out of the world, as it is written, Now Jeroboam said in his heart, “Now shall the kingdom return to the house of David: If this people go up to do sacrifice in the house of YHWH in Jerusalem, then shall the heart of this people turn unto their lord, even
unto Rehoboam king of Judah. He reasoned thus: It is a tradition that none but the kings of the house of Judah may sit in the Temple Court. Now when they [the people] see Rehoboam sitting and me standing, they will say, The former is the king and the latter his subject; whereas if I sit too, I am guilty of treason and they will slay me and follow him. Thus Wherefore the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold, and said unto them, It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem; behold your gods, O Israel, that brought you up out of the land of Egypt.

How did he “take counsel”? R. Yehudah said: He set a wicked man by the side of the righteous and said to him: “Will you sign [your approval] for all that I may do”? They replied “Yes”. “I wish to be king”, he went on, and again they said “Yes”. “Will you execute all my commands?” he asked. Again they replied “Yes”. “Even for the worship of idols[stars]?” Whereupon the righteous man rejoined: “God forbid!” “But,” urged the wicked upon the righteous, “do you really think that a man like Jeroboam would serve idols? He only wishes to test us, to see whether we will give full acceptance to his orders.” And even Ahijah of Shiloh signed.

There is an apparent contradiction: on the one hand we concluded that no amount of external advice or discussion is adequate to prevent religious failure; on the other hand, we said that tradition and the public forms of religion are necessary conditions of wisdom. Is it simply that education and conversation are necessary but not sufficient conditions of wisdom? Or is there an effective dimension of tradition, of meaning and language, that transcends the personal level of opinion and advice, of pride and rhetoric?

The conceit which possessed Jeroboam drove him out of the world. — Elias and Katz supply “to come” after “world”; but I see no justification for this. When the text is talking about the world to come, it says so. I think R. Nachman has something more interesting in mind. In Aboth 4:5 there is an interesting correlative statement: Whoever derives worldly benefit from teachings of Torah takes his life out of this world. Being “out of this world” implies being trapped in yourself, not realizing that the way to God is through humanity. It also recalls the saying of Heraclitus:

It is necessary to follow the common; but although the Logos [the rational structure of the world and language] is common, the many live as though they had a private understanding.

The wisdom is very ancient, but not obvious to moderns. We tend to think that we have to project ourselves out of our heads or minds in order to make a first contact with truth, with things in themselves, as in the European philosophy of the Enlightenment. More recently, philosophers have been teaching that we are
already “out there” in the world, which has itself shaped our concepts of it. But we can indeed adopt the attitude of a monad, a bubble of thought separated from things by an infinite chasm of subjectivity.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, like other great philosophers of the 20th century, worked to dismantle the Cartesian philosophy; he did it by showing how what had been taken to be questions of fact (about the metaphysical structures of minds and things and God) are really expressions of anxiety or wonder about the world and our place in it. In a sense he deliteralized the traditional statements of metaphysics. For example, he describes a “private language” in which I share meanings only with myself. The procedures of this “language” are then shown to be senseless gestures with no effect—because, to put it briefly, language is essentially public. And yet the solipsistic feeling induced by the gestures of this private ritual remain, showing what was important about the questions of meaning in the first place. For it is certainly possible to feel as if one is in a world unto oneself, unknown and even unknowable to others—even if this feeling really stems from lack of confidence in our own expressiveness (our ability to make ourselves known).

The feeling of personal uniqueness may be attached to a sense of inadequacy or embarrassment; or on the contrary it may take the form of conceit. This is the point of departure of our text. It views the creation of the golden calves as the result of self-interest and self-distinction: Jeroboam left the public world of the nonsubjective tradition of Solomon’s Temple, creating something with a kind of private or arbitrary meaning, in a world of his own.

The retreat from the public world results in a special kind of Babel, already glimpsed in connection with Achithophel, and again with the “old prophet”: a condition in which, although the words used are familiar, one does not know how to take them. One does not know how literally or figuratively to take them; their motivations and subtext are suspect; they could either be divinely inspired or manufactured (or a combination of the two). And yet one cannot simply suspend judgment; the interpretations we make, even when forced to a decision, have consequences of their own.

The crux of this section of the text is the Biblical statement that Jeroboam “took counsel” before making the golden calves. On the one hand, he was “out of this world” in conceit; yet he acted in accordance with what others arrived at through dialogue and debate. This makes sense if we remember that the problem of doubt and discord within religion (as a necessary consequence of its delimitation and continuity) is not something simply to be solved or eliminated. The “problem” rather pertains to the structure of wisdom itself. Wisdom is not to be conceived as an Aristotelian Thought-thinking-Itself or steady gaze; it is rather like the Platonic “conversation of the soul with itself”—a give-and-take of dialogue and dialectic. And the pressure of self-interest and the commodification of

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88 I urge readers who find this synopsis of Wittgenstein unduly psychologistic to consult the works of Stanley Cavell, especially The Claim of Reason
89 disregarding the fact that Jeroboam contested the Temple immediately after the death of its builder … we are considering it nevertheless as a symbol of tradition as such, with its origins shrouded in antiquity
religion can introduce misunderstanding not only in the hallways of power, but even into the conversation within the soul.

Therefore the idea that Jeroboam planted a “wicked” agent in the council of advisors is a bit of overkill (and does not quite fit with the conclusion of our gemara that it was Ahijah who led Jeroboam into error, not the other way around). Even those with the best intentions would have raised the same questions about the meaning of the religious innovations. They would first have debated the status of the Jerusalem Temple—is it literally the one house where God (or His Name) is present, or must serious people not recognize that the creator of the universe will be present wherever and to whomever He chooses? (At any rate we have already noted that this debate is anachronistic with regard to the time of Jeroboam.) More importantly, the question reported in our gemara—“Do you really think a man like Jeroboam would serve idols?” is one that absolutely needed to be asked: were the calves meant to be regarded in the same manner as the cherubs and the Ark—namely as the throne or footstool of the invisible God—or rather as (representations of) God Himself?

Evidence from the ancient Near East shows that both alternatives were possible (and that the line between the two could be blurred). It is easy to see how the throne-interpretation could degenerate over time, and in the popular mind, into various literalizations and the embrace of the tangible and visible. (The stories of the magical powers exercised by the Ark show this clearly enough.) Furthermore we must take into account the polemical dimension of interpretation: recall that the Samaritans and others regarded the cherubs as idolatrous; it is impossible to know whether some Judeans really had the interpretation thus attributed to them. And of course the whole question of the calves ultimately comes to us from the Elohist source-text, which expressed its antipathy to the priestly bureaucracy in the parable of “Aaron and the Golden Calf.”

The search for wisdom (and wisdom itself) can lose its way simply by guessing wrong about the interpretation of religious statements. And it is not necessarily a question of insufficient subtlety or insensitivity to motivation and context: the Talmud tells us that error may lie in not taking things literally enough—in clinging too much to the “interior”, the subjective, the preferred interpretation … to the point of forgetting the real consequences of words and symbols in the public world. At the heights of scholarship or in the discipline of negative theology one may come to assume the arbitrariness of all religious symbols and words (even the Name of God). But this impression of arbitrariness is only the artificial, ahistorical pole of the dialectic that will drag thinking back into history as soon as it reflects on its own terms. This point is made by reference to Jehu.

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\textit{cf.} Exodus 20:21: …in every place where I’ll make my name remembered I will come to you and I will bless you.
8. The Contractual Nature of Speech

...And even Ahijah of Shiloh signed. For Jehu was a very righteous man, as it is written, And YHWH said unto Jehu, Because you have done well in executing that which is right in my eyes, and have done unto the house of Ahab according to all that was in my heart, your children of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel.\(^91\) Yet it is written, But Jehu took no heed to walk in the law of YHWH God of Israel with all his heart; for he departed not from the sins of Jeroboam, who made Israel to sin.\(^92\) Now what caused this? Abaye said: A covenant is made for the lips, as it is written, [And Jehu gathered all the people together, and said unto them] Ahab served Baal a little, but Jehu shall serve him much.\(^93\) Raba said: He saw the signature of Ahijah of Shiloh, and was thus led into error.

As usual the lesson takes off from a Biblical puzzle: parts of the story describe Jehu as a very righteous man, “zealous for YHWH”, and the subject of glowing prophecies; and yet the conclusion states that after becoming king, Jehu was no different from Jeroboam. The explanation is found to lie in Jehu’s trickery of the Baalites, saying “Jehu will serve Baal” simply in order to lure them to slaughter. The point is that words have consequences; their meaning is not something inside my head, it is in the common world. All speech has a contractual dimension, as Isaac taught Esau. Thus Jeroboam is said to have gone wrong when he saw that Ahijah the prophet signed on to the plan. Ahijah was just expressing a reasonable opinion, given Jeroboam’s moral and intellectual credentials; likewise he gave the benefit of the doubt to the Israelites as a whole. But his opinion had none of the authority of the words of God he had previously delivered, and Jeroboam made the mistake of being swayed by his charisma.

Thus continues the Talmudic critique of private language, of interiority and the overvaluation of intentions. The discourse of wisdom has a responsibility to consider not just the ideas it wants to express, but the effect of its expressions on those who will take it too literally, or not literally enough.

Now the puzzle about Jehu, which commentators go to great lengths to explain, is deflated by modern textual criticism. For the passages glorifying Jehu can most plausibly be seen to come from writers employed by his heirs, whereas the condemnation fits the Deuteronomistic editorial view that all kings of Israel were bad (in keeping with the general notion of Israel as lying in the trashbin of history). It is a case of propaganda from successive centuries, serving different interests. But there is another picture of Jehu which the Talmud doesn’t mention here: the prophet Hosea’s condemnation of the bloodbaths. And we can’t help thinking that murder on the scale practiced by Jehu must be a greater sin than his pretense of allegiance to Baal.

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\(^91\) 2 Kings 10:30  
\(^92\) 2 Kings 10:31  
\(^93\) 2 Kings 10:18
Hosea begins with YHWH telling the prophet to marry a prostitute and call her son Jezreel, “for I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel.” (The Jezreel valley was the secondary residence of Ahab, where Jehu killed the kings of Israel and Judah, and a great many others, before proceeding to the massacres in Samaria.) The prophet predicts a reunification of Israel, “for great shall be the day of Jezreel.” The section ends with a poem in which grain, wine and oil (noted a few verses earlier as occasions of sin for the Israelites, who attributed fertility to traditional Canaanite deities) speak to the earth, “Jezreel” (רְשָׁעָהּ לְיָזְרָאִיתִיּוּת—“God sows” or scatters). God says “I will sow her to me in the land” (w‘yezra‘thiyah li וּרְשָׁעָהּ לְיָזְרָאִיתִיּוּת). Here Jehu’s rebellion and bloody purges are regarded as wicked in themselves; the author gives no credence to attempts to legitimize Jehu through Elijah and Elisha, and does not even give him credit for fighting Baalism (even though Hosea is very anti-Baal himself, and shares the Deuteronomist’s disdain for “the calf of Samaria”).

Hosea also says “they have set up kings, but not through me” (8:4). The reference is not specified. It could refer to the dynasty of Jehu, or any of the other usurpers of the throne of Israel, or to Jeroboam. (The latter is supported by the Judean editorial framework of the book of Hosea.) But it could also be taken more literally and thus generally: kings are by definition an affront to YHWH, who alone should be king in Israel. (This is supported by 10:9-10, referring to the “double sin” of Gibeah: the first sin pertains to the Benjamite war of Judges 19; the second is indicated by Gibeah as the home of Saul—thus the institution of monarchy.) This, in addition to mass murder, would be Jehu’s sin, as it would be the sin of Jeroboam and Solomon as well.

Now how does any of this help us either to clarify the relation between wisdom and the contractual dimension of language, or to reconstitute the unifying tension (i.e. the presupposition of Biblical unity) which the rabbis use to exploit the conflicting views of Jehu? We must return again to the structure of the “downward path” whose traversal in thought is also an ascent to wisdom.

Jehu poisoned the waters of public discourse by pretending to worship Baal, say the rabbis, and thus the slaughter of the Baalites (though in itself a good thing) led to bad results. This teaches us about the value of reticence, and that we should consider the unintended consequences of our speech; it also warns against the overvaluation of interiority, and the illusion of its inexpressible superiority to the real world (rather like Hegel’s portrait of “the beautiful soul”). But if, with Hosea, we see Jehu’s language not as a mistake, but rather as a sign that his talk of Baal and YHWH was political rhetoric in the service of a ruthless pursuit of power, then a point emerges which is complementary to that of our text.

While interiority or good will is insufficient to guarantee a blessed destiny, it remains a necessary condition—especially with regard to the most important aspects of character.94

What are these? The tradition identifies them as the aspects of God indicated by the Two Names: justice and love (or mercy). Hosea reinforces our

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94 cf. M.Berachot 2:1 “...if he directed his heart, he fulfilled his obligation. If not, he did not fulfill his obligation.”
sense that Jehu was lacking in both, and that attempts to imply that the massacre of Jezreel were just retribution for Naboth, etc., are only propaganda. The contractual dimension of language not only implies that I am bound by what I say, but also that I have a right and duty to hold others accountable as well, and to be alert for propaganda even in the transmissions of the tradition.

The permanent possibility of propaganda, of wisdom’s decay into self-interested language, and the pursuit of wisdom from a starting-point already immersed in polemics, requires that we keep open the paradox of wisdom—now trusting in personal judgment, now submitting that very judgment to the “wise counsel” of dialectic. When faced with contradictions between the prophetic and royal-priestly accounts—the former deliteralizing myth and ritual with an eye toward justice and peace, the latter stressing orthodoxy and militarism—we should trust our intuition that the unifying power of the Bible lies in the direction of the prophets. Hosea and Jeremiah were critics of Biblical-traditional unity; but they adhere to the unity of the way of God, behind the Babel of self-interested religion.

9. Spiritual Blindness and Violence

It is written, *And the rebels are profound to make slaughter, though I have been a rebuke of them all.* 95 R. Yochanan explained this: The Holy One, Blessed be He, said, “They have gone deeper than I. I said, Whoever does not go up [to Jerusalem] for the Festivals violates a positive injunction; whereas they proclaimed, Whoever does go up for the festival will be pierced with the sword.”

The Talmud didn’t mention Hosea’s condemnation of Jehu, but it can be no coincidence that the next proof-text comes from Hosea. In fact we may say that they are weighing in with an interpretation of Hosea that would mitigate the unmentioned theme of Jezreel. And this involves situating the text historically. The book of Hosea shows many signs of a long evolution, in both pre-exilic and post-exilic Judea. Its superscription refers to an improbable period of at least 70 years for the prophet’s activity, and it is impossible to extract an original set of verses tied to one specific period. Nor can one rule out the possibility that Hosea is entirely a Judean fiction. The rabbis accept the Judean point of view, according to which Hosea speaks against Israel in its historical entirety from Jeroboam. Thus “the rebels” (those who stray) is interpreted in terms of the fundamental issue of the Jerusalem Temple. Traditional commentary relates the “slaughter” in Hosea 5:2 to the animal sacrifices at the Jerusalem Temple, which Jeroboam wanted to prevent the Israelites from attending.

But the reference to Jehu makes it more likely that “the rebels” would refer to him and his dynasty—to the way in which Yahwism, which had such vitality as a populist movement in opposition to the internationalist politics of the house of Omri, became cynical and corrupt in the hands of a state-sponsored priestly

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95 Hosea 5:2
bureaucracy. Another possibility, indicated by the anti-Assyrian references in 5:8-14, is that the rebels are the post-Jehuid kings, especially the Assyrian puppet king Hosea.96

But there is an even more fundamental problem in identifying the rebels. As usual the rabbis have chosen a verse of obscure meaning, words that call out for interpretation. Consider these two alternate translations of it:

JPS: and they were profound to kill the revolters, but I have been removed [or:rejected] by them all.

Oxford: and they have made deep the pit of Shitim, but I will chastise all of them.

The Jewish Publication Society translation(s) fits the perspective in which the main recipient of blame is the house of Jehu, and the rebels would be the Omrids (who rebelled by worshipping Baal). It also matches the Masoretic text, which takes the unusual word שִׁטִּים, שִׁטְיוֹת, שִׁיתִים, שִׁיתּוֹת to begin with a sin (ש) and so reads satim, derived from שָׁרָה, to stray or turn away (thus “revolters”). The Oxford translation instead takes the first letter to be shin (ש), thus shitim, understood in all other occurrences of שִׁטִּים in the Bible as either “acacia” (in the phrase “shitim wood”), or as the name of a place beyond the Jordan (presumably a place where acacias are found), scene of the apostasy of Baal-Peor in Numbers 25. That chapter is one of the grisliest and most xenophobic in the Priestly corpus, sanctifying violence in the name of orthodoxy—much like Jehu in 2 Kings 10. No doubt the rabbis had it in mind as well, as it comes up for discussion in connection with Balaam a few pages hence.97

The gemara relates the “depth” (וֹעַמְךֹת, "they made deep”) of violence to stringency in the requirements and enforcement of a religious regime. The corruption of wisdom that we are analyzing is distinguished by greater stringency than the Torah itself. Thus despite their assent to the Deuteronomistic and Priestly orthodoxies, the rabbis are focused on violence as in truth a sign of that very conceit which flees the public world, which loses sight of God through aggrandizement of its own spiritual resources and opportunities.

Violence is a sign of spiritual blindness lost in the literal. Hosea says “My people inquire of a thing of wood; their staff gives them oracles.”(4:12) As a consequence, “they shall seek YHWH but not find him, he has withdrawn from them.”(5:6). Once again, it is not a question of punishing nonbelievers per se; the proper focus of religious discourse is the way of and toward wisdom only. Not only is it true that self-interest and failures of language can seduce the wise into literal-mindedness (and thence to violence). Religious students (i.e. all of us) find themselves entangled from birth in the paradox of wisdom, as they try to sort out the life of the tradition from the husks and fences congealed around it in transmission. There are always asheroth (idolatrous “things of wood”) in the Temple—always remnants of creative expressions treated as if the mere signs

96 no relation to the prophet
97 see Sanhedrin 106a, the discussion of Balaam, where shitim is related to shetoth, “folly”.
themselves were divine. Here again we see why the “way up” and the “way down” are the same. They are just oscillations of the same difficulty. And we can view the dialectical oscillation from the positive side as well: the necessary difficulties affecting the search for and communication of wisdom are just as much its enabling conditions.

Hosea expresses this in a way as well: at every point of extreme desolation he concludes that God will overturn his own justice in order to embrace Israel, to welcome home the faithless spouse. Because of this it may be permissible to offer a fourth translation of the verse 5:2. It hinges on the word musar (משר), the ambiguity of whose derivation is already apparent in the translations “rebuke” and “chastise” on the one hand, and “removed”/"rejected" on the other. In the latter case we have a participle based on a verb meaning to deliver or give up. Following this possibility, and rendering shitim according to its generic import, we have:

though they deepen the slaughter of the unorthodox, I give myself to them all.

The light of wisdom shines even through the fluctuations of spiritual vision.

**10. Destiny and the Moral-historical Context**

And it came to pass at that time when Jeroboam went out of Jerusalem, that the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite found him in the way, and he had clad himself with a new garment. A Tanna taught in the name of R. Yose: [That time was] a time destined for punishment. In the time of their visitation they shall perish. A Tanna taught in the name of R. Yose: a time destined for punishment. In a time of favor have I heard thee. A Tanna taught in the name of R. Yose: a time destined for good. Nevertheless in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them. A Tanna taught in the name of R. Yose: a time destined for punishment. And it came to pass at that time, that Yehudah went down from his brothers. A Tanna taught in the name of R. Yose: a time destined for punishment. And Rehoboam went to Shechem; for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king. A Tanna taught in the name of R. Yose: a place destined for evil; in Shechem Dina was raped; in Shechem his brothers sold Joseph; and in Shechem the kingdom of the house of David was divided.

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98 1 Kings 11:29
99 Jeremiah 51:18
100 Isaiah 49:8
101 Exodus 32:34
102 Genesis 38:1
103 1 Kings 12:1
Because neither good intentions nor scholarship nor adherence to authority can guarantee wisdom, because the search for wisdom is always already entangled in instrumental thinking and polemics, we have repeatedly found ourselves verging on a kind of fatalism: salvation or the “world to come” ultimately as an accident of one’s place in the grand design of history—one’s destiny. But we must delve deeper into the notion of destiny to see what it really offers to thinking.

We should first rid ourselves of the simplistic contrast between a “scientific” perspective based on causality, and a worldview in which events are all explained by divine will. Both are caricatures. The simplistic causality of billiard-ball X bumping into billiard-ball Y must first be replaced by a picture in which multiple causal factors for an event are recognized, some necessary, some (in some cases and in some combinations) sufficient; as well as probabilistic versions of both. And on the other side, a divine will that simply causes everything (and thus explains nothing) must be replaced by a sense of the dramatic context of events: for there are indeed human events which cannot be grasped apart from the perception of their moral qualities; and so this perception necessarily involves a distinction between good and bad, destined and not.

Causality and destiny are thus complementary rather than conflicting concepts in the sphere of historical understanding. Causality pertains, in the primary sense, to the relationship between events. (In other senses it relates to the material or formal structure of objects, or to the motivations of living things.) Destiny pertains rather to the context of events, and to the way in which an event fits or does not fit a historical context. We say that a leader is “right for the times”, that a work of art expresses the spirit of the age, and so forth. The religious analog of these things involves the evaluation of events and things in a context wider than the political or the aesthetic—call it the moral-historical, or simply the cosmic.

Now the fit between event and context implies that the historical moment has its own qualities, rather than being nothing but the sum of events. There is an analogy here to the conception of space-time in Einsteian physics: instead of being a mere abstraction or neutral container of matter and energy, space and time are conditioned by matter and energy, and condition the dynamics of matter and energy in return. And this is how the rabbis see moments and places in the moral-historical perspective: the moments and places themselves have qualities, conducive to events of deferral or resolution, alienation or harmony, blindness or vision. The five examples illuminate different kinds of moral-historical fit: five dimensions of destiny.

1. Ahijah’s meeting of Jeroboam on the road—“a time destined for punishment.” On the surface, the idea seems to be that God arranged an apparently “chance” meeting; it was destined to happen. But the “punishment” refers to Solomon, or the house of David, having the “ten tribes” stripped away. The time in this case had a certain quality—it was ripe for revolution—as a result of a
generation (Solomon’s proverbial 40 years) of abuse and repression; a generation of attack on the ideals of decentralization and egalitarianism that were central to original Yahwism. Because of the need for security and the influence of the Temple, the people endured the repressions of Solomon, and were even prepared to accept his son if he would so much as give lip-service to the need for reform. But his “youthful advisors” argued for rule by fear instead. —In all this we see clearly, and without recourse to the miraculous, that Jeroboam was indeed the man of the hour, a man of destiny.

• The path to wisdom requires a moral-historical sense.

2. The destruction of the idols of Babylon in Jeremiah 51:18 has a double reference: first to the idols themselves, which inherently deserve destruction; and second to the Chaldeans, who are punished for their conquest of Jerusalem. The timespan in this case is roughly 70 years—a lifetime. There is really no question of justice here, as in the first case: the idols are what they are from the beginning—it is their very existence that is illicit; and likewise the Chaldeans, who are regarded as no more than God’s tools. Objectively speaking, the cause of the destruction of Babylon is the unpredictable, unrelated event of the rise of Persia. And of course we like to call the unpredictable “an act of God.” The unexpected, novel event corresponds to the time-span guaranteeing a complete turnover in population, so that events can be experienced in innocence and wonder.

• Progress toward wisdom requires the destruction of preconceptions imposed on us by representation, by language, so as to see with new eyes.

3. Unpredictability also corresponds to the undeservedness of God’s mercy, which the prophets promise nonetheless. “In a time of favor” Cyrus arose to restore the Judean exiles (that is, to restore their children and grandchildren after a lifetime).

• Wisdom too arrives as undeserved and unexpected—unexpected, that is, with regard to the moment of its arrival, even though it, like the messiah, is always “expected” in the indefinite future. It answers the spontaneity of divine favor with the spontaneity of its own gratitude (which gives thanks merely for existence , or as Heidegger said, thanks merely for being allowed to give thanks).

4. Moses argues with God after the golden calf incident, trying to get Him to agree to spare the Israelites. But God refuses to make a deal with Moses. For the time being He lets Israel off with a minor plague; but He warns that “in the time when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them.” Again we have the indefinite time-horizon—so indefinite that the rabbis will debate (below) whether the punishment has yet been carried out.
The path to wisdom begins (and remains?) in a fundamental condition of guilt, and a history of errancy that determines current historical possibilities. The words and concepts we must use have long since been fixed in literalistic interpretations that can only be deconstructed from within. And this must be done repeatedly, perhaps indefinitely.

5. Now we switch from time to place. The proof-text no longer refers to destiny. It simply says that Rehoboam needed to go to Shechem to be crowned, because “all Israel” was waiting there. Here again the gemara has in mind a kind of textual puzzle: why did he need to go to Shechem?

The Jewish (as opposed to Samaritan) Bible doesn’t provide any explanation of Shechem’s special status. The patriarchs spent time there, of course, and Joshua held a great ceremony there, in accordance with Deuteronomy 27. It was also declared to be one of the cities of refuge. Between Joshua and Jeroboam Shechem is mentioned only in connection with the story of Abimelech, another king who reigned over Israel from Shechem. The story seems to imply that the god of Shechem at that time was not YHWH, although the identity of “Baal-berith” (lord of the covenant) seems indistinguishable from YHWH of the Shechem covenant. But at any rate the city is destroyed at the end of the story. And yet everyone in 1 Kings 12 acts like Shechem is either the capital of northern Israel, or has some other crucial significance.

The Talmud explains this by saying that Shechem had an evil destiny—a claim further supported by reference to the “rape” of Dinah and the casting of Joseph into the pit. Then, finally, the assertion that Shechem bears guilt for the splitting of the kingdom.

The central point concerns this very schism or dissension within the controlling principle of religion, and within tradition. The symbol for the controlling principle is the Jerusalem Temple. The Samaritan Temple on Mt. Gerizim (above Shechem) represents heterodoxy and dissemination. But all this difference and dissension is also destined. The brute facts of geography are enough to guarantee the essential implications of Babel: the permanent possibilities of misunderstanding, of concepts that imply opposing conclusions … of dialectic.

It is appropriate, then, for us to question the rabbinic logic at this point—to enter into the dialectic. The enigmatic picture of Shechem in the Bible smells of a coverup. The Shechemites of the Hellenistic period, the Samaritans, have a view of history according to which it is quite understandable that Rehoboam would be crowned at Shechem. They say that their ancestors remained true to the 10th Commandment (as it appears in their Torah) to sacrifice on Mt. Gerizim, even when most of Israel followed the high priest Eli to Shiloh, where he took the Ark. Whatever the continuity of the community there from the Iron Age to the Hellenistic period, it seems obvious that Shechem, with its history as a religious and commercial hub reaching back long before Israel, continued to have important connotations as a place of teaching (the famous Terebinth of Instruction [elon moreh מזרה] there), and as a touchstone for the unity of the
tribes of Israel according to holy covenant. The Bible has seen fit to edit this out—why?

Consider the accounts of the origin of Shechem in Genesis. When Abraham first arrives in Palestine, he visits the Terebinth of Instruction and builds an altar nearby (chapter 12). Jacob returns to Shechem and buys some land from the locals (chapter 33). Then the episode of Shechem (the eponymous Canaanite) and Dinah erupts, resulting in shame for the sons of Jacob (especially Shimon and Levi) and death for the Shechemites (chapter 34). Finally (chapters 48-49) there are Jacob’s blessings of his sons and grandsons in Egypt. The mention of Shimon and Levi condemns them for their violence—presumably the massacre at Shechem. But the blessing of Ephraim, the favored grandson and eponym of the tribal territory containing Shechem, runs as follows: “I have given to you rather than to your brothers one shoulder [or mountain-slope—shechem שֶׁכֶם], which I took from the hand of the Amorite with my sword and my bow.”

The last part refers to a tradition that must otherwise be lost. There seem thus to be three different accounts: Jacob bought it; Jacob conquered it; Shimon and Levi took it by deception and treachery. The first two accounts come from what I take to be the earliest source of the texts that became the Torah, the work of the (northern) Israelite or “Elohist” author. Presumably the blessing of Ephraim was already proverbial by the time of the Elohist, who didn’t really have an account of a battle with “Amorites” (an old term). His intention was clearly to account for and support the religious and political prominence of the area. On the other hand the story of Dinah and the treachery of the brothers has an opposite effect: while helping to explain the expropriation of the tribes of Shimon and Levi, it also attaches an aura of shame to the history of Shechem. This story belongs to the “Yahwist” author from Judah, whose work tends to minimize or cast aspersions on neighboring rival Ephraim.

So in other words we find ourselves dealing again with propaganda and edited history. Again it seems that the negative moments of wisdom’s dialectic are as necessary as the positive ones. And again we must work to discover a kernel of unity to the tradition, not being able to accept the artificial unity of the Judean editors which the Talmud embraces. This work must be both scholarly and spiritual; for if we do not repair the breaches in religion caused by the corrosive effects of analysis, then our investigation has no value.

And in fact scholarship is so addressed in the following:

C. Scholarship and Dialectic

11. Destiny and Scholarship

104 Genesis 48:22
[Now it came to pass at that time] that Jeroboam went out of Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{105} R. Chanina b. Papa said: He went out of the destiny of Jerusalem. \textit{And the prophet Ahijah found him in the way, and he clad himself with a new garment, and they two were alone in the field.}\textsuperscript{106} What is meant by “with a new garment”? R. Nachman said, as a new garment: just as a new garment has no defect, so was Jeroboam’s scholarship without defect. Another explanation: “a new garment” intimates that they expounded new teachings, such as no ear had ever heard before. What is taught by “and they two were alone in the field”? Rab Yehudah said in Rab’s name: All other scholars were as the herbs of the field before them. Others say that all the reasons of the Torah were as manifest to them as a field.

R. Chanina’s wordplay merely reiterates the implicit supremacy and uniqueness of Jerusalem. While not accepting this premise, we can still provisionally accept Jeroboam as a symbol of failure in the search for wisdom, and decide later as to the ramifications of the Judean prejudice.

We have so far understood the modes of destiny as the relationship we have to the moral-historical context: the requirements of social justice, conceptual reconstruction, spontaneous gratitude and infinite obligation are the predicates of wisdom which we approach as ideals. We measure our progress in terms of the degree of failure in respect of each. And yet now a startling perspective emerges: four separate opinions testifying to the greatness—no, the perfection!—of Jeroboam’s scholarship. As if its very perfection were a mark of guilt. It is clear that Jeroboam’s conceit (which drove him “out of the world”) was the conceit of scholarship—of discursive reasoning in pursuit of wisdom. In effect the rabbis are analyzing themselves. The failures with regard to justice, novelty, gratitude and obligation will be spelled out in scholarly terms.

The first implication of the “new garment” is the perfection, or lack of defect, in Jeroboam’s scholarship. This recalls the “depth” of “the rebels” in section 8, which related to the excessive stringency (or adherence to the letter) of the law and its administration, a stringency leading to violence. In scholarly terms, we should probably think of a systematic self-consistency which shuts itself off from the accidents and confusions of history and tradition.

The second implication is novelty of scholarship and language. Fundamentalists think that tradition is nothing more than mechanical repetition. We have already seen plenty of evidence of the prodigious creativity of the Pharisees (who were such innovators as compared to the Sadducees and Samaritans) and their Talmudic heirs. An explicit statement on the subject is found a few pages before the “Three Kings”, in the gemara to “he who says the Torah is not from heaven.” R. Joshua b. Karha said: \textit{Whoever studies the Torah but does not revise it [or return to it, repeat the lesson] is like one who sows without reaping.}\textsuperscript{107} And indeed we saw in the second mode of destiny, relating to the destruction of idols after a period of exile, the awareness of a fundamental need for conceptual criticism, linguistic reform and the experience of radical

\textsuperscript{105} 1 Kings 11:29
\textsuperscript{106} 1 Kings 11:29
\textsuperscript{107} Sanhedrin 99a
novelty. But this necessity of innovation does not change the fact that innovation can lead to misunderstanding, and alienation between scholars and non-scholars (even if it also leads to tenure). This is the perpetual danger the text is calling to our attention.

The third implication is the alienation just mentioned, but now exaggerated to the point that even scholars are as non-scholars compared to Jeroboam and Ahijah. No one else could understand them! Excessive rigor alienates the affections, while excessive linguistic brilliance alienates the intellect. Academic supremacy is inimical to the third determination of destiny, its unexpected and undeserved quality; whereas the scholar who always wins the debate puts himself forth as deserving wisdom (if not already being wise), and as being able to bring it about through technical procedures. Religion is thus commodified as surely as in the case of Micah, who bought religion with stolen silver.

The fourth implication is the comprehensiveness of Jeroboam’s analysis. The gemara is understood to be saying that Jeroboam even knew the reasons behind all those laws in the Torah that, according to tradition and indeed common sense, have rationales known only to God. Once again Jeroboam appears strangely modern. Today scholarly works are available bringing all manner of comparative studies, anthropology and psychology together to reconstruct what might have been in the minds of the authors of all the most mysterious Biblical laws. Almost all such explanations seem to dissolve the law as such, leaving only historical curiosity and/or an occasion for homily. But the giving of such reasons by itself still cannot measure up to the fourth determination of destiny: the open horizon of the search for wisdom, implying infinite obligation and the ultimate deficiency (“guilt”) of language with its seduction into literalism. The analyst who knows all the reasons still has an infinite obligation to communicate, to learn and address the confusions of the moral-historical context, and to try to focus attention on the silent opening that restores and reveals the unity of religion.

12. Religious Falsehood

Therefore you shall give parting gifts [or bill of divorce] to Moresheth-gath; the houses of Achzib shall be a lie to the kings of Israel. R. Chanina b. Papa said: A heavenly voice cried out and said, “He who slew the Philistine and thereby gave you possession of Gath, you shall give parting gifts to his sons.” [Therefore] the houses of Achzib shall be a lie to the kings of Israel.

The infinite horizon of obligation, hope and gratitude is thought by the rabbis in terms of the messiah—a concept inseparable on one side from the ultimate determinations of “the world to come” and so wisdom as we are trying to understand it; and on the other side from the founder of Jerusalem and its
dynasty in Assyrian times. An odd line from Micah (from a text making puns on place-names) is used to connect the rejection of David with the falsity (achzib אַחְצִיב) of the state religion of Israel. We could easily interpret this in terms of the errancy introduced into the search for wisdom by closure of the infinite horizon—by a focus on today and on the tokens of wisdom, rather than always holding open an infinite expectation, always escaping from the clutches of the literal. But the proof-text draws us again into our recurring opposition to the priority of Jerusalem over Shechem, and to acceptance of royal theology over prophetic tradition.

The book of Micah uses the state religion of Israel (together with its judicial, economic and moral culture) as a focus of retribution; but like the book of Hosea, it is primarily addressed to Judeans, and it accuses the religion of Jerusalem of the same corruption:

What is the transgression of Jacob? Is it not Samaria?  
And what are the high places of Judah? Are they not Jerusalem?109

Just as the true and ancient religion of Israel is explicitly distinguished from the theocratic trappings of the kings in Samaria, so Micah distinguishes it as well from the royal Jerusalem Temple. Mt. Zion is no better than any other “high place”,110 because

Its heads give judgment for a bribe; its priests teach for hire; its prophets divine for money; and yet they lean upon YHWH, saying “Is not YHWH among us? No evil can befall us.”111

It may be that Micah preached at a time when Jerusalem paid lip-service to monotheism, and thus felt superior to old polytheistic Israel. But Micah saw that this made no difference.

The prince and the judge ask for a bribe, and the great man utters the evil desire of his soul; thus they weave it together.112

Micah is really against the corruption of the whole power-structure, which not only fails its obligations, but interweaves its corrupt practices with the upper echelons of society—and with religion itself.

How then can the Jerusalem king and his orthodoxy be the symbol of the ultimate horizon of the search for wisdom? It is only possible if we are also willing to accept that the falsity of religion, and of the search for wisdom, are as much internal to the tradition (and to language, and the Torahs) as they are external to it—as much a part of Judaism as the religion of old Israel. My search for wisdom is not isolated from my lower desires, nor from my laziness and mediocrity. This

109 Micah 1:5  
110 notwithstanding some post-exilic additions in Micah, notably chapter 4  
111 Micah 3:11  
112 Micah 7:3
also implies that the infinite perspective of perfectionism or messianism still exists in a rhythmic interplay with the finite and literal, and that the relaxation of concentration is also a part of the dynamic of wisdom. This question of constancy is addressed in the next gemara.

13. Mindfulness and Morality

R. Chanina b. Papa said: He who enjoys anything of this world without uttering a blessing is as though he robbed the Holy One, blessed be He, and the community of Israel, for it is written, Whoever robs his father or his mother and says, It is no transgression, he is the companion of a destroyer. Now “his father” can refer only to the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is written: Is he [God] not your father who bought you? While “his mother” can mean nothing but the community of Israel, as it is written, My son, hear the instruction of your father, and forsake not the law of your mother. What is meant by “he is the companion of a destroyer”? He is the companion of Jeroboam son of Nebat, who destroyed [the allegiance of] Israel to their Father in heaven.

Wisdom requires a kind of continuous concentration, a wholeness of heart and mind without fluctuation ... so the sages say, with very few exceptions, east and west, ancient and modern. This ideal mental unity on the part of the student corresponds to the cosmic, divine unity, as well as to the unity of the tradition (the unity of language and of religion), which mediates between them. Even when the Zen master answers the struggling meditator by barking “Lazy mind not possible!”—thus denying the difference between the student’s fluctuating consciousness and the constancy of the ideal—his aim is to impart a sense of liberation which will, nonetheless, be treated as a new state to be preserved and solidified in constancy. R. Chanina seems to be in accord with this perennial perspective when he admonishes us to bless God for every single experience we enjoy. Yet we might wonder about experiences of suffering (or even boredom), which certain other sages would also have us use as occasions to bless God—precisely in order to maintain the uniformity of perspective. (For example, Mishnah Berachot 9:5—“a man is obligated to say a blessing over evil just as he says a blessing over good.” Perhaps this omission is intentional. (The issue will return in force below.)

R. Chanina’s device is to identify the enigmatic “destroyer” of Proverbs 8:24 with Jeroboam. Whereas the more common Talmudic maneuver is to over-literalize the Biblical text, here the rather prosaic and literal proverb is read as a cosmic metaphor. What sense does the connection with Jeroboam make? The relationship posited between Jeroboam, God and Israel recalls the beginning of

113 Proverbs 28:24
114 Deuteronomy 32:6
115 Proverbs 1:8
116 see Interlude below
the Three Kings gemara: spiritual blindness manifests itself through 1) debasement of the people, or their alienation from God, 2) alienation of people from each other, and 3) strife with God. Here Jeroboam in effect stands for the third term, strife with God, while the first two are mentioned explicitly.

Just as Proverbs 28:24, at the literal level, compares an ambiguous or ostensibly minor crime (stealing from parents—no more than “borrowing” from mom’s purse, taking an advance against the inheritance) with all-out violence, so R. Chanina compares the seemingly minor omission of one who forgets to thank God for even a small daily benefit with the sin of Jeroboam himself, denied a share in eternity. Alienation from God through simple laziness or lapse of concentration can lead to alienation from others, that is, moral lapses; and from there to the destruction of religion itself, that is, true religion turning into false religion—the “sin of Jeroboam.”

14. Religiosity and Spirituality

And Jeroboam drove Israel from following YHWH, and made them sin a great sin. 117 R. Yochanan said: as two sticks which cause each other to rebound.

What are the two sticks here? Are they Israel and God, as the preceding word of R. Chanina b. Papa would imply? Or are they Israel and Judah, as in Ezekiel 37:16, which speaks of sticks inscribed “for Judah” and “for Joseph”? I choose the first case, inferring that the “strife with God” as third term following religious and moral failure is being given a further determination, one which helps distinguish it from the first term (debasement of the people). Otherwise we would just be emphasizing the moment of moral failure, which leads to the third dialectically.

How are Israel and God alike enough to be compared to sticks? Because as God’s chosen people, Israel is a manifestation of God in history—the model of true religion; but in the sin of Jeroboam they become a model of false religion. And yet false religion and true religion look as alike as two sticks: false religion is merely the literalistic misinterpretation of the truth, as subtle as the distinction between the calves and the cherubs, between idols and signs that point beyond themselves, between propaganda and piety.

Levinas, commenting on Sanhedrin 67-68, put forth a distinction between sacré and saint, the sacred and the holy, which would provide the title of his second collection of Talmudic essays, Du Sacré au Saint. In English this distinction is confusing; I would prefer to translate: (objects of) religiosity and spirituality. The former is concerned with miracles and the supernatural, with otherworldliness, with the literal fixation of past expressions of spirituality—all connected to the need for security and power, self-interest and manipulation.

And the definition of spirituality or the holy?—The question is suspect—definitions are tools for the technical manipulation of representations, and

117 2 Kings 17:21
suggest that their objects are fixed “essences”—but it cannot be avoided. Levinas relies on the phenomena of infinite obligation and disinterestedness as the ultimate referents of religious discourse (not forgetting that Referent beyond all reference). I might add the determinations of spontaneous or unconditional gratitude and radical novelty (Levinas also stressed openness), as developed above. In both cases the concern is more practical than theoretical: the language does not aim at presenting a picture of things, but of encouraging certain ways of seeing and thinking. So the “definition” does not point to the essence of true religion, separate from that of false religion; the two are related rather as the two aspects of an Escher drawing.

But in the context of the Talmud we must also deal squarely with the more obvious and literal definition of spirituality or true religion: obedience to and study of the Torah, as epitomized by the religion of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. We must first remember the pointed ideality of the Temple as remembered in the Talmud after the actual corrupt Temple of post-Maccabean days had ceased to exist. This ideality allows, as is often said, for treating everyday life in home and synagogue “as if” it had the weight of the Temple service on Mt. Zion. The fact that the Pharisees developed this approach, even while the Temple still stood in its corruption and Herodian splendor, shows that their adherence to the specificity of David/Jerusalem/Temple should never be taken literally.

Consider again the dialectical concept “Israel”: here, as in a great many places from the later strata of the Bible, it means precisely the false religion of Jeroboam and the failed community of its adherents. At the same time “Israel” refers to the Jews (or the Samaritans, or Christians, etc.), that is, the followers of the true religion, the “all Israel” mentioned at the start of our mishna, all or most or a few of which have a share toward the world to come. Sometimes these two senses of “Israel” are superimposed: precisely in order to signify that the representations of religion are all subject to criticism, that none are to be taken literally—not the signs of ethnicity, of outward piety, of scholarship, discipleship, etc. For no Israelite (not even Moses) is without sin, and none are free from spiritual blindness. Even in a time of favor, in the very flourishing of religion, sin is brewing—as the next section makes clear.

15. Wisdom and Instrumental Thinking

[These are the words which Moses spoke unto all Israel...in the wilderness...between Paran and Tophel...]

118 see Prelude 1, The Myth of the Lost Tribes and the Ambiguity of “Israel”
119 Deuteronomy 1:1
basket of straw, but out of a basket of meat. R. Oshaia said: until Jeroboam, Israel imbibed from one calf; but from him onwards, from two or three calves.

The puzzle here concerns the terminus of the wilderness itinerary given in the first verse of Deuteronomy (the opening of the Deuteronomistic Bible of the exilic royal party). Otherwise unknown as a place-name, Di-zahav would seem to mean only “of gold”. The separated word di or dai is Aramaic, perhaps betraying the later origins of this section of Deuteronomy (as compared to the core material beginning in chapter 4). The interpretation is itself counterintuitive on the surface: the Israelites on the way to Mt. Horeb did not consider themselves so fortunate, whiners that they were—they would hardly have cried “enough”. Nevertheless the logic we have been following is continued here. Religion is not corrupted by forces outside itself, but through an intensification or excess of its own essence. The golden calf comes out of the people’s fear and loss of direction in the absence of Moses, but not because they have abandoned YHWH; Aaron explicitly says that the festival of the calf is for YHWH. The only offense seems to lie in Aaron’s statement, quoted by Jeroboam (or is it really the other way around?): “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” The plural “these”, although there is only one calf, is puzzling unless the original context really had another reference, such as Jeroboam’s two calves. In any case, the instrumental perspective is predominant: gods are good for leading wanderers, feeding and protecting them, fighting their battles, etc. Since there is such clear giving of benefits on one side, the other side seeks to pay for them with silver and gold, animals and produce, etc. The multiplicity of different benefits, and thus prices for them, does introduce a certain multiplicity into the realm of the divine.

So the cause of sin is expressed as an excessive providence on God’s part—he was too good to Israel! We might say that wisdom is so enjoyable, and its benefits so great, that an instrumental approach to wisdom arises naturally out of (partial) wisdom itself; even though such an approach causes wisdom quickly to recede from the pursuer. Wisdom is ideally characterized by absolute unity in form and content (simple constancy of meditation on the unity of God). Thus Aristotle calls it “most self-sufficient.” But this ideal self-sufficiency of the hermit-ascetic is itself a kind of self-indulgence, which Kafka dramatized in “The Hunger Artist”. The great Mahayana movement in Buddhism, which said that personal salvation must be deferred in favor of other suffering beings, is another witness to this moral truism. The well-fed lion of our parable wants to use his strength while he has it to increase his position. Even the scholar wants to store up benefits for a spiritual rainy day (to put wisdom in a silver rod, and love in a golden bowl).

Discounting the textual history behind the singular-plural confusion of “these are your gods” applied to the single calf, we may simply take it as a sign of the introduction of plurality through commodification. R. Oshaia’s remark points to a further pluralization, described as a multiplication of calves. It suggests that the initial distortion or refractions of unity due, to the benefits of the contemplation

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120 Exodus 32:5
of unity, is to be distinguished from subsequent confusions. Literalizations of religion or systematizations of wisdom give rise to levels of confusion and self-interest that go beyond the initial paradox of the search, and have repercussions in the moral sphere, as we have already seen. Philosophy and politics, in their mutual entanglement, follow parallel trajectories. Our next section looks more closely at this question of cascading consequences, and tries to relate them, through a return to the theme of destiny developed above, to the question of redemption—that is, to the underlying unity of God and of wisdom, against which consciousness compares its own representations and impulses.

16. Dialectic and the Remnant

R. Isaac said: No retribution whatsoever comes upon the world which does not contain a 24th part of the first calf, as it is written, nevertheless in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them. R. Chanina said: After 24 generations this decree was fulfilled, as it is written, He cried also in my ears with a loud voice, saying, cause the visitations [pekudoth פקרה] of the city to draw near, every man with his destroying weapon in his hand.

In section 10 destiny was defined in terms of both favor and punishment or visitation (translations of paqad פקר). R. Isaac returns to Exodus 32:34 with its double use of paqad (“on the day of my visit, I will visit”) in order to show the inner connection between the infinite horizon of the search for wisdom and the karmic chain of effects articulating its downward path. Israel’s sin at the foot of Mt. Horeb was so profound that its very character and soul was damaged, leading to an inevitable cascade of errors. The pure communion with God that Israel would have enjoyed exists now only at the messianic horizon. But the horizon is reflected in each moment, even as every error is an echo of the first great error—and thus an echo of wisdom itself.

R. Chanina puts forth a contrary opinion. Its dialectical continuity with the statement of R. Isaac is indicated by the inverse quantities 24 and 1/24 in the two statements. (I am as usual dismayed to find the traditional commentators attending to the two 24’s as a factual matter—Rashi documents the 24 generations—which is either a weird coincidence or a divine manipulation no one can explain. How much clearer the text becomes if we are willing to recognize that the connection is a literary one.)

R. Chanina, who in section 12 preached a constancy of awareness and infinite gratitude, here says that the sin of the calf was fully punished by the Babylonian destruction and exile (24 generations after the exodus from Egypt). Righteousness and wisdom are possible for us. The historical conditions—ambiguous language, rituals decayed into superstition, ethnic divisions, crime

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121 Exodus 32:34
122 Ezekiel 9:1
and political corruption—are not insurmountable. The messiah will come at a definite hour; he is not an abstraction of the end of time.

One opinion, although it looks at the inescapability of historical consequences, implies a transhistorical philosophical perspective. The other, although it focuses on redemption and the transcendence of historical limitations, ties itself to definite events in the past and future. What is the middle term linking the 1/24 to the 24? In such a situation we consider what may be found in the proof-text.

R. Chanina interprets כפדת עיר "the visitations of the city" as the punishment from Exodus 32:34; but the straightforward interpretation is that the pekudoth כפדת (commonly translated here as “overseers” or “executioners”) are the six men who come from the north gate in the following verse. The vision, which had begun with a review of the abominations being practiced in Jerusalem, proceeds with a description of the wholesale slaughter of all who have not been found bemoaning the abominations (and thus marked by a mysterious man in linen with a writer’s inkhorn). It concludes with the glory of YHWH and the animated cherubs flying out of the Temple. (More evidence of the idolatrous meaning of the cherubs!)

Ezekiel is overly rich in suggestive themes; we will focus on three: 1) the abominations, 2) the remnant saved from the pekudoth כפדת, and 3) the scribe who marks the remnant.

The abominations pertain to the usual sins of injustice and the religions of the nations, but a particular characterization is given in 8:12:

Then the king said to me, “Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, every man in his rooms of pictures? For they say, ‘YHWH does not see us, YHWH has forsaken the land.’”

The “rooms of pictures” can be taken as Egyptian-style tombs or temples; but they also suggest the theme of retreat from the common world (section 7). The elders, who should guide Israel by seeing the moral-historical context, instead see only images of their own making, confined in their own minds as in dark rooms. (It is hard to avoid thinking here of the display screens of modern technology. Probably more to the point, however, is the comparison with scholars who retreat into their own caves of language and theory.) And this is connected with a loss of hope and of any sense of divine presence. Presumably the context is the period after 597 BC: a defeated Jerusalem, still largely intact, has already lost faith. Their self-interested, instrumental conception of God is incompatible with political subjugation and loss of the native dynasty. Moreover, their cynicism has translated into further moral decay. At this point the only hope is to start anew, as in the time of Noah, with a faithful remnant.

The Hebrew Bible was compiled by and for a group who saw themselves as a noble remnant of the tragic Israelite kingdoms. But the “remnant” has a deeper meaning: it exemplifies the movement of dialectic, whereby negation results in a positive, and the whole is represented in a part, through discontinuity and inversion of perspective. Another example is שבח ג—time purged of
everydayness—whose purpose is to see the truth of the everyday, and thus inevitably to make every day like Shabath (thus abolishing Shabath!)

The vicious cycle of sins-that-damage-character-leading-to-worse-sins-etc. can be broken by a divine rupture, a historical discontinuity. Whereas we previously connected such discontinuity with the 70-year time-span of the Babylonian Exile, R. Chanina connects it with a period of 480 [960?] years! The deepest negation applies to the widest historical perspective: the whole religion of ancient Israel was a failure, from the time of Eli to the destruction of the Temple. And how did something positive come out of it?—Through literary culture, the man with the inkhorn. Unlike the Israelites of Biblical times who were merely ethnically determined (although supposedly all bound by covenant), the Remnant determines itself dialectically, through interpretation of the literary-historical record. The Remnant is not merely Israel but a new Israel, and its interpretations must be novel.—R. Chanina is at bottom in accord with R. Isaac’s focus on the infinite horizon, but he sees the horizon available to the living present through Talmudic practice.

A clarification is still necessary with respect to the definite historical references. Why was the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC of such singular importance? There are other instances of “visitation” that could be tied to Exodus 32:34, such as the verse of Hosea discussed above (section 8), with “for I will punish ( nip̄d) the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel.” The destruction of the kingdom of Israel, with its two calves, might just as well answer to the original sin of the calf; and indeed it was seen this way by the first group to practice the dialectic of the Remnant, the Jerusalemites of the 7th century BC, who had survived Sennacherib’s near-total conquest of Judah. The dialectical requirement of novelty and interpretation expressed itself violently in the Josianic revolution, but its grounding in the book of Deuteronomy already indicated the literary horizon of self-reinterpretation.

Of course we can just as easily use other historic ruptures as symbols of dialectical rebirth: the destruction of the Samaritan Temple in 163 BC, the destructions of 70 and 135 AD, the Crusades, the Holocaust… The main point is that dialectical processes do not lead (contrary to Hegel) to final culminations. The idea of the final culmination, like the ideas of total purity, every-day Shabath, and so forth, only has its reality in the movement between conceptual moments. The Remnant can only be a Remnant through perpetual separation and purification—through the rhythm of the search for wisdom.

17. The Ambiguity of Pride and Authority

After this thing Jeroboam turned not from his evil way. What is meant by “after this thing”? R. Abba said: After the Holy One blessed be He had seized Jeroboam by his garment and urged him, “repent, then I, you and the son of Jesse will walk

123 1 Kings 13:33
in the Garden of Eden.” “And who shall be at the head?” he inquired. “The son of Jesse shall be at the head.” “If so, I do not desire [it].”

R. Abba reaffirms the greatness of Jeroboam, that is, the internal relation between wisdom and the natural errors arising in its pursuit. Jeroboam’s efforts, though they are called sins, need not be so interpreted—they are that close to being supreme virtues on a par with David, the son of Jesse. Only one thing forces a negative evaluation of Jeroboam’s wisdom, and that is his refusal to follow the house of David.

We have previously understood the references to David in terms of the unity of the controlling principles of religion, and in terms of the infinite horizon of hope, gratitude, justice and revolution, as symbolized by our relation to the messiah. The contours of the messianic horizon are the articulations of the controlling principle. Spiritual blindness distorts the contours because of self-interest and the confusion engendered by the ambiguity of language. It wants to dictate the implications of wisdom, rather than opening itself to wisdom as unexpected and undeserved; and to meet injustice with strictness and violence rather than leniency and patient engagement.

But there is a problem. The text mentions three walkers in the garden of Eden, with David at the head—not God, but David. It is assumed that Jeroboam is really only concerned with his own position in relation to David; but if we stick to the letter of the text, it would be more logical for Jeroboam to be concerned with the honor of God. And would his concern not be justified? Didn’t Christianity put the messiah before God? We may understand Jeroboam’s voluntary renunciation of paradise as due to a genuine concern that the signposts and strictures of religion not be taken as ends, but only as means. From such a position it is of course easy to degenerate into anarchy, because of the need of the many (or the many within me) for signs and wonders and kings.

And yet another difficulty attaches to the device of the gemara: “after this” in 1 Kings 13:33 refers, in its plain sense, to the prophecy of the Judean “man of God” at Bethel, from section 5. In a scientific light, the “after this” refers to an event which advertises its origin in propaganda. The paradox of wisdom and our hermeneutics of suspicion remain as urgent as ever.

D. Talmudic Self-consciousness

18. The Necessity of the Negative

R. Abbahu used to make a practice of lecturing on the Three Kings. Falling sick, he undertook not to lecture [on them anymore]; yet no sooner had he recovered, than he lectured [on them] again. They [his disciples] remonstrated with him,
“Did you not undertake not to lecture on them?” He replied, “Did they abandon, that I should abandon?”

But is all this concern with blindness and sin really necessary? Is it really true that the path downward through idolatry is the same as the path upward to wisdom? Must we endure the restless negativity of dialectical thinking—or might we not just adhere to the positivity of obedience, faith and tradition? And doesn’t prolonged exposure to dialectic in fact carry a great danger, wearing out the patience of the many?

R. Abbahu surely entertained these doubts (as did Aristotle). Our text says that he “undertook” not to lecture on the kings upon falling ill. Why? A commentator suggests that he viewed his illness as “punishment for dwelling on the sins of others.” This is hardly convincing, especially in the context of Sanhedrin, with its endless discussions of a vast array of crimes and depravities; and R. Abbahu’s reservations are surely on a more subtle plane. When he resumed lecturing on the kings, there were in fact no ill results. We should instead understand Abbahu’s “illness” as the dis-ease of dialectic itself—what Hegel called “the wound of the negative” which philosophy is supposed to keep open. Perhaps one day Abbahu, like Parmenides in Plato’s dialogue, felt “like the old race horse in Ibycus, who trembles at the start of the chariot race, knowing from long experience what is in store for him”125, to consider wisdom from the perspective of ignorance and ignorance from the perspective of wisdom, considering how each implies the other; and to give oneself up to the historical texture of the search, at the risk of new failures and confusions. Perhaps one day Abbahu felt like resting in the self-sufficiency of his own understanding, without analyzing its fallibility and impermanence.

But as soon as he returned to teaching, the necessity of the negative became clear to him again. Actually the text just says: “no sooner had he recovered, than he lectured again.” It isn’t just that he found, after returning to his job as a teacher, that the Three Kings were a necessary part of the curriculum; his “recovery”, his re-engagement in teaching, and his attention to the negative are all the same thing. For teaching and learning essentially involve the negative: mistakes and corrections, reflective distancing, and critical analysis. And on the path to wisdom, these movements are grounded in the negative emotional register: fear and trembling, regret and repentance (the complements of love and wonder, hope and gratitude). Abbahu was ready again to suffer through all this, for the benefit of his students and himself. And even more: to suffer the confusion, the strife and misinterpretations attendant upon the context of teaching and learning.

Now how are we to understand Abbahu’s reply to his disciples (“Did they abandon, that I should abandon?”)? The kings have been dead for thousands of years, and likewise their kingdoms! But for the rabbis the kings are the principles of religious reality, and their kingdoms are the aspects of religion itself. In the thousands of years it has not ceased to be the case that religious truth only

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125 Plato, Parmenides 137a
appears through dialectical struggle, that religious authority must be discerned through layers of propaganda and semantic drift. The search for wisdom is threatened by the very forces it studies, including the lassitude that turns from dialectic and dialogue to simple affirmation and quietism.126 Abbahu’s “illness”, understood as this lassitude, is itself a dialectical moment in the larger ebb and flow of his learning and teaching.

19. Talmudic Self-consciousness and Self-criticism

In the college of R. Ashi, the new lecture terminated at “Three Kings.”
“Tomorrow,” he said, “we will commence with our colleagues.” Manasseh came and appeared to him in a dream.
“You have called us your colleagues and the colleagues of your father. Now from what part [of the bread] is [the piece for reciting] the ha-motzi to be taken?”
“I do not know” he answered.
“You haven’t learned this,” he jibed, “yet you call us your colleagues!”
“Teach it to me,” he begged, “and tomorrow I will teach it in your name at the session.”
He answered, “from the part that is baked into a crust.”
“Since you are so wise, why did you worship idols127?”
He replied, “Were you there, you would have picked up the skirt of your garment and sped after me.”
The next day he observed to the students: We will commence with our teachers...

The problem of the Three Kings has been understood as an essentially philosophical analysis of authority or meaning (that is, the rules of the linguistic practices) in religion. So it was not surprising, given the self-referential aspect of philosophy—the fact that its “analysis” is always also a matter of personal orientation and growth—that the Biblical kings should be portrayed as scholars. They are the shadows, if not the mirror images, of the rabbis themselves. At this point the text makes the project more explicit by quoting R. Ashi’s reference to the kings as “colleagues”, and by mixing kings and rabbis in its narrative.

What is the import of R. Ashi calling the kings “colleagues”, and then “teachers”? The commentary that simply points to section 11 (and others to come), as evidence that the ancient kings were in fact scholars, is vacuous—as if one explained a metaphor by pointing to another use of the same metaphor (and taking it literally). R. Ashi, like R. Abbahu, is concerned with the activity of “the kings” in the present. It would be misguided to consider how the actual historical figures may have engaged in Talmud—especially considering that the Torah as

126 which is not impugn the value of reticence and silent meditation
127 Here as elsewhere, the term translated as “idolatry” or worship of idols is actually “service of stars”.

we know it did not exist when they lived.\textsuperscript{128} The point is that we are studying ourselves, we are studying the phenomena of learning and teaching, in which the obstacles and modes of failure are themselves part of the ladder to wisdom. As Dr. Jekyll, we are studying Mr. Hyde, whom we find to be essential to our medical practice.

Manasseh comes to R. Ashi in a dream and demonstrates his comprehensive scholarship. We know that the best part of the bread must be used for blessing, but which part is best? I don’t know what we learn from the answer that it is the crust. I have to worry that that’s just how Manasseh liked it! Maybe he just knew that whatever part you like best is the part to use. I do notice a connection with the theme of hunger and “the mouthful”, which will occupy us below.\textsuperscript{129} But in any case we have to focus on the fact that the answer is convincing to R. Ashi, and that certainly counts for something: R. Ashi not only headed the great academy of Sura for 50 years, he is said to be the first great compiler and editor of the Babylonian Talmud itself. So we see here the Talmud reflecting the limits and incompleteness (we could just say, the open-endedness) of its own knowledge. But then, and even more profoundly, we are shown the limits of its \textit{character}: even as great a master as R. Ashi is susceptible to idolatry, if he lives in a place and time destined for error. “If you were there, you would have sped after”—as if Manasseh was as far above R. Ashi in character as in scholarship.

Now we know that this “there” is really here; and this “if” is really an indicator of potentialities and tendencies in R. Ashi’s own soul—and ours. It is, after all, his dream talking. Only an extreme modernist prejudice would hold that R. Ashi took his dream literally as a visitation from the beyond, ignoring its roots in his own psyche. (That it had a divine component as well goes without saying, but adds little here.) The first great Jewish interpreter of dreams was not Freud but Joseph son of Jacob. So the explanation of Manasseh’s statement has nothing to do with the supposedly benighted ancient time, which in regard to moral (as opposed to technological) progress was only yesterday. It must rather be given in terms of the structure of destiny as discussed in sections 10 and 16. “If you were there” means: at the moments and to the extent that your relation to the moral-historical context is determined by the literal, the polemical, the economic order—by contraction of the infinite horizon of gratitude and hope, and retreat from the negativity of dialectic.

We have already learned that this is not simply a matter of good intentions, scholarly brilliance or a communal consensus; and that the secondary effects of spiritual error can create a negative moral feedback. There is no doubt that one is privileged to be at the academy in Sura, and the rabbis indeed recognize the greater responsibilities of those so privileged. The most subtle interconnections of wisdom and error require the greatest self-criticism.

\textsuperscript{128} Of course this anachronism is no greater than that of the Dual Torah theory itself, which has Moses being given the Mishna, with its references to rabbis and events of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century AD. In both cases the absurdity on the surface forces us to look beneath.

\textsuperscript{129} sec.18
20. Self-consciousness and Pity

The next day he [R. Ashi] observed to his students: “Ahab” denotes that he was a brother \( \text{ach } \overline{\text{NN}} \) to Heaven, and a father \( \text{ab } \overline{\text{NN}} \) to idolatry. A brother to Heaven, as it is written, \textit{a brother is born for trouble}.\textsuperscript{130} And father to idolatry, as it is written, \textit{As a father pities his children}.\textsuperscript{131}

R. Ashi’s lecture zeroes in on this essential interconnection with his etymology of the second king excluded from the world to come, Ahab (we should write Achab) son of Omri. The \textit{ach } \overline{\text{NN}} (brother) of Ach-ab is interpreted as “brother to Heaven”—that is how close the relationship between good and evil, wisdom and confusion.

Before examining the logic of this teaching, we might pause to take note of the point we have reached in the analysis. We will now spend several paragraphs on the second of the three kings, whom we might expect to represent some sort of middle term between initial and ultimate error. If the schema of section 1 still holds, we might expect this middle term to be especially concerned with the moral realm. But there is a small puzzle: why has the third king, Manasseh, already made an appearance, and why did R. Ashi’s encounter with Manasseh result in a teaching on Ahab? Many explanations are possible; it could be an accident; it could be that the lecture was arranged alphabetically.\textsuperscript{132}

But Manasseh is the most dialectical figure of the three, in that the Deuteronomist portrays him as the ultimate evil, responsible for the Babylonian Exile, while the Chronicler describes his \textit{repentance}, which found favor with God.\textsuperscript{133} Dialectic and repentance are required for the self-criticism which probes the nature of education and moral relations; this echoes Abbahu’s experience. And at the point of greatest conflict and alienation a reference to the end and the whole is at work.

Now what about this divine brotherhood of Ahab? The proof-text seems to make sense at first hearing, but quickly proves provocative.

\textit{A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for trouble.}

“A brother is born for trouble”—not in the vulgar sense that relatives can be a pain in the neck, and Ahab was a pain in God’s neck. The point is clearly that the destiny and mandate for human life is to help others, to become involved in their trouble and identify with it. So if we put Ahab in the position of the (initially) troubled brother, the conclusion would be that God Himself attains to his essential divinity precisely through His mercy and salvation. The famous implacable justice of the “Old Testament”, in support of which so many Biblical

\textsuperscript{130} Proverbs 17:17
\textsuperscript{131} Psalm 103:13
\textsuperscript{132} In the last chapter of Part 2 (sec.40) below, I look at the parallel sections of the earlier Talmud (\textit{Yerushalmi}) on the three kings, and discover a textual explanation for the conflation of Manasseh and Ahab here.
\textsuperscript{133} Ahab also has a smaller and more ambiguous episode of repentance.
passages can be mustered, would give way to the ultimate mystery of hope for the lost. And our next proof-text will confirm this.

But the logic of our text suggests an even more difficult reading, if we notice that the designated “brother” is not the one who causes or initially suffers the trouble, but the one called upon to help; and that it is Ahab who is the designated brother. This suggests that the sin of Ahab originates in the heart of things, and in the search for God itself, as has been repeatedly intimated above (although the context of brotherhood now emphasizes the moral and social dimension of the search). This is indeed a dialectical teaching worthy of Manasseh. But what exactly is this moral connection between wisdom and error?

It is specified in the second part of R. Ashi’s teaching with reference to Psalms 103:13. Here again the phrase “as a father pities his children” cannot be abstracted from its context; we must look at verses 10-14 to read properly.

> He has not dealt with us according to our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.  
> For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him.  
> As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.  
> As a father pities his children, so YHWH pities them that fear him.  
> For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.

The theme of Psalm 103 is YHWH’s incomprehensible and excessive mercy. (So much for the wrathful “Old Testament”!) This mercy (or pity—racham נרה) is compared in verse 13 to that of a father for his children. So Ahab’s feeling for idolatry is compared to that of God for “those who fear him”—is this intelligible?

Again we must explicitly reject the vacuous explanation that Ahab had such feeling for idolatry or idolaters just because he was such a bad guy, or had an innate evil inclination. (Of course the rabbis teach that we all have an innate evil inclination.) Freedman’s translation “as a father loves his children” in the Soncino Talmud encourages this non-interpretation. But one who has mercy or pities does not envy or simply identify with the pitied; to pity is rather to feel the force of empathy which gives direct access to the fact of moral obligation. Although the phrase “father to idolatry” suggests one who instigates, the notion of pity or mercy—and the context of mercy beyond rational justification—implies rather that Ahab responded to the plight of others mired in idolatry or literal thinking. His error is thus of the second order; it belongs to the negative moral feedback mentioned above, as the next paragraph of gemara will explain.

The inner connection between sin and the search for wisdom is compounded by the moral situation with regard to those who are already in sin (including myself, toward whom I also am obligated). Education must make use of symbols it knows will be taken literally at first; it must persuade, it must sell wisdom as a product. Conversely, one can withdraw from the realm of education, as Abbahu did—and thus persist in the error of private language or the “beautiful soul.” In either case, the position of the seeker is one of guilt by virtue of the
existence of those who do not seek (or who do not know that they seek, or who seek only shadows); just as the position of Israel is one of guilt by virtue of the existence of the nations, to whom it is commanded to be a light. Because the burden is heavy, and all around us others are failing with respect to the infinite obligation, we are subject to failures of the second order: our strategies for dealing with error backfire.

Let me put this another way, one which brings out the problem as a form of the paradox of wisdom. In order to know enough to seek wisdom I must have enough of it to set me apart from those who do not seek it; and this in itself is a source of embarrassment for me, in the context of my infinite moral obligation, which requires that I meet everyone as an equal. At the same time it is equally embarrassing to hide my apartness, to acknowledge idols for the sake of solidarity—whether they are idols of depravity or idols of literalized tradition. The embarrassments of the two poles produce a perpetual dialectical oscillation which is the rhythm of (the search for) wisdom. But they also produce new incentives for deepening the errors (of fixed and polemical interpretations that close down the infinite horizon, of self-congratulation which closes itself off to divine mercy).

E. Religious Failure and Political Failure

21. Totality and Habituation: the economic perspective

And it came to pass, as it were a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat.134 R. Yochanan said, the light transgressions which Ahab committed were equal to the gravest committed by Jeroboam. Why then is scripture fixated on Jeroboam? Because he was the first to corrupt.

Yea, their altars are as heaps on the furrows of the fields.135 R. Yochanan said, there is no furrow in [Palestine הולמ upon which Ahab did not plant an idol and worship it.

The second-order error builds on the first in a logical manner: it starts where the first-order error ends; the least sin of the former equals the greatest sin of the latter. People got used to the sin of the calves, and Ahab went as far again further downward by promoting Baalism. For the calves were thrones of YHWH, but Baalism was a rival to Yahwism itself. Habituation to one kind of error gives rise to new kinds of error. We have referred to this before in terms of damage to character and cascading consequences, in terms of contraction of the religious horizon and suppression of self-criticism or dialectic. In the preceding section we saw the progression of stages happening through the moral dynamic pertaining

134 1 Kings 16:31
135 Hosea 12:12
to recognition of the difference between seekers and non-seekers of wisdom—Yahwists and Baalists, if you will. "The Remnant" conceived as a result of self-criticism must in turn embrace the "bad Israel"; that is, it must oppose its own apartness, through pity and infinite obligation. But this duty is correlative to the actual social conflict in which divisions are reinforced, propaganda is believed, and literal interpretation is explicitly required.

The goal therefore is to accept and examine the inevitability not only of error but of habituation to error, as part of an effort to resist such habituation and keep it open to the advent of destiny. Pursuit of this goal itself implies further possibilities of error. The controlling principle in religion itself gives rise to new problems needing to be controlled. But the principle of religious authority remains one; the complications due to successive literalizations and habituations merely unfold the essential dialectical problem. Therefore the text emphasizes that "Jeroboam" remains the "first", that is, the principle. (Whereas in fact he was preceded in causing sin by the generation of the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, etc.—and especially by Aaron, who might well replace Jeroboam in a mythic history informed by a critique of priestly influence in Judaism.) For self-critical scholarship the descent of the principle (that is, its extended implications) through Ahab to Manasseh is an ascent back into its original openness.

Ahab’s sin is explicitly determined to have a comprehensive scope: he put an altar on every furrow, that is, not just on the obvious "high places" but even the most minor and pervasive "hills" of the field. Just as the sages want us to persist in gratitude, openness and obligation at every moment, Ahab wanted to imbue every occasion and place with spirituality. But as we saw in section 20, his very concern with reaching those mired in confusion results in a comprehensive institution of religiosity instead. For the religion of "the Baals" described in our proof-text (yet again Hosea) is a religion of self-interest and instrumental thinking: it aims solely at attaining material results—good weather, good harvest of grain, wine, oil, livestock, etc.—each associated with an aspect of the divine. And the case is not very different when the benefits promised by religion are psychological rather than material—we cannot escape into interiority, into a private world. We cannot escape destiny, the moral-historical context, although we have the choice of fleeing or embracing it. And this means that we cannot escape the guilt and confusion of our neighbors, but must in some cases take it on in order to communicate or help. Ahab tried to accommodate the needs of a culturally mixed society—his great sin was one of liberalism. Thus, thought the scope of his activity was comprehensive and an image of true religion, it devolved into instrumentalism: a free market of religion.

The economic perspective imposes itself in connection with comprehensiveness or totality because everything is assigned a value in the economic order, that is, the perspective of instrumental thinking. The story of Ahab and Naboth is appropriate here: contrary to the ancient Israelite prohibition against selling hereditary land, Ahab proposed a free market where anything can be exchanged. And this corresponds as well to the interpretation of all meaning as literal—as information conveyed by a transparent, homogeneous symbol
system. For the literal is what everyone can understand, and Ahab's concern was with all Israel.

22. Freedom and the World to Come

How do we know that he is not coming to the world to come? From the verse, And I will cut off from Ahab him that pisses against the wall, him that is shut up (atzur יצר) and forsaken (azub עזב) in Israel.  

Here again we see a kind of willful misunderstanding, what Harold Bloom called “misprision” in The Anxiety of Influence, the appropriation of an influential text by finding that it really meant to say precisely what one wants to say in its place. The words atzur and azub are assumed to have a poetic redundancy that conveys only one meaning to the ordinary understanding, thus requiring interpretation, by the principle of economy. The text conveys a double meaning to scholarship, which requires or posits that the language of the Torah is maximally efficient. The same pattern was followed in section 5 with respect to Jeroboam, where it turned out that the plain sense did not involve a synonomous redundancy after all. Similarly here, the translation of atzar and azub as “shut up and forsaken”, both vague and negative-sounding, contrasts with the Oxford translation “bond and free”, which is a clear dichotomy (i.e. slaves and non-slaves).

The proof-text is emphasizing that all male members of Ahab's house will be destroyed, and so it makes sense that a polarity be used to encompass a totality (as in "all of them—rich and poor, tall and short," etc.). The most literal translation would be “restrained and left” ("left" as in "left alone"). If the expression originated at the time of the political purges themselves, it could be that the real meaning is “captured and at large”: even those who have so far escaped the revolution will be stamped out eventually. Since we are talking about the fate of the house of Omri, the revolution in question would be Jehu's. On the other hand we notice that the same words, in what seems to be a more complete setting, were put in the mouth of Ahijah of Shiloh with respect to Jeroboam. Did Elijah quote Ahijah? Or did the Deuteronomist in Jerusalem (in the late 7th century BC) reuse language from the Jehuid history (mid-8th century BC) to help flesh out the sketchy events of the late 10th century BC?

The rabbis look past this kind of issue by treating the Torah as a work of pure information—a danger we interpreted as belonging to the Ahab syndrome itself. But then, the rabbis and kings are so closely related! (At the same time we should ask why the Talmud did not use the passage [1 Kings 14:10 = 1 Kings 21:21] with regard to Jeroboam but only Ahab.) If we, on the other hand, pursue the literary effects and textual-historical issues raised by the Torah without

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136 1 Kings 21:21
137 The present commentary is especially open to this charge, and awareness of it provides a goad to keep returning to the text.
138 1 Kings 14:10
accepting the rabbinical misprision, we might hope to remain faithful to their higher goal of evoking the “world to come” or the advent of wisdom. For when we see how it was necessary for the rabbis to misread Scripture in order to open it up to philosophy, it becomes clear that dialectic is the wellspring of this openness, which is only intensified by a multidimensional appreciation of Biblical language—the poetic, the polemical and the mystical, in addition to the literal “information” of narrative and law.

So we might hope, for example, to relate the “bond and free” distinction to the underlying topic, in two ways. First, the punishment of the “bound” descendants of Ahab adds a new twist to that fatalism or determinism we have previously encountered as a motivation to religious realism (acceptance of the fact that the wicked sometimes prosper and the good often are oppressed; that great faith is sometimes misguided and scholarship sometimes ends in self-delusion; that metaphors are taken literally while literal meanings drift and change). Not only does inherited guilt (about which the Torah is so ambivalent) introduce a fallibility or inadequacy into the intentionality of the search for wisdom, as discussed in section 3 and 4; here we have an additional dimension of “guilt” or fallibility due to conditions imposed on us by others against our will. Who we are, our character and soul, is influenced to varying degrees by our masters, rulers, employers, priests and teachers. Errors on the search for wisdom come from without as well as from within.

As always, awareness of this fallibility in no way provides a mitigation of our responsibility (otherwise we couldn't speak of guilt!). The stages of religious error are analyzed in order to show the magnitude of the religious task, and to anticipate its perpetual renewal out of failure.

The second point about “bound and free” is its signification of the “two worlds” doctrine itself: as this world is a prison or condition of slavery, so the world to come is a time or condition of essential freedom. This is of course a very old and widespread thought—the central thought of Buddhism, and an essential component of Platonism, Gnosticism and Christianity, etc. Its esoteric meaning is that it is possible, temporarily if not permanently, to transcend all material concerns or feelings of compulsion, and experience only joy in the contemplation of the divine. The exoteric meaning refers such experience to a future time, to heaven or the messianic age. It does not have to face the contradiction between perfect freedom and moral obligation.

Because of this contradiction (which is not solved by simply insisting on the compassion of the enlightened one, or the unity of the ideas of truth, beauty and the good, etc.)—and because the Torah contains neither a two-worlds doctrine nor a reference to absolute freedom—Judaism has restrained its transcendental-ecstatic impulse more than other religions. The Pharisees introduced a doctrine of resurrection and the world to come, and raised it to the highest level of religious necessity. But at the same time they severely restricted its exploration—as in the famous statement instruction regarding experience of the divine presence “ought not to be taught even to one man, except if he be wise and able to understand by himself, in which case only the chapter headings
may be transmitted to him.” The placement of the Mishnah’s major discussion of the world to come in a digression from criminal procedures, and its treatment in a negative and indirect manner, further emphasize this attitude. Doctrines of mystical freedom are too dangerous for anyone whose moral development has not prepared him or her for a proper exploration of freedom in the light of obligation.

Therefore the literal, exoteric aspect of the doctrine is even to be encouraged, as a defense against antinomianism. (Is this the reason R. Yochanan uses the literalistic expression “future world” here?) Nevertheless, it is the fruit of the inner meaning, the liberation experienced in gnosti, that is really being denied to the Ahab syndrome by our gemara. Because of the erroneous application of a universalist ethic to religion, the inner meaning is lost. Ahab stands outside the gates of which Maimonides spoke (to which his book was supposed to provide the keys) …

And when these gates are opened and these places are entered into, the souls will find rest therein, the eyes will be delighted, and the bodies will be eased of their toil and of their labor.

23. The Dialectic of Pleasure

R. Yochanan said, Why did Omri deserve to be king? Because he added a region to the land of Israel, as it is written, And he bought the hill of Samaria [Shomron שֹׁמְרוֹן] from Shemer for two talents of silver, and built on the hill, and called the name of the city which he built after the name of Shemer, owner of the hill Samaria. R. Yochanan said, Why did Ahab deserve to be king for 22 years? Because he honored the Torah, which was given in 22 letters, as it is written, And he sent messengers to Ahab king of Israel into the city, and said unto him, Thus says Ben-hadad: Your silver and your gold is mine; your wives and children, even the best, are mine…Yet I will send my servants unto you tomorrow at this time, and they shall search your house, and the houses of your servants; and it shall be, that whatever is pleasant in your eyes they shall put in their hand, and take it away... Wherefore he said unto the messengers of Ben-hadad, Tell my lord the king, all that you asked of your servant at first I will do, but this thing I may not do. Now what is meant by “whatever is pleasant in your eyes”? Surely the scroll of the Torah! —But perhaps [this refers to] an idol? —You cannot think so, because it is written, And all the elders and all the people said to him, Listen not to him, nor consent. Whereon R. Joseph commented: They were evil elders? There “and all the people” is not stated, while

139 Chagigah 11b — see Interlude
140 Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed, Introduction [final sentence]
141 1 Kings 20:3,6,9
142 ibid. v.8
143 2 Samuel 17:4
here it is written “and all the people”; and it is impossible that there were no righteous among them, for it is written, Yet I have left 7000 in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth which has not kissed him.\footnote{144}{1 Kings 19:18} 

In section 6 R. Yochanan asked why Jeroboam deserved to be king. In that case the prophecy of Ahijah and comments of the Biblical editor indeed support Jeroboam’s initial favor. The text furthermore gave several indications of his uprightness and defense of the people, in addition to his depth of learning and God-given intellect. We have assumed that this praise of the “bad king” is not some silly fantasy, but is a kind of parable about the controlling principle or non-subjective linguistic ground of religion, which is both necessary and a source of error. Here R. Yochanan seems to rehearse the logic of “deserving to be king” with reference to Omri (who somehow has been admitted to the world to come, despite doing “more evil than all who were before him,”\footnote{145}{1 Kings 17:25} including Jeroboam), before using it on the main subject, Ahab. The necessity of authority might thus be distinguished from its corruption (which is nonetheless necessary in its own way).

But we might pause at this mention of Omri, who receives a mere 12 verses in the book of Kings (and none in Chronicles), but whose name was synonomous with Israel itself for generations after his death. Indeed, from an archaeologically constrained perspective, Omri marks the horizon of knowledge about the kingdom of Israel. He was probably the first of the Biblical “kings” worthy of the term as we understand it, that is, an actor on the stage of international politics. His very internationalism aroused the anger of traditionalists and led to a number of conflicts that eventually gathered under the banner of “YHWH vs. Baal”.

And of course it is only this that matters to the Deuteronomistic historian, who in chapter 17 mostly shows us the anarchy of conspiracies and civil war preceding Omri’s elevation from military commander to monarch. But this very account makes it hard to see how Omri deserved to be king. The notion that in the midst of all this he “bought” Samaria is manifestly propaganda, but it brings out something important: the controlling principle belongs to the economic order, which it secures and maintains. Even with the army at his back, Omri was a negotiator and diplomat. For the power to persuade others is the source of all power. It is the flip side of our original openness to persuasion as such—our belonging to the public world.

On superficial reading, it sounds as if the rabbis are saying that whoever was king, deserved to be king—that fatalism again. The fact that Omri “deserved” it based on something he did after becoming king imparts a confusing sense that everything was simply God’s will. But if the present reading is at all sound, the only necessity in question is not causal or metaphysical, but logical: it pertains to the structure of religion, of language and persuasion. Omri, as the “father” or general condition of the Ahab-principle, is the requirement of a political-economic...
basis for the religious community. Ahab, as complication and intensification of the paradox of wisdom, stands for the confusion of the divine and economic orders in response to an essential moral concern. We are concerned not with destiny as predetermination, but with destiny as the dimension of moral-historical interpretation or existential decision.

Now the reason Ahab “deserved” to be king—the virtue in which wisdom and its corruption are inscribed—is something more precious than the land itself: it is the Torah, which he honored. The reasoning here is perhaps more far-fetched than anything we have seen yet: Ahab’s 22-year reign corresponds to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, in which the Torah was written.\(^{146}\) Is this another case of mythology regarding the divine status of Hebrew? Or is the reasoning rather moving in the other (downward) direction, that is, the adaptation of the Torah, the highest Teaching, to historically specific symbol-systems and the material means of textual transmission? Ahab’s confusion, stemming from moral concern, is a consequence of the universality attaching to the alphabet (which brought writing to the common man, during the era in which Israel arose)—a coin used by all, which thereby becomes worn and indistinct. As we have said, the error grows out of the truth: the imperative to water down Torah in the effort to spread it universally comes, in a way, from the Torah itself, which aims at human beings in the natural world, speaking natural language.

Our gemara now begins an analysis of Ahab’s honoring of Torah, that is, the motive leading to the second stage in the degradation of wisdom, in its initial positivity. It is a recapitulation, if you will, of the genesis of error from wisdom traced in connection with Jeroboam, but here already set in the context of alienated and contested religion. Therefore the interlocutors set forth a series of tests, as if needing to be convinced that the negativity of the Ahab syndrome really starts in a positive intention.

The central premise of this passage is given in the “proof” that Ahab honored Torah from the fact that he resisted the Syrian king’s demand to plunder “whatever is pleasant in your eyes”; and that what is most pleasant is the (study of) Torah. This is a bold philosophical thesis, and an indicator of a naturalistic interpretation of “the world to come”, the enjoyment of which is available to us here and now through Torah and our historical engagement.—But Ahab is denied the world to come! Yes, but he enjoys that which he is denied; for it generates its own loss. Section 15 expressed this as “too much of a good thing”: the very pleasure of wisdom or divine favor leads to its undoing. Undoubtedly it is the manner of enjoying that contains the error.

It is interesting to notice how the rabbis use 1 Kings 20 here to indicate the beginning of Ahab’s position (prior to another descent). For they show an awareness that in verses 1-34 of this chapter we have a rare instance of a pro-Ahab textual source, included because it shows YHWH’s deliverance of Israel for the sake of his reputation, and the power of prophets vis-à-vis kings. (The defensive warfare and theological bent of verses 1-34 contrast sharply with the bloodthirsty spirit of the anti-Ahab source in verses 35-43.) Given that textual-

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\(^{146}\) The Aramaic alphabet used by the rabbis (and today called “Hebrew”), also has 22 letters.
historical criticism reveals the basis of most of what is written about Elijah and Ahab in propaganda from the dynasty of Jehu, leaving little reliable historical information, it seems reasonable to suppose that the bit of pro-Ahab material in 1 Kings 20 is older and has more to do with the real Ahab than anything else in the Bible. Ahab may at one time have been remembered primarily as a ruler who relied on the prophets of YHWH (not necessarily Elijah, who is not mentioned in 1 Kings 20), although the foreign and economic policies required to advance the position of the state of Israel in the 9th century BC sometimes put him at odds with their constituencies.

Now the first objection to “Ahab honored Torah” as proved by the hedonistic principle is that Ahab may have derived his greatest pleasure not from Torah but from idols—not from wisdom or spirituality but from religiosity and mere representations of the truth. We know by now that religious success is not only a matter of having the proper representations (e.g. cherubs rather than calves—the symbols and language used by genuine tradition); but much more importantly, it is a matter of always looking past representation—even the written Torah, which can itself become an idol.

The answer to the first objection is that Ahab’s honoring of Torah was in accord with and had the explicit support of the elders, the respected opinion leaders, as well as “all the people.” Here again, as in sections 4 (Achithophel) and 7 (Ahijah), the oscillation of the paradox of wisdom swings away from immediate intuition of truth (now expressed as validation via the pleasure principle) toward validation through consensus and recognized authority. I must make sure that I am not trapped in the private world of my own understanding. But if we remember Achithophel and Ahijah, we will not expect that authority and consensus will be sufficient to relieve us of the need for perpetual criticism and self-criticism.

Therefore the elders who agreed with Achithophel are made the basis of the second objection, which designates them “elders of shame” or evil elders. The question really aims at the fallibility of the Logos or public world as a whole—the possibility that the community goes astray, transmitting the tradition erroneously (not just or primarily through corruption of texts and symbols, but through forgetting how to read the texts and animate the symbols). As in section 16, the symbol for this fallibility of the community as a whole is “old Israel”, the fallen kingdom. And as in section 16 (there implicitly, here explicitly), the answer to the paradox of wisdom is symbolized by the Remnant. Here the Remnant is an Israelite group to be saved from Jehu’s carnage.

On a literal level, this is simply a proof that “all the people” couldn’t be evil during Ahab’s reign, since 7000 were to be saved. Of course the literal is ultimately incoherent, as the prophecy of 1 Kings 19:18 did not exactly come to pass, and there were surely more than 7000 Israelites left after Jehu’s rebellion; moreover it is hard to see why the 7000 and their descendants would immediately turn evil again, taking up the “sins of Jeroboam” that led to destruction a century later. So we must recognize that the Remnant is not really

a specific group of individuals (under Elisha, Ezra, Judah Maccabee, Jesus, et.al.), who are simply good apples plucked from a bad barrel. The Remnant is the positive element—in the world, the community or in myself—that emerges from critical purification. The process of purification is never finished, and the Remnant will always be subject to further criticism. Every interpretation is itself subject to interpretation, and neither personal feeling nor the words of the wise can provide an end to the necessity of the dialectic—to the perpetual testing of Torah to make sure it is not being received as an idol.

It is within this dialectical rhythm that the Ahab syndrome, as complication of the paradox of wisdom within the moral and economic spheres, is to be specified.

24. Dialectical Balance

R. Nachman said: Ahab was equally balanced \(\text{שָׂכָל לְוָק} \) since it is written, And YHWH said, Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead? And this one said thus, and this one said thus. \(^{148}\) R. Joseph objected: He of whom it is written, But there was none like Ahab, who sold himself to do wickedness in the sight of YHWH, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up. \(^{149}\) whereon it was taught: every day she used to weigh out gold shekels for idols—yet you say that he was equally balanced!—But Ahab was generous with his money, and because he used to benefit scholars with his wealth, half [his sins] were forgiven.

Commentators understand \(\text{שָׂכָל לְוָק} \) ("balanced") here to mean "equally good and evil." I take the notion of balance here more literally, as a tension maintained by opposing weights or forces; and see the forces not as the primal elements of a dualistic metaphysics, but rather as poles of the dialectical rhythm which always has more of itself to overcome. I take the search for wisdom as primary, and derive evil from its progressive degradations. All of us stand in the midst of moral and religious tensions of different kinds and degrees, and the efforts of the mind determine each resolution and redeployment of tension.

But the argument here, ending in Ahab being half forgiven, does suggest that a certain midpoint or equivalence is under discussion, as if again Ahab represented a middle term between the subtle errors of Jeroboam and the extreme of Manasseh. Since we last heard from R. Nachman in section 17 warning about leaving the public world, and since the previous section concerned the fallibility of public opinion and the perpetual necessity of criticism, we might take Ahab as standing with one foot in the public world and one in the private room of solipsism. Jeroboam’s blindness caused him to leave the world without knowing it; but Ahab is aware of the problem, he wants to get back to the public

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\(^{148}\) 1 Kings 22:20  
\(^{149}\) 1 Kings 21:25
world. The errors specific to his stage arise in the context of this very awareness—as we saw above, they pertain to the moral concern for those entangled in the economic order and thus driven into the private world of self-interest.

“This one said thus and this one said thus”—in other words a variety of opinions was offered by the spirits at the court of YHWH. R. Nachman implies that these opinions, expressed as a binary “thus and thus”, correspond to the two sides of Ahab. There is also the idea that the very difficulty of persuading Ahab to destruction shows his measure of wisdom. More fundamental, however, is the fact that the variety of opinion and web of deceit are pictured *in heaven itself*. The dualistic metaphysics (what the rabbis call the Two Powers doctrine) threatens to reassert itself!

The story in *1 Kings 22* tells of the death of Ahab in battle with Syrians at Ramoth-Gilead. Its provenance is puzzling. In some ways it seems consonant with *1 Kings 20*, the pro-Ahab source: it shows Israel at war with Syria, and it shows Ahab as a Yahwist with Yahwist prophets. On the other hand it seems to come from a later time and place. It refers only to “the king of Israel” and “the king of Syria”, but calls Jehoshaphat of Judah by name, and shows him in a favorable light. For it is Jehoshaphat who urges consultation of the prophets, who suspects the consensus of the 400 prophets promising success at Ramoth-Gilead, and who causes Ahab to call upon the prophet Micaiah (already known to Ahab as a critic). Micaiah reveals a celestial vision in which a “lying spirit” from the court of YHWH “goes forth” to put words in the mouths of the prophets. The story thus shows both king and prophets being punished without any explanation. It seems to come from a time when prophecy—especially prophecy in the service of militarism (note the aggressive posture of Ahab in *1 Kings 22*, versus the defensive one in *1 Kings 20*)—was suspect in some quarters, probably due to discord among prophets themselves (for our story shows false prophecy unmasked by true prophecy).

At any rate, there are not two Powers, and the “lying spirit” is not the Devil. The whole business of the prophetic deception serves YHWH’s purpose. It is the same kind of deception we saw God perpetrating among David’s advisors in connection with Achithophel. It emphasizes again the fallibility of all human efforts to take true counsel, whether from within or without, even when it is bolstered by the miraculous or the charismatic, by public consensus or the light of reason. The only criterion of success is destiny, never to be fully comprehended but always present as the horizon of moral-historical interpretation—the search for wisdom in which everything (reason and revelation, common sense and inspiration) needs to be continually evaluated against the changing background of the whole.

R. Joseph’s objection seems to stick to the literal level of the discussion, on which nothing more is happening than the moral evaluation of quasi-historical personages. Ahab and Jezebel were so bad that they devoted the royal treasury

\[150\] At Sanhedrin 89a, in a prior discussion of false prophecy, the rabbis say that the uniformity of expression amongst the 400 should have been enough to reveal their falsity, since no two true prophecies are identical.
to manufacturing idols! R. Joseph’s cleverness seems only to lie in a pun on *shakul* (שָׁקוּל) for idolatry, so how could Ahab be balanced (*tlwq?)? But let’s look at the terms of the pun: on one side, money and accounting; on the other side, the “balance”—which we understood as a tension between religiosity and spirituality, in which the pleasure of Torah is compromised by the imperatives of the economic order. So there is indeed a continuity with what went before; and it seems that R. Joseph is only playing with R. Nachman’s statement, in such a way as to recast the polarity within Ahab as a polarity between Ahab (or his better nature) and Jezebel, as the anonymous rejoinder makes clear. Ahab gave as much gold for the support of Torah study as Jezebel did for idolatry. So the real argument seems to go as follows:

1) (R. Nachman) The distortion of the search for wisdom arising from accommodation to the economic order is still grounded in the primacy of the search, and the honor of God.

2) (R. Joseph) But the economic order is essentially opposed to the divine. It depends on a homogeneous logical space in which dialectic and true spirituality are compromised in advance.

3) (editor—R. Ashi?) Yet it may still be true that the compromise aims at, and partially or intermittently succeeds in promoting the search for wisdom.

The liberal tolerance which seeks universal education, and thus endorses the need to speak to each according to his or her capacity for understanding, ends up establishing a multiplicity of mutually unintelligible vocabularies with variously literalistic interpretations. In other words it ends up establishing a world of intolerant religiosity. The problems of the economic order affect spirituality to its core. Even though Ahab’s donation to scholars sounds a positive note, it still emphasizes the economic dependence of the scholars themselves.

R. Joseph’s argument may be restated in philosophical terms: the distinction between the absolute and the conditional (or infinite and finite, etc.) is itself a relation of the absolute to the conditional, so that the absolute is conditioned by the conditional, and thus no longer absolute. And the reply to R. Joseph, by pointing back to a compromised but righteous remnant (the scholars) within the economic order, seems to imply the preservation and validity of absolute meaning in a contingent world. Unlike those today, half-understanding philosophy, who cry about “relativism” as if the historical contextuality of language deprived it of all moral or epistemic validity, the rabbis had a holistic doctrine of truth; they knew that the context is what makes truth possible. Truth appears in this world thanks to the benevolence of God’s reach into the human heart—even into the economic order (which is also dependent upon Him). The blindness and self-interest of the economic order also is used by God, who created a world of haves and have-nots—not just materially but spiritually as well. The Torah scholars, the Remnant who shun the economic order but still must eat and buy books, are spiritually wealthy but exposed to great danger: they

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151 a *shekel* is a measure, a fixed *weight*, of gold
are tempted to spend their wealth, or to loan it at interest. They would like, of course, to abolish the difference between haves and have-nots (or between the richer and poorer parts of themselves), but this impulse itself may lead to a production of idols.

25. The Mechanization of Justice

And there came forth the spirit and stood before YHWH, and said, I will persuade him. And YHWH said to him, How? And he said, I will go forth and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of his prophets. And He said, You will persuade him, and prevail; go forth and do so.\textsuperscript{152} Which spirit? R. Yochanan said, the spirit of Naboth the Jezreelite. What is meant by “go forth”? Rabina said, Go forth from within my barrier, as it is written, \textit{He that tells lies shall not tarry in my sight.}\textsuperscript{153} R. Papa observed, Thus men say “He who takes his vengeance destroys his own house.”

The eye of the philosopher has already been drawn to the vision of Micaiah, with its presentation of prophecy (i.e. revelation) as the means to truth, which can nevertheless deliver falsehood instead. The cases of Achithophel and Ahijah (both involving failures of interpretation) pale in comparison to this frightening recognition that even genuine interpretation may be false; and we have intimated a response which, avoiding dualism, would try to understand the genesis of error out of wisdom or truth. But the present paragraph seems to speak directly to this philosophical concern, which early in our study was expressed as a question of “emanation” or the “downward path”. Rabina approaches it through interpretation of a single word, the imperative \textit{tz:\textsuperscript{a} (תּוּ)}—“go forth!” For Rabina is asking precisely this question: how does deception emerge from Heaven itself?

Actually it is his “answer” that makes this clear: “go forth” means to emerge from the boundary or partition between the sacred and profane, the divine realm and “this world”. Of course we aren’t thinking of heaven as a place, or God as having an inside and an outside; we are interested in the possibilities (good and bad) and rhythms of the search for wisdom. If Rabina’s ostensible answer only completes the question, we must look to the prooftext for the positive conception.

The liar “shall not tarry in my sight”. In the psalm the speaker is King David, affirming that he is both the exemplar of righteousness and the scourge of the wicked, whom he seeks to banish from his presence, from his city, and ultimately from the whole land. The movement or emanation of “go forth” occurs, then, through the enforcement of justice. —This sounds backwards, as if the punishment of injustice preceded injustice itself. But the text indeed pictures the

\textsuperscript{152} 1 Kings 22:21
\textsuperscript{153} Psalms 101:7
descent from holiness originating in revenge. Naboth, who suffered from Ahab’s imposition of capitalism, loses his place in heaven by becoming an instrument of justice. We already saw in the case of Absalom that the application of justice can itself be a matter of self-interest. Perhaps this is what defines revenge, which destroys the avenger’s own house, according to R. Papa.

Rabina’s maneuver transposes the position of the king, the enforcer of the law, to that of God vis-à-vis the spirit of deception. And yet it is Ahab whom God punishes, not Naboth. The emanation of deception from holiness occurs through the corruption of prophetic speech, or more generally wisdom; and this corruption is rooted in the injustice of the economic order, established through violence and requiring the constant application of law—a kind of institutional revenge. So whereas justice itself issues from holiness, and its understanding from wisdom, the human application of justice, tinged with revenge, produces a condition of deception, a corruption of religious language or the discourse of wisdom. How so?

Let’s return to the story of Ahab and Micaiah. The curious thing about the story is that after Micaiah reveals the deception of the prophets, Ahab doesn’t believe him. Micaiah is known to Ahab as an inveterate naysayer; but we aren’t told whether any of his previous prophecies had proven true or false. One imagines that somehow Ahab’s desire for Ramoth-Gilead, like his desire for the vineyard of Naboth, was simply not to be restrained, especially with the pretext given by the words of the 400. The application of justice infected with self-interest exhibits this lack of restraint and spiritual blindness, which brings pretext and deception into its prosecution.

But does God Himself have a “self-interest”? In one sense God’s “interest” is in justice at all times; but not, apparently, in His creation of nature and dust-like humanity, and the economic order. A more specific sense will be raised in section 26: God’s anger at Ahab’s direct provocation. Before considering this “direct provocation” in detail, we can already say: human self-interest emerges directly from the divine—from the creation of good and evil, if you will, or the particularity of religious language (from the very fact that it is possible to worship improperly or call God by the wrong name).

In 1 Kings 22 God’s mercy is presumably expressed in the fact of Micaiah’s revelation, giving Ahab a chance to evade punishment. It is interesting to note in this connection the comments of R. Isaac, related to 1 Kings 22 by R. Yochanan or the editor at Sanhedrin 89a, to the effect that the testimony of the 400 prophets should have been recognized as false, because of the principle that every prophetic word is unique (and yet all 400 prophets spoke peh echad, literally “one mouth”). Genuine inspiration is never mechanical (habitual) or formulaic; it belongs to a historical moment and an individual mission. Both the one who listens for the divine word and the one who speaks it (who must also listen before speaking) must be awake to the specificity and uniqueness of the situation. It is through history that God speaks, offering mercy but not the means of obtaining it—not any method or formula, that is, guaranteed apart from one’s actual historical understanding.
Thus the Talmud seems to imply that deception emerges from truth as the administration of justice becomes mechanical or bureaucratic, thereby taking on the character of revenge. We are reaching the climax of the discussion of Ahab, and the transition to Manasseh. Ahab’s primary significance lies in the necessary conflicts of the social/economic/legal realm, corresponding to the second of the three moments given in section 1. The third moment pertained to direct conflict with or provocation of God. We will see whether the clue about revenge helps explain the transition.

26. Accommodating Human Weakness

And Ahab made a grove [asherah]; and Ahab did more to provoke YHWH God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him.\textsuperscript{154} R. Yochanan said: [This means] that he wrote upon the gates of Samaria, ‘Ahab denies the God of Israel.’ Therefore he has no share in the God of Israel.

And he sought Ahaziah; and they caught him, for he was hid in Samaria.\textsuperscript{155} R. Levi said: He was engaged in erasing the Divine Names [from the Torah] and substituting [the names of] idols [lit., servants of stars] in their stead.

Manasseh [denotes] that he caused Israel to forget their Father in Heaven. And how do we know that he is not coming to the world to come? —Because it is written, Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty and five years in Jerusalem . . . and he made a grove, as did Ahab king of Israel.\textsuperscript{156} Just as Ahab has no share toward the world to come, so has Manasseh neither.

Next I find that I must bite off a rather large chunk in order to make an advance. The components are:

1) R. Yochanan’s assertion concerning Ahab’s surpassing provocation of God
2) R. Levi’s assertion concerning Ahaziah son of Jehoshaphat
3) the double etymology of the name Manasseh
4) the proof of Manasseh’s exclusion from the world to come by analogy with Ahab

R. Yochanan’s and R. Levi’s statements in themselves are too elliptical; only the editorial context lets us find the thread.

Furthermore the unity of this section is suggested by the subject repeated at its beginning and end: the Asherah. Although it seems an offhand reference not taken up explicitly by the rabbis, in fact it goes to the heart of the matter of the social paradoxes of wisdom and justice developed above.

The word asherah comes from ashar, to be blessed, happy, fortunate; but it is used in the Bible primarily in reference to religious practices involving trees.

\textsuperscript{154} 1Kings 16:33
\textsuperscript{155} 2Chron.22:9
\textsuperscript{156} 2Kings 21:2,3
The details of these practices are unclear. They might have involved living
groves, planted and decorated according to ritual, and/or carved trunks like totem
poles. In the Talmud they are modified living trees with idols beneath them. With
or without idols, the tree always connotes a female deity, also called Asherah.
The Bible gives no real information about this goddess, although it mentions that
Elijah confronted prophets of Baal and Asherah in equal number, and that King
Josia suppressed the women who wove hangings for the asheroth.

The main thing we know about Asherah is thus simply her femininity—
something that the “Old Testament”, with its famous penchant for “patriarchy”, is
said to have repressed; but which is so strikingly depicted in the great Hebrew
literary heroines and their stories. It seems to me that whereas the ancient
Semitic culture was indeed patriarchal in general, the outlook of many of the
Israelite writers and prophets, focused on social justice, was as favorable to
women as it was to the poor and other disadvantaged groups. Be that as it may,
the question here concerns femininity as an attribute of the divine, and of the
search for wisdom. And this question is not clarified by presupposing what is
meant by gods and goddesses, or by the male and female aspects of God.

Historical science places Asherah in a universal pattern of divine consort.
She is the consort of Baal in Canaan, and corresponds to Astarte-Ishtar-
Aphrodite. But most importantly, a 7th century BCE inscription speaks of “YHWH
and his Asherah”. This tells us that the worship of Asherah, especially around the
time of the Deuteronomist, was in no way opposed to the worship of YHWH; it
was rather dependent upon and ancillary to it. The sexual duality of the divine
doesn’t conflict with monotheism; indeed it is explored within rabbinic Judaism in
connection with the concept of the shechinah, the divine Presence. This, along
with the etymology of asherah (blessing, luck), suggests that the femininity of
God relates to human experience and understanding; whereas the masculinity of
God relates to creation and judgment. No conflict, but some kind of balance and
polarity.

Thus the near-absence of Asherah from the Bible, and her identification
with idolatry and abomination, should provoke us to wonder. It is somewhat like
the problem of the calves, which seem so similar to the cherubs and yet are
interpreted idolatrously (economically, literally, etc.). As tradition recognizes only
a literalistic interpretation of the calves, and rejects the footstool symbolism which
it applies to the cherubs, here it seems that symbols for an aspect of the divine
are recognized only as representations of competing divinities, according to the
ancient understanding of gods as ethnically or geographically distinguished. At
the same time a certain range of ritual practices (and corresponding range of
literary and artistic traditions) is proscribed and declared to be false and “foreign”.

Our prooftext, connecting the account of Omri to the first story of Elijah,
gives a formulaic summary of Ahab. The Deuteronomistic framework incessantly
condemns Israelite religious practices involving hills, images, altars and trees.
Except for trees, these categories all present the same interpretive problem as
the calves: Mt. Zion isn’t a hill (but Mt. Gerizim is), the cherubs aren’t images,
and the altar in Jerusalem isn’t an altar—in the idolatrous sense. Or perhaps we
should just say directly: there is only one legitimate hill, image and altar, in the Temple of the Davidic king.

In other words, we are back to the totalitarian innovations of King Josiah (perhaps preceded by Hezekiah). Prior to the 7th century, Israelite religion was understood by most Israelites to involve ritual practices at the local level, at local holy places or at home, some presided over by priests and some conducted by family-level groups of men, or women, or both. Of course there had long been a quarrel between Samaria and Jerusalem about the official worship of YHWH. But after Samaria fell, and then Sennacherib reduced the kingdom of Judah to Jerusalem, the emphasis on Jerusalem’s uniqueness grew; and when Josiah reconquered Samaria and Judea, his enforcement of Deuteronomy over against the earlier texts was essentially a war on the practice of religion outside Jerusalem. The altar at Bethel was defiled with human bones, etc. Local holy sites, usually on hills, were abolished, and statues, dolls, etc. were destroyed. Everyone was invited to Mt. Zion, but forbidden from worshipping “under every leafy tree”.

Now how can we relate R. Yochanan’s acceptance and intensification of the Deuteronomistic restriction of religion (as expressed in the editorial condemnation of Ahab) to his previous acceptance of the pro-Ahab text (1 Kings 20:1-34), and the interpretation that “Ahab honored Torah” (section 23)? How does the provocation of God arise from the “balanced” liberalism in which religion is accommodated to the economic order? Does it involve the theme of vengeance?

R. Yochanan provides no prooftext for his assertion of Ahab’s explicit denial of God, and thus no entry-point for our questions. Instead we are given R. Levi’s interpretation of 2 Chronicles 22:9, the Chronicler’s version of the death of King Ahaziah of Jerusalem. Ahaziah son of Jehoshaphat (not to be confused with Ahab’s elder son Ahaziah) was an ally of Ahab’s son Jehoram (who succeeded his brother), and was killed by Jehu during his coup. Whereas the Deuteronomist’s version had Ahaziah slain “in the chariot, at the ascent of Gur”157, the Chronicler shows him captured in Samaria and brought before Jehu, where he is given a proper burial for the sake of his father (Jehoshaphat being one of the Chronicler’s heroes). The textual discrepancy provides the occasion for R. Levi’s “explanation” of the reference to Samaria: Ahaziah had fled the scene of battle, not just to save his life (seemingly an adequate explanation!), but to engage in erasing the instances of “YHWH” from Torah scrolls.

Not only does this fail to throw any immediate light on Ahab’s provocation, it seems out of place—what has Ahaziah to do with Ahab or Manasseh? Of course we know that the literal historical reference is not of primary significance, but what is the connection? One thing we notice is that three pages further on, the editor states as a matter of fact (presupposed by Eleazar and Yochanan) that Manasseh erased the Divine Name. So we can see that the notion of “erasing the memorials” is connected with the extreme state of irreligion symbolized by Manasseh as the last of the three kings. And we can also see in a general way

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157 2 Kings 9:27
how this notion could be taken as the most extreme provocation of YHWH. It represents both a falsification of holy texts and a covering-up of God Himself, who is present to Israel through language and memory.

But does this help clarify the transition from Ahab or the origin and reason of divine provocation? Not yet. Let’s continue on to the conclusion of this transitional section, which the editor has placed before the next return to the Mishna (where the controversy over Manasseh will be taken up). In the final paragraph we have two items: a double etymology of Manasseh, and the proof of his exclusion from the world to come.

“Manasseh” (**מָנָשֶׁה**), is connected with **nashah** (**נָשָׁה**), to forget. One way to think of it is that Manasseh forgot God; another is that he caused Israel (meaning Judah) to forget. Actually, both points of view are necessary, and each implies the other. For while truth appears in the lived experience of the individual, its structure and meaning depend on “this world”—on the public reality, on language and history; and the corruption of each implies the corruption of the other. Still, forgetting sounds passive, and provocation active. Can a final piece of the puzzle make all this come together?

The final piece is the proof from 2Kings 21:2-3. Manasseh made an **asherah**, as did Ahab. Proof by analogy. We are back to the significance of Asherah, which we have initially considered in its ambiguity due to the exaggerations of the Deuteronomists. The positivity of Asherah lies in the freedom of families to mediate their own relation to God, rather than being dependent on the king and his priests. (*Deuteronomy* itself eventually contributed strongly to the later Jewish tradition of home worship, through its special emphasis on inner experience and individual comportment as the primary referents of religious symbolism and ritual.) The negativity of Asherah lies in a diffusion and fragmentation of religious language and meaning, dragged down by the tendency to associate holiness with good fortune—superstition, or the confusion of the economic order.

Now the problems associated with Ahab have been based on moral concern confronted by an already-corrupted social world. One overall message is surely that this legitimate motivation can lead nonetheless to error through a corruption of justice. We characterized this as a decay of justice into revenge through both self-interest and a mechanical approach—in other words, bureaucracy, which frustrates justice by sticking to the letter of the law. Ahab presided over a bureaucracy. Now after religious meaning has been disseminated in the manner of Micah (section 3), and further allowed to degenerate through the pity of those aware of the discrepancies, then adherence to what is currently understood to be the “letter of the law” may in fact be an insistence that goes in a completely different direction from, or even contrary to, the original meaning. The original meaning (i.e. God) is then *forgotten*.

In this state of irreligion, not only have holy texts been corrupted but, more importantly, the art of *reading* them has been lost. Here we must mention a note about Manasseh given at Sanhedrin 99b. Manasseh is cited as one excluded from the world to come on the basis of his questioning or mockery of such things as the genealogical details in *Genesis*. The passage, which Levinas discussed in
1985, analyzes various deficient ways of engaging in (or disengaging from) Torah study. As in our section 13, there is an overriding ideal of constancy: applying supreme concentration and interpretative labor even to apparent trivialities—just as we must thank God for even the smallest good fortune (or more stringently, even for bad fortune), so we must apply our interpretive powers most strenuously to even the seemingly least significant words of Torah (or in the broader view, to every word spoken to us by anyone). Otherwise we can completely lose access to religious truth—as if the “reminders” of God’s availability had been erased.

A social world in which the administration of justice has decayed into bureaucracy no longer provides the material support for true religious discourse or the motivations to religious study. Conversely, without a glimpse of the transcendent reality of the divine appearing to us through moral feeling, there is no motivation to a disinterested and strenuous administration of justice.

Overall, then, the Talmud’s message is one of all-or-nothing: accommodation to the economic order, or to the self-interested religion of the family, or in general accommodation to the reality of human weakness, is ultimately equivalent to erasing God’s name and provoking His wrath. The rabbis adhere to the stringency of the Deuteronomistic totalitarianism, in which all natural religion is suppressed and thus religion is only maintainable by internal vigilance, by pure strength of mind—and by the king. Instead of a divinely ordained king, we have only the Messiah, that is, the hope for a just social order. So for us, Torah study or philosophy is the only external support for religion, and any lapse in study can have catastrophic results, through a cascade of unintended consequences, for the continued existence of religious understanding through tradition. This stark warning gives sense to R. Yochanan’s statement about Ahab’s provocation: even a “balanced” approach to the world, recognizing both sacred and profane aspects, is ultimately equivalent to writing your denial of God on the gates of the city—that’s how slippery the slope on which we rest as soon as accommodations are made.

And yet from my point of view, the liberal tolerance of Ahab is preferable to the totalitarianism of Josiah; the feminine aspect of God should not be disparaged; and the inevitability of human weakness must be recognized. It seems like I might have to rethink everything from the ground up. But so do the rabbis. Rabbi Yehudah’s emphasis on mercy will turn everything upside down.

R. Yehudah said: Manasseh does have a share, for it is written: and he prayed to Him, and He harkened to his supplication, and they restored him to Jerusalem, to his kingdom.\(^{158}\)

\(^{158}\) 2 Chronicles 33:13
Interlude 1: Dreams, Interpretation and Wisdom

Manasseh represents the extreme forgetfulness in which we no longer understand the holy texts or know how to interpret our moral-historical situation. Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Yochanan will indicate a way out of the extremity, but they will not forget the dogged realism of the foregoing analysis, they will not forget the contingency of history. Interpretation, it turns out, is itself a partly contingent matter. Interpretations aren’t merely a product of our will and reason; they come to us from beyond. (This is another way of stating the paradox of wisdom.)

Let us pause for a few moments before confronting the Talmud’s dialectic of interpretation and repentance, to consider a more explicit discussion of interpretation itself.

A. Duty and Creativity in Interpretation

The 9th chapter of the tractate *Berachoth* (“Blessings”) discusses how we situate ourselves in religious history, specifically, how we encounter and recognize elements of the divine story in our own experience, and how we incorporate our experience into the divine story by thanking God or “blessing”.

*Mishnah*: He who sees a place where a miracle was done for Israel, say: “Blessed be He who did miracles for our fathers in this place.”
A place in the land of Israel that had idol worship uprooted from it, say: “Blessed be He who uprooted idol worshippers from our land.”
Meteors, earthquakes, thunderclaps, storms and lightning, say: “Blessed be He whose strength and might fill the world.”

[and so forth, regarding mountains, seas, etc.; and for good and bad fortune; while traveling (arriving and leaving)…]159

Of course we don’t situate ourselves in history merely through the recitation of formulaic blessings; what we really need is to *interpret* our surroundings and the events we see transpiring. And ultimately this interpretation involves, as we saw in connection with the judgments on the kings, an evaluation of the world that takes both good and bad into account.160

Now there is a phenomenon that lends itself to interpretation to such an extent that it seems paradigmatic for our interpretation of life and the world: the phenomenon of dreams, which appear so often in the Biblical text. So it is not very surprising when we find that, out of ten pages devoted to discussion of this

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159 The chapter goes on to deal with how the moral-historical understanding deals with good and evil in general. This material is discussed below in the Coda.
160 see especially Part 2, sections 4, 5, 10 and 27
mishnah passage on blessings, four are mostly devoted to the interpretation of dreams (despite the fact that dreams weren’t mentioned by the mishnah). The subject is introduced as follows:

Rab Yehudah said in the name of Rab: There are three things for which one should ask: a good king, a good year, and a good dream. A good king, as it is written: *A king's heart is in the hands of YHWH as the water-courses.* A good year, as it is written: *The eyes of YHWH thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year.* A good dream, as it is written: *and make me dream and make me live.*

The three items represent ways in which life is beyond our control, is given to us (or done to us). The kind of society in which we live, and the degree to which it suffers from an unjust exercise of power, is a limiting condition on the quality of our lives. Even more so the range of events—meteorological, medical, commercial, interpersonal, etc.—that determine the goodness or badness of a year. And all dreams have the property of coming to us, of playing out under an external script that we aren’t aware of creating.

These elements of fate are all “from God”. We can understand this in a literal, causal way (which is fairly uninteresting and tautologous); or we can understand it in the sense that these events are imbued with a *meaning*, however inscrutable it may be at present, derived from their place in the cosmic drama that plays out before us, and before the divine Observer. Dreams, of course, have widely been viewed as messages from God, caused by Him. But Rab’s clever quotation goes deeper than simple causation. *w’tachalimeni w’tachayni* (וּתַחַלֵּיָנִי וּתַחַלְּיָנִי) is an unusual expression found in Isaiah’s poetic presentation of King Hezekiah’s plea for recovery from his illness. *tachalimeni* is often translated as “make me whole” or “make me healthy” based on the context; but the more straightforward understanding would be based on the word *chalam*, to dream. So our translation of Rab’s quotation is “make me dream”. And perhaps an even more daring translation is possible: *dream me*. Then humanity would spring from a kind of creativity beyond even the divine intention, will and reason. To pursue wisdom and God would be to follow a thread of meaning with a dreamlike character.

The Talmud quotes Jeremiah:

*A prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; and he who has My word let him speak My word faithfully. What has the straw to do with the wheat, says YHWH.*

The prophet has the duty to interpret, and dreams are a kind of small prophecy given to the ordinary person. But just like the prophets (whose failures and sins

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161 Proverbs 21:1
162 Deut.11:12
163 Isaiah 38:16
164 Jeremiah 23:28
Jeremiah is recounting) and the kings, we are fallible in interpreting our dreams (and our world and history). And this has to do with the way in which dreams differ from king and year: we really do create the dreams ourselves, at least in some measure. The problem is thus to distinguish the divine from the human, the illuminating from the neurotic parts of the dream...

What is the connection of straw and wheat with a dream? The truth is, said R. Yochanan in the name of R. Shimon b. Yohai, that just as wheat cannot be without straw, so there cannot be a dream without some nonsense.

Interpretation is therefore a necessity. And if you choose simply to ignore the dream, R. Chisda will warn you: “An uninterpreted dream is like an unread letter”\(^ {165}\) — a moral trespass against the sender. The situation from which it arises is still there, even if you ignore it. The responsibility of interpretation is unavoidable.

You can’t do anything about the king; you have to do something about the dream. The year in its goodness and badness encompasses both. The years of our lives have a narrative and evaluative dimension, in which our hopes and fears and responsibilities are entangled, but which still affords us a measure of freedom and control. To say it more precisely, the year represents the moral-historical context of human behavior.

The mishnah began by talking about special places (where miracles took place, etc.). But in Judaism talk of places always evokes the thought of ha-maqom, The Place of all places, He who is also the Context of all contexts. The search for wisdom is the search for one’s place in the Place, for a meaningful life story within the Big Story. We have to read and interpret not just our dreams (within the context of our lives) but also our lives (in the moral-historical context).

But as we have seen from the beginning, all interpretations lie under a cloud of suspicion: maybe the interpreter doesn’t know what he’s talking about! Where did he get the credentials to start speaking with even the least bit of authority, prior to having completed his initial interpretation? How can someone who is not already wise become wise, since she doesn’t know what to do, where to look, whom to trust. In the discussion of dreams, R. Yochanan gives the most explicit statement of the paradox of wisdom that we have yet encountered:

R. Yochanan said: The Holy One, blessed be He, gives wisdom only to one who already has wisdom, as it says, *He gives wisdom to the wise, and knowledge to them that know understanding*\(^ {166}\). R. Tahlifa from the West heard and repeated it before R. Abbahu. He said to him: You learn it from there, but we learn it from this text, namely, *In the hearts of all that are wise-hearted I have put wisdom.*\(^ {167}\)

\(^{165}\) B.Berachoth 55b
\(^{166}\) Daniel 2:21
\(^{167}\) Exodus 31:6
The paradox is introduced after a discussion of leadership, and the principle that "We must not appoint a leader over a community without first consulting it." It is immediately followed by the section on dreams. It seems that the whole topic of dream interpretation is subsidiary to the paradox, as an attempt at its resolution; and that the paradox in turn is subsidiary to the problem of how a community submits itself to governance.

R. Yochanan’s citation combines the elements of dream and leadership: it comes from the story of Daniel’s recovery and interpretation of King Nebuchadrezzar’s dream (which the king himself had forgotten). Daniel pacifies the irrational ruler, who had threatened the community of interpreters if they failed to interpret the dream (without being told what it was). The story doesn’t say how the king knew that Daniel’s rendition was what he had really dreamed, or that it correctly predicted the future. The most straightforward answer would be: he knew it from the intrinsic impressiveness, the voice of authority that he heard in the words and images.

You might say that when the king heard the correct report of his dream he remembered or recognized it. That’s how he himself no doubt felt. But philosophically speaking, there is no criterion of identity between the representation of a dream, in memory or language, and the dream itself. What takes the place of an objective criterion is an aesthetic criterion: it feels right, it makes sense … in the context of my own aspirations and idioms, of course (whereas another person may read my dream differently). The dream “itself” (that is, the object of my dream-memory) is already an interpretation, not an objective fact; so interpretations of dreams are interpretations of interpretations.

A good interpretation gets its validity partly from the creative effort and openness of the interpreter—this is the clue needed to confront the paradox, which says that only the wise can obtain wisdom. For wisdom is not a passive knowing; it is, on the contrary, divinely creative: it involves putting each thing in the Big Picture (or Big Story), envisioning even the lowest in the light of eternity, and in the urgency of its moral situation. Those who have the knack for wisdom have a chance of becoming wise. We can’t say in advance how things will turn out, it’s not a matter of simple calculation; and so we can’t identify in advance those who are wise enough to receive wisdom. But in retrospect it will be apparent who had a chance to begin with.

The element of creativity and openness brings with it the risk of error and nonsense. So the Talmudic discussion dwells on the mixed character of dreams. “Neither a good dream nor a bad dream is ever wholly fulfilled.” In both cases we have to try to “turn” the dream toward a good outcome (“say, ‘May the All-Merciful turn it to good’”)—but we may fail. And this mixed character generates a dialectic:

When Samuel had a bad dream, he used to say, The dreams speak falsely.168 When he had a good dream, he used to say, Do the dreams speak falsely, seeing that it is written, I [God] speak with him in a dream?169 Raba pointed out a

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168 Zechariah 10:2
169 Numbers 12:6
contradiction. It is written, ‘I do speak with him in a dream’, and it is written, ‘the dreams speak falsely’. — There is no contradiction; in the one case it is through an angel, in the other through a demon.

This initially seems like a cheap way out. But we know that the rabbis disavow all theological dualisms, all suggestions that there are “two powers in heaven”. The demons must be permitted by God, and so in some sense authorized by Him. And so we are led to consider that the “demonic” aspect here is really the deeper mystery of the divine Dreamer Himself, Creator of ignorance, pain, evil. The perpetual push and pull of dreams is a proxy for the push and pull of life, of history, of good and evil. It is in the nature of things; and so it belongs to the pursuit of wisdom.

B. All Dreams Follow the Mouth

God has entangled us in history, with its danger and drama. Our very being is open-ended, suspended in this dramatic entanglement. Like a dream, what we are is waiting, in some measure, for its meaning to be developed and decided. And this is ultimately a social process, taking place in the terms of inherited culture and ways of life. Thus the Talmud repeatedly examines the interpersonal nature of interpretation, as well as its extension in time. The patriarch Joseph is invoked to demonstrate that one must be prepared to wait 22 years for the “fulfillment” of a dream. (The number 22 evokes the alphabet, and is thus a preliminary indication of the linguistic—or literary—nature of dreams.) Then we come to the central maxim of our chapter, in which the social and temporal aspects are united.

R. Bizna b. Zabda said in the name of R. Aqiva who had it from R. Panda who had it from R. Nahum, who had it from R. Biryam reporting a certain elder — and who was this? R. Bana'ah: There were twenty-four interpreters of dreams in Jerusalem. Once I dreamt a dream and I went round to all of them and they all gave different interpretations, and all were fulfilled, thus confirming that which is said: All dreams follow the mouth. Is the statement that all dreams follow the mouth Scriptural? Yes, as stated by R. Eleazar. For R. Eleazar said: Whence do we know that all dreams follow the mouth? Because it says, and it came to pass, as he interpreted to us, so it was. Raba said: This is only if the interpretation corresponds to the content of the dream: for it says, to each man according to his dream he did interpret… When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was good… How did he know this? R. Eleazar says: This tells us that each of them was shown his own dream and the interpretation of the other one's dream.

170 cf. the cases of Achitophel et.al. in Part 1
171 Genesis 41:13
172 ibid. v.12, 16
The central maxim of our chapter is: *all dreams follow the mouth.* What does this mean? At the surface level, it seems to be saying that dreamed events (or events symbolized in dreams) later transpire in reality, if and only if someone correctly interprets the dream. Many “correct” interpretations are possible; and if they are all told to the dreamer, all will come true. In fact, opposing interpretations (such as those that imply good fortune and bad) can both come true; or only one of them can be made to happen, depending on the whim of the interpreter—this is what we see in the story of Bar Hedya and Raba, a few paragraphs on…

Bar Hedya was an interpreter of dreams. To one who paid him he used to give a favorable interpretation and to one who did not pay him he gave an unfavorable interpretation. Abaye and Raba each had a dream. Abaye gave him a zuz, and Raba did not give him anything…

Raba learns that he has been manipulated when sees the words in a book that Bar Hedya possessed: *all dreams follow the mouth.*

Bar Hedya was once travelling with Raba in a boat. … As he was disembarking, he let fall a book. Raba found it, and saw written in it: *All dreams follow the mouth.* He exclaimed: Wretch! It all depended on you and you gave me all this pain! … May it be God's will that this fellow be delivered up to the government, and that they have no mercy on him!

The dream-interpreter appears to be somewhere between a magician and a self-interested hustler. Of course his fate isn’t pretty:

They tied two cedars together with a rope, tied one leg to one cedar and the other to the other, and released the rope, so that even his head was split. Each tree rebounded to its place and he was decapitated and his body fell in two.

With this warning against using interpretation for gain, we haven’t gotten much meaning out of “*all dreams follow the mouth*”. But let’s look beneath the surface, as all interpreters must do. The context tells us that there is a dimension of interpretation that rises above the level of self-interest and causality: dreams are a kind of prophecy (“one sixtieth part”), and yet, R. Samuel b. Nahmani says

in the name of R. Jonathan: A man is shown in a dream only what is suggested by his own thoughts, as it says, *As for you, Oh King, your thoughts came into your mind upon your bed.*\(^{173}\) Or if you like, I can derive it from here: *That you may know the thoughts of the heart.*\(^{174}\)

Raba said: This is proved by the fact that a man is never shown in a dream a date palm of gold, or an elephant going through the eye of a needle.

\(^{173}\) Daniel 2:29

\(^{174}\) ibid. v.30
What’s important about reading the message is to learn about the divine, and about ourselves, and about how each resides in the other. Whether this learning “pays off” in material benefit isn’t the point—indeed, we don’t want to end up like the greedy Bar Hedya.

The mouth is hungry, even greedy. But it is also much more. It is the organ of speech. The statement that all dreams follow the mouth can be understood as indicating the fundamentally linguistic nature of dreams. Dreams contain metaphors, puns and every manner of linguistic trope. Clearly they emerge from a fundamental biological capacity, responsible for pictorial and verbal representation, that imbues both mental images and perceptions with meaning. We can also say that the same capacity is responsible for religion.

The rabbis don’t always see this point clearly. R. Samuel’s remark can be taken to indicate the opportunities for self-discovery that dreams afford (as mentioned above), or again as a kind of empiricist theory, one step behind those of Locke or Hume. For Raba tries to prove Samuel’s statement by the “fact” that “a man is never shown in a dream a date palm of gold, or an elephant going through the eye of a needle”. All I can say to this is that Raba had some boring dreams! The European empiricists likewise wanted to say that dreams are only a regurgitation of experience and ideas, but they could at least account for things like dreamed golden trees, by saying that elementary notions (gold, trees) could be recombined in imagination to produce unexperienced results. (The unicorn is a standard example.) Some of them also denied “impossible” things like the elephant going through the needle, or a round square. But the fact is that we can dream the impossible as well as the possible, because we can discuss the impossible in language, and can thus do much more with images and ideas than mere logical calculation. And the fundamental requirement of meaningfulness, not only in imagination but even in perception (what Kant called the “schematism” of empirical intuitions in conceptual frameworks), makes the linguistic character of dreams a window into the basic meaningfulness of life and the world. Reality only appears with the help of imagination.

The rabbis are familiar with such ideas, not only because some of them have heard of the Greek doctrine of the Logos (language as cosmic order), but as a result of their own studies in the traditional notions of creation.

Rab Yehudah said in the name of Rab: Bezalel knew how to combine the letters by which the heavens and earth were created. It is written here, And He has filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom and in understanding, and in knowledge, and it is written elsewhere, YHWH by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding He established the heavens, and it is also written, By His knowledge the depths were broken up.

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175 The philosopher Meinong famously discussed the kind of being that impossible objects have.
176 Exodus 35:31
177 Proverbs 3:19
178 ibid. v.20
Bezalel exemplifies the interpretive ability of the ideal leader: knowledge of the basic linguistic (even literary) structure of the world. He was introduced, with his awesome power, in order to demonstrate that even divinely-inspired leaders have to have the consent of the governed; and this statement was followed by R. Yochanan’s statement of the paradox of wisdom. So at the highest as well as the most mundane levels, dreams follow the mouth. Dreams follow the (human) mouth as the world follows the basic conditions of meaningfulness and intelligibility laid down by the Creator. On both sides, interpretation is the means by which we pursue that which is given to us from beyond ourselves and is at the same time most our own—what is commanded us from above as well as what we command ourselves. Interpretation is demanded by the linguistic nature of the world, and the way we are dreamed within it.

We don’t just speak and interpret on our own, we listen to and interpret others, hear and interpret their interpretations of us, and so on. The mouth is also the organ of sociality. Prior to words and grammar is the act of crying, of warning, invitation, play … all the modes of being together with (and apart from) others. And dreams have a social dimension, not just because they often include other people and situations of urgency with regard to them, but because, as already mentioned, who we are is in part socially determined. R. Eleazar’s idea, that each is shown his own dream and the interpretation of the other’s dream, points to the fact that the very modes and principles of interpretation I use to make sense of my own life are both borrowed from and subject to correction by other people.

The open-ended character of life involves goals and dreams that can succeed or be crushed, often at the whim of nature and (especially) of society; and it is only in retrospect that the meanings of a life can be confidently assessed. It isn’t only the king or President who struggles for his place in history. Now a certain kind of youthful philosophizing opposes the idea that human being is fundamentally social. It spurns the opinions of history and everybody else. It may even try to found everything on self-interest. The mouth as hunger and self-expression. Of course this view is far from the Talmud’s (or any mature philosophy); but it takes us back to the final essential point: the simple need and self-interest of others is a fact that calls forth my own moral obligation, irrespective of their current stage of moral awareness. The crying baby makes a compelling claim, without knowing anything except how to cry.

The mouth simultaneously symbolizes self-interest and morality, monologue and dialogue. The path from one to the other is like the “impossible” path from ignorance to wisdom, in which blindness turns into vision, and the random, meaningless fragments of experience come together in dramatic meaning. And if the structure of the text is as I have speculated (with the discussions of the paradox and interpretation serving the topic of leadership), then the analogy can be extended to the “impossible” task of constituting a just government with wise (rather than self-interested) leaders.

At any given moment we can look around and see a nightmare world of crying babies, criminals and dictators, or a dream world whose members combine through mutual understanding andgoodheartedness, submitting to true
justice and wise governance. The real world is never completely one or the other. Ultimately it is a matter of interpretation, and the responsibility to pursue favorable interpretations, even when the first impression is bleak, is as great as the responsibility to try to better the world, even when things are bad on a large scale and one’s influence is small. Fortunately we have the examples of great interpretations from the past—the tradition, the sacred and scholarly writings. R. Yochanan highlights the importance of texts in a remark within the dream section that steps beyond the province of dreams and into the day:

R. Yochanan said: If upon getting up in the morning a text falls into one’s mouth (w’nafal pesiq l’toch peyu), this is a small prophecy.

Dreams fall upon us. But something of the $\frac{1}{60}$-part-prophecy of the dream can linger into waking life. Words from the sacred texts can have this quality, falling not into dream but into the mouth. That’s what the rabbis do: confronted with any problem or question: they let a verse of Scripture fall into their mouths, into the discussion, affecting the perspective. And life in general requires confronting problems by “quoting” procedures and themes learned along the way, as you engage in the moral-historical adventure.

By the same token, the dream-like character of sacred texts ensures that every reading and application of them must involve a sorting-out of wheat from chaff, if not in the letters then at least in their conventional interpretation. And in this connection the positive meaning of the paradox of wisdom becomes clearer: the paradox guarantees the openness of our dialogues, because it removes all absolute support for opinion. You can affirm that the Torah is God’s word and the doorway to Truth; you can affirm that the “Oral Torah” is its authentic interpretation; you can respect the wisdom of your elders and scholars trained by established methods—but none of this relieves you of the responsibility to question the direction that interpretation takes today. Similarly, the leader may have legitimate (or at least long-established) credentials; he may espouse the accepted values and beliefs; he may have the support of established pundits—but none of this relieves you of the responsibility to question the actions and policies that the leader currently pursues (and thus ultimately his judgment and legitimacy).

The necessity and fallibility of interpretation turns out to affect even the most personal and “ineffable” of experiences, the experience of mystical ecstasy or (to the extent that it is possible to say this) the experience of God Himself. I will look at the Talmud’s explicit teaching on mystical experience in the next Interlude. But now let us return to King Manasseh.
Three Kings part two: Manasseh

A. Judging Manasseh, Ourselves, the World

The question about the failure of religion, and its embodiment in a king or ruling social principle, has revealed the inescapability of the paradox of wisdom, and the extent of its reach—especially as regards the activity of religious teachers themselves. By stressing that the three kings were all brilliant scholars, Ashi, Yochanan and the others keep their own destinies in suspense. The point is not just that moral behavior is more important than any amount of scholarship, but that the pitfalls of the search for wisdom must in a sense be lived through and transcended, rather than merely avoided.

The ultimate disaster, the forgetfulness of God (which is already loss of the “world to come”, the presence of the ideal), is not merely the extreme logical outcome of the early, relatively innocent phenomena of religious commodification and politicization; the disaster is also that which provokes true repentance, the upheaval of perspective that is required in order to experience the essence of divine mercy. In the most extreme possibilities of religious and political failure, the rabbis seek the key to their own redemption and pedagogical success—an outcome which remains beyond their own control, in the hands of heaven and the contingencies of the moral-historical context.

The gemara on Manasseh tries to demonstrate this interdependence of calamity and grace, or the solution of the paradox of wisdom, as a dialectical process. But the process is by no means straightforward.

The text here is organized somewhat differently than in the previous section dealing solely with condemnation. That section favored no particular authorities. If any stood out it was Abbahu and Ashi, with their explicit discussions of the kings as part of the core curriculum; and if it’s true that Ashi played a preeminent role in the editing of the Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), then we may tie his dream about Manasseh to the overall vision of the first section of gemara, which emphasized the negative.

Now, however, there is another personality who dominates the discussion: R. Yochanan, Ashi’s forerunner as the editor of the Yerushalmi (Palestinian Talmud). The successor has placed himself in a subordinate position relative to the earlier master, who aims at the fuller dialectic.179 Yochanan, like Ashi, will provide a crucial indication of the reflexive and self-critical nature of the discussion. And he too will offer the possibility of infinite mercy as food for thought and a springboard to wisdom. But he will add something crucial: a focus on the reversal of the negative at its extremities.

179 Although we will see, when we look explicitly at the Yerushalmi, that the Bavli presents even R. Yochanan’s own material in a more complex and deeper manner.
We have seen repeatedly how the same textual problems, taken by modern critics as evidence of multiple authorship and editing, are seized upon by the Talmudic masters as opportunities for their most powerful and creative interpretations. Here we have one of the clearest examples: the contradiction between the accounts of Manasseh in *Kings* and *Chronicles*. One says that Manasseh was the all-time worst villain, directly responsible for the Babylonian Exile; the other says that he repented and God forgave him. Of course it is logically possible that the worst of the worst could still be forgiven, and that his being forgiven would not prevent the necessity of Exile. But making sense of such a situation will require spiritual resources of the first order. The impossible only becomes possible, the unforgivable only becomes forgivable, through a new vision of the world.

### 1. Personal and Communal Repentance

R. Yochanan begins by setting the apparent contradiction (between the two Biblical texts, or between R. Yehudah and the anonymous “rabbis”) in the wider context of society.

R. Yochanan said: Both of them expounded the same verse. For it is written, *And I will cause them to be removed unto all kingdoms of the earth, because of Manasseh the son of Hezekiah, king of Judah.* One Master maintains, ‘because of Manasseh’ who repented, while they did not; whereas the other Master maintains, ‘because of Manasseh’ — who did not repent.

The quotation from *Jeremiah* establishes that the contradiction won’t be resolved by denying Manasseh’s connection with the Exile. But maybe the connection between individual behavior and the course of history isn’t so straightforward. It might be that Manasseh escaped personal judgment while yet playing a part in the larger social process. Whoever says that Manasseh’s personal immorality was the proximate cause of exile has to deny that he truly repented, if we assume that no sin is too great to be forgivable through sufficiently fervent acts of repentance. God can’t create a sinner that He is unable to forgive. So R. Yochanan supplies a reason that R. Yehudah may have had in mind, in concluding that Manasseh’s prayers and Temple restorations saved him: it could have been that the real cause of exile wasn’t Manasseh’s insincerity but his inability (through no fault of his own) to bring the people with him into true repentance.

*Chronicles* says that he cleaned up all the heretical religious behavior except for worship on “high places”; but that even there, the worship was strictly Yahwistic. Nevertheless, R. Yochanan imagines that the people remained

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180 Jer.15:4
entrenched in immorality. This moral characterization of a particular generation in the 7th century BC cannot be taken literally. The point here—a point that will be amplified by R. Yochanan in the third paragraph below, contrasting the king and the people of his generation in the cases of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah—seems to be that the salvation of society lies in a harmony of the community with its ruling principle, its institutional realization of the ideal. Purity in either of the parts without the other is no good.

I take it that the position that the “rabbis” advocate assumes that the people repented, despite their unrepentant ruler or unreformed institutions. And if we recall the critique of the merely personal, of private experience and unrealized intentions, from the discussions of Jeroboam and Ahab, then we won’t be surprised to hear that the public ground of meaning (its institutions and language) is just as necessary as the good will and feelings of individuals. R. Yochanan reminds us that the converse is equally true.

2. The Pragmatics of Religious Judgment

Now how does this connect up with our dilemma from the previous section, regarding the uncompromising stringency of the ideal and the accommodation of human weakness? R. Yochanan wants to accommodate human weakness.

R. Yochanan said: He who asserts that Manasseh has no share toward the world to come weakens the hands of penitent sinners. For a tanna recited before R. Yochanan: Manasseh was penitent for thirty-three years, as it is written, Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and reigned fifty and five years in Jerusalem [...] and he made a grove, as did Ahab king of Israel. How long did Ahab reign? Twenty-two years. How long did Manasseh reign? Fifty-five years. Subtract therefrom twenty-two, which leaves thirty-three.

Before getting to the numbers, consider the strangeness of the first assertion: it abandons the conceit that the status of the three kings is an objective matter, a simple reading of the divine will manifest in Scripture. It speaks instead as if the ultimate fate of the kings somehow lies in the hands of the rabbis—or as if the decision worked on an allegorical level whose details were subject to a simple practical calculus: encourage the best possible behavior on the part of everyone; don’t weaken the hands of penitent sinners. Since it’s in everyone’s interest to keep them penitent, there is no practical justification for telling one who truly repents that he has no hope, even if he used to be Hitler (who never repented).

Originally, in the Yerushalmi, this pragmatic argument was attributed to God Himself, in order to retain the impression that the fate of Manasseh is an objective matter. But the Bavli, substituting R. Yochanan (the editor of the

\[181\] 2Chron.33/2Kings21:1..3
Yerushalmi) for God, has intentionally brought out the paradox of religious interpretation, which depends on but seeks to erase its human, historical nature. Awareness of the fallibility of scholarship can lead us to accept the responsibility of interpretation, which entails a heightened attention to the importance of forgiveness. Again and again we have seen that the obstacles to wisdom and moral behavior affect us all, R. Ashi as well as Manasseh, and thus certainly you and me. We have seen that the road to murder and incest begins in liberal tolerance and private good will. So he who condemns Manasseh ultimately condemns himself.

This conclusion, and the question of the authority required for the practical decision, will be taken up in a few pages when we encounter the explicit question as to the enumeration of the kings, and the liberal position according to which all of the kings (and all of us) are eligible for the world to come.\(^{182}\) First R. Yochanan considers a piece of the evidence for Manasseh’s case: the extent of Manasseh’s repentance. We aren’t talking about some simple epiphany, nor just the contrition that earned him a ticket back to Jerusalem, but about all those years of his reign during which he put his repentance into practice. And it turns out that his repentance lasted longer than his sinning. Manasseh had an extremely long reign of 55 years, and if the duration of his sinning equaled Ahab’s at 22, then he spent his last 33 in repentance. Anybody who repents for 33 years had better have a hope of forgiveness!

Nevertheless it cannot be a matter of mere calculation, or one could plan a great crime and simply allow time to repent about it later. But in any case R. Yochanan’s point is deeper than this. We will see that he is going to be very concerned with the alphabet, in its relation to guilt and punishment. The association between the number 22 and the alphabet is too obvious to ignore. Doesn’t it stand here for the letter of the law? The perspective of mercy transcends the letter of the law; but only by applying half again as much effort. The spirit of the law naturally decays into literalism and mechanical application or revenge, as we saw in R. Yochanan’s identification of the “lying spirit” who misled Micaiah with Naboth the Jezreelite.\(^ {183}\) To retrieve the spirit of an already-decayed law, one must first work through the literalism. Then comes the effort corresponding to divine mercy beyond the letter of the law.

3. Beyond the Letter of the Law

R. Yochanan said on the authority of R. Shimon b. Yohai: What is meant by, And he prayed unto him, and an opening was made for him. [wa-yechtar lo וַיַּעֲמֹר לוֹ]\(^ {184}\) Should not ‘and was entreated of him’ [wa-ye’tar lo וַיֵּאָמְר לוֹ] rather have been written? — This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, made

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\(^{182}\) see sec.22-23 below
\(^{183}\) Sec.25 above
\(^{184}\) 2Chron.33:13
something like openings (mechtaroth) in the Heavens, in order to accept him with his repentance, on account of the Attribute of Justice.

In order to remove the possible misconception that we are looking for a loophole in the law that might save Manasseh from his fate, R. Yochanan turns to the mystical R. Shimon b. Yohai, who emphasizes that this is a case of overruling the law rather than cleverly interpreting it. Divine mercy simply outstrips rational calculation, as the spirit outstrips the letter. It isn’t a matter of 33 years of repentance making up for 22 years of sin. It’s a matter of God’s highest power, mightier than the boundaries of heaven itself.

The divine opening can also be a metaphor for the reach of human understanding, when it shatters its conceptual shell through unexpected and uncontrolled expansion of perspective. Then this infinitely creative power of divine mercy would also be connected with the political situation of man, the openness of the individual to the common reality, and the balance between society and its ruling principle.

4. Judging the World as a Whole

R. Yochanan also said on the authority of R. Shimon b. Yohai: Why is it written, In the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah; and in the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah; were there then no kings until then? But [it teaches that] the Holy One, blessed be He, wished to hurl the world back into chaos on account of Jehoiakim, but that He gazed at [the rest of] his generation, and His mind was appeased. The Holy One, blessed be He, [also] desired to hurl the world back into chaos because of Zedekiah's generation, but that He gazed at Zedekiah [himself] and his mind was appeased. But in the case of Zedekiah too it is written, And he did that which was evil in the sight of God — [That denotes] that he could have stemmed [the evil of others], and did not.

Just as neither the people nor the ruler alone could stop the Exile, neither alone is sufficient for a condemnation of the world. We leave aside the question of how the people turned bad so quickly (Zedekiah became king only a few months after Jehoiakim’s death), just as the new, righteous king took over. Instead we ask about the meaning of such a condemnation. It seems to be an indication of the activity that is the ultimate function of religion and philosophy, namely, the evaluation of the world as a whole. Therefore the search for wisdom aims at an ultimate convergence with the divine judgment (throughout the days of creation) that the world is good. And so just as the judgments of God and humans are sometimes conflated in the case of the kings (since it isn’t clear whether God or rabbis have the final say), the judgment of God upon the world here in Shimon b. Yohai’s parable also may be read as the judgment facing each of us, alone and together, upon the world and the value of our lives in it.

185 Jer.26:1
186 Jer.28:1
187 2Kings 24:19
The negative evaluation of the world and of life, familiar from the ancient Greek refrain “better never to have been born”, is not unknown to Jewish tradition. Qoheleth voices it explicitly. But the Talmud suggests it only obliquely in the course of its dialectic. For example, in the parable about the capture of the personified Evil Inclination (Yoma 69), a heavenly voice tells the elders of Israel that if they eliminate the principle of evil, then kalya’ alma (כָּלִיָּא אלמה), “the world stops” or even more literally, “the world is prevented”—it will be as if the world had never been created. In other words the course of thinking beneath the parable is touching upon the preferability of the never-having-been, the Nothing rather than Something. So too in the thought of Yochanan and Shimon b. Yohai, we encounter the question of the preferability of the tohu v’bohu, the formless emptiness that preceded Creation.

But only for a second. Although a righteous people under corrupt rule can’t prevent political disaster, they can yet justify the world. And the same goes for an enlightened institution, a system for the realization of the ideal, which is wasted on a corrupt people. The very existence of the effort to establish justice justifies the world, even if it is still full of unjust acts. In either case there is at least a possibility of bringing society into a more just future. And from either side this possibility depends on developments that are beyond our control, that depend on the inspired opening to overcome the present state and undertake a creative reordering of public and private perceptions. For the obstacles to social change can seem immovable.

5. Comedy and Tragedy in Exile

R. Yochanan also said on the authority of R. Shimon b. Yohai: What is meant by, If a wise man contend with a foolish man, whether he rage or laugh, there is no rest? — The Holy One, blessed be He, said, ‘I was wrath with Achaz, and delivered him into the hands of the kings of Damascus, whereupon he sacrificed burnt incense to their gods, as it is written, For he sacrificed unto the gods of Damascus, which smote him: and he said, Because the gods of the kings of Syria help them, therefore will I sacrifice to them that they may help me. But they were the ruin of him, and of all Israel. I smiled upon Amaziah and delivered the kings of Edom into his hand, so he brought their gods, and prostrated himself before them, as it is written, Now it came to pass, that after Amaziah was come from the slaughter of the Edomites, that he brought the gods of the children of Seir, and set them up to be his gods, and bowed down himself before them, and burned incense unto them. R. Papa commented: Thus men say, ‘Weep for him

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188 Therefore I praised the dead who were already dead, more than the living who are still alive. Yet better than both is he who has never existed, who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun. [Qoheleth 4:2-3]
189 Prov.29:9
190 2Chron.28:3
191 ibid. 25:14
who knows not his fortune, laugh for him who knows not his fortune. Woe to him who knows not the difference between good and bad.’

If we regard the Talmudic text as a hodgepodge of sayings stuck together by simple thematic associations, then we won’t be surprised to see that here some comments on two other kings by Yochanan/Yohai have been inserted. Do they apply to the case of Manasseh, or its underlying issues? A final saying completes this apparently random sequence.

And all the princes of the king of Babylon came in, and sat in the middle gate [sha’ar hatoch[192]]. R. Yochanan said on the authority of R. Shimon b. Yohai: It was the place where halachoth are decided upon [lit. ‘cut’, machetochin]. R. Papa observed: Thus men say, ‘Where the master hangs up his weapons, there the mean shepherd hangs up his pitcher.’

This doesn’t even concern other kings of Israel and Judah, but “princes of the king of Babylon”, who would seem even further afield. But let’s return to the argument we have discerned in the Talmudic text so far, and see if things connect up there.

The focus has been on the interdependence of subjects and rulers—or more generally the connection between the moral lives of individuals and the direction of the traditions and institutions that provide those lives with context and overarching meaning. This is supposed to shed light on the workings of repentance, that is, teshuvah, a kind of returning which is also renewal—and which, as a psychological process of perspectival inversion, corresponds to the dialectical pattern we have seen from the beginning of the discussion of the kings … in the three meanings of the name Jeroboam; in the opposing meanings of the phrase “upright in their own eyes”; in the insight that the Torah is as much a representation of the divine as an idol; in R. Yochanan’s image of God and Israel as “two sticks which cause each other to rebound”; in R. Abbahu’s change of heart regarding the necessity of discussing the three kings; in the “balanced” structure of wisdom and evil in the Ahab syndrome; in the very name “Israel” that refers, first of all, to a sinful body that produces a “new”, righteous remnant, and yet also applies to the “all Israel” who are admitted to the world to come; and perhaps most generally, in the basic structure of the rabbinic “two worlds” doctrine, according to which we are both “bound” and “free”, subject to error and suffering while yet granted intimations of the eternal. Our examination of dialectic/repentance as an essential ingredient in the search for wisdom has run from examples of scholarly self-criticism (in which rabbis are momentarily inferior to evil kings, and the very words of God may be misleading), and a concomitant recognition of the necessary ambiguity of language and persuasion, through a confrontation with the facts of human weakness, and finally to the idea that mercy (toward others, ourselves, the world) is to be understood from the

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[192] Jer.39:3
extremity of irreligiousness (a kind of forgetting, and blindness to meaning). Understanding the interdependence of individuals and ruling social principles should be a further step along this negative path: a characterization of wisdom in terms of reactions to historical misunderstanding.

“If a wise man contend with a foolish man...” R. Yochanan’s topic is wisdom; and he uses God as its model. God, like a man, rages at Achaz and laughs at Amaziah. They are the fools. They didn’t understand the historical meaning of the events transpiring around them. They drew the wrong moral conclusions. I have previously expressed this as misinterpretation of the “moral-historical context”—the framework of meaning in which all behavior, all choice and judgment of value occurs. This framework is not a projection of the individual human mind. On the contrary, we find ourselves caught in it without wanting to be. We find ourselves striving for goals and acting on the basis of ideas we didn’t invent and sometimes poorly comprehend. And sometimes our hopes are dashed against the rocks, no matter how hard we try to deny or avert our eyes from what has happened. Nevertheless, we can try to understand or interpret the meaning of what happens, and the validity of our interpretation may be taken as a measure of the authenticity of our lives.

R. Yochanan reminds us that the validity of our world-and-self-understanding cannot be simply correlated with good and bad fortune; for both can be misinterpreted with regard to their genesis and the use to be made of them. You can be born on third base and think you hit a triple; or as the poet said,

*It is an easy thing to rejoice in the tents of prosperity: Thus could I sing and thus rejoice: but it is not so with me.*

The proper response to both good and bad fortune involves an awareness of the contingency of events, and a balancing of the comic and tragic perspectives, both of which respond to misinterpretations of the moral-historical context—misinterpretations committed by others around me as well as by myself, and even more fundamentally, by those before me who handed down the language and concepts from which my thinking must begin. R. Papa says we must weep and laugh for those who misinterpret contingent events. He implies that the predicates ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are correctly applied to things not in isolation but only in the big picture. And you aren’t really getting the big picture unless you appreciate both the tragic and comic aspects of life.

Here the dialectical pattern we have been following reaches a kind of peak: tragedy and comedy are the most extremely opposed, and yet intimately related, of all the phenomena we have considered. We have returned to Wittgenstein’s characterization of religious thinking as a rhythmic interleaving of seriousness regarding the facts of the world (or as the rabbis would say, “this world”) and an even greater seriousness (which is also a playfulness) regarding the cosmic context that confers meaning upon the facts as a whole. The facts are tragic. But when regarded as creations in a meaningful dramatic whole, they are

193 William Blake, “Four Zoas”
comical, that is, there is a contrast between their contextual and noncontextual meanings.

Tragedy too involves contrasting contexts: the viewer is thrown back into her self-awareness, outside the world of the drama (even as the “private” realm is thematized and universalized by the chorus). So the nexus of comedy and tragedy (as required by R. Papa) is the back-and-forth movement between opposing contexts, in which successive reversals of perspective (each a kind of “repentance”) develop the tension and balance between public and private approaches to moral-historical understanding. We alternately look at things “from within” or in their own terms, and from an external or God’s-eye perspective; the mediating factor is the public, historical sphere.

Now R. Yochanan’s insistence on the repentance of both ruler and subjects in the cases of Manasseh, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah makes more sense. It isn’t a question of some bizarre social phenomenon caused by the ascension of Zedekiah, but of a natural and perpetual alternation of perspectives. The public, institutional sphere (personified by the king) is in each case opposed to the private by the dissonance of contexts—a dissonance generated by misunderstanding of the historical situation. The misunderstanding appears from one perspective as the moral error of an individual, from another as the structural and cultural dynamics of an institution.

The proverb said that “there is no rest” in the struggle between wisdom and misunderstanding. Is there then any “rest” (nachath נחת), in the relevant sense, possible for humans in general, in their state of alienation and exile? The Bible is at best ambivalent. On the one hand nachath is a precondition for understanding:

The words of the wise in quiet [nachath] are heard, more than the cry of a ruler over fools.\(^{194}\)

On the other hand

For thus says YHWH, the Holy One of Israel: in returning [b’shuvah] and rest [nachath] shall you be saved; in quietness [shaqat] and in confidence shall be your strength: but you were unwilling.\(^{195}\)

Human unwillingness makes true stillness and silence impossible. Human unwillingness renders the ideal ideal. Its reality lies only in the restless movement of concernful existence and the search for wisdom: in the moments of balance when a pivot is turned; in the silence that shelters the music. The ambiguity in “returning” (repentance) here highlights the point: does salvation come from the activity of returning—that is, does it come while one is on the way home—or does it result from having returned? In the latter case repentance is itself an ideal. But in the former, we have to admit that we are in the circle of interpretation: only as we begin the movement of returning does the way back

\(^{194}\) Koh.9:17
\(^{195}\) Isa.30:15
begin to show and clarify itself—so that we not only begin but persist, to some
degree, in a state of confusion and misunderstanding. Comedy and tragedy will
continue to alternate. But their manner of interpenetration may evolve.

So the first sequence of R. Yoḥanan’s sayings concludes with an image
of historical alienation and exile: the Babylonians sitting in the place of
judgment—brute force in place of the moral Law. It is in the midst of historical
misunderstanding and tragedy, says R. Papa, that we can discern the ineluctable
influence of the ideal. ‘Where the master hangs up his weapons, there the mean
shepherd hangs up his pitcher.’ Our exilic understanding still exists in the shadow
of the ideal. Human nature has a pre-understanding of morality implanted in it.
There is honor even among thieves. And perhaps this shadow of the ideal is
already the “opening” available to repentance.

B. Absence and Presence in Moral-historical
interpretation

6. The interplay of divine absence and presence

We now come to three sayings of R. Chisda (all in the name of R.
Jeremiah b. Abba). We will consider them as a unit. They are not connected by
reference to the Three Kings, or even kings in general. And whereas the first two
might be thought to share some kind of typology of character flaws, the third
concerns not flaws but blessings. All we can say for sure at the beginning is that
each involves an enumeration: five kings; four flaws; three sources of blessing.

R. Chisda said in the name of R. Jeremiah b. Abba: What is meant by the
verse, I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of
understanding. And lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered
the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down?196 — I went by the
field of the slothful — this refers to Achaz; and by the vineyard of the man void of
understanding — this denotes Manasseh; And lo, it was all grown over with
thorns, — to Amon; and nettles had covered the face thereof — to Jehoiakim;
and the stone wall thereof was broken down — this alludes to Zedekiah, in whose
days the Temple was destroyed.

R. Chisda also said in the name of R. Jeremiah b. Abba: Four classes will
not receive the presence of the Shechinah, — the class of jokers, the class of liars,
the class of hypocrites, and the class of slanderers. ‘The class of jokers’ — as it is
written, He withdrew His hand from the jokers.197 ‘The class of liars’ — as it is
written, He that tells lies, shall not tarry in my sight.198 ‘The class of hypocrites’

196 Prov.24:30
197 Hosea 7:5
198 Psalm 101:7
— as it is written, *For an hypocrite shall not come before him.*¹⁹⁹ ‘The class of slanderers — as it is written, *For thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness: neither shall evil dwell with thee,*’²⁰⁰ [which means] Thou art righteous, and hence there will not be evil in thy abode.

R. Chisda also said in the name of R. Jeremiah b. Abba: What is meant by the verse, *There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling?*²⁰¹ ‘There shall no evil befall thee,’ the Evil Inclination shall have no power over you; ‘neither shall any plague come near your dwelling’ — you will not find your wife a doubtful niddah²⁰² when you return from a journey. Another interpretation: ‘There shall no evil befall thee’ — thou wilt not be affrighted by nightmares and dread thoughts; ‘neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling’ — thou wilt not have a son or a disciple who publicly burns his food. Thus far his father blessed him: beyond this, his mother blessed him: *For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee in their hands etc. . . .You shall tread upon the lion and the adder.*²⁰³

Thus far his mother blessed him, beyond this, Heaven blessed him: *Because he has set his love upon me, therefore I will deliver him, will set him on high, because he has known my name. He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and glorify him. With long days will I satisfy him, and make him see my salvation.*²⁰⁴

The correlation of *Proverbs* 24:30 with the five kings is mysterious, and is not illuminated simply by noting that it matches up with the anonymous passage a few pages hence: “Achaz caused the service to cease, and sealed the Torah… Manasseh cut out the Divine Name [from the Torah]… Amon burnt the Torah, and allowed spider webs to cover the altar…” If we were to operate on this literal level we would be left with a host of questions regarding the difference between Manasseh, on the one hand, and Achaz, Amon, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah on the other. How do their sins (which still allowed them the “world to come” or experience of the Shechinah) shed light on those of Manasseh (which perhaps did not)? But instead of clarification, we plunge immediately into another surprising enumeration, which seems to cast a very wide net for Shechinah-losing sinners—for who among us has never scoffed, lied, been hypocritical or slanderous? All the more surprising, then, when these depressing enumerations are followed by a progression of salvific blessings.

Can these surprising inversions be understood as further instances or developments of the dialectic based on the alienated expression of the ideal? Are we still dealing with the interplay between institutions and personal experience,

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¹⁹⁹ Job 13:15 (16)
²⁰⁰ Psalm 5:5
²⁰¹ Psalm 91:10
²⁰² meaning a menstruating woman
²⁰³ ibid. 91:11ff.
²⁰⁴ ibid. 91:14ff.
comedy and tragedy? First we have to look more closely at the substance of the commentaries.

The proverbial warning against laziness is applied to all the kings of Judah beginning with Achaz, excepting the two “good kings” Hezekiah and Josiah. Its characterization of Manasseh is at odds with that of R. Ashi and others (including a notice of his hermeneutical abilities below). But the main point would seem to be that institutions decay, without perpetual rebuilding and maintenance. Institutions naturally tend to bog down in bureaucracy and self-aggrandizement. Only great reformers, such as Hezekiah and Josiah were, can temporarily halt the slide. On the individual level, R. Chisda brings in the eternal vigilance common to all philosophies of moral perfectionism, as an element in moral-historical understanding, and perhaps in the dialectic of tragedy and comedy as well.

“Four classes will not receive the presence [lit. ‘face’] of the Shechinah.” This is not the place to examine the dialectics of the Shechinah—the (Divine) Indwelling or Presence (so that the statement concerns the presence of presence)—which is sometimes said to be everywhere, sometimes only in the Holy of Holies or in Heaven; sometimes only in the future and sometimes in the now; and which by implication and context is here identified with “the world to come”. This way of framing the matter emphasizes that the examination is not primarily legal but rather phenomenological in nature: it concerns how the divine can be present, can show itself, and how this appearing can affect and be affected by moral perspective.

The first quote, ymashach yado eth latzatzim (יָמשַח יָדוֹ אֶת הָלַצַּצִּים) (only Biblical use of ‘joker’, latzatz [לַצַּצִּים]), from Hosea’s condemnation of the debauched ruling class of Israel, who looked to Egypt for protection against Assyria, is normally understood to imply that the king (not God) is joining (not withdrawing from) the jokers, as in RSV: “On the day of our king the princes became sick with the heat of wine; he stretched out his hand with mockers.” By playing on the ambiguity of mashach, R. Chisda depicts the proper vigilance of the institution as an inversion of the natural tendencies of body and bureaucracy. But this condemnation of “mocking” doesn’t contradict the necessity of comedy.

The second quote is our old friend Psalm 101:7, which we encountered in the discussion of revenge in the administration of justice as an effect of the ambiguity of religious language.205 There we surmised that the banishment of the liar represented the metaphysical grounding of the possibility of error in the divine—the sense in which God Himself introduces falsehood into the world. It is also another case where God and king are conflated by the Talmudic commentary. But in connection with the theme of the Shechinah we should notice another element in the Biblical context (verses 1-3), which requires looking past the conflation:

I will sing of mercy and judgment: unto you, O YHWH, will I sing.
I will behave myself wisely in a perfect way.

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205 Part 1, sec.25
O when will You come to me?
I will walk within my house with a perfect heart.
I will set no wicked thing before my eyes: I hate the work of them that turn aside;
[it] shall not cleave to me.

The central line here, “When will you come to me?”, shows that the reception of
the Shechinah is the goal of the vigilance of the institution. Unlike the spirit of
revenge (identified by Rabina and R. Papa with the liar’s “not tarrying” or “going
forth” from the divine presence), which hardens vigilance into mechanical
inflexibility and mercilessness, this resolution begins with mercy, and with song.
R. Chisda thus develops the first quote’s inversion of unkind mockery in the
direction of innocent playfulness and loving creativity. These are what is needed
to prevent the decay of the institution (and thus of the people).

The third quote, from Job, completes a prior verse:

Behold, He will slay me, I have no hope; yet I will argue [‘ochiyach אתה
אלאין] my
ways to His face.
This shall be my salvation; for a hypocrite shall not come before him

Here, with Job, we are surely at the peak of the tragic point of view. English
translations that render hen y’katalni lo aychal as “though He slay me, I will trust
(in Him)” turn it into comedy—hope of salvation after all is already lost! Job, on
the contrary, is concerned with the reason206 that confronts the tragedy as
tragedy, and brings it into the light of the divine presence. Job asserts that
salvation lies not on the physical-causal plane, but in the quality of reason
returning to its divine source. The hypocrite is he who pretends to trust in God’s
infinite superiority, but secretly expects salvation on his own terms. This
hypocrisy lies in the heart of all religion, which must fight incessantly against it,
ever working to replace magical thinking with the magic of morality. The decay of
institutional religion always involves the re-assertion of magical thinking, as the
relation between individual and institution devolves into mere acceptance of
authority.

This sequence ends with “slanderers” (purveyors of evil speech—masefri
lashon hara’) and their exclusion from divine presence. Psalm 5
mentions evil speech in verse 9:

For there is no truth [nchunah נחנוא] in their mouth,
In their midst is a chasm,
their throat is an open sepulchre,
they flatter with their tongue.

The use of nchunah (established, prepared) presents an idea of language as
either being something reliable, rooted in reality, or as hovering over a swirling

206 see ibid. v.3: Surely I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to reason [chochach דברי] with God.
void. This is the final result of mockery, falsehood and hypocrisy—the personal end-product of institutional decay. It reminds us of our starting-point with Jeroboam, and the dialectical interchange of the religious and moral perspectives: the greatest insult to God always turns out to be the distance and strife between human beings. It is the greatest tragedy, that is, the situation most in need of a Job-like argument or reasoning. It implies that dialogue is the road to Presence, as well as the method of institutional vigilance: an opening-up to others in which language provides a firm footing, a foundation. Of course that foundation is itself the divine—intimated or expected in a way that gives creative shape to thought, so that the Presence is both already here and yet just on the verge of arriving. Speech must begin in good will and a sense of the imminent Presence between us that it will evoke.

With this progression of inversions, in which fatal flaws are signposts to the divine presence, we are prepared for a final section in which institutional decay is counterposed by growth and preservation. The Psalm begins

He who dwells in the secret of the Highest
Will abide in the shadow of the Almighty (shaddai).

This certainly fits in with the theme of understanding by thinking through the tragic (and comic) aspects of life: only as the secret meaning of the dark events that surround us can the Presence be divined; to take cover in God’s “shadow” is to take a different perspective on the everyday, daylight view of things. This recalls our use of the image of a shadow to describe R. Yochanan’s conception of the relation between the ideal and alienated administration of justice. There the “shadow” was our exilic state, whereas here it is actually our enlightenment. The worst (Manasseh) must be forgiven; light must come from dark. And once again we are given a three-part analysis (father-mother-Heaven) to explicate the process.

The progression unfolds the involuted perspective indicated by the Psalm in verse 8. After seeming to describe a miraculous immunity to physical devastation and the terrors of existence, it has this peculiar statement: “Only with your eyes shall you behold and see the reward of the wicked.” Here shilumah, “reward” or “retribution” is ambiguous: it could mean that the wicked prosper, or that they get what’s coming to them. But before addressing the ambiguity, we have to ask: with what would we behold if not with our eyes? With feeling? With inner vision? These apparently will be blind to the failures of justice and the irredeemable tragedies of the world. The evil will “only” be seen with the eyes; it will “only” exist on the physical plane, in “this” world. But for those who dwell in the secret shade of the Highest, something else appears. The evil is integrated into the most meaningful context in such a way as to transcend the tragic perspective. What appears (to the eyes) to be the rewarding of wickedness turns out to be retributive justice (sin is its own punishment) in the big picture, in the light of the “next” world.
How this occurs is presented by R. Chisda in his parsing of the psalm. He assigns verse 10 (no evil, no plague) to “a father’s blessing”, verses 11-13 (“tread upon the lion”) to a “mother”, and verse 14-16 (“because he set his love upon Me”) to God. In order to get the progression going, a far from obvious interpretation of verse 10 is given. It directs our attention away from external events toward moral psychology and the social order. According to this interpretation, the starting point is concern for tradition (a son who “burns his food” is one who goes culturally astray) and legal clarity. It belongs with the concern for well-grounded language (nchunah) as a bulwark against institutional decay.

The remaining verses are mentioned without interpretation. The “maternal” blessing seems to be completely preoccupied with physical safety, and with a fantasy in which no one so much as stubs his toe (“…lest you strike your foot against a stone”). The second element is the element of magical thinking, of yearning for miraculous protection.

The final verse continues the theme of “salvation”, but looks in a different direction, as R. Chisda rightly notices. It seems to say that through love of God, and “knowledge” of His Name, a person can see things from the divine perspective (from “on high”), and thus “see” salvation, even in the midst of trouble. Obviously this means more than literally knowing the Name in its written or vocal form, or using it. Here speech and love are somehow the same. The magnification of God through language is simultaneously a “glorification” of the human voice, and of the soul. Here the “miracle” is not magic, not physical protection, but is a miracle of understanding, a triumph of spirit: the redemption of tragedy.

It’s not hard to see that such understanding would require a foundation in tradition, in the correct interpretation and practical mastery of a language—which implicitly also means, participation in an institutional framework, a social matrix. But why does it also require magical thinking, given that the ultimate understanding involves precisely the realistic confrontation with tragedy that such thinking immaturely avoids?

The discussion of the “magnification” of God that is also a transformation of the human voice, a discussion that will be examined in the final section of this book, is also found in Yoma. There a dispute is imagined between the prophets Jeremiah and Daniel, on the one hand, who rebel at the idea of God as a provider of physical protection (given the evidence of history), and the men of the Great Assembly on the other, who are said to have interpreted the relevant anthropomorphic language in a purely spiritual sense (going so far as to define God’s power (gevurah) as His restraint from intervening in human affairs). We will see that although the spiritual position is clearly acknowledged in its superiority over the physical-causal (magical), it is nevertheless asserted that the

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207 see “The Problem of Evil and the Parable of the Eggs”, especially sec.2b
208 “But they came and said: On the contrary! Therein lie His mighty deeds, that He suppresses His inclination, that He extends long-suffering to the wicked.”
latter takes a certain priority in everyday discourse, as it remains necessary for all those who have yet to attain to the higher understanding.

That’s one reason. It is complementary to the point emphasized here: that magical thinking is not only a result of fear and insecurity; it can also be an expression of love—of an unconditional, optimistic adoration that expects reality to accord with its wishes for the beloved. Thinkers as diverse as Plato and R.Chisda agree that the path to wisdom must take a turn through love’s funhouse-mirror craziness. Distinguishing the holy mania from mere anarchic lust is a perennial puzzle. It leads back to the grounding of ethics in self-interest, the universal regard for humankind grown out of love of one’s own—the circle of family and land and culture—which may be as small as the circle enclosing only mother and child.

Thus both a strong grasp of cultural norms and an emotional, loving expectation are required for the higher type of prayer to succeed. Its language must be coherent, must conform to rules of grammar and principles of interpretation; but it must also be motivated by an ecstatic creativity, and an optimism that can say “I have no hope, yet I will argue my ways to His face”. We might observe that Talmudic argument itself has these properties. And it maintains that they are necessary preconditions for the higher calling-out to God that can “only see” tragedy—see past it, that is, to something higher.

This higher kind of seeing is the endpoint of the blessing. “With long days I will satisfy him, and make him see my salvation”—“because he knew My name”. A magical element seems to remain, in the promise of “long days”, that is, a long life. But there is a double ambiguity here.

First of all, there is the ambiguity surrounding the question of the practical utility of wisdom. It may well be argued, without recourse to knowledge of divine mechanics, that wisdom includes prudence, and will naturally tend to lead to a longer life than ignorance. One who has developed a proficiency in the higher reaches of language (prayer and argument) may well fare better, on average, than someone less educated.

But I prefer to focus on a second ambiguity, namely that the “length” of days intended by the psalm may be exploiting the idiom so as to indicate not a large quantity of days but a special quality that relates to depth of meaning and fullness of experience. The “lengthening” of time in religious experience can be understood not only as a comprehensiveness of perspective, but also as a kind of stilling and quiescence of mind (nachath נַחַת, the “quiet” or “rest” of Proverbs, Koheleth and Isaiah\(^{209}\)), which loosens the pull of time and allows the “light of eternity” to illuminate the situation.\(^{210}\) You could also describe it as seeing things in the context of love.

How did we get to love and serenity, from institutional decay and the corruption of speech? The gemara continues to follow the “downward path” as a

\(^{209}\) see sec.5 above

\(^{210}\) in Maimonides’ Commentary on Sanhedrin (trans.Rossner, NY 1981, p.145) he describes the “highest pleasure”, i.e. wisdom, as “endless”; and identifies the world to come, which the rabbis had already taken to be the referent of the phrase “prolong your days” in Deut.22:7, with the “infinitely long” aspect of the world.
way to the heights, simultaneously descending and ascending. R. Chisda’s epicycle went from five bad kings to four condemned classes of people to three blessings. Vigilance against institutional decay was related to the experience of divine Presence out of the historical situation of decayed language. The possibility of reversing the quality of speech is tantamount to the prospect of divine mercy, of unexpected coherence of meaning. What is learned about downward pull of historical reality—the grounding of thought in language and culture and biology—is itself the substance of an upward redirection of attention, a clarification of the real possibility of wisdom.

7. Wisdom in the Midst of History

The interplay of above and below, spirit and history, truth and confusion remains the theme as we move on to a discussion of typography.

R. Shimon b. Lakish said: What is meant by the verse And from the wicked their light is withheld, and the high arm shall be broken: now why is the ‘ayin of resha’im [wicked] suspended? Once a man becomes poor below, he becomes poor above. Then let the ‘ayin not be written at all? — R. Yochanan and R. Eleazar [differ in their answer]: One said, because of David's honour; the other said, because of the honour of Nehemiah, the son of Hachaliah.

The quotation is from Job. It is the famous speech out of the whirlwind. In the previous chapter Job prayed “Teach us what we shall say to Him; [for] we cannot order [our speech] by reason of darkness.” God’s “answer” seems mostly a continuation of the previous chapter’s indictment of human ignorance and powerlessness. But the line at 38:12, “Have you commanded the morning of your days, or made the dawn to know its place?”, continues in a peculiar direction: “that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it.” The mythic cosmogony is familiar, but when did or will this shaking-out of the wicked occur? At events such as the Flood, or the Exile? In the world to come? The tenses of the next line are even more obscure: “It is changed like clay by a seal, and they (will) stand like a garment.” If the subject of “stand” (vay’titzavu) here is still “the wicked”, then the image of a garment, outside of but surrounding the earth, raises even more questions.

Perhaps the most mysterious thing about the shaking-out of the wicked is that “wicked” (r’sha’im רשאים) is written with the ‘ayin (א) above the line like a mathematical superscript. The same thing occurs in the following line, “From the wicked their light is withheld...” When and why this typographical convention was established is unknown. But without the ‘ayin, the word

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211 3 places in Bible with ‘ayin — one with nun at Judges 18:30 (Moses/Manasseh), the story of Micah discussed above (part 1 sec.3a)
becomes *reshim*, plural of “poor” (dispossessed). The wicked are those who dispossess (*yerash*) the poor.

But surely God isn’t shaking the earth to eject the poor people, is He? To get that reading you would have to say that the standing-like-a-garment metaphor really means elevating and extricating the poor from their positions. A point in favor of this position comes from comparing the ‘*ayins* here to the *nun* in Judges 18:30 (from a very small handful of examples), where it changes “Moses” into “Manasseh”. In that case we know that there was indeed a motive, on the part of the Aaronite priesthood that secured its supremacy after the Exile, to obscure the priesthood descended from Moses.\(^{212}\) By analogy, the original reading here would be “poor”. God wouldn’t be pictured as being on their side so much as blamed for their present condition. The ‘*ayin*’s would be a figleaf over God’s creation of poverty and general misery. But a figleaf that still lets the truth show through. And it reminds us that poverty and wickedness, prey and predator, were created together.

In any case, R. Shimon doesn’t really offer an interpretation of the verses—he ignores the breaking of the raised arm, and all other causal implications of the verse—but just focuses on the raising of the ‘*ayin*. It teaches, first, the principle of “poor below implies poor above”; and second, that there are important exceptions to this principle. We assume that “above” and “below” refer to heaven (or the “world to come”) and everyday reality. A commentator says that “poor” refers not to money but to friends. Without being so specific, we may agree that the contrast concerns the state of the soul in relation to God or itself, as opposed to the soul as a part of the intersubjective historical situation. Thus we find ourselves back on the main thread, concerning the balance between public and private spheres in the formation of moral-historical understanding. The typographic symbol seems to put the emphasis on sociability.

But kings and imperial administrators aren’t subject to the principle in the same way as the rest of us. They participate in the violence that makes the general peace possible. Freedom isn’t free. The reality of conflict and evil always conditions the institutional structure, and thus the human relations that mirror the relationship to God. All this confirms what Yochanan and Chisda taught about the road to wisdom leading through the landscape of decay, injustice and exile … and mercy. We have to forgive King Manasseh, and the Manasseh within ourselves, because we also have to forgive David and Nehemiah. (This doesn’t mean we have to forgive George Bush.)

The paragraph may be related to *Sayings of the Fathers* chapter 3, which contains the saying of R. Chananiah ben Dosa: “With whomever the spirit of men is pleased, the Spirit of God is pleased; and with whomever the spirit of men is not pleased, the Spirit of God is not pleased.” Interestingly enough, the second saying of this chapter corresponds to the exceptions pointed out by Yochanan and Eleazar: “Pray for the peace of the kingdom, since but for fear thereof we had swallowed up each his neighbour alive.” So pleasing the spirit of men isn’t so easy. But these considerations are footnotes to the bulk of the chapter, which is

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\(^{212}\) rabbis say that the *nun* was added to preserve Moses’ honor; but they still agree that the point was to eradicate the memory of any Mushite priesthood
about the search for wisdom and the stringent requirements of scholarship. The statement that seems to echo R. Shimon’s interpretation, the principle of “as below, so above”, is actually the culmination of a series that begins with two crucial limitations on wisdom:

   He whose fear of sin precedes his wisdom, his wisdom stands; and he whose wisdom precedes his fear of sin, his wisdom stands not.
   He whose works are in excess of his wisdom, his wisdom stands; and he whose wisdom is in excess of his works, his wisdom stands not.

So the primacy of human relationships, always conditioned by original violence and the persistence of evil, is the context determining whether wisdom “stands”. The search for wisdom is prone to solitude, requiring withdrawal from the idle chatter of the vulgar. And this tendency to withdrawal has something in common with the violence of the institutional (of justice and religion), as well as the cosmic (God’s shaking-out of the poor).

8. The Seriousness of Interpretation

The connection with the search for wisdom leads us to our next, otherwise inscrutable paragraph:

   Our Rabbis taught: Manasseh interpreted the Priestly Law in fifty-five different ways, corresponding to the years of his reign. Ahab [in] eighty-five, and Jeroboam [in] one hundred and three [ways].

   If you know what these numbers mean, please let me know. They don’t correspond to the reigns of Ahab (20) and Jeroboam (21), and it is puzzling that, whereas the degree of sin presumably increased over time, the number of interpretations decreased. In any case, what is the problem here? In the Talmud an abundance of interpretations is usually a good thing. And why mention the “Priestly Law” specifically, rather than the whole Torah?

   If we think literally about the kings of Judah and Israel, we might guess that the king’s changing views on priestly law meant a change in the Temple service. (The multiple shrines in Israel, allowing for even more priestly protocols to be implemented, might help explain the larger numbers.) In contrast to the Talmud, which allows for much intellectual exploration while yet demanding clear rulings on practical matters, the bad kings or defective institutions keep changing the rules. Perhaps they thought that changing times require changing interpretations—a reasonable principle in the abstract. Perhaps the problem is their failure to see the ways in which things stay the same.

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213 Sanhedrin 68a: R. Eliezer had 300 (some say 3000) teachings on cucumbers
The defect of excessive or gratuitous interpretation has already been associated with Manasseh in the section a few pages prior to our entry point with the kings’ explicit condemnation. There the topic is the denial of the world to come to anyone who denies the divine origin of the Torah\(^{214}\). It is asserted that the phrase “the person who does anything with a high hand, whether he is native or a sojourner, reviles YHWH”, from Isaiah 5:18, refers to Manasseh; and that this “high-handed” activity consisted of mocking the Torah.

Thus, he jeered, had Moses nothing to write but, “Lotan's sister was Timna…”\(^{215}\)

The discussion not only argues for the value of the genealogy (it turns out that Timna was an ancestor of Amalek, supposedly a punishment upon Israel for having rejected her attempts to convert), but analyzes the basic attitude of skepticism toward sacred texts. It relates this attitude to a certain kind of temptation, and the concluding remark is given by R. Ashi: “Temptation is at first like a spider’s thread, but eventually like a cart rope.” Playing with texts is fun at first, but leads to radical estrangement from God. It leads, as the text in Isaiah 5 puts it, to calling evil good, and good evil\(^{216}\)—in other words, to the anarchy of “interpretation” in the vulgar sense, where being subject to interpretation is equated with having no fixed or intrinsic meaning.

Emmanuel Levinas has gone over this particular passage, in his “Contempt for the Torah as Idolatry”\(^{217}\). He emphasizes that the divinity of the Torah consists primarily in the “unnatural” or ideal character of its message and tradition. While not disputing the factuality of historical criticism, he associates it with a frame of mind that cannot appreciate the ideal, cannot grasp the meaning of the absolute moral imperative—cannot subjugate its own intellectual pride to the works of tradition that were formed over a millennial span in accord with principles not apparent on the surface.

The issue here hits close to home. My attempt to interpret the Talmud without a teacher is certainly in danger of relying too much on pure reason, and in plugging holes in spiritual insight with historical knowledge. My mystification at the numbers 55-85-103, for example, inclines me to brush them off and yet salvage a meaning sufficient for my own purposes. Unlike Levinas, I am unable to affirm the factuality of the events at Sinai, if even in a manner that removes them from the gaze of historical science. (When I remove Sinai from history, I retain it in a different category.) My attitude is that writings that claim to be historical (if that intent could itself be established unambiguously), and are false, need to be revised or at least interpreted with their falsity in mind. So I am not entirely different from Manasseh in his criticism of “flaws” in the text. And my “wisdom”, such as it is, may well be in excess of both my fear of sin and my good works.

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\(^{214}\) see Preface, “Why the Three Kings?”

\(^{215}\) Gen.36:22

\(^{216}\) verse 20

But indeed, it was R. Ashi whose own conscience told him\(^\text{218}\) that, faced with Manasseh’s moral-historical situation, he would have “sped after him”. So he knew something about the spiderwebs of intellectual temptation. And if I am to understand the question of the forgiveness of Manasseh, I must undertake a certain forgiveness of the Manasseh in myself—a forgiveness that would depend, of course, on repentance and reconciliation with the social world.

The temptation to trivialize the text is one with the temptation to avoid the endless task of engaging interpretively with other people. For the presumption of the perfection of the text is one with the presumption of infinite moral obligation amongst humans. If our goal is (as R. Chisda’s interpretation of Psalm 91 implied) one of perfecting the language of our prayer (the blessing of God in which the blesser is transformed), then R. Shimon reminds us that it is simultaneously a goal of perfecting human dialogue. So to trivialize the Torah is to trivialize human relations, where interpretive economy and accuracy of insight are crucial. And conversely, to trivialize the language of everyday relations is to trivialize the Torah. But here it’s obvious that the ideal isn’t merely very difficult, it involves a certain paradox. The perfectionism that insists on pursuit of God at every moment of the day, shunning both the beauty of nature\(^\text{219}\) and laughter\(^\text{220}\), does not make a very good impression on people. There are good reasons why Jews finally developed such a comedic sense. We have already considered comedy as a survival mechanism and counterweight to tragedy—the balance R. Yochanan saw as a consequence of moral-historical confusion. A further consideration is that lightheartedness promotes sociability. Idle chatter may be intellectually disrespectful, but it can have a moral value. And there might also be a value in playing with the sacred text.

9. Suspension of judgment and the opening to mercy

We now have a couple of seemingly miscellaneous opinions coming from R. Meir. First, he adds Absalom to the list of those denied the world to come. Perhaps Absalom didn’t make the Mishnah’s list because he wasn’t quite a king and also not a commoner. No defense for Absalom is considered. But now a whole new category is added to the possible relationships toward the world to come: those who “will neither live nor be judged” there.

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\(^{218}\) see part one, sec.19

\(^{219}\) R. Jacob said, He who is walking by the way and studying, and breaks off his study and says, How fine is this tree! how fine is that tree! and how fine is this fellow? they account it to him as if he were “guilty of death.” (*Aboth* 3:11) Now that’s harsh.

\(^{220}\) R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Shimon b. Yohai: It is forbidden to a man to fill his mouth with laughter in this world, because it says, Then will our mouth be filled with laughter and our tongue with singing. When will that be? At the time when They shall say among the nations, YHWH hath done great things with these. It was related of Resh Lakish that he never again filled his mouth with laughter in this world after he heard this saying from R. Yochanan his teacher. (*Berachoth* 31a)
It has been taught: R. Meir said: Absalom has no share toward the world to come, for it is written, And they smote Absalom, and killed him. “They smote him” — in this world, “and killed him” — in the next. It has been taught: R. Shimon b. Eleazar said on the authority of R. Meir: Achaz, Achaziah, and all the kings of Israel of whom it is written, And he did that which was evil in the sight of YHWH will neither live [in the world to come] nor be judged [there].

The observation about Absalom may seem unsurprising. After all, Absalom fought against David, the source of all political authority in the rabbinic view. But the text doesn’t call him evil—in fact, it is clear that he fulfills the prophecy of Nathan—and the righteousness of his rebellion is an open question. It was based on a perceived lack of justice in David’s administration (represented dramatically by the failure to prosecute Amnon’s rape of Tamar), which Absalom promised to rectify if the people made him king. It was also a revolt of the Israelites against rule from Jerusalem, which had not yet become consolidated as it would be under Solomon. Absalom himself was no doubt an opportunist like any power-hungry prince; but the institutional stress he exploited is worth noting. And the interpretation of “smote…and killed” here is too convenient, ignoring the context in which Absalom has already been stabbed three times without expiring. The explicit “kill” here isn’t redundant.

So we may want to contest the judgment on Absalom, and the privileging of Judah over Israel that it implies. But the focus on Israel continues in the second part, when a list is formed from scripturally condemned kings of Israel, plus two kings of Judah (Achaziah b. Jehoram, killed in Israel by J ehu for aiding Jehoram b. Ahab; and Achaz b. Jotham, who broke a string of good kings going back three generations, by “walking in the ways of the kings of Israel”). What about the other kings of Judah (or Judah-and-Israel) who were also “evil in the eyes of YHWH”? This would include David and Solomon, as well as several other later kings like Amon and Jehoiakim. Now some of these are dealt with in our text as special cases. Nevertheless, the focus on Israel here suggests that the relation between Israel and Judah has something to do with the special category of those who “will neither live nor be judged”.

What then does this expression mean? It seems at first to indicate some kind of intermediary state between “all Israel”’s enjoyment of the world to come and the exclusion judged to pertain to those like Jeroboam, Ahab and Manasseh. But does that make sense? Isn’t the judgement in question precisely what

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221 2 Samuel 18:15
222 This is said of the following kings (both Israel and Judah):
223 2 Samuel 12:11
determines whether or not you live? And then again, hasn’t the judgment already been rendered? Our text will tell us that the Great Assembly made the determinations that the Mishnah preserves. Of course we have seen repeatedly that the judgments rendered by God and by rabbis are sometimes profoundly conflated, just as the “world to come” is both in the future and, in a deeper sense, the present.

Instead of understanding here an intermediate or “indifferent” state, wouldn’t it make at least as much sense to think that these evil Israelites are actually worse off than those who are to be (or who have been) judged? Isn’t the judgment related to the possibility of mercy?

Perhaps it is significant that the case of Manasseh—a case that not only awaits judgment in the sense of the literal-future “world to come”, but in the sense that the gemara here prolongs and keeps open the dispute between Rabbi and the rabbis, holding Manasseh’s fate in the balance—is the only Judean king amongst the radically evil three. This is in keeping with Israel’s fundamental rhetorical role as the false start and failed version of Judaism. The Israelite kings would represent only a bureaucratic continuation of the “sin of Jeroboam”—the establishment of shrines to YHWH outside Jerusalem, or in our interpretation, the establishment of religion as an institution of the political world. The bureaucratic inertia implied by the first of R. Chisda’s sayings above removes them from both guilt and opportunity. Only the extremity of the Judean experience can lead to the purest praise and most creative dialogue; only through repentance can we hope to find a deconstruction of the political order—a deepening of moral-historical understanding that transcends the trivialized (and therefore cruel) interpretations of life.

My problem with this Judeo-centric perspective dovetails with my reservations regarding perfectionism. Here I may as well also state my view regarding the Talmudic defense of David (for the arranged murder of Uriah) found in Shabbath 56a. As I mentioned, David is also condemned by the prophet Nathan for “doing evil in the sight of YHWH”**, that is, arranging for the death of Uriah. Rab sums it up for me when he says

Rabbi, who is descended from David, seeks to defend him, and expounds [the verse] in David's favour: the ‘evil’ here is unlike every other ‘evil’ elsewhere in the Torah. For of every other ‘evil’ in the Torah it is written, ‘and he did,’ whereas here it is written ‘to do’: [this means] that he desired to do, but did not.

Rab isn’t taken in by this sophistry, nor by the argument that the condemnation for killing Uriah “with the sword of Ammon” (i.e. putting him in the front line against the Ammonites) is really a vindication (because it was okay to kill Ammonites); nor with several even weaker arguments that contradict the plain sense of the Biblical text. When he associates Rabbi’s defense of David with his (Rabbi’s) alleged royal descent, he is implicitly extending this charge of bias to all the others (R. Joseph, R. Jonathan, et.al.) who defend David because of their

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224 2 Samuel 18:9
Judean descent. In my view this bias is real, and needs to be revised. And so does a certain kind of moral perfectionism.

Baruch Halpern has offered a different kind of defense of David in the matter of Uriah. His analysis is based on a reading of the text as political propaganda. He concludes that Solomon was not David’s son. The whole story was cooked up to conceal this fact. If Halpern is right, David would be innocent of this one murder but guilty of many more. He would also be guilty of many crimes against the Israelites. And he would not himself be an Israelite! (Halpern thinks it likely he was a Philistine.)

So in my view David is as guilty as the Israelite kings. The defects analyzed in connection with Jeroboam, Ahab and Manasseh go back to the origin, to the essence of religion and politics. In Shabbath, R. Samuel b. Nachmani poses a rhetorical question about David, “Is it possible that sin came to his hand, yet the Divine Presence was with him?” Contrary to his expectation, I must answer: yes; the Presence can be “with us”, but in varying degrees and modalities. It is never a 24/7 arrangement. Everyday reality intrudes every day. But if we judge David, and Manasseh, as well as the Israelite bureaucracy and ourselves, we are thereby also holding open the possibility of repentance and mercy.

10. Repentance and Moral-historical Understanding

Moreover, Manasseh shed innocent blood very much, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another [from mouth to mouth]; beside his sin wherewith he made Judah to sin, in doing that which was evil in the sight of YHWH.225 Here, [in Babylonia] it is interpreted as meaning that he slew Isaiah; in the West [Palestine] they said: [It means] that he made an image as heavy as a thousand men, and every day it slew all of them. With whom does this dictum of Rabbah bar bar Chana agree? Viz., The soul of one righteous man is equal to the whole world: with whom does it agree? With the author of the view that he killed Isaiah.

We return now to the “downward path”— the nature of cultural decay and the impediments to wisdom. We must think through Manasseh’s error to the end. The ultimate sin is of course murder.

The account of Manasseh in Kings is almost comical to the modern sensibility, in that it takes 10 verses to detail transgressions against Deuteronomic ideology (no worship on “high places”, etc.), spends another 5 predicting exile as a result of these transgressions, and ends up with half a verse mentioning that he shed “much innocent blood” (the other half of the verse repeating that this was in addition to the errors of ritual). The priorities seem inverted, to say the least. This mystery is only deepened by the fact that

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225 2 Kings 21:16
Chronicles replaces the mention of the murder (as well as the prediction of exile) with the story of Manasseh’s captivity and repentance in Babylon.

The rabbis know how to invert the inversion. The killing of innocents is the greatest act of idolatry: it is a provocation to God. Since God is present as the ground of ethical relations, we are worshiping false gods if we think that they sanction moral disorder and violence. The magnitude of the idolatry (“heavy as a thousand men”) is the magnitude of the crime.

But at the same time, the killing of one person is already an infinite transgression.—Now we have completed the reversal. The moral claim infinitely outranks the claim of ritual. For the righteous soul is “equal to the whole world”. This metaphorical reading takes the filling up of Jerusalem (“from one end to the other”) as the expansion of a single soul to engagement and identification with a whole community or tradition. Isaiah’s moral-historical understanding typified such engagement.

Given this metaphorical reading, it is surprising that no one seized on the expression here translated “from one end to the other”: *peh l’peh* (פֶה לְפֶה), literally “mouth to mouth”. For this expression not only conveys the corruption of language and human relations that leads to violence and forgetting of God; it also will turn out to be the ultimate theme of the gemara on the three kings. Violence with regard to conversation is intimately related to transgressions caused by hunger, and the “devouring” of human beings by their oppressors.

But what about this idea that Manasseh killed Isaiah? One minute he’s multiplying interpretations of Leviticus, the next he’s killing an elderly prophet? It turns out there is a connection. It is a scholarly murder. In *Yebamoth* 49, there is a story of Manasseh executing Isaiah after giving him a remarkable “trial”—a trial that reads more like the defense of a doctoral dissertation. Its meditation is highly relevant to our reflections on moral-historical interpretation, perfectionism and corruption.

### a. The Trial of Isaiah

… Raba said: He [Manasseh] brought him [Isaiah] to trial and then killed him. He said to him: Your teacher Moses said, ‘*For men shall not see Me and live*’²²⁶ and you said, ‘*I saw YHWH sitting on a throne, high and lifted up*’.²²⁷ Your teacher Moses said, ‘*For what [great nation is there, that hath God so near to them], as YHWH our God is whenever we call upon him*’²²⁸ and you said, ‘*Seek YHWH when he may be found*’.²²⁹ Your teacher Moses said, ‘*The number of your days I will fulfill*’²³⁰ but you said, ‘*And I will add on to your days fifteen years*’²³¹ ‘I know’, thought Isaiah, ‘that whatever I may tell him he will not accept; and

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²²⁶ Exodus 33:20  
²²⁷ Isaiah 6:1  
²²⁸ Deut.4:7  
²²⁹ Isaiah 55:6  
²³⁰ Exodus 23:26  
²³¹ 2 Kings 20:6
should I reply at all, I would only cause him to be a willful [homicide].' He thereupon pronounced the [Divine] Name and was swallowed up by a cedar. The cedar, however, was brought and sawn asunder. When the saw reached his mouth he died. [And this was his penalty] for having said, ‘And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips’.232

[Do not] the contradictions between the Scriptural texts, however, still remain? — ‘I saw YHWH’, [is to be understood] in accordance with what was taught: All the prophets looked into a dim glass, but Moses looked through a clear glass. As to ‘Seek ye YHWH when he may be found [etc.]’ one [Isa.55:6] applies to an individual, the other [Deut.4:7] to a congregation. When [is the time for] an individual? — R. Nahman replied in the name of Rabbah b. Abbuha: The ten days between the New Year and the Day of Atonement. Concerning the number of thy days I will fulfil, Tannaim are in disagreement. For it was taught: The number of thy days I will fulfil refers to the years of the generations. If one is worthy one is allowed to complete the full period; if unworthy, the number is reduced; so R. Aqiva. But the Sages said: If one is worthy years are added to one's life; if unworthy, the years of his life are reduced. They said to R. Aqiva: Behold, Scripture says, And I will add unto your days fifteen years! He replied: The addition was made of his own. You may know [that this is so] since the prophet stood up and prophesied: Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name,233 while Manasseh had not yet been born. And the Rabbis? — Is it written ‘from Hezekiah’? It is surely written, ‘To the house of David’; he might be born either from Hezekiah or from any other [Davidic king].

Here again we see Manasseh at work interpreting sacred texts. But this time he is not preoccupied with trivialities, as demonstrated by the illustrious rabbis who took up his questions.

The question about seeing God couldn’t be more fundamental. It is bound up with the idea of God’s essential formlessness and the battle against anthropomorphism, as well as the idea that humans are so inferior to God as to not be worthy of seeing Him. The latter idea conflicts with the first, since it seems to presuppose that some higher being could see God, just not humans (or most humans). In Exodus 33 Moses gets to see God’s “backside” (acharei) but not His face, “for no man shall see Me and live”. This seems to contradict Isaiah’s report of his vision, assuming that God on the throne was facing him, with face exposed. Isaiah doesn’t say anything about His face, only his shul, that is, the lower part of a robe or dress. Maybe Isaiah was averting his eyes.

But the fact is that we needn’t reach to find a contradiction here, because a stronger one exists within Exodus 33 itself: verse 11 says “YHWH spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his neighbor.” The chapter sets the puzzle of distinguishing between seeing the Face and speaking with It. The difference between sensory perception and intellectual comprehension is posed as a criterion. And the text implies, again, the accessibility of God through human dialogue, and through the inter-human experience of faces.

232 Isaiah 6:5
233 1 Kings 13:2
The contradiction, in other words, is a productive one. The rabbis use it here in a more limited way: to posit a distinction between the vision of Moses and all the other prophets. Their metaphor of glass has been explained\textsuperscript{234} as a matter of super-sensory seeing versus apprehension through the imagination (as in dreams). But perhaps it is more fully understood in connection with the more famous use of this metaphor, by Saul of Tarsus:

> For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.\textsuperscript{235}

The distinction, in other words, is between “this world” and “the world to come”. Moses got a taste of “the world to come” in its essence; he experienced the ideal as if it were real; and he experienced the unalienated commonality of perfect human co-existence. But no one else, not even prophets, can have this kind of experience. Moses is himself the ideal—the ideal author of the Torah. The Torah is not a book to be completely comprehended in real time, but a source of infinite education and inspiration.

The second contradiction broadens the discussion from the cognitive and social dimension of theophany to its realization, hours into days, years into generations, in the flow of life. And with this it sheds light on the perfectionist demand for incessant pursuit of the ideal. It contrasts “whenever we call upon Him” (literally, “in all our calling to Him”) with “seek YHWH while you may”. The first is said in the context of the wandering in the desert; the second after the conquests of Cyrus the Persian (long after the death of Isaiah). For the generation of desert wanderers, it was a nonstop theophany; for the exiles after the fall of Babylon, it was “seize the day”. How do these different perspectives fit together? Doesn’t the uniqueness, if not the ideality, of the generation of the wilderness settle the case in favor of Isaiah rather than Moses? On the other hand, don’t we want to see the limitation on God’s availability as being in ourselves, so that every moment should in principle be as good as another? The question of God’s temporal availability should be decided analogously to the question of His spatial availability, with regard to which we have favored the “in every place” of \textit{Exodus}.

The Talmudic solution splits the availability between individual and community: God’s availability is limited for each of us, but unlimited with regard to the community as a whole. What does this mean? A trivial possibility is dismissed, namely that the overlapping periods of seeking by individuals might cover all the days of the year. For everyone is limited to seeking God only during the first ten days of the year. After that you’re on your own.—Really?

Of course not. But the temporal limitations on the search for wisdom are of fundamental importance in the realism of our tradition. They are what I have called the moral-historical situation, the understanding of which is not an obstacle to wisdom, but rather its basic precondition. Similarly, the primacy of the

\textsuperscript{234} by Rashi
\textsuperscript{235} 1 Corinthians 13:12
community (to whom God is said to be continuously available), the public ground of culture and tradition, is not a detour on the soul’s path to God, but is rather the path itself.

The individual’s dialogue with God is not a repetitious drone. It proceeds by way of encounters in everyday reality, oriented by the larger dimension of history. The limitations on understanding are not just in us; they belong to the historical drama. Isaiah is right again. And the alleged contradiction exposes an important distinction.

Finally the timeframe of the search for wisdom is expanded to a whole lifespan, from birth to death. The question is basically one of destiny—the course of a life that is “written down” beforehand by God. The sense of an outcome as destined is an abstraction from the anticipatory structure of moral-historical understanding.

On the surface, the problem is that *Exodus* 23 speaks in an optimistic tone about the conquest of Canaan under the guidance of an angel, during which everyone obeys the angel’s voice and therefore everyone’s destiny is fulfilled; whereas in *Kings* Isaiah first tells Hezekiah that he’s going to die, then he/God changes his mind and “adds 15 years”. So it looks like the allotment wasn’t “etched in stone”, so to speak. But more importantly, the implication is that some destinies are not fulfilled.

We are dealing here with a subtle concept of destiny, quite different from the simple notion that everything is predetermined. This subtle conception has two aspects, expressed as two sides of a dispute. Is the span that is “written down” a maximum or a minimum? If it’s a maximum, then moral failure might lead to death at an earlier age (destiny unfulfilled), as almost happened to Hezekiah. If it’s a minimum, then moral excellence might lead to death at a later age (fate circumvented), as “the sages” say did happen to him. Should we aim at fulfilling our destiny or transcending it?

R. Aqiva says we should aim at fulfilling it. This seems straightforward: if God is the author of our destiny, why would we need to circumvent it? Could our own initiative be better than God’s plan? But the other, equally correct perspective is that life isn’t predetermined, that our destiny is in our hands. For if our moral choices aren’t freely made, then morality is meaningless.—This seems even more straightforward. What can we learn from the argument?

The prediction of Josiah’s reign was a remarkable feat of prophecy, if it really happened. From the critical perspective, the story of the prophecy points to its invention by Josiah’s supporters. Be that as it may, the argument is strange: because Manasseh, born after Hezekiah’s illness, was the grandfather of Josiah, the destiny of Hezekiah (to recover from his illness) must have been “written down” in advance. Isaiah’s original message was just a bargaining position. Most likely God didn’t let him in on the strategy, so as to allow him plausible deniability. But the important question is, what about Hezekiah’s decision? R. Aqiva implies that we have to regard even our own moral choices—*inssofaras they are correct*—as coming from God. This might sound like: God takes all the credit, we take all
the blame; but it’s only reasonable to view morally successful outcomes as blessed.

The response is that Hezekiah could have died before Manasseh was born, and some other descendant of David named Josiah would have fulfilled the prophecy. The moral choices weren’t predetermined, only certain outcomes emanating from the community as a whole. (This echoes the previous discussion: the community as a whole carries the ideal). We (as individuals) take both the credit and the blame; the incentives are balanced. A common sense opinion, but does it make use of the concept of destiny to illuminate individual experience, that is, moral-historical understanding?

The argument on Isaiah’s side seems weak. A Josiah who wasn’t descended from Manasseh would be a different Josiah, even if he fulfilled the Bethel prophecy. The general problem here is that of allowing for a certain amount of predestination, while maintaining that some events and decisions are yet contingent. The slippery slope results in everything being predetermined, or everything being contingent. If Manasseh’s birth was contingent, then the Babylonian Exile he brought down upon the Judeans was also contingent. This is what Aqiva anticipates when he insists that the righteous outcome is conditionally determined. The account “written down” in advance includes the right moral choice, but we still have to make it.

This is consonant with the view of life as constituted through moral-historical understanding. The grand drama has an objective character that we have to struggle to interpret, like a play in which we find ourselves acting with only a hazy memory of the script. It’s not that we don’t contribute to the meaning; but we didn’t invent it, or build the multigenerational structures that support it. If we are tempted to think of moral-historical understanding as “subjective”, something projected onto the material reality, then we should recognize that the “subject” of this projection is no individual, but only the culture as a whole and over time. The individual succeeds by developing a new twist on universal themes.

The text offers us two perspectives on our lives: destined and open-ended. In the first, all the moments and qualities of life are conditioned and made intelligible by the Whole, the stage and story on and in which they occur, in such a way as to cohere. In the second, the meaningfulness of life waxes and wanes, and various stretches and timescales may bear no internal relation to each other (only to the Ground of the whole). The gemara doesn’t explain how these perspectives are related. But it is interesting to notice that Manasseh, as prosecutor of Isaiah, seems to be on the side of R. Aqiva, that is, the perfectionist insistence on the ideal as realized through unwavering resolve, and as applicable in the fullest sense only when taking account of the whole span from birth to death.

Now what about the trial and its extrajudicial outcome? It’s hard to see why Isaiah so mistrusts Manasseh to pursue the argument fairly. Do the “sages” equally mistrust R. Aqiva? Isaiah evades Manasseh by uttering the Name, and yet God lets Isaiah die as punishment for his writing—the very charge prosecuted
by Manasseh. The explanation given is that Isaiah shouldn’t have written that line about “a people of unclean lips”. It seems that this is considered a piece of antisemitism. But it is what Isaiah said upon seeing God:

And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, YHWH of hosts!"

This statement simply expresses the common Biblical notion that God and man are so different in rank as to render their coming into proximity a transgression on the part of man. It is in agreement with “no man shall see My face and live”. But the rabbis aren’t saying that Isaiah was wrong to declare himself to be of unclean lips. The individual’s speech always starts from a state of corruption and alienation; it aims at transforming itself, as we have seen, into praise of God and acknowledgment of other people. But once again we are reminded that the people/culture/tradition as a whole or in its essence is inhabited by the divine Presence. It shares something of the status of the ideal. The Hebrew language itself isn’t corrupt, only specific utterances.

But is that true? Hebrew considered as a real language, related to Aramaic and Akkadian and Moabite, etc., is inarguably corrupt in the sense of being a creation out of more primitive states of communication and speech. The ideality of the language lies in its potential, its future. Even the Torah speaks “the language of the sons of men”. The Torah is like the theophany to Isaiah: it doesn’t reveal the Face, doesn’t give literal statements about ultimate reality, but instead offers morality as a way to grasp the Presence obliquely, as one can see galaxies in the sky only with averted vision. And Israel (or any community or civilization) is, in this respect, like the Torah.

Manasseh isn’t a trivializer of the Torah. He finds triviality only because he seeks so resolutely after the ideal. He shares the perfectionism of one who risks the greatest error of historical understanding: insisting, as did R. Aqiva, that the Messiah is here, and defying the political order unto death. Manasseh’s forgetting is a loss of balance … the balance between public and private, institutions and individuals, that has been the theme of the section on Manasseh, and which was first raised in the context of the compromise between spirituality and compassion for the ignorant, in the context of the Ahab syndrome.

As the primary text here, cited by R. Yehudah and R. Yochanan, is 2 Chronicles 33, it is important to recall the key statement of its first part:

And YHWH spoke to Manasseh and to his people, but they would not listen.

How did YHWH speak to Manasseh? You might think that it was through Isaiah. The fact that he isn’t mentioned is suspicious; it makes me very skeptical of the tradition of Isaiah’s murder. But the point I want to emphasize is: the error, the heedlessness of God, wasn’t just Manasseh’s alone; the people were equally

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236 see the Coda
responsible. (We might also have gotten this result by working backward from Manasseh’s role in the causation of the Exile.) Unlike the cases of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, where the morality of the people and king were inverted, here we have them in agreement. The salvation from “never having been born” provided by one or the other side in those cases is lacking. It has been lost through an excessive stringency or literal-mindedness in pursuit of the true balance between culture and personal life. The lives of individuals become as trivialized as holy texts to the critical eye. Measured against the 24/7 stringency of moral perfectionism, their self-image is based only on joking and fantasizing; although the doctrine says that God is always available, to them it seems that he never is. Their moral-historical sense, in other words, becomes blunted to the point of experiencing only one damned thing after another.

C. Repentance from the Extremities of the Secular

11. Provocation and blessing

Back to the text of Sanhedrin…

[And he set] the graven image, but it is also stated, [And the Asherim and the] graven images, [which he had set up]. R. Yochanan said: At first he made it with one face, but subsequently he made it with four faces, that the Shechinah might see it, and be angry.

If we have thought through the extremity of intellectual failure, and anticipated the possibility of undeserved mercy, what question guides the remainder of the discussion? It seems that the depths are still to be plumbed, as we head into a series of culminating “provocations” against God. Or are we already bottoming out, and are on the way to a more positive reflection on repentance?

R. Yochanan comes on stage again. He will soon enter the spotlight. Here he is explaining a discrepancy in Chronicles, between verse 7 and verse 19. He is really putting his finger on the difference between Chronicles and Kings; for verse 7 is copied from Kings, but verse 19 belongs to the new material (starting at verse 11) that replaces the “ear-tingling” prophetic warning of Kings with the hopeful story of Manasseh’s repentance. This material claims to be based on two other books, one about “the kings of Israel”, the other called “the sayings of the seers”. Kings, in contrast, refers only to the “book of the chronicles of the days of the kings of Judah.” In Chronicles, “Israel” is now a religious community, not a nation-state like Judah was. It is suspicious, if we take things literally, that the two new sources were unknown to the author of Kings. In fact it may be that verses

237 2 Chron.33:7
238 ibid. v.19
18-19, referring to the two sources, were the first piece of invention in the editing process of this chapter, and that the legend of verses 11-17 was spun out of them.

But R. Yochanan focuses only on a point of apparent indifference, buried in those possibly imaginary books, between a reference to a singular “image” and plural “images”. He doesn’t take note of the larger pattern of editing here: *Chronicles* changes “an image of the Asherah” to “an image, an idol” in verse 7, as it changes “Baal” to “Baalim” and “Asherah” to “Asheroth” in verse 3. Verse 19 is in keeping with these changes when it speaks of his “setting up of the Asherim and the images”. The point seems to be to speak of cultic implements (statues and trees) rather than of gods and goddesses (Asherah in particular). As mentioned in connection with Ahab above, Asherah was pictured as a woman, the consort of YHWH, in pre-Exilic artifacts. But by the late Persian period (the time of *Chronicles*), it was possible to deny her very existence, speaking only of “asherim/oth” as trees or poles used to stake out a sacred precinct. By the later reasoning, “an image of the Asherah” would have to be a picture of a tree. (This might seem unlikely, but it brings up the question of the origin of the menorah, the ancient symbol of Judaism, and its association with “the tree of life” … and thus quite possibly with Asherah.)

R. Yochanan appears to consider none of the bias or lateness of *Chronicles*, nor its editing-out of Asherah the consort of YHWH; strangely, though, he describes the act of idolatry as a provocation against “the Shechinah”—the rabbis’ covertly feminine principle! He alludes to the divine vision of Ezekiel (a throne with four faces), as if Manasseh somehow knew of the reality that Ezekiel was to apprehend in a vision, and purposely constructed a parody of it.

Yet the context tells us that this purposefulness occurs within the cascade of unintended consequences that threatens even the greatest scholars. How much more easily might it affect the simple superstitions of family religion, the maternal investment in blessings for one’s children that R. Chisda saw transcended in the heavenly (and non-superstitious) type of blessing. To provoke the Shechinah must mean to refuse the Presence, to distance the divine and approach it only through the institutional structures (of a “father’s blessing”), which are thus drained of their meaning. The most horrific thing of all, from the religious point of view (and especially the viewpoint of moral perfectionism), is hollow religious expression—expression that only mentions the divine without in any way bringing it near. This would include not only religious hucksters and pious frauds but also everyone who views religion as a merely private matter, a question of “belief” or “faith” rather than behavior informed by understanding of the historical situation.

What we have learned in the first part is that false religion is produced, not by a separate force or principle, not in the first instance by evil people who set out to deceive, but by the decay of spiritual understanding as it endeavors to establish its reality in the world, compromising with ignorance and suffering a drift or dissemination of meaning in the echo chamber of culture. Numerous examples

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239 see Part 1, sec.24
have traced the downward path of negative feedback attendant upon spiritual blindness. The kinship, sometimes even the indistinguishability of true and false symbols (cherubs and calves, Gerizim and Zion, etc.) was given the extra twist that sometimes even the “true” inspiration leads to bad consequences (even prophets lie). Sometimes even the Torah—interpreted defectively, trivially, cynically—can mislead. This surely goes for Ezekiel's vision as well as Isaiah's; both are “false” from the strict perspective of “no man may see My face”, but they nevertheless point to truth. And thus the difference between Ezekiel's vision and Manasseh's image of it is far from obvious. What makes one act or utterance a blessing and another a provocation?

Our next progression furthers this question by using an indefinite “it” to identify the artifact of Manasseh (the image of Asherah) with those of two other kings.

12. Moral-historical Blindness and Hope

Achaz set it in an upper chamber, as it is written, And the altars that were on the top of the upper chamber of Achaz. Manasseh placed it in the Temple, as it is written, And he set up a graven image of the Asherah that he had made in the house, of which YHWH said to David, and to Solomon his son, In this house, and in Jerusalem which I have chosen out of all tribes of Israel will I put my name for ever. Amon introduced it into the Holy of Holies, as it is said, For the bed is shorter than that a man can stretch himself on it: and the covering narrower than that he can wrap himself in it.

Now, what is meant by ‘For the bed is shorter than that one can stretch himself on it’? — R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Jonathan: For this bed is too short that two neighbours may rule therein together. What is the meaning of ‘and the covering narrower etc.’? — R. Samuel b. Nahmani said: When R. Jonathan reached this verse, he wept. He of whom it is written, He gathereth the waters of the sea together as an heap — should a molten image be made a rival to Him?

The information regarding the “upper chamber of Achaz”, and the altars upon it, is confusing. The reference here, from the story of Josiah's purge, makes it sound like later “kings of Judah” added altars to a chamber Achaz had built; but this only leaves Hezekiah, Manasseh and Amon, and Manasseh’s contribution is listed separately. On the other hand, the story of Achaz—which is primarily focused on his bribery and flattery of the Assyrian emperor Tiglath-pileser, aimed

240 2 Kings 23:13
241 2 Kings 21:7
242 Isaiah 28:20
243 Psalm 33:7
244 Soncino translates “to it” rather than “to him”
at the destruction of his rivals in Damascus and Samaria—does include his copying of an Assyrian altar and using it in his depleted and refurnished Temple. Achaz is also associated with the sun-dial that registered the miraculous reversal of the sun in the presence of Isaiah and Hezekiah; and this fits in with the other creations of “the kings of Judah” destroyed by Josiah, the horses and chariot dedicated to the sun-god. We could quickly get lost in pursuing the possible influences behind all this sun-worship, from Bronze Age Europe and the kingdom of Mitanni, to Assyrian, Persian, Greek and Indian examples of sun-gods in chariots. It is also intriguing to note that in Mesopotamian religion the sun is often associated with a lion … which happened to be the symbol of Judah. But our purpose here is served simply in noting that the motivation of Achaz was political (gaining protection and influence with Assyria); and that his view of religion was based on the impressive powers of architecture and military might.

The progression suggests that Achaz took a first step, which Manasseh furthered and Amon completed: from roof to Temple to the inner sanctum. The cosmopolitan corruption due to political considerations became intensified by an explicit reliance on native religion in the furtherance of these considerations, when Manasseh told the Assyrians, in effect, “look, we too worship Ishtar, who is the wife of our YHWH, in His great house in Jerusalem.” Amon, it is imagined, took this to a logical conclusion by putting an idol in the Holy of Holies, where YHWH manifests His Presence—the point of contact between the real and the ideal. His act shows how political compromise ends in utter heresy and destruction of human access to the ideal.

Now the “evidence” for Amon’s actions in the words of Isaiah is peculiar. We would already be puzzled about Amon, who only reigned for two years, in the light of Manasseh’s repentance and 33 years of just governance. It’s obvious that the revolutions and counter-revolutions of the later 7th century have been obscured in the final record. But the oration of Isaiah quoted here is addressed to “the drunkards of Ephraim”, that is, northern Israel. Furthermore we are well aware that Isaiah died, at the latest, during the reign of Manasseh, and was no longer around for Amon, who seems to have been dragged in simply in order to complete the sequence.

But for the sequence of the Talmudic argument, rather than historical plausibility, the context in Isaiah may yet be relevant. Unfortunately it is extremely ambiguous, as indicated by the fact that for many people the famous line, “precept upon precept, line upon line” is understood as a positive description of learning, despite the context in verse 13:

But the word of YHWH was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.

The problem is that the same phrase in verse 10 may be understood as God’s (or perhaps the prophet’s) own method; although it seems to me more likely that the subject of “whom will he teach?” in verse 9 refers to “the priest and the prophet”, pictured in drunkenness in verse 7, who therefore employ the word of
YHWH to ill effect. Of course we will be struck by the fact that the famous phrase seems well-suited to the Talmud itself, as well as reflections upon it such as these. And this illustrates the situation we find ourselves in: it is much the same as in the following chapter of Isaiah (addressed to “Ariel”, i.e. Jerusalem as a lion):

For YHWH has poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep, and has closed your eyes: the prophets and your rulers, the seers he has covered.
And the vision of all has become for you as the words of a book that is sealed, which they deliver to one who knows books, saying, Please read this; and he says: I cannot, for it is sealed.

The subject of the context, in other words, is the paradox of wisdom—the fact that history must be interpreted like a book; the endlessness of interpretability; and the unreliability of priests and prophets, and rabbis, and ourselves—that we have been following all along, including the element of God-induced error (why has God closed their eyes and made them sleep? how did they blow their chance at understanding?). More immediately, the context is the purgative process that God will use to sift the mockers, the drunken interpreters and misguided clergy, from those that trust God truly in their hearts(those who react to the historical situation with a moral imagination, with optimism and humility. The “scourge” (or whip, shot שקר) that accomplishes this sifting is itself highly obscure, an arrangement of historical forces regarding which “it will be only trouble to understand the message.” The image that represents this situation is that of the short bed with its inadequate sheet. It symbolizes situations God arranges for us that leave no room for satisfaction or security. The path to wisdom is sometimes closed.

What has this got to do with idolatry? R. Samuel b. Nahmani first uses a pun to suggest that it’s a question of two “rulers” trying to occupy the space (“bed”) of one; and then comparing a molten image to God’s fabrication of a “heap of waters”, as invoked by Psalm 33. I suppose that the molten image must be a rival (or “trouble”) to God; but perhaps there is also an analogy (presumably behind the Soncino translation “a rival to it” rather than “to Him”) between the human fabrication of the image and God’s forming of the waters. These waters “as a heap” are mentioned in two other places in the Bible: in Exodus 15, Moses’ poetic recounting of the parting of the waters of the Red Sea, and Joshua 3, when the same phenomenon is repeated at the crossing of the Jordan.

It isn’t just that no one should dare to worship an idol when God is so great as to have parted the waters; it’s that God’s shaping of history is the only true “representation” or manifestation of the divine. An idol is a symbol of the ideal; but the real way to apprehend the ideal is in the dramatic character of the world itself, beckoning us to action through a careful and attentive reading of its possibilities and its wonder. Judaism rejects religious symbolism because the world is itself the symbol of God—as long as it is understood in its moral-historical urgency. (This urgency must of course be apprehended even in the absence of wonders like the parting of the waters.)
When there’s an idol in the Holy of Holies, religious representations (and they could just as well be the cherubim, or the words of YHWH) have turned our vision away from the divinity of the world itself. This comes about in stages: the practical utility of religion comes to dominate it (Achaz); the dilution of religion through incorporation of popular representations; and the corruption of religion in its essence, as religion replaces and thus blocks the apprehension of the world’s divinity. The ultimate loss—Manasseh’s “forgetting” of religion—is the loss of this apprehension: the perception of ways in which the world makes room for coherent moral-historical action.

When “the bed is too narrow”, this possibility is absent, and our efforts end in incoherence. God doesn’t guarantee that we can apprehend the meaning in life … sometimes it’s possible, sometimes not. But it ultimately depends on us, on the purity of our moral imagination. In the gemara on the “four who entered paradise”\textsuperscript{245}, R. Abbahu characterizes the manner of God’s presence as doogmah, the “example” or exemplary meaning of things: God isn’t present as a flag at the head of an army (although this is the etymology of doogmah), but rather as the moral mission of a community and the urgency of the historical situation. What popular religion conceives as a referential or symbolic relation, true insight sees as a moral one.

\section*{13. The Dimensions of Hopelessness}

The progression of errors reveals the truth at their root: the truth of religion is prior to its manifestation in symbolism, narrative and even law—all of which can conceal as much as they reveal, notwithstanding their necessity. Now the Achaz-Manasseh-Amon sequence is given two more turns, relating to the extreme opposition of real and ideal. One involves the loss of religious ritual and teaching; the other, in which a fourth king is added, involves a loss of morality that sees only a self-sufficient reality (without any need for the ideal). First the loss of religion:

Achaz caused the [sacrificial] service to cease, and sealed the Torah, as it is written, \textit{Bind up the testimony, seal the Torah among my students}.\textsuperscript{246} Manasseh cut out the Divine Name [from the Torah], and broke down the altar. Amon burnt the Torah, and allowed spider webs to cover the altar.

This sequence seems related, on the surface, to R. Chisda’s saying about \textit{Prov.24:30} above. We have already discarded factuality of the assertions about the kings, but this makes it even more likely that the two passages are related thematically. R. Chisda’s saying emphasized the bureaucratic decay of institutions; here there is a loss of understanding. But understanding depends on

\textsuperscript{245} Chagiga 14b — see my commentary, sec.3
\textsuperscript{246} Isaiah 8:16
learning and teaching, and thus on institutions. Now both are lost; the context is still the moral-historical chaos of *Isaiah*.

And although we have moved from chapter 28 of *Isaiah* to chapter 8, we are still in the same realm of thought and poetry. The consequence of adopting an attitude of "precept upon precept" in ch.28 was "that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken;" whereas here in 8:15 (immediately before the cited verse 16) we have: "And many among them shall stumble, and fall, and be broken, and be snared, and be taken." And whereas there God closed the eyes and put to sleep the prophets, rulers and seers, here (in v.17) God "hides his face from the house of Jacob."

But here the full verse is important:

Bind up the testimony, seal the Torah among my students,
And I will wait upon YHWH, who hides His face from the House of Jacob; and I will look for Him.

Here God's hiding isn't a matter of punishment so much as a basic condition of human understanding, which exists in a state of perpetual looking (for God, for ourselves, for each other). This, of course, is the key to the paradox of wisdom: that the "absence" of the ideal is the way in which it affects and orients the present. For it isn't absent in a simply negative or abstract sense, but rather as specific discrimination within the moral-historical situation. The "binding" and "sealing" of the Truth are set within a social, indeed a political context, wherein false applications of the law and inappropriate interpretations of tradition are common. But in the end our judgments of appropriateness and morality depend on an intuitive grasp of the whole: on an intelligibility and illumination that reflects the coherence of our own souls. Therefore the institutions of education and law depend on the inner illumination of individuals:

To the Torah and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.

This adds an element of extreme alienation: most people in the corrupt nation are hopeless—even if they employ religious language, its true meaning is beyond them. The Talmud insists that even those subject to capital punishment can still make it to the world to come if only they confess; but in the study of those denied the world to come for the failures of their historical missions, it becomes apparent that the difficulty of confession (and of pure speech in general) is even greater than you would imagine, and its necessity extends not just to criminals but even to rabbis. This corresponds to the ambiguity of the concept itself, in its literal and metaphorical senses: it is in connection with the sense of "world to come" as a modification of present experience, rather than an afterlife, that the serious difficulties arise.

So the "great villain" Manasseh has a chance at the world to come, if it is posited that he was indeed some kind of religious thinker, a deep and serious penitent; whereas it may turn out that a majority of the "all Israel", who are
promised an afterlife in principle, are in reality shut out from dialogue, from the moral sphere and its shaping by the ideal, simply because they lack the light of interpretive insight. And though Achaz is also counted as a villain, we must be supposed to notice that the quotation puts him in the position of Isaiah, whose students are being ordered to seal the Torah. (Likewise, if Manasseh “cut out the Name”, so did Second Temple Judaism in its substitution of euphemisms for the Name.) The difference between prophet and sinner is razor-thin; it depends on your historical options and choices—especially as regards the relation between your intellectual cohort and the forces of darkness.

The progression ends with the burning of the Torah—the same condition as that of the “too-short bed”, the idol in the Holy of Holies: the loss of the possibility of religious understanding, cut off at its root in language and symbolism. There we discerned in God’s hiding a historical dead-end, shorn of viable options; here we have a complementary loss of tradition, the past that makes a future possible. And of course this loss is more than a literal loss of books; it is a loss of common understanding in which the opposition between groups is internalized to an opposition of each against all.

14. The Convergence of the Secular and the Aniconic

Finally, one more progression to explain this unsurpassable state of corruption and hopelessness. A slippery slope from the margin to the apex of incest first suggests an equation of incest with burning the Torah. The destruction of tradition is like violation of your mother; for we are indeed children of tradition, since our identity depends as much on cultural as biological inheritance. And to repudiate your origin, as if you could invent yourself out of nothing, is tantamount to repudiating the world and thus God. But then this repudiation of the world is cast as a stealing or re-creation of it: the vision of a perfectly secular universe.

Achaz permitted consanguineous relations; Manasseh violated his sister; Amon, his mother, as it is written, For he Amon sinned very much. \(^{247}\) R. Yochanan and R. Eleazar [dispute therein]: One maintained, He burnt the Torah; the other, he dishonoured his mother. His mother remonstrated with him: ‘Hast thou then any pleasure in the place whence thou didst issue?’ He replied: ‘Do I do this for any other purpose than to provoke my Creator!’ When Jehoiakim came, he said, ‘My predecessors knew not how to anger him: do we need [Him] for anything but His light? But we have Parvaim\(^{248}\) gold, which we use [for light]; let him take His light!’ Said they [his courtiers] to him, ‘But silver and gold are His too, as it is written, The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says YHWH of Hosts.’ \(^{249}\) ‘He has

\(^{247}\) 2 Chron. 33:23

\(^{248}\) cf. 2 Chron. 3:6

\(^{249}\) Hag. 2:8
long since given them to us,’ he replied, ‘as it is written, *The heaven, even the heavens, are YHWH’s: but he has given the earth to the children of men.*’

We pause first to notice that the quotation cryptically posed as proof of Amon’s incest is another text from the seam of the *Chronicles/Kings* divergence. Since in *Kings* Manasseh is totally evil, the explanation for Amon is simply that he followed his father. But in *Chronicles* it’s another surprise (as was Manasseh following Hezekiah) to see the corrupt son of a repentant father. The fault lies with “he, Amon” alone. Amon’s self-reliance and self-invention, apart from tradition, isn’t to be blamed on his father. Yet in our Talmudic progression, the loss of identity follows from a relaxation of moral standards regarding relatives, in which Manasseh is a middle term.

In any case this progression ends not with Amon’s mother but with Jehoiakim and his claim to have no need for God. The secular universe is proved by means of Scripture. That is, the most extreme possibility of secular thinking is to be grounded in its traditional sources and categories.

Jehoiakim is imagined to have rejected even the need for light, saying that with the aid of fine gold he could do without it. Is that because the gold somehow shines in the dark? Or because he can afford plenty of oil lamps or other technologies? Or is it something deeper—the reduction of everything to its monetary value, so that what is seen is not the independent reality but only an economic order in which things play their assigned roles? Even more basically: the rejection of natural light is the rejection of the *intelligibility of the world*, its ability to present us with phenomena and situations that are both new and meaningful. To live without light in this sense would mean living “out of this world,” as R. Nachman said of Jeroboam, in the solipsism of Ezekiel’s “rooms of pictures,” without taking advantage of and working to share in the *Logos*. For the merely objective is undifferentiated in its meaninglessness. It is—as R. Yochanan said earlier—equivalent to the *tohu v’bohu*, the world never having been created, the judgment that it would have been better that way.

This merely objective, secular (and worthless) world is envisioned through complementary quotations illustrating the basic paradox of religious symbolism. In the first, from *Haggai*, God claims the gold for His Temple in Jerusalem. The gold enhances the glory of religious symbolism, its transcendent reference. But symbolism and representation necessarily fail to convey or explain That which is beyond being and reference. In *Psalm* 115 there is also a mention of gold and silver, but it is to idols made of these metals. Idol-worshippers ask “where is the God of Israel?” because they look for earthly manifestations and symbols; but “Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases.” In other words He cannot be controlled by any technology of the sacred, by representation or ritual. He is simply to be trusted and feared, for He will bless those who fear Him (verse

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250 Psalm 115:16
251 see part 1, sec.7
252 *Ezekiel* 8:12; see part 1, sec.16
253 see part 2, sec.4
254 Psalm 115:3
Such trust and fear is an intellectual exercise of looking beyond the gold and silver, beyond representations, and thus in a sense beyond religion itself, to the meaningfulness of the world and the urgency of history. In this sense the earth is “given to us”, that is, made available to us as something that draws us in, and thereby changes us, and reveals us to ourselves, and each other.

Apprehension of the ideality/intelligibility of the real, trust in the invisible meaning of the visible, enables a public reality in which the pure language of blessing would be possible. But Jehoiakim seeks only the real, the immediate; he is an empiricist or materialist or atomist—someone whose one-sided philosophy chooses plurality over unity, content over form, and sensation over concept—and is thus blind to any context or purpose in his historical situation. Jehoiakim was a king and his choices were of supreme importance. But we too are rulers over ourselves and our lives, and are of great influence over others—even if the scale of our moral action isn’t that of nations and armies but is the scale of household, neighborhood, job, synagogue, etc.—the “historical” drama of the everyday, fraught with decisions and moral claims.

Jehoiakim’s idol-free secular vision converges with the imageless religion that takes the world itself as the only “symbol” of God. (Another way of putting it: Jehoiakim was his own idol—see next section.) But of course he throws away that which is most valuable: his moral-historical sensibility. Only someone this blind would pick a fight with Nebuchednezzar.

D. The Mouthful

15. A Light in the Darkness: Hospitality

Raba said to Rabbah b. Mari: Why did they not count Jehoiakim [amongst those who have no share toward the world to come], seeing that it is written of him, And the remaining words of Jehoiakim, and the abomination which he wrought, and that which was found upon him etc.? Ḥanematz’a? — R. Yochanan and R. Eliezer differ: one maintained that he engraved the name of an idol upon his body (תבונה), and the other held that he engraved the name of Heaven thereon. — He answered: I have heard no explanation concerning the kings, but I have heard one concerning the commoners... Why did they not include Micah? — Because his bread was available to travellers, as it is written, Every traveller turned to the Levites.

Raba’s question is obvious: Jehoiakim seems to represent a final extreme, even beyond Manasseh. Yet he isn’t denied the world to come. This reinforces

\[255\] 2 Chron.36:8

\[256\] not found in Judges 17-18; 18:2 says of the Danites “they came to Mount Ephraim, to Micah’s house, and lodged there.”
our earlier suspicion that the apparent further descent, through the “provocations” of the later kings of Judah, was really already the beginning of a turnaround. But the paragraph here is kind of a mess. Raba’s question isn’t answered—in fact the case against Jehoiakim is further prosecuted—and instead the question is applied to Micah … who is excused on the basis of a nonexistent (and not obviously relevant) Bible quote! Fortunately, the connection made here at the underlying level is quite solid, and provides further proof, if we still needed it, that the surface-level connections are artificial. It is the transition from the examination of extreme irreligion to the keystone of the remaining text, namely, the “mouthful” (l’gimah שלגימת) of food, as R. Yochanan will call it—the subject of human need, the intertwining of speech and morality, and the “bread-like” nature of Israel in relation to the nations.

So we have the abandonment of moral-historical sense, followed by the Biblical case against Jehoiakim.

At the surface level this is just an aside. The case is based on yet another of the elements unique to Chronicles: something was “found on” Jehoiakim, as explained in the lost books. Yochanan and Eliezer have a disagreement about what the lost books said. (R. Chiyya has a third account, a few paragraphs hence, offered as an answer to Raba’s question.) One says Jehoiakim had a tattoo with the “name of an idol” (shem avodah zarah שם עבודה זרה), presumably some foreign god or goddess; the other says it was the “name of Heaven” (shem shamayim שם שמים)—presumably the Tetragrammaton. The implication seems to be that stamping himself with the true divine Name was as bad or worse than doing it with a false divine name. Now why exactly would this be?

Well, tattoos are prohibited in the Torah, and writing the Name is generally prohibited by the rabbis. Another possibility, on the historical level, is that this reflects the report that Jehoiakim, originally named Eliakim, had the Yahu-put in his name by the Pharaoh Nechoh, when the latter made him “king” (in reality a glorified Egyptian tax collector) in place of his brother. In some context we don’t quite understand, the Name became part of Egyptian propaganda. Jehoiakim’s very kingship was a piece of moral-historical calamity.

But what is R. Eliezer’s point? Is it that Jehoiakim had a well-intentioned but twisted way of honoring God? Or that he thought that he himself was God? I suppose we could say that in the radically secular world, man puts himself in the place of God—but in what sense exactly? When the moral-historical sense is lost, we can see no meaning or direction in life beyond our own fantasies. Secretly we think that our fantasies are divinely meaningful, without realizing that objective meaning involves openness to and interaction with the world. We think that symbols can be manipulated in private to private ends, without realizing that the meaning of symbols lies in culture and tradition, and that what they point to is the ideal.

This applies as well, as we have repeatedly noticed, to the Name (or Torah) itself. And the fact that R. Yochanan lived a century after R. Eliezer suggests that we should reverse the order given here. The first statement, reflecting Nechoh’s naming, was that Jehoiakim had the Name “on” him (but not
“in” him). Then the twist was to say that he had an “idolatrous” name on him: in this context, the Name served to hide the ideal rather than make it intelligible.

The ideal is never something present, like a body or writing. It is the organizing principle of a system of behaviors, and therefore concerns the future (and its correlations with the past) more than the present. It transcends tragedy and comedy through the urgency of its claim. That claim comes from other human beings and animals, that is, from those who have physical needs such as hunger; it especially comes from “travellers”...

Rabbah b. Mari says Micah is in the world to come because “his bread was available to travellers.” The quotation isn’t in our Bible, and looks strangely fragmentary (“… all travellers, and turned to the Levites.”). But there is nothing to do but relate it to the story we have already considered in connection with Jeroboam, the story of the Danites who stole Micah’s statue and took it to Laish—a story of the moral chaos ensuing when everyone does what’s right “in their own eyes”. It was a time (if we extrapolate from the lost quotation) when “Levites” (long before this term would designate a class of sub-priests in Jerusalem) were a caste or guild entrusted with various functions of a village or estate, including both the maintenance of religious institutions and social functions like providing for travellers.

Previously we considered Micah’s story as representing the commodification of religion, and the necessary contamination of language by the economic order. Religion is sometimes “sold”, even when there is an intention to give it freely, because the semantic drift of language and symbolism constantly creates new gaps in understanding and attitude. Now, however, we see that even this corrupted religion is at least partly redeemed by its responsiveness to the needs of others, just as charity performed selfishly still has value.

But what is the specific implication of the bread being available to “travellers”? The Danites were on their way from their unsuccessful southern settlement to the northern edge of Israel, which would become their historical home. And of course each of us is on our own journey through life and history. To attend to the needs of someone isn’t just a physical business: it is to give implicit support to their journey, their projects—which may of course be aimed in a dubious direction, or even be on track to interfere with projects of our own. Moral actions have unintended consequences that drift away from us just like the meanings of our words and religious expressions. And our moral-historical understanding is always subject to surprising revisions, when our ideas must give way before the claims that other individuals make (implicitly or explicitly) upon us.

Here again the way up and the way down are reflectively intertwined. Insight into the intricacies and inevitabilities of moral and intellectual failure deepens our sense of mercy. As much as tradition insists on moral perfectionism, it must struggle hardest to engage with human imperfection, which is itself a manifestation of the divine. The hungry mouth we encounter is intertwined with the voice that cries, pleads and preaches. It both alienates and unites, as R. Yochanan is about to tell us. First, however, he makes one last cryptic addition to

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257 part 1, sec.3
the discussion of idols which has recurred throughout the treatment of the late Judean kings.

16. The Virtue of False Religion

And he will cross the sea’s trouble, and strike the sea’s waves.\footnote{Zechariah 10:11} R. Yochanan observed: This refers to Micah’s graven image.

The quotation is puzzling. Odd and fanciful explanations have been given to connect it somehow with Micah. Rashi says Micah “stole the Name” (YHWH) from Moses, who had cast it into the Red Sea (whatever that means); he then used it to create the Golden Calf for Aaron (notwithstanding the fact that Micah lived long after the time of the Exodus). This puts a further spin on the idea that true and false religious symbols are deeply interconnected.

But if we stick to the text, we notice that there is a connection between this quotation and the previous reference to “the traveller” \( (\text{ha’ovar} \quad \text{רָבָה}) \); for the same word, in verbal form, is used here, although I translated it as “[and he will] cross” \( (v’avar \quad \text{רָבָה}) \). (You could also say “pass over” or “get beyond”.) (This word is of great importance in many other Biblical contexts, from the sinful “passing through fire”\footnote{Deut.18:10} to God’s “passing before” Moses\footnote{Exodus 33:19, 34:6}. It is also the root of the word “Hebrew” \( [i’vri \quad \\text{רֵבֶּה} ] \), the name of the travelling/crossing/transcending ancestors of the Israelites.)

Although there is a puzzling grammatical shift from third person plural to singular, our quotation is dependent on the previous verse (Zechariah 10:10):

\[
\begin{align*}
I \text{ will bring them home from the land of Egypt, and gather them from Assyria; and} \\
I \text{ will bring them to the land of Gilead and to Lebanon, till there is no room for them.} \\
\text{And he will cross the sea’s trouble, and strike the sea’s waves; and all the depths of the river will dry up; and the greatness of Assyria will be brought down, and the sceptre of Egypt will depart away.}
\end{align*}
\]

Here the travellers are all of the lost and exiled Israelites and Judeans—in other words, people like ourselves. The prophet pictures them on the way, but not yet home; they are waiting on the borders, while the political order is remade.

The shift from “they” to “he” seems to involve the quotation of a piece of archaic poetry (literally: “he will cross of sea trouble, strike of sea waves”), whose
subject was a mythic divine conquest. So the traveller is in some sense God himself, making way for the exiles.

We can see, then, why Rashi invoked Moses and the Name, Israelites and God. And yet R. Yochanan says that it’s neither; the traveller is actually Micah’s statue, that is, the illegitimate, commercially debased expression of religion. Somehow it’s false religion that overcomes the political order and gathers in exiles. Or perhaps we should say that commodified religion is on the way to such a returning and such reform.

Or is our translation still wrong? Perhaps the sense is: his voyage over the sea will end in trouble; his striking of the sea will only make waves. Instead of a fragment of poetic cosmology, perhaps it was a proverb about losers. Then the implicit subject would be the Assyrians and Egyptians, their empires having come to nought. And the association with Micah would make more sense.

Nevertheless, the Talmudic context acknowledges that Micah’s religion is founded in true repentance (for his theft of his mother’s silver), and that his efforts were fundamental to the religious life of the Danites. (I would add that it was also connected to the priesthood of Moses, which was arguably older than the line of Aaron that solidified its power in the Second Temple.) Micah’s good intentions are manifest in his hospitality. Even when religion operates in the darkness, in moral-historical error, there is an immediate morality that is independent of the ultimate outcomes and traditional frameworks. Therefore true and false religion are essentially “mixed together”.

17. The Blending of Truth and Error

It has been taught: R. Nathan said: From Gareb to Shiloh is a distance of three mils, and the smoke of the altar and that of Micah’s image intermingled. The ministering angels wished to thrust Micah away, but the Holy One, blessed be He, said to them, ‘Let him alone, because his bread is available for travellers.’

The smoke of the altar at Shiloh provided God with a “pleasing odor”; it entered Heaven; and thus it established a connection between experience and the ideal, this world and the world to come. So if Micah’s offering at Gareb intermingled with it, Micah’s religion also provided the minimal requirements of salvation—not according to the letter of the law, or an eternal (“angelic”) metaphysical yardstick, but in the ultimate moral value of his response to circumstances, to history, and to individuals.

Micah’s historical understanding was messed up. He got caught in his mother’s curse and tried to turn around both the curse and his criminal

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261 In archaic poetry, the “vav-consecutive” rule inverting the tense of the verb following “and” [vav] sometimes doesn’t apply; so the original reading may have been: “He crossed of sea trouble, He struck of sea waves.” We also notice that in Zechariah’s time the greatness of Assyria had passed away, and the Persians were in the process of conquering Egypt.

262 A mil is about a kilometer
inclinations, but he still understood religion in commercial and genealogical terms. Therefore he had nothing left when the Danites stole his Levite and silver statue, for his security had been based on the thought “Now know I that YHWH will do me good, seeing that I have a Levite for a priest.”

But even in the darkness of this night, the world to come is available, as it is to the desperations of Jehoiakim and Manasseh. The distance between Micah and Moses, therefore, though astronomical is only a matter of degree. All religion is carried out with a certain degree of error. All needs to be—and will be—forgiven, if only the basic moral motivation is manifest. But that doesn’t mean that there aren’t dire consequences.

And it was because of this [Micah’s image] that the people involved in the matter of the concubine at Gibeah were punished.263 For the Holy One, blessed be He, said to them, ‘You didn’t protest for My honour, yet you protest for the honour of flesh and blood.’

I’m a bit confused about the basics here. The Israelites were protesting the gang-rape-murder of the Judean concubine of a Levite from Ephraim, which resulted in the massacre of the Benjaminites. Those who protested weren’t the ones punished, the Benjaminites were. But in any case, the outrage over the murder by the Sodomites of Gibeon is contrasted with the outrage that should have been felt over Micah’s statue, over his false-but-charitable religion that intermingled with the true religion of Shiloh.

One reaction would be that to place religious “honor” above the demands of human justice is itself an outrage; and that worse still is to envision the slaughter of tens of thousands of people as “punishment” for religious tolerance. On the other hand there was certainly something wrong about the moral calculation that resulted in 25,000 deaths as compensation for one. From everything else we have learned, this would have been the real offense to God. And perhaps the proper “outrage” against Micah would simply have involved the elevation of his level of understanding, from the economic and hereditary to the spiritual.

The story of the Benjaminites includes another example (in addition to Micah) of entanglement in the unintended consequences of a linguistic utterance (the vow not to marry Benjaminites), which ends with an even more dubious effort at moral rectification by means of a scheme for capturing wives (literally). When moral blindness (“doing right in your own eyes”, as the Deuteronomist understands this phrase) reigns, one should refrain from hastily acting upon perceived demands of justice, and give priority to spiritual reflection and the big picture.

Social strife is the “punishment” for false religion because it is the consequence of moral-historical blindness, which lets depravity spread even through the reactions of vengeance it provokes. Vengeance belongs to God, not humans. The only real moral certainty is that the hungry should be fed.

263 Judges 19-21
We come now to what may be the heart of the whole discussion of the kings.

18. The Mouthful

R. Yochanan said on the authority of R. Jose b. Kisma: great is the mouthful, since it alienated two families from Israel, as it is written, [An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of YHWH] . . .

Because they met you not with bread and water in the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt. R. Yochanan, stating his own views, said: It alienates those who are near, and draws near those who are distant; it causes [God's] eyes to be averted from the wicked, and made the Shechinah to rest even on the prophets of Baal; and an unwitting offence in connection therewith is accounted as deliberate. ‘It alienates those who are near,’ [this is deduced] from Ammon and Moab. ‘And brings near those who are distant,’ from Jethro. For R. Yochanan said: As a reward for [Jethro's saying] Call him, that he may eat bread, his descendants were privileged to sit in the Hall of Hewn Stones [as scribes], as it is written, And the family of the scribes which dwell at Jabez; the Tirathites, the Shimeathites, and Suchathites. These are the Kenites that came of Hemath, the father of the house of Rechab; whilst elsewhere it is written, And the children of the Kenite, Moses’ father-in-law, went up out of the city of palm trees with the children of Judah into the wilderness of Judah, which lieth in the south of Arad; and they went and dwelt among the people. ‘It causes eyes to be averted from the wicked’ — [this is learnt] from Micah. ‘And made the Shechinah to rest upon the prophets of Baal’, — from the companion of Iddo the prophet. For it is written, And it came to pass, as they sat at the table, that the word of YHWH came unto the prophet that brought him back. ‘And an unwitting offence in connection therewith is accounted as deliberate’ — for Rab Yehudah said in Rab’s name: Had but Jonathan given David two loaves of bread for his travels, Nob, the city of priests would not have been massacred, Doeg the Edomite would not have been destroyed, and Saul and his three sons would not have been slain.

a. Morality and Inversions of Perspective

The response to hunger and human need turns everything upside down and inside out, because it involves us in the moral-historical projects of others whose pathways cross and diverge from our own. But despite all the

\[264\] Deut.23:4
\[265\] Exodus 2:20
\[266\] 1 Chron.2:55
\[267\] Judges 1:16
\[268\] 1 Kings 13:20
unpredictability and unintended consequences, the simple core of charity and hospitality is decisive.

R. Yochanan begins with an older saying illustrating the negative side: Ammon and Moab were excluded ("unto the 10th generation") from membership in Israel because of their hostility as recorded in the book of Numbers. Although the incidents were bloody, Deuteronomy recalls it by focusing on the hospitality that would have made everything go so much more smoothly. The key moment was that of the initial encounter, when a stranger appears as both threat (not unreasonably so: the Moabites ended up getting massacred) and as a moral claimant. What Moab and Ammon should have realized was that the Israelites were destined to be their neighbors and cousins, and therefore deserved love more than fear.

If we look at the text critically, the “destiny” may appear contrived. In the era of Josiah when it was written, the ten generations would have already passed. Judah, Moab and Ammon all spoke dialects of the same language and probably understood each other to be ethnically related—just as modern historians who think the Israelite conquest is fiction understand them to be. The exact political overtones of Deuteronomy may be lost on us—perhaps the text reflects the fact that Moabites could now be admitted to the Temple under certain circumstances, with a subordinate status. But the important point is that the apprehension of destiny—that is, the best path forward from the present historical context—contains an essential moral component. Wrong choices lead us away from the things and people we should (“naturally” or in terms of destiny) be closest to. Families can break apart or, worse, never come together in the first place.

R. Yochanan uses this way of regarding the withholding of “the mouthful” as a starting-point for a more complex analysis. The distancing of what is (or should be) near is complemented by the bringing-near of what is distant, followed by three more reversals of the apparent natural order of things. Does the whole sequence shed any light on the paradoxes of wisdom and mercy, or the fate of Manasseh?

The positive reversal of distance and kinship is illustrated by the assimilation of the Kenites, proved by:

a) Moses’ meeting of his wife Zipporah, and her father Reuel (“Call him, that he may eat bread”—qara’in lo wa’yochel lechem (קרואין לו וא邱ל לשם))

b) the note about Kenites as scribes in Chronicles

c) the inclusion of the Kenites in the conquest of Judah

From this it is inferred that the Kenites “sat in the hall of hewn stones”, that is, the seat of the Sanhedrin. They were not only brought into the territory and kinship system, they were brought into the heart of the culture, and its administration of justice.

The details here could overwhelm us from several directions. The Kenites remain a mystery to both orthodox and scientific investigations. We will bypass the question of their connection with Cain of Genesis, as well as whether the connotation of qayini as “metal-workers” might have originated in a guild rather than an ethnic group; and we won’t try to decide whether they came from Midian
or Rechob of Hamath, that is, Arabia or Syria. We will bypass as well the history of the Rechabites as a nativist and ascetic movement that wielded political influence from the revolution of Jehu in 9th century Israel down to the time of Jeremiah. And we won’t venture into the rabbinic traditions about the priestly doings of Moses’ father-in-law and his multiplicity of names (Reuel? Jethro? Hobab?).

Instead let the elements here be: the calling out of hospitality; the bonds forged by marriage; and the growth of scribal culture. The linguistic and nutritive functions of the mouth have long been associated, since Deuteronomy’s statement that God’s word provides nourishment as essential as food. Here another connection is added: Moses gets not only bread, priestly blessings and reasoned advice269 from his father-in-law; he also gets a wife. The offering of true hospitality is ultimately an offering of flesh and blood. We have to offer ourselves, as well as our bread and our thinking. Marriage can symbolize the core of morality.

And what accounts for the development of the Kenites into a community of scribes? Well, they had already become priests, and later, members of a reclusive religious order—both groups tended to be relatively literate. But more fundamentally, generosity in material support, conversation and familial relations leads to a reading of history that is analogous to the reading—and writing—of texts by scribes. Without the most basic level of moral concern, history becomes an illegible welter of random events. But the urgency of human need calls forth both a sociability and a narrative, interpretive sense such as that which created the Bible. It is this sense that brings about the intimacy, coherence and clarity of life and the world, and unwinds the downward spiral of fear and alienation. It overcomes the paradox of wisdom and makes possible, by its creative extension of hospitality, the rationale for mercy.

b. Morality, Deception and History

Now another pair of apparent reversals of the natural order: forebearance toward, and the divine inspiration of, practitioners of false religion. The first one being exemplified by Micah, we can assume that the eyes being averted are heavenly—but of course they are still a model for our own. (Remember that Micah was originally associated with spiritual blindness or materialism. Here we see materialism from the other side, as it were: the effort to satisfy the material needs of others.) The inspiration of false prophets is much harder to understand: rather than providing a model, it casts a pall of skepticism returning us to the depths of the paradox of wisdom and interpretation; for it shows that “the mouthful” can also lead to error.

The “prophet of Baal” here is none other than our friend the “old prophet” who met the Judean “man of God” in 1 Kings 13, after the latter had confronted Jeroboam with the prophecy of Josiah’s reign.270 The “good” (though still flawed

269 Exodus 18
270 see part 1, sec.5
enough to deserve death\textsuperscript{271} prophet is identified, for unclear reasons, with one Iddo, mentioned as an author and prophet in \textit{Chronicles} and \textit{Zechariah}). The lying prophet is uncharitably called a Baalist. But the relevance here is in verse 18:

And he said to him, "I also am a prophet as you are, and an angel spoke to me by the word of YHWH, saying, 'Bring him back with you into your house that he may eat bread and drink water.'" But he lied to him.

Then because the "man of God" falls for it, accepting the offer of bread which had been prohibited to him, God speaks through the "old prophet" for real.

I suggested before that there was no reason to doubt that the "old prophet" had in fact been a prophet. It’s possible that he underwent a radical change after delivering the word of YHWH to the Judean; but it’s also possible that the attitude of reverence he showed afterwards (honoring the Judean’s corpse, asking to be buried with him) reflected his basic character, which had allowed him to be a prophet when he was younger. The old man wanted to get the prophet to do what he had refused to do for Jeroboam: to break bread with him. Was this because he was loyal to Jeroboam? Even in that case it would be wrong to call him a prophet of Baal, since Jeroboam’s temples worshipped YHWH, even if with improper iconography and priestly pedigrees. But there is no evidence that he cares about Jeroboam. He seems rather to be the type of person who is drawn to the glamorous religion, having perhaps once experienced its inner grandeur; but who has lost the moral-historical context of religious behavior, and therefore pursues it as a matter of fantasy and self-gratification.

What really bolsters the old prophet’s case is the logic of the story: like Micah caught in his mother’s misdirected curse (et.al.), the “man of God” seems to have been trapped by the vow not to eat with Jeroboam; and so it looks like the old prophet was God’s tool in testing him, and in demonstrating the connectedness of speech and history, the importance of acting in accordance with a coherent narrative. It wouldn’t be the first time we’ve seen God make people lie.\textsuperscript{272}

But how then does “the mouthful” bring about the inspiration of religious fakers? We can’t say that he was only a momentary mouthpiece, because the final acts of the old prophet are clearly sincere. It’s also not a matter of the faker providing a merely materialistic appeal to the hungry traveller, since the text is clear that it isn’t the bread that the Judean finds irresistible, but the claim of angelic inspiration. I think that the key must lie, not with the entrapment of the “man of God”, but with his rejection of Jeroboam.

And the king said to the man of God, Come home with me, and refresh yourself, and I will give you a reward.

And the man of God said to the king, If you give me half your house, I will not go in with you, neither will I eat bread nor drink water in this place;

\textsuperscript{271} according to Sanhedrin 89b
\textsuperscript{272} cf. the case of Ahitophel and the “lying spirit” Micaiah saw upon the prophets
For so was it charged me by the word of YHWH, saying, Eat no bread, nor drink water, nor turn back by the same way that you came. And he went another way, and returned not by the way that he came to Beth-El.

Here the mouthful isn’t the source of moral compulsion, but a matter of bribery or the cultivation of allies. Jeroboam had to have his arm supernaturally withered, and then restored, in order to listen seriously to the prophetic message. So it seems that the counterpart to the mitigating effect of moral action on spiritual error is an insight that arises out of the rejection of false morality, such as self-serving hospitality, and the false religious claims that accompany it. Restraint of credulity is sometimes necessary in order to follow your historical path (returning not by the way you came), and maintain its coherence. The insight here is tied to the act of refusal, but also to the failures that such severity or perfectionism risks.

Now I have to reiterate that the prophecy about Josiah is propaganda justifying his slaughter of the Israelite priests. And the refusal of Jeroboam’s bread is a cynical way of slandering the purity of the Israelite Temple and its priesthood. Not to mention the fact that the death of the “old prophet” is about as morally illuminating as the death of the 42 children who mocked Elisha. Unlike R. Yochanan, I can’t look to this Biblical text as a source of teaching on mercy. It is rather like the false religiosity it depicts, relying on ghastly miracles to persuade. But then again, perhaps he used this context to redeem the text of 1Kings 13, even as people like Micah (and arguably the “old prophet”) are redeemed by their saving graces.

c. History and the Limits of Morality

“The mouthful” reverses relations of distance, and brings mercy (even inspiration) to proponents of false religion. The sequence is completed with a final upside-down state of affairs: unwitting offenses (failures of omission, or failures to foresee all the consequences of an action) are treated as if they were intentional. The example is Jonathan’s failure to supply David with bread as he escapes from Saul: a cascade of events ends with his own death, after the death of many others. Is his death then punishment for the oversight? Is he also responsible for all the other deaths as well? How could that be?

If we try to coordinate the argument here with the Biblical text, there are several difficulties. In source-critical terms, the connection between the episode with Jonathan in 1Sam.20 and the episode with Ahimelech starting at 21:2 is artificial: the latter originally followed from 19:17 (David’s escape from Saul with Michal’s help). But that just underscores the surface implausibility of any guilt attaching to Jonathan. For the point of the encounter with Ahimelech is that David deceived the priests, regarding both his supposed mission from Saul and his need for bread (implying that he had companions to feed). He even went so far as to take the holy bread from the temple under these false pretenses—surely more of an offense than failure to offer food to someone who gave no indication

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273 2 Kings 2:24
of needing any. And everything following from the revelation of David’s lies to Saul would also seem to be more David’s fault than Jonathan’s.

Besides David’s conning Ahimelech out of the holy bread, the theme of bread also enters the story through the absence of David from Saul’s table and, most significantly, Jonathan’s eating honey after Saul, unbeknownst to Jonathan, had cursed anyone who ate that day. This idea of the fateful words with unintended consequences—already seen in the cases of Micah, Jehu, the Israelites who shunned the Benjaminites, and the “man of God” at Bethel—here reaches a kind of culmination that illuminates R. Yochanan’s saying on “the mouthful”. We need no more reminders of the contingency of moral-historical understanding or the unreliability of institutions; but here we find an extreme illustration: Jonathan was simply on the wrong side of history. He had no chance at getting it right. David, who refused Saul’s hospitality and exploited the hospitality of the priests, was on the right side of history, and could scarcely get it wrong (“except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite”). The reversal of guilt and innocence characterizes the state of extreme moral-historical blindness, pervading society and projecting a secular image of the world. But the light that penetrates even this extreme darkness is the core of morality and spirituality—the mouthful, whose meaning can’t be denied even in the maelstrom of political intrigue, self-interest and self-deception that engulfs us.

Wisdom therefore consists not just in correctly interpreting and responding to your historical situation; it extends as well to situations in which there is no happy ending, no way out, but only the hungry mouth of moral obligation, and through it the possibility of meaning, the intimation of the world’s arrival. There is some deep connection between this hungry mouth and the mouth that blesses, with which we have previously been concerned. Like the blessing that must creatively overflow the bounds of language, the morality that God demands (both by commandment and through His creation of the intelligibility of human need) exceeds the prescriptions and prohibitions of ethics. It operates in the realm of what philosophers call the supererogatory, where you go the extra mile, and the mile after that … and perhaps never stop taking responsibility and trying to foresee more hidden consequences and turns in the road.

Infinite responsibility is the flip side of infinite mercy.

The divine mandate extends from helping our neighbor even to the extreme of forgiving Manasseh (and the Manasseh in ourselves), and sharing in his repentance. The moral-historical situation is intelligible only to a quite limited and temporary extent. Looking into the abyss of ahistoricality reminds us of the

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274 1Sam.20:27 And it came to pass on the next day, which was the second day of the month, that David’s place was empty; and Saul said to Jonathan his son, Why does not the son of Jesse come to the meal, neither yesterday, nor today?

275 1Sam.14:27 27 But Jonathan heard not when his father charged the people with the oath; therefore he put forth the end of the rod that was in his hand, and dipped it in a honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth; and his eyes were brightened.
truth. We are trapped in history—which by itself demonstrates the connectedness of our experiences—but a moral thread always leads forward.

E. Reading History

19. Historical Connectedness and Moral Sensibility

The next section addresses the possibility of a way into history, out of moral-historical blindness and materialism. It is framed as the question about how Achaz and Amon retained their share in the world’s coming, despite their provocations and confusions. Two saving principles are examined: connectedness with past and future generations; and moral sensibility, particularly shame in the presence of the righteous. It will be up to us to see whether and how the two principles are related.

Now, why did they not include Achaz? — R. Jeremiah b. Abba said: Because he was placed between two righteous men, Jotham and Hezekiah. R. Joseph said: Because he was abashed before Isaiah, as it is written, Then said YHWH unto Isaiah, Go forth now to meet Achaz, thou and Shear-jashub thy son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool in the highway of the field of washing [koves חבטה]. What is the meaning of koves? — Some say, he hid [d’kavashihu רכושה] his face and fled. Others say, he dragged a washing trough upon his head and fled.

And why was Amon not included? — Because of Josiah's honour. Then Manasseh [Hezekiah's son] too should not be included, because of Hezekiah's honour? — A son confers privileges on his father, but a father confers no privilege on a son. For it is written, Neither is there any one that can deliver out of my hand: Abrahm cannot deliver Ishmael, Isaac cannot deliver Esau. Now, having arrived at this answer, Achaz too was omitted because of Hezekiah's honour.

Even if Achaz is blind and lost, his position as both the heir and progenitor of righteous kings connects him to the world to come. Although our consciousness may be debased and our moral compass adrift, we might still have enough sense to help truth survive for our children. The alternating sequences of “good” and “bad” kings in the Bible raises the question of why “good” kings often raise “bad” sons, and vice versa. Achaz did a better job than Jotham at what was arguably his highest responsibility, educating his son; and yet he wouldn’t have been able to do that without at least subconsciously passing on something from Jotham. What was this subconscious connection?

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276 Isa.7:3
277 Deut.32:39
R. Joseph says it came out in the feeling of shame Achaz felt before Isaiah. Jotham had trained Achaz’ emotions at least this far, even if he couldn’t pass on his moral vision. The text in Isaiah sets the stage for this expression of shame or embarrassment in a complicated way.

The first thing we notice in the text is that, rather than saying something to make Achaz ashamed, Isaiah was actually giving Achaz some good news: the threatening forces of Israel and Syria would not prevail against Judah, but would themselves be destroyed by Assyria. Then Judah would prosper, if it followed a righteous path (otherwise, not so much). The problem for Achaz seems to come up here only in connection with asking for a divine sign. Isaiah tells him to ask for a sign from God.

But Achaz said, I will not ask, neither will I tempt YHWH [lo’ ‘anasah ‘eth YHWH הָ֣נָּסָּה אֵ֥ת יהָּהָ֖ו].

You might think this an admirable reaction, but you’d be wrong. You might think it, since to “tempt” or “test” God, (that is, to ask for miracles) is something condemned by Moses (“And Moses said to them, Why do you strive with me? why do you tempt YHWH?”). Nevertheless Isaiah responds as if Achaz had tempted God.

And he said, Hear now, O house of David; Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary my God also? Therefore YHWH himself shall give you a sign...

The “sign” here is simply the naming of a child (Immanuel, “God is with us”), who will not know right from wrong before Israel and Syria are destroyed. This is hardly a miracle. (Nor did it necessarily take supernatural help to predict that Assyria would expand its empire at the expense of two small, troublesome neighbors, temporarily benefitting Judah.) The part that Achaz doesn’t want to hear, of course, is that Judah will ultimately suffer the same fate as Israel and Syria. (The situation involving the “sealing of the Torah” referred to above is approaching.) Isaiah’s message is that trying to buy off the Assyrians isn’t a good long-term strategy, and that righteousness is the only safeguard.

So Achaz’ “shame” is really his wanting to stop after hearing only the good news. It is an indifference to the fate of the people, after his own lifetime. But he knows enough to use the language of Moses to express his acceptance of the good news, and he’s politically astute enough to avoid responding to Isaiah’s threats. Instead he “hides”—he’s never heard from again in our Bible, at any rate.

In fact the fate of Achaz is unclear. Chronicles says that Tilgath-Pileser took all of Achaz’ tribute and “troubled him rather than strengthened him.” But Kings says nothing about this, only describing the destruction of his enemies. The detailed description of Achaz’ attempt to imitate Assyrian culture makes it

278 Isaiah 7:12
279 Exodus 17:2
280 ibid. v. 13
likely that he enjoyed at least a period of good relations with the emperor, being his only ally against the anti-Assyrian coalition in Syria-Palestine. He outlived Tilgath-Pileser, as well as his successor Shalmaneser; and the next emperor, Sargon, after finishing off the Israelites in the first year of his reign, spent the remaining years of Achaz’ life occupied with Elamites, Hittites, Syrians and Egyptians. So the whole bit about destruction coming before a child matures seems to have been a failed prophecy. (Forgetting the child, you could still connect the destruction to either the massive Assyrian destruction of Judah under Hezekiah (14 years after Achaz), or to the Babylonian conquest 150 years later. But in any case it seems that Achaz did indeed buy some time for Judah by sucking up to the Assyrians.

He provided, in other words, the “mouthful” for his subjects, who otherwise would have been killed, starved, or taken into slavery. Like all politicians, he was duplicitous, respecting native traditions while accommodating the superpowers. This turns out to be his saving grace.

Now what does it mean to say that Achaz used a washing trough to hide his face? What is added by combining the connotations of “hiding” and “washing”? I can only imagine that washing is a metaphor for the cleansing of the soul, that is, repentance. Achaz would have made some show of repenting, even though it was probably just a political tactic. The point would be that his genuine concern for the security of the people gave a minimal redemptive power to his show of repentance. Undoubtedly the rabbis understood what Pascal would argue: that going through the motions of religion can lead to genuine religious experience over time. And even when the whole community has lost its way, not understanding the meaning of its own traditions, those traditions still have the power to reawaken understanding.

But it isn’t just the forms of tradition that preserve a glimmer of light; it’s the spark of desire to repent that subconsciously drives us toward them. Thus even corrupt religion can transmit the spark, as we have seen. The case of Achaz and Hezekiah provides another example. Kings says that Achaz made his son “pass through the fire,” which was a Mesopotamian ritual of spiritual initiation. Manasseh is also charged with this offense. The Talmud understands that this was merely a ritual, involving jumping over or walking between flames. Chronicles changes the wording of Kings to say that he “burned his children” (וייבא’ר בןיו rather than “made his son pass through fire” (beno ha’avir b’esh), but that’s a typical exaggeration. If we stick with the singular “his son”, and apply Occam’s razor to the fact that we only know of one son of Achaz, we will conclude that the sainted Hezekiah is the one who passed through the fire. The false ritual of spiritual initiation somehow produced authentic spirituality. Hezekiah’s cosmopolitan upbringing somehow led him back to the truth of Israelite tradition.

Sanhedrin 64b: “Abaye said: There was a loose pile of bricks in the middle, and fire on either side of it. Raba said: It was like the children’s leaping about on Purim.” also: “If he passed through himself, he is free from punishment.” — so he who passed through must still be alive.
This brings us back to the question of fathers and sons. Amon’s relation to the world to come was saved by his son Josiah, but Manasseh couldn’t be saved by his father Hezekiah, since his son was Amon. (Strangely enough, this is the next to last mention of Manasseh in our text, which was supposed to decide his fate. This argument seems to side with “the rabbis” against Rabbi. The final mention will take Rabbi’s side, and go beyond him.) We will soon be taking a more critical look at Hezekiah, and that criticism could be thought to factor in here. But for now it’s simply a question of whether the past or future is determinative for access to the ideal.

The prooftext here, the ancient “Song of Moses”, is strangely unhelpful. God’s statement of His omnipotence, “none can deliver out of My hand”, is somehow applicable to the cases of Ishmael and Esau with respect to their fathers. But what’s the reason? Why can’t it apply just as well to sons, as in: Josiah can’t save Amon, Hezekiah can’t save Achaz?

The immediate context seems like a familiar statement of “monotheism”:

See now that I, I am he, and there is no god next to me; I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal; nor is there any who can deliver out of my hand.

The impression of “monotheism” is in tension with two other verses of the Song, however. These two verses have been altered in the Masoretic text, but their original versions are known from texts at Qumran and the Septuagint. Verse 8 was:

When the most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the sons of God. [MT: “sons of Israel” (which makes no sense)]

And verse 43:

O heavens, rejoice with Him; bow to Him, all sons of God [MT: Rejoice nations his people]

These verses at least make clear that “none can deliver from My hand” is referring to other deities. Thus the analogy between God and Abraham or Josiah is between Deity and sub-deities, on the one hand, and fathers and sons on the other. The Talmudic statement, then, says that a son stands higher than a father on a scale of holiness; or better, that a son can be “as God” to a father—perhaps in something like the sense that Moses was “God” to Pharaoh.282

What does this mean for the argument? How do children open up an avenue to holiness for parents; and how does this relate to repentance? We can of course observe that the parent’s historical existence extends into the future through his children. But the mere material continuity can’t elicit understanding.

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282 Exodus 7:1 “And YHWH said to Moses, See, I have maded you god to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet.”
Is it that the new vision of children is needed to upset and rejuvenate the old paradigm? This would especially apply to the fallen state we have been discussing, where the only spark of holiness lies hidden from even the users of sacred language. The natural feeling of the parent for the child draws the attention of the former into contexts and perspectives he would otherwise ignore. It may even lead to true repentance, to a revulsion with the existing state of things and one’s participation in it.

Morality isn’t the “because I said so” of a parent to a child. Morality requires a vision of the new, of the future and our connection with it. To the extent that we live in the fallen state of Achaz and Manasseh, we must see the holy emerging out of future generations, realizing depths of meaning and spiritual clarity that we can only surmise. The connection with “shame”, or the realization of the inadequacy of one’s existence, is that our hope for the future must have this structure of dissatisfaction, even hunger: the natural feelings that cause us to provide “the mouthful” for our children must be extended to the dimension of meaning and history, so that we feel the necessity of a more sacred life, world, history.

* * *

The pair of bad-but-saveable kings Achaz and Amon are joined by another candidate, Jehoiakim. But this story is a duplicate of the one at Sanhedrin 82a, where it is supposed to illustrate the dangers of having a gentile wife. It looks like a later editor thought it would fit in here, and fill the gap of “explaining” why Jehoiakim isn’t mentioned by the Mishnah (a question already posed and left hanging). But we already have an “explanation”, namely that Jehoiakim was redeemed by the virtue of his generation (or at the level of our interpretation, that his case represents the presence of the necessary social ground of wisdom). Therefore it seems best to pass by this rather unedifying story here.

20. From Hospitality to Exile (bad mouthfuls)

The theme of hospitality or “the mouthful” is now turned upside-down in the case of Hezekiah. Instead of preserving one’s connection to the divine, it can lead to exile—to the loss of history. Like the principles of tradition, inspiration, and all the others whose fallibility and invertibility have been demonstrated here, the core of moral obligation can also be lost in the play of appearances and confused with its opposite.

It has been taught: R. Shimon b. Eleazar said: On account of [Hezekiah’s boasting] And I have done that which was good in thy sight,\(^{283}\) [he was led to inquire] What shall be the sign [that YHWH will heal me]?\(^{284}\) On account of

\(^{283}\) 2Kings 20:3
\(^{284}\) *ibid.* v.8
‘What shall be the sign’, foreigners ate at his table; and on account of foreigners eating at his table, he caused his children to go into exile. This supports Hezekiah’s dictum: He who invites a foreigner into his house and attends to him, causes his children to go into exile, as it is written, And of your sons that issue from you, which you will beget, they will take away; and they will be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.

And Hezekiah was glad of them, and shewed them the house of his precious things, the silver, and the gold, and the spices, and the precious ointment etc. Rab said: What is meant by “the house of his precious things”? — His wife, who mixed the drinks for them. Samuel said: He showed them his treasury. R. Yochanan said: He shewed them weapons that could eat other weapons.

R. Shimon’s analysis in support of the dictum of one Hezekiah (presumably a coincidentally named sage) at first seems like silly xenophobia. Surely one owes hospitality to foreigners, as Abraham showed to the three foreigners at Mamre. We had better look first at the case of King Hezekiah and see if we can work toward a more palatable contribution to the argument.

The main problem, of course, is that Hezekiah showed his wealth and military assets to the Babylonians. Marduk-apal-idina was currying favor with potential allies against Assyria, during one of his two stints on the throne of Babylonia. Betting against Assyria would be the wrong way to go for another 75 years, until the death of Assurbanipal. And if the events of 2Kings 20 took place during Marduk-apal-idina’s second stint (703-702 BC), then the Assyrian backlash was soon in coming: the conquest of all Judah save Jerusalem (described in 2Kings 19) took place in 701. The original talk about a “remnant” of Judah rebuilding after destruction (“For out of Jerusalem shall go forth a remnant…”) pertained to the situation under Hezekiah after 701, when the “miraculous” preoccupation of the Assyrians with internal power struggles gave Jerusalem some breathing room that would continue under the vassalage of Manasseh, who became king two years later.

Now the initial prophecy looks to have failed. Nothing happened to Hezekiah’s own sons, despite the prophet’s emphasis on sons “that come out of you, which you bear.” Instead a later editor has connected the prophecy to the events of the 6th century, long after the defeat of the Assyrians. The “remnant” of Sennacherib’s campaign has turned into the “remnant” of the Babylonian captivity.

In any case, Hezekiah’s error seems very similar to that of Achaz in courting the favor of Tilgath-pileser. It isn’t a question of being on the side of the Assyrians, Babylonians or Persians; the whole practice of international politics is the problem. But there is a more specific connection between them: their expectation that Isaiah would produce miraculous backup for his

285 ibid. v.22 Babylonians were shown his treasures; the text doesn’t mention eating explicitly
286 ibid. v.18
287 Isaiah 32:2 (=2Kings 20:13 with wayishma ‘Iוימשא, he listened, changed to wayishmach [Iוימשא] he was glad)
288 2Kings 19:31
pronouncements. Isaiah tells Achaz to ask for a sign, and he refuses. Wrong choice. Isaiah tells Hezekiah that God will cure him of his apparently terminal illness, and he says “What will be the sign?” Wrong move again. The sign is given (the shadow on the sundial of Achaz moves backwards), but you’d rather not have seen it.

Here it becomes hard to remember that Hezekiah was a “good” king and Achaz a “bad” one—that the former had to save the latter’s access to the world to come for the latter. It becomes even more questionable when we see that Hezekiah’s “goodness”—and his attempt to trade on it—is the beginning of the problem. According to R. Shimon it led him to ask for a sign (which is always “tempting” God, except in the case of Achaz, which we chalked up to political calculation). Expecting a reward for righteousness leads to a craving for miracles. The mistake of expecting miracles is like the mistake of self-admiration and self-satisfaction. The scribes who first said that “He trusted in YHWH God of Israel; there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him” were paid by Hezekiah. Achaz, being too cynical to ask for a sign, was also too cynical to believe in his own righteousness.

Now what about the foreigners? How is the error of engaging in international politics related to the expectation of miracles and belief in one’s exceptionalism? Israel is commanded to be something other than a nation, a unit in the international balance of power. It is also commanded to do without religion in the superstitious sense; and to do without the self-satisfaction that comes from merely following a set of rules, in order to take on a boundless sense of obligation. An unrealistic self-confidence and instrumental view of religion lead to the idea that relationships of power—that is, the conflicting forces we have to navigate in an alienated and desacralized world—can be manipulated as well. And the connection is that the appearance of spirituality and morality, in the form of hospitality, becomes the vehicle of this manipulation.

Having entered upon a field of such thoroughly inverted and self-negating appearance—the appearance of goodness, of spirituality and of hospitality—we lose sight of history. We can only wait its miraculous reconstitution. Hezekiah didn’t see his sons in exile, but he saw the young Manasseh, and his readiness for the debased social world and the trivialization of tradition. He saw the destruction of Lachish and the other cities of Judah, and the great discrepancy between the glorious history depicted in the great literary outpouring of his day, and the destitution of “the remnant” of Judah. He too was in need of a new vision, a turning and repentance; and it may be that the kingdom had to wait for Manasseh (or that each of us must experience the extreme he represents) before this needed turning could (or can) occur.

The real problem with “what will be the sign?” is that it foregoes its own reading of history—it’s sensitivity to meaningful connections, and openness to the unexpected. To think that events will explain themselves, so to speak, like a play within which the chorus explains the lesson, is to take an inappropriately passive position with regard to the meaning of your own life. And this may be so even if you’re playing by the rules (ethical and ritual), and being kind to others, if your

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289 2Kings 18:5
consciousness of your own goodness lets you forego the work of perpetual re-
examination and accommodation to life’s contingencies.

If you avoid the responsibility of reading your history, you are inclined to
write the story yourself, and so to try to manipulate history imprudently. Historical
blindness leads to the corruption of morality, as in the case of an inappropriate
hospitality; and ends in the loss of all self-determination, as in political exile.
Instead of asking for a sign, true religion sees the whole world as the sign of
God, as filled with the implicit meaning that calls out for our interpretation. It aims
at being good without self-satisfaction or exploitation. Perhaps it can only arise
out of the ashes of the ego.

R. Yochanan now reappears, “responding” to a question by Rab, who
lived after him. Since the following section is all in the name of R. Yochanan, it
appears that this whole section on Hezekiah was likewise constructed around his
vision, linking the sayings about “the mouthful” to a discourse on Lamentations,
that is, the subject of exile, suffering and repentance. Here his saying is that
Hezekiah showed the Babylonians “weapons that could eat other weapons.” This
is contrasted with Rab and Samuel, who said that the crucial divulgence
of Hezekiah was his wife and his treasury, respectively. How this fits with the rest of
the argument isn’t obvious. First we have to figure out what these meta-weapons are.

Some translations read “weapons that could destroy weapons”, rather
than “weapons eating weapons.” This follows the most prosaic interpretation: the
weapons were simply of a superior technology, like the iron chariots that had
rebuffed the Israelites in the era of the judges (that is, the early Iron Age). Or
perhaps they were some kind of magic charms that disabled weapons or caused
them to disappear. But it can hardly be an accident that R. Yochanan’s remarks
on “the mouthful” are followed by a statement involving the word “eat”. And in any
case, it’s too fanciful to imagine that the kingdom of Judah possessed some
science fiction technology that would have defeated the imperial armies.

If we consider the triad of wife-money-weapons, it seems that these must
be examples of something like power or greatness in the secular world: the ability
to procreate and to work one’s will on others. More simply, it is the things of
greatest value: family, wealth, power. But the Talmud has a way of turning the
material into the spiritual, as when R. Yochanan interpreted Ahab’s statement
to the king of Damascus, “take whatever is pleasant” (including wives, children,
gold and silver) to refer to that “most pleasing” thing of all, the Torah. Surely the
same must be said in relation to a list of things of greatest value. What if the
“weapon” that “eats” weapons is the vision that sees beyond weapons, that
eschews the calculus of violence and power, and seeks a different historical
path? The greatest treasure that Hezekiah had to reveal was surely the wisdom,
the cultural capital that Jerusalem had accumulated (especially with its flood of
Israelite immigrants after 722).

Is the problem then that he disclosed his society’s weakness due to its
nonviolent calling? If we think that, we are assenting to the cynical view of power

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290 see part 1, sec. 23
politics, and turning our backs on the Biblical judgment that the Babylonian conquest resulted from too little, not too much spirituality. It makes more sense to say that he exposed the falsity and hypocrisy of his society, as measured against the spiritual greatness of its traditions. Or that due to his own lack of sincerity, he failed to demonstrate to his guests the wisdom of nonviolence. As a result of his failure to manifest the authentic “trust in God” that had once permitted a community to abjure its place among “the nations,” he furthered the people’s loss of their destiny.

Hezekiah too, then, represents an element of the extreme forgetfulness of the divine: the “good” person’s furtherance of historical loss, and inability to repent. For all need to repent. Because of Hezekiah’s self-satisfaction, Manasseh has to rediscover the repentance already begun by Achaz. Because of his craving for the miraculous (and thus failure to see that the natural unfolding of history itself contains the meaning or “sign”), the people will have to suffer through an alienated world in which repentance and regret form the overwhelming theme. Alas!

F. Repentance in Language: Alas!

The Biblical book of Alas! or How (eychah עַכָּה) (known in English as Lamentations) now becomes the subject of sayings in the name of R. Yochanan. Although commentators make a superficial connection between the topic of exile in the dictum of the sage Hezekiah and the exilic setting of Alas, they don’t notice that the argument concerning the availability of the world to come has reached a crucial turn: the pseudo-historical question about Manasseh’s repentance, followed by explorations of the conditions of repentance and the inversions of perspective it involves, now gives way to a kind of rehearsal of repentance as it has been performed and sanctified in Scripture. “Exile” is merely a name for the general object of repentance, or for repentance directed not only at oneself but at the whole community.

1:1 How lonely sits the city that was full of people. She has become like a widow. She that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces, has become a vassal.
1:2 She weeps, she weeps in the night, tears on her cheeks. Among all her lovers she has none to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies.
...
1:5 Her oppressors are at the head, her enemies prosper, because YHWH has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions; her children have gone away, captives before the foe.
...
1:12 Is it nothing to you, all you that pass by? Behold, and see if there is any pain like my pain, which was brought upon me, with which YHWH has afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger.
1:13 From on high he sent fire into my bones, and it dominated them; he spread a net for my feet; he turned me back; he has left me stunned, faint all the day long.

...  
1:15 YHWH trampled all my mighty men in the midst of me; he summoned an assembly against me to crush my young men; YHWH has trodden as in a wine press the virgin daughter of Judah.
1:16 For these things I weep; my eye, my eye overflows with water; because the comforter, who should restore my life, is far from me. My children are desolate because the enemy prevailed

...  
2:16 All your enemies have opened their mouths against you; they hiss, they gnash their teeth, they cry: "We have destroyed her! Ah, this is the day we longed for; now we have it; we see it!"
2:17 YHWH has done what he purposed, has carried out his threat; as he ordained long ago, He has demolished without pity; He has made the enemy rejoice over you, and exalted the might of your foes.

...  
2:22 You have called as in the day of an appointed feast my terrors in every side, so that in the day of YHWH’s anger none escaped nor remained; my enemy has consumed those whom I have cherished and brought up.

...  
4:10 The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children; they became their food in the destruction of the daughter of my people.

...  
4:16 The face of YHWH has divided them; He will no more regard them. They didn’t respect the faces of priests; they weren’t gracious to elders.
4:17 Our eyes failed, ever watching vainly for help; in our watching we watched for a nation that could not save.

21. Spiritual Loneliness

How [eychah] the city sits alone! Rabbah said in R. Yochanan’s name: Why was Israel smitten with eychah [הכיה]? Because they transgressed the thirty-six injunctions of the Torah which are punished by cutting-off [charithoth שרתות].

The beginning or top-level view is divined from the first word alone, by means of numerology. The letters in eychah (אכיה) add up to 36. א=1, כ=10, ה=20, י=5; 1+10+20+5=36. This seems to be a special number in Talmudic tradition. It is the number assigned by the Mishnah to the sins for which the
punishment is “cutting-off” or careth (קרת). (This chapter of the Mishnah is accordingly called Carithoth.) These range from incestuous relations to blasphemy, desecrating the sabbath or day of atonement, and ritual transgressions. “Cutting-off” (usually part of the phrase “cut off from Israel”, or “cut off from his people”) basically means excommunication from Judaism, although there is also the notion that God shortens or “cuts” the life of those who are cut off from Israel. The punishment only pertains to intentional transgressions; uninformed or accidental transgressions can be atoned by sacrifices.

Since our whole discussion has taken place under the heading of “All Israel has a share toward the world to come,” being expelled from Israel means losing the world to come. Perhaps more remarkably, R. Yochanan is saying that all of Israel was expelled from membership in Israel! Although it has seemed that the discussion had reached the extreme limits of religious blindness, representing corruption in both public and private spheres, this must represent another extreme: the whole of Israel cut off from the world to come! You might as well say the world to come cut off from humanity—from reality. Or more concretely: the extinction of Israel. Something like this idea—that is, the loss of all hope—is what R. Yochanan sees as the beginning of repentance.

22. Repentance and writing

R. Yochanan said: Why were they smitten with an alphabetical dirge? Because they violated the Torah, which was given by means of the alphabet.

Let’s ignore any ideas about the mystical properties of Hebrew letters here. The subject of repentance is too serious. Alas is written so that the first letter of each verse (within chapters 1, 2 and 4) is in ascending order (aleph, beith, gimel, daleth,…). R. Yochanan says that this is to call our attention to the written nature of the Torah: the violation of commandments is a betrayal of sacred writing. But sacred writing is capable of representing this very betrayal within itself. The emphasis of Alas on the alphabet brings to mind the intelligibility of the world, and thus the possibility of repentance in the midst of hopelessness.

The idea that the Torah was given in alphabetic writing contains a point of embarrassment: archaeology shows that the alphabet was just getting organized at the time of Moses. The admission that the Torah was first written down alphabetically is tantamount to admitting that it was created in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, not in the desert. But history also brings out something else about the Torah: that it was a product of the new technology that brought writing to the people. The alphabet made writing dramatically more available. You no longer needed a Ph.D. to read, as you did with the complexities of writing systems with hundreds of symbols. The Torah was the product of a culture that readily took up the mass writing, because of its originally populist character.
Repentance requires a return to the unity of sacred and popular culture that the Torah originally represented. The intelligibility of writing is a symbol of the intelligibility of the world and of history. This creation of the human mind is a link to the divine, more explicit than the sacred phenomenon of language itself. To re-establish our connection with tradition and history, we have to begin like children learning the alphabet—appreciating, that is, the preciousness of each letter that helps accomplish the realization of meaning, that helps make life meaningful. The fact that we do still have our texts, even if we are lost and confused and have forgotten how to read them, yet holds out the possibility of return.

23. Sitting vs. Dwelling

‘Sits alone [yishvah badad ישבה בדד]: Rabbah said in R. Yochanan's name: The Holy One, blessed be He, exclaimed, 'I said, "Israel then shall dwell in safety alone, the fountain of Jacob shall be upon a land of corn and wine; also his heavens shall drop down dew,"' but now their sitting [moshavem מושבם] shall be alone.’

Commentators suggest that this saying contrasts the positive connotation of solitude as security with the negative connotation of cultural isolation (in the diaspora) and antisemitism. Before making this leap, however, we have to get clear about the analogy between the emptiness of Jerusalem and the condition of the people in exile, and thus the contrast between “dwelling (safely) alone” and “sitting alone.” The city is “lonely” with regard to its missing people; shouldn’t we understand the people’s loneliness also with regard to the city, rather than their alien surroundings? Or perhaps we should say that the people are like the city in that they too have been emptied out of their vital contents, emptied of their understanding of Torah—that the state of exile, in other words, is as much a psychological matter as a physical one. The people have been emptied of their historical sense. Their alienation from neighbors only mirrors their alienation from God, as we learned from R. Shimon b. Lakish’s dictum that being “poor below” implies being “poor above”.

This being the case, the difference between dwelling (yish’chan) and sitting (yishvah) becomes apparent. (Granted, yashav can also have the connotation of residing or dwelling, but here a contrast is intended.) To dwell in a place, to pursue a historical existence, is what is vital. Merely sitting there, like an empty city, is to exist without a history, a purpose, a meaning. Empty of true religious understanding, the people are alone without God. This is much worse than social ostracism, although you may correlate the two. Repentance grows

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291 Deut. 33:28
292 Even if only temporarily, as the “tenting” association of yish’cahn might imply
out of this higher loneliness, and the longing for a cultural life in which both sacred writing and history are intelligible again.

24. The Marriage of the Old and the New

_The city that was full [rabathi] of people._ Rabbah said in R. Yochanan's name: They used to marry off a girl to a grown man, and a boy to a grown woman, that they might bear many children.

This is very hard to figure. The saying doesn’t “explain” this clause of the text, which seems to need no explanation anyway. The city was populated, now empty. But here we have some arcane strategy for maximizing the population. There is no prooftext, and no obvious connection to the theme of repentance.

Reduced to my own speculation, I am inclined to look more closely at who these spouses might have been. Surely this peculiar practice didn’t exist throughout the history of Jerusalem. Nor would it have worked. So I look for more specific referents for the children and adults. Literally they are “small (f.) to large (m.) and large (f.) to small (m.)” (qatanah lgadol v’gadolah lqatan). I think of the relation between Israel and Judah: the older nation and culture of the Israelites, appropriated by Jerusalem after 722, when its population swelled due to this “marriage”. (The rabbis weren’t inclined to look at it this way. But if we sneak a peek ahead in the commentary on _Alas_, we will see that they bring _Ezekiel_ 16 into the discussion, wherein Samaria is called the “big sister” of Jerusalem.)

In a deeper sense, the large and small, or old and young, must represent some general principles that are fruitful when combined, rather than the historical inhabitants of 7th century Jerusalem. The most obvious principles would be tradition and novelty: the relation between old and new that we have considered most recently in the asymmetrical “saving” relations between fathers and sons, and the idea of a childlike relearning of writing in the beginning of repentance.

When the experience of a new generation renews the language and the dialectical resolutions (between tragedy and comedy, etc.) of the past, there is a flowering of wisdom. But when the tradition is either copied slavishly or scorned as obsolete, the people loses its historical focus, its spirit, and is hollowed out from within, “sitting alone”. Then cultural identity is nothing but a source of conflict, and history nothing but a nightmare. Repentance is the awakening from this nightmare.

25. The Temporariness of Exile

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293 see subsec.i below
She has become like a widow. Rab Yehudah said in Rab's name: Like a widow, yet not a widow in fact: as a woman whose husband has gone overseas, but intends returning to her.

Now an explicit note of optimism is sounded. Rab Yehudah makes a simple point, which gains its force from the context. The possibility of redemption in exile is not to be denied. Repentance begins with awareness of this possibility. The prophetic threats of divorce between God and Israel were just made in the heat of argument; there is no divorce, only a separation. It may take the miraculous “opening in heaven” like that invoked on behalf of Manasseh, but trust in (or in accord with our metaphor, remembrance of) God’s ultimate availability is the beginning of the miracle.

26. Superiority in Exile

She that was great [rabathi רבחית] among the nations, and princess among the provinces: Rabbah said in R. Yochanan's name: Wherever they went, they became princes of their masters.

[omitted: A folk tale about Jews in captivity who impress their captors.]

Now it looks like the optimism has gotten out of hand—or has perhaps been exaggerated by a later editor. The editors of the Vilna edition of the Bavli must have felt something of this, for they truncated the long story of Jews who impress their captors with feats of deduction, leaving out parts that extend Sherlockian deductions into the realm of supernatural intuition. As far as I’m concerned, the whole story is an excrescence that interrupts the flow of comments on Lamentations in the name of R. Yochanan.

But even if we ignore the folktale of blind camels and king’s jesters, the change of pace remains noteworthy. In the midst of all this lamentation and reaching for repentance, it suddenly looks like the state of exile isn’t so bad? Exile enables the Jews to be the bosses? It sounds like antisemitic conspiracy theory! More to the point of the textual interpretation, how can Rabbah leave out the last word of “She that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces, has become a vassal”? Surely a vassal isn’t a prince? And we’re ignoring the fact that Jerusalem was never in reality great among the nations.

A clue to continuity with the context may be found in the repeated word rabathi, “[the city] full of [or: great with] people” and “she was great [among the nations]”. The “greatness” of both pre-exilic Jerusalem and the so-called “princes” of Rabbah’s saying must not be a material or political greatness, but rather a cultural and spiritual greatness, the fullness and fertility that results (as we just saw) from a mix of old and new (or better: a transformation of each into the other).
I don’t think that “princes of their masters” can be regarded as any kind of master-slave dialectic here. Relations with gentiles aren’t the point. The word “provinces” (medinot מְדִינָת) is usually used in the Bible to refer to regions of Israel. “Wherever they went” might be understood in such a way that they might find themselves to be in Israel after all. The transformation of exilic, alienated consciousness doesn’t come from outsmarting one’s enemies, or even rising through the ranks on godlike abilities, as Joseph did in Egypt. The statement still calls the masters masters. The exiles become like princes even though they are vassals. Their distinction must be a moral, not political or commercial one.

Most important of all, this “princely” condition is still one with a state of loneliness and weeping—they are distinguished by their state of repentance. Now the weeping continues…

27. Weeping and the Dimensions of Repentance

*She weeps, she weeps in the night.* Why this double weeping? — Rabbah said in R. Yochanan's name: Once for the first Temple, and once for the second.

*In the night* — on account of what happened at night. For it is written, *And all the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried, and the people wept that night.*

Rabbah observed in R. Yochanan's name: It was the night of the ninth of Ab, and the Almighty said to Israel, ‘You have wept without cause: therefore I will appoint a weeping to you for future generations.’

Another interpretation of ‘*in the night*’: whoever weeps at night, his voice is heard.

Another meaning: whoever weeps at night, the stars and constellations weep with him.

Another meaning: whoever weeps at night, he who hears him, weeps. It happened that the child of a neighbour of R. Gamaliel died, and she was weeping for him at night. R. Gamaliel, on hearing her, wept in sympathy with her, until his eyelashes fell out. On the morrow, his disciples discerned this, and removed her from his neighborhood.

This section seems at first to have two parts: the question about the repetition of the word ‘weep’, and the fourfold significance of the nighttime. Upon examination, however, it divides more naturally into the two sayings of Rabbah and the three anonymous interpretations.

i. Failure of the Second Chance

We might have expected the double weeping to be related to the world to come, like many interpretations already given for the common Hebrew emphatic

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294 Num. 14:1
device of repetition. I could imagine that the interpenetration of tragedy and comedy in R. Yochanan’s dialectic is projected into the ideal itself. But apparently there is no weeping in the world to come, even if weeping here and now helps open us up to it. The ideal concerns the future, not the past.

Instead the double weeping is connected with the two Temples, as if Jeremiah (the supposed author of Alas) had left a clue to the coming war with Rome six centuries later. Rabbah’s following remark also relates events from different eras, picturing the weeping in the Babylonian exile as an echo of the events of Numbers 14, when the scary report of the spies led to more discontent of the Israelites under Moses. There’s some Big Picture thinking going on here, appropriate to the perspective of repentance. And it’s bigger, that is more general and philosophical, than just the span from Moses to the Roman emperors.

Everything we read into the lamentations of the Babylonian exile is ultimately oriented by the prospect of divine mercy correlative to the return from exile and re-establishment of the Temple. It’s all about the second chance. But the destruction of the Second Temple is the failure of the second chance. Now the big picture changes. The simple dialectic of fall-and-ascent, exile-and-return, must be replaced by either a deep pessimism, or a schema of perpetual ups and downs. The Temple has never been rebuilt. But even if it were, we could expect more of Israel’s (and humanity’s) perpetual backsliding. The exilic condition is a fundamental aspect of existence, which repentance cannot expect to transcend or forget. Our problematic relation to language and writing is part of the structure of our existence. Future misunderstanding and failure is to be anticipated.

So we consider the prooftext in this light. The Israelites in Numbers 14 are reacting to the the “slander” or “evil report” (dibah) given by the cowardly spies:

> So they brought to the people of Israel an evil report of the land which they had spied out, saying, “The land, through which we have gone, to spy it out, is a land that eats its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are men of great stature.”

The text tells us that the spies were lying by saying that they gave an “evil report”. But the text (13:22) also tells us that the spies did encounter the “sons of Anak”, who seem to be associated with some kind of legendary giants. The spies themselves call them sons of Nephilim, the demi-gods of Genesis 6:4. Perhaps the Anakim were just somewhat tall, and it was the spies who exaggerated them into mythical giants. In any case, the Israelites are blamed for being frightened by the cowardly spies rather than accepting Caleb’s optimistic militarism. The spies’ frightening metaphor of a land that “eats its inhabitants” (‘ocheleth y’shuviah hu’ אוכלת ישביה היא), especially noteworthy in light of the “mouthful”, is counterposed by the statement of Caleb and Joshua that the Canaanites “are bread for us” (lechemanu hem ללחםנו הם), because “their protection is removed from them, and YHWH is with us”. Here we can’t help glancing ahead to the penultimate paragraph of our section on Alas, where the prooftext is “they eat my

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295 Numbers 13:32
people as they eat bread”. We are working in a context where the mouth-connected concepts of learning, blessing and eating (as well as lying) are joined to those of violence and exploitation, and the fragility of human life.

Rabbah characterizes the Israelites’ weeping as false, “without cause”, because it signified a lack of trust in God. Lack of trust leads to further weeping centuries later. Does that mean that it was a contributing cause (along with all the later sinning, the bad kings, etc.) to the exile itself, or only to the weeping that accompanied it? Or is the only connection that they were all made to happen on the same day of the year? The exile would seem to be what needs explaining, as compared to the fact of weeping in exile; and revered commentators have found ways to trace the exile back to the rupture with the exodus caused by the sin of the spies and consequent wandering—or even to find explicit Biblical proof of the connection. But I think that the point here is to see how different moments in history mirror each other. The genuine weeping of exile mirrors the “false” weeping of the fearful Israelites in the desert because in both cases there is a deficiency of trust. Even when skepticism is reasonable, what is demanded is a transrational trust aimed at the inexplicable “opening in heaven” of divine mercy. Even in exile we have to retain our love of the world, of life, of ourselves, knowing that a second (third, fourth…) chance is to be anticipated as surely as the squandering of that chance. If we weep it should be with the sense that life is serious, but only up to the point where a higher and different seriousness, which is also playful, takes over.

The metaphor of eating in Numbers emphasizes the violence and racism of the conquest story. But if there is a sense in which Jews and Gentiles are both “bread” for each other, and both are in danger of being eaten by the very earth itself, then perhaps the theme of courage in the face of death can be abstracted from the story of the conquest. (We can also take comfort from the fact that the conquest never happened, according to archaeology.) The skepticism we feel in our exilic state, which is both exposed to physical death and is already a kind of death, must be focused and transformed so as to look that death in the face, looking with trust and love. Even when the historical situation rends the public sphere and casts us at each other’s throats, we can see a thread of morality leading through the conflict, as the “mouthful” that swaps and unifies opposites. Warfare should not be a basic moral category; nevertheless even warfare can be approached spiritually. This approach must involve both weeping and laughing, fear and courage, awareness of the past and focus on the future, fitting together as night and day.

ii. Harmony of the Soul-City-World

Now the nighttime aspect of weeping is shown from three different angles. It (a) lets your voice be heard; (b) puts you in harmony with the stars; and (c)

296 Psalms 106:24-27: And they despised the pleasant land, they did not believe his word; and they murmured in their tents, and did not listen to the voice of YHWH. And He lifted up his hand against them, to make them fall in the wilderness; And to make their seed fall among the nations, and to scatter them in the lands.
makes those who hear you weep. This trio makes me think of the classical Greek ideal of the harmony between the soul, the city or community, and the world as a whole.

(a) Some commentators explain the hearing facilitated at night as a simple matter of sound carrying better, or of it being a better time to evoke pity. Thus the hearers intended by the Talmud would be generic neighbors of the weeper—possibly neighboring Jews, as in (c) below, or perhaps the Babylonians or other gentiles hearing the Jews in exile. But then what is the point? That the exiles try to evoke pity, but don’t succeed? Indeed, the Biblical verse goes on to speak of lovers who provide no comfort, and friends who have become enemies. But it seems strange to sum this up with “his voice is heard”. A more obvious meaning would be that it is God who hears the weeping, that is, receives it favorably.

Now hearing in the sense of being disposed to respond favorably doesn’t necessarily mean acting immediately. In particular, it doesn’t imply ending the exile immediately. But it does imply that the weeper comes into a more favorable relationship with the hearer, that is, God. For God Himself can repent, and can thus reflect our own repentance.

So having your voice heard by God, if we abjure the materialistic senses of this expression, means achieving a certain ordering of your soul (balancing of tragedy and comedy, refining speech into blessing, etc.). To bless is to be blessed, and vice versa. The quiet and darkness of night allows for a purification of the voice, the reason, the spirit.

(b) When the stars weep with us, we are in harmony with the widest sphere, the Whole of the heavens and the earth. We have had several occasions to reflect on the phenomenon or concept of the world as a whole. In Part One, this appeared mainly as the commonality or public intelligibility of the world, as contrasted with the private worlds of narcissism and solipsism. We also began to consider the relation between the unity of the world and the resoluteness or mental constancy required by sayings such as that of R. Chanina b. Papa. In Part Two we had the sayings of the mystical R. Shimon b. Yohai regarding the undoing (or justification) of the Creation and the convergence of comedy and tragedy; Rabbah bar bar Chana’s equation of the righteous soul with the whole world; and we considered the whole in connection with R. Aqiva’s thinking about the whole of a person’s life (and the resoluteness needed to unify it), as well as with the concept of “signs” (which King Hezekiah sought because he

297 Some Biblical examples of God “repenting” (nacham נחם) a previous decision are: Gen.6:6 (regrets creating man); Ex.32:14 (retracts decision to annihilate Israel); 1Sam.15:35 (regrets having made Saul king); and 2Sam.24:16 (pulls back the angel of pestilence after it has killed 70,000 Israelites as a result of David’s selfishness [he could have fought the Philistines instead of bringing the plague], which was itself a result of God’s previous anger). Also see Joel 2:13-14 discussed below.

298 “He who enjoys anything of this world without uttering a blessing is as though he robbed the Holy One, blessed be He, and the community of Israel.” see part 1, sec.13

299 Part 2, sec.4

300 Part 2, sec.5

301 Part 2, sec.10
couldn’t appreciate the world as a whole).\textsuperscript{302} The very theme of our discussion, the apprehension or loss of the “world to come”, the possibilities of homecoming into the world or of exile, can be articulated in terms of the presence or absence of moral-historical coherence, framed by the Big Picture and the Big Story unfolding ahead of us. The text has taught us how historical coherence is necessarily moral coherence and resoluteness. At the same time it has acknowledged the realism of inconstancy and human weakness, and the inevitability of failure.

The weeping of repentance aims at the Whole when it prays to God for its own salvation. At the same time it also aims in a third direction: towards other people.

(c) The saying that nighttime weeping is contagious could stand by itself. The anecdote about R. Gamaliel is somewhat appalling. Because the teacher wept, a bereaved woman gets kicked out of the neighborhood? Surely the master in his wisdom knows how to balance tragedy and comedy. Surely he won’t be more affected by this woman than by the destruction of the two Temples—or by the basic alienation affecting all. But his eyelashes fall out; he’s losing it. His wisdom can’t affect the basic interconnection of souls, each of which is (potentially or actually) “equal to” the world—mapping the contours of their concerns to the direction of history. The interconnectedness of persons both requires and is required by the unity of the world that is the focus or horizon of individual spiritual understanding and resoluteness. At the same time the separation between us reflects both the incoherence of history and the inconstancy and distractedness of our minds. Although I would have preferred that the disciples throw cold water on the master and leave the woman alone—or better, get the two of them to talk it out—there is a point here about getting a handle on weeping and regret: self-control, as part of repentance or in the religious context, is actually a public and cooperative process, in which the individual psyche is an equal partner with the community and the cosmos (and thus by implication God).

\textit{28. Futurity and Divine Repentance}

\textit{And her tears are on her cheeks.} Rabbah said in R. Yochanan’s name: As a woman who weeps for the husband of her youth, as it is written, \textit{Lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth for the husband of her youth.}\textsuperscript{303}

What is the point of connecting tears on cheeks (another detail that seems to need no explanation) with the metaphorical virgin widow? Although Rab Yehudah has told us that the empty city/exiled people is only \textit{like} a widow but not one, the quotation seems to refer to a marriage that not only has not been consummated, but never will be. Pessimistic and desperate as previous

\textsuperscript{302} ibid.
\textsuperscript{303} Joel 1:8
characterizations have been, they were never so final. An endless series of separations and reconciliations is better than the permanence of widowhood. How does this saying add to our understanding of repentance?

The context in Joel is intimidating, because Joel is so opaque, and its provenance so uncertain. Scholars guess that it’s from the Persian period, and that Joel was familiar with the Second Temple; but there is also a reference to Greeks (yavanim), which might indicate a later date. In any case it doesn’t seem to have been written from exile in Babylonia. A plague of locusts, already in progress, evokes visions of a devastating invasion (are the locusts merely like an army, or is the invasion by a real army yet to come?). But there’s still a chance that repentance will cause God to change everything around.

So we look to Joel’s discussion of repentance for relevance to the Talmudic argument. Here we find a peculiar fragment:

Yet even now, says YHWH, turn to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning;
And tear your heart, not your clothing, and turn to YHWH your God; for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repents of the evil.
Who knows if he will not turn and repent, and leave a blessing behind him; a meal offering and a drink offering to YHWH your God?  

These lines stand out from the surrounding text, and yet the grammar is inconsistent even within them. It begins with God’s voice saying “turn to me”; then refers to YHWH by name and in the third person; and ends with a question about “him” (who? God? God’s army? Israel?) repenting so as to leave an offering to YHWH. Now God speaks of himself in the third person in Exodus 34:6 when he shows Himself to Moses, using the same words “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness.” Joel’s “repents of the evil” replaces the original ending “and truth”. But nearby in Exodus, at 32:14, God “repented of the evil which he thought to do to His people.” So God has a habit of repenting when He punishes Israel. Therefore it makes sense to speculate (“who knows?”) that He will repent again in this case to which Joel is speaking.

But here, as in other cases we have seen, there is a purposeful conflation of God and man. Here it raises the chicken-and-egg question: where does the initial spark of repentance come from—from the human heart, or the spark of the divine it contains? When God showed Himself to Moses, He was showing the attributes that the text represents Him naming in speech. And the apprehension of those attributes undoubtedly takes place through the development or exercise of their human counterparts. So when God says that He

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304 Joel 2:12-14
305 see for example part1,sec.14 (God and Israel compared to two sticks); part 2, sec.5 (God identified with the “wise man” of Prov.29:9); part 2, sec.18 (the averted eyes being both God’s and our own); the conflation of God and king in the interpretation of Psalm 101:7 (part 1,sec.25; part2,sec.6; see also the quote from Chagigah in Interlude 2); and the general theme of humans executing divine judicial prerogatives
repents of the evil He does to us, this also indicates that we must repent of the evil we do to God (by violating commandments), and to ourselves. Then our offering, which before was an empty ritual, will be a true blessing, and will appear as something “left behind” by God, something provided like the miraculous oil of Chanukah.

Now what about the virgin? Is her husband dead or just “overseas”? Was their wedding recent—in other words, is she still in her youth—or is she weeping years later, for her husband and her youth? If so, there is great loyalty in the fact that she is still a virgin; and an indication that he may yet return somehow. This interpretation would seem to have the greatest applicability to the argument. At the same time, however, the main point must be that their relationship has never been consummated, and that the consummation is sought with the urgency of a bride.

There is a tendency to think that the true religion was practiced in the past, but has now become corrupted. Perhaps (like Joel) one thinks that the golden age of nearness to God was the time when the Temple stood and the sacrifices were performed. Or that it was during the First Temple, when the Ark was there and a Davidic king reigned. Or perhaps only during David’s reign, before the sins of Solomon. The Samaritans believe that the Era of Divine Favor ended when the Ark was moved to Shiloh by the High Priest Eli. Or perhaps the only real experience of the divine Presence was at Sinai.—But the metaphor of the virgin seems to tell us that the golden age is not in the past—the marriage has never been consummated—but in the future (the “world to come” in either the literal or figurative senses). And repentance is its precondition.

### 29. Repentance and Oppression

*Her oppressors have become head.* [Hayu tzeriah l’rosh]

Rabbah said in R. Yochanan’s name: Whoever oppresses Israel becomes head. *For there is no weariness [or gloom] for the one that oppresses her.* [Ki lo muaf l’asher mutzaq lah] For the first time he lightened [or cursed] [Hiqal Leyqal] the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but later he will make heavy [or glorious] [Hiqibdy B’dykh] the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, the circuit [Galeel LeGaleel] of the nations. Whereupon Rabbah said in R. Yochanan’s name: Whoever oppresses Israel does not weary [Ainu ‘ayef].

Rabbah (in the name of R. Yochanan) brings in a quotation from Isaiah 8 (a chapter already familiar to us from “bind up the testimony and seal the Torah”, verse 16) to support his generalization of the statement about the “head” or chief status of Israel’s oppressors. The generalization is from “have become” (in the case of the Assyrians and Babylonians) to “becomes”—so as to cover Greeks,

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306 Isaiah 8:23 (9:1)
Romans and Nazis. The quotation explains this perpetual oppression as an effect of divine punishment: just as God sent Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar, he keeps sending Hadrians and Hitlers.

Now this doctrine is rather alarming. Surely it doesn’t mean that every murder and torture worked upon Jews is coming straight from God. Talk about blaming the victims! That way lies madness, and the upside-down theology of the Frankists. As it happens, just as I was coming to Rabbah’s sayings, the news was dominated by the ravings of the American “Zionist Christian” John Hagee, who was wielding this blame-the-victim doctrine on behalf of Presidential candidate John McCain. Of course it was taken as evidence of antisemitism and insanity on its face (as were similar thoughts offered by Hagee about homosexuals and Catholics), as well it should have been. It wasn’t justified by its apparent similarity to the views of Isaiah, Jeremiah or Rabbah. You don’t encourage someone’s repentance by reaffirming their guilt, let alone adding in false charges and pretending to stand above them. But it made me even more worried about how to limit the doctrine that God motivates and enables persecutors.

Fortuitously enough, Sanhedrin has previously (94b) addressed the question of how to distinguish divinely motivated oppressors from mere evildoers, and has used the same quotation as Rabbah (Isaiah 8:23) to provide help with it. But the excursion this invites is intimidating for several reasons, beginning with the fact that the discussion there involves a conflicting translation and interpretation from that of Rabbah’s here. Furthermore, there’s a lot of disagreement about Isaiah 8:23 in general. Jews and Christians can’t even agree on whether to count it as part of chapter 8 or 9. Christians want it to form a transition from the dire prophecies of 8 to the messianic vision of 9. Therefore they translate its first words, *lo mu’af l’asher mutzaq lah*, as “there will be no gloom for her that was troubled”. The translation of the rare word form *mu’af* (מעָף) is problematic, and the previous verse does use the equally rare *ma’uf* (מען) along with other words connoting darkness. The two Talmudic translations agree that *mu’af* has to do with weariness, but that of R. Eleazar b. Berechiah on 94b, like the Christian translation, plays loose with grammatical forms of the words to arrive at new meanings.

The discussion of the divinely motivated oppressor looks at Sennacherib, the Assyrian conqueror who can be seen as fulfilling some of Isaiah’s prophecies, and whose representative is reported to have argued his divine credentials to the representatives of King Hezekiah. R. Joshua b. Levi asks what could have led Sennacherib to say “*Have I now come up without YHWH against this place to destroy it? YHWH said to me, Go up against this land, and destroy it.*”. He answers that Sennacherib had heard the words of Isaiah (8:6-7):

> Forasmuch as this people refuses the waters of Shiloach that go softly, and rejoices in Rezin and Ramaliah’s son, therefore, behold, YHWH will bring upon

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307 2Kings 18:25
them the waters of the river, strong and many, even the king of Assyria, and all his glory.

The “waters of Shiloach” is interpreted as the rule of the Davidic king, which the Israelites had rejected 200 years before. (Isaiah’s reprimand was also aimed at the Judean faction that favored Damascus and Samaria against Assyria, and so could be considered disloyal to Hezekiah.) And verse 8 (“And he shall pass through Judah; he shall overflow and go over, he shall reach up to the neck”) is interpreted as predicting the Assyrian conquest of Judah (including its largest city, Lachish) that left the “head”, Jerusalem, intact. Had Sennacherib been more attentive to the meaning of “up to the neck”, he wouldn’t have attacked Jerusalem. This, as well as the following interpretation of verse 23, shows that his subsequent behavior was no longer divinely motivated, just evil.

The interpretation is based, again, on the words *lo mu’af l’asher mutzaq lah*. R. Eleazar translates: “the wearied doesn’t belong to the oppressor”—“the wearied” being the righteous Jerusalemites who were worn out from studying the Torah. And the rest of the verse (*ka’eth harishon hiqal … w’ha’acharon hich’bid… … dybkh /wrhahw … lqh /w?arh tuk*) is given the following interpretation:

It is not as the first generations, who lightened the yoke of the Torah; but as for the latter generations who made the yoke of the Torah heavy upon themselves and are therefore worthy of having a miracle wrought for them, like those who passed over the [Red] Sea and the Jordan — should he [Sennacherib] repent [of his attack upon Jerusalem], fine; but if not, I will roll him in the scorn of the nations.

“The first time”, which actually refers to the first Assyrian invasion of Shalmaneser (who conquered Naphtali and Zebulun), is here interpreted as referring to all of the kingdom of Israel (or as the rabbis say, the Ten Tribes). The “later times”, which actually refers to the invasion of Sargon, is interpreted as referring to Jerusalem in its post-722 BC ascendance. The “way of the sea”, which meant the path taken by the Assyrian army, is associated with the waters parted by Moses and Joshua. And the *galeel b’goyim*, the “circuit of the nations” that is the region of Galilee, is interpreted as scorn (or dung, *gelalim*).

So what do we learn? The oppressor is well-motivated up to a point; but his own judgment enters into the equation; and he is subject to divine punishment if he messes up (which he pretty much always does, like Sennacherib who was humiliated and murdered by his relatives).

One implication here is that we take politics seriously. The argument of the Rabshekah in 2*Kings*18 is one of the most remarkable historical reports in the Bible. He employs the standard imperial propaganda that claims to liberate a population from its corrupt rulers and restore a putative prior state of things. In this case it was the worship of YHWH in its popular form (that is, with worship at local shrines and on high places, and with Asherah as divine consort), which Hezekiah tried (unsuccessfully) to obliterate. Sennacherib not only claims that he is on the side of YHWH, he has a strong argument against Hezekiah:
But if you say to me, "We rely on YHWH our God," is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and to Jerusalem, "You shall worship before this altar in Jerusalem"?308

This must have seemed very reasonable to many Judeans. Remember, the book of Deuteronomy hadn't yet been "discovered". The Jerusalem Temple had probably never exerted any such far-reaching repression of traditional religion before—certainly not in the time of David or Solomon. Centralization probably represented an assertion of royal authority more than anything else: it was a reversal of the Assyria-friendly stance of Achaz. So the moral-historical way forward was ambiguous, to say the least. And although the Biblical judgment is that the Rabshekah blasphemed YHWH, it seems to me that the legitimate part of Sennacherib’s mandate must to some extent be reflected in the genuine ambiguity to which the use of the Name was exposed by historical events. Only in the reality of the historical situation can the authenticity of religious language, always compromised to a lesser or greater degree, be tested.

Israel’s oppressors are only partly sent like forces of nature against us; for they are also real people with their own rationality and morality. However alien or hostile, there is a possibility of engaging them, and of accepting a certain amount of chastisement as good for the soul, that is, an aid to repentance. But in any case their supernatural tirelessness is conditional and temporary, however powerful they may seem for awhile. To the extent that the oppressor is implacable, there is nothing better we can do than work on our own souls, while waiting for a better opportunity. This state of extremity complements the previous extremities of irreligion and hopelessness that we are attempting to repent.

Is it legitimate to locate the hope of repentance here in the Torah study that R. Eleazar imagined occupying the besieged inhabitants of Jerusalem? Our context in Alas is clearly that of the Babylonian conquest, when Jerusalem’s protection had vanished, and Torah study itself had been debased. It might also be appropriate to add that according to historical science the Torah didn’t yet exist in the form we know. The literary flowering under Hezekiah depended in large part on the Israelite immigrants that the myth of the Ten Tribes sweeps under the rug. Nevertheless it makes sense to think of spiritual study and practice as being called forth by the extremity of oppression, when resistance seems futile. The possibility of a fortuitous turnaround is in the nature of things; history takes unexpected turns; and it’s our responsibility to look for a turnaround as the correlative of a turnaround within ourselves.

30. Hospitality in Exile

308 2Kings 18:22
Not to you [or is it nothing to you?], all who pass on their way.\textsuperscript{309} [lo” 'aleychem kol ‘ovrei derech ]

Rabbah said in R. Yochanan's name: This gives Biblical support to the custom of saying 'not to you' [kublana].

‘All who pass on their way.’ R. Amram said in Rab's name: They have made me as those who transgress the law [k’ovrei al dath]; for in the case of Sodom it is written, And YHWH rained upon Sodom [and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire].\textsuperscript{310} while in the case of Jerusalem it is written, From above He has sent fire into my bones, and it dominates them.\textsuperscript{311} And it is written, For the iniquity of the daughter of my people is greater than the sin of Sodom: \textsuperscript{312} is there then favouritism in the matter? — Rabbah answered in R. Yochanan's name: There was an extra measure [of punishment] in Jerusalem, which Sodom was spared. For in the case of Sodom, it is written, Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.\textsuperscript{313} Whereas in the case of Jerusalem it is written, The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children.\textsuperscript{314}

After developing the importance of the “mouthful” as the saving grace of corrupt religion, we have visited the enactment of repentance at the extremities of ignorance and ahistoricality in Alas. But now the theme of the “mouthful” returns with a vengeance. Now the elements of the teaching on the “mouthful”—travelling, eating, language and hospitality—are found together in the Biblical text, and so brought in touch with its anticipation of repentance. We have already seen, in connection with King Hezekiah, that even the most basic core of morality can be corrupted and corrupting. But here we move from the insincere entertainment of foreigners to cannibalism, a considerable moral jump. Here we consider the situation in which hospitality is no longer possible. The basic form of communication and human interaction has been reduced to the cry of repentance alone.

There seem to be two ways of reading lo” 'aleychem kol ‘ovrei derech in verse 12 of the Biblical text. The standard translation "Is it nothing to you?" captures a tone of complaint, and of insistence that the world recognize the deprivation afflicting the speaker. Here we are reminded again of the necessity of the public dimension of meaning—even the meaning of something seemingly private like repentance—which our text has taught us. But the Aramaic word kublana seems to have been used as a way of wishing that the speaker’s misfortune happen “not to you”; and so the emphasis would be not on empathy but blessing. This sentiment would certainly be more noble than what we find at the end of the first chapter of Alas: the wish that God “do to them [my enemies] as You have done to me.” It wouldn’t be surprising, however, if here again the

\textsuperscript{309} Lam.1:12 
\textsuperscript{310} Gen.19:24 
\textsuperscript{311} Lam.1:13 
\textsuperscript{312} Lam.4:6 
\textsuperscript{313} Ezek. 16:49 
\textsuperscript{314} Lam.4:10
Talmudic text has been cast in just such a way as to invite comparison of the two perspectives, the complaint and the selfless wish, and to suggest a movement from one to the other.

But before proceeding further with the modes of communication and interaction appropriate to the repentant consciousness, we need to answer a more basic question about the text: who is speaking, and to whom? Is it a representative Jew speaking to the conquerors or other gentiles passing through Jerusalem? Or is it a singular Jew speaking to other Jews?

Let’s start with the travellers on their way, the ‘ovrei derech. Who are they? It can’t be a coincidence that we are again looking at the word ‘avar. We could think of them as the travellers (ha’ovar) that Micah fed, the beneficiaries of the “mouthful”; or they could be connected with his sea-crossing idol. Or they could just be other exiles, other outsiders—“Hebrews” (תֶּבֶר) in the original sense—making their way back toward the light.

As for the speaker, although he seems to own the transgressions of his people, we have to notice that R. Amram’s interpretation (“they have made me as one who transgresses”) implies that he isn’t in fact a transgressor, but that “they” (who? the bad Jews? the Babylonians?) have reduced him to a similar state, receiving their punishment. This fits with the idea that Jeremiah is the author of Alas. It suggests that the extreme state of hopelessness, in which the ability to interpret texts has been lost, didn’t really imply the absence of all individuals with understanding and a moral-historical sensibility, only the lack of a public reality for that understanding.\(^{315}\) But the individual must take responsibility, in some sense, for the ignorance of others—for the apathy and self-indulgence of his neighbors as well as the rapacity and cruelty of his enemies. The sinful world makes us similar to it, makes us take on the sensibilities of corruption and hopelessness in a suspended form, as a starting point for a repentance that would somehow lead the world toward its ideal state of love and gratitude.

Just as, near the beginning of this study, we were repeatedly confronted with a kind of fatalism that threatened to make everything a matter of “destiny” (since even our understanding is to a large extent determined by tradition and circumstances), we have lately seen hope reduced to the anticipation of an unexplainable and transcendent reversal of moral-historical trends that seem to lead only to oblivion. There is something of this fatalism in the comparisons made by Rabbah and R. Amram between Jerusalem and Sodom.

It’s odd that R. Amram has to use the reference to fire in verse 13 to make a connection with Sodom, since the explicit reference in 4:16, cited by Rabbah, was available. Perhaps it is to suggest how the fire of suffering fuels the spiritual fire of repentance. But the primary connotation of Sodom seems to be that of destruction and annihilation. Thus the puzzle that arises from the comparison, since Jerusalem was restored by the Persians, and in any case remains an object of perpetual hope. Ezekiel says that Jerusalem was even worse than

\(^{315}\) Universalizing hyperbole (e.g. Lam.2:22, “in the day of YHWH’s anger none escaped nor remained”), common in ancient rhetoric, complicates the interpretive situation. See below…

\(^{316}\) see part 1, sec.4-5, 10, 22-23
Sodom! Isn’t Sodom another symbol of hopelessness? How can we get any more hopeless?

The context in Ezekiel isn’t exactly what our thoughts of Sodom might suggest. Ezekiel doesn’t share the rabbinic/Deuteronomic prejudice in favor of Judah over Israel, nor does he think of Israel as having been erased from history (as does R. Aqiva when he assimilates the “Ten Tribes” to those who have no share toward the world to come\(^{317}\)). In ch.16 he calls Samaria the “big sister” of Jerusalem, and says that it will be brought into captivity again (reflecting the reality that Israelites remained in Israel during the 7\(^{th}\) century BC), after which it will be restored. The idea that Israel will be restored along with Judah (at which time the two will be reunited) isn’t unique to Ezekiel, but is put forth repeatedly by Jeremiah and Isaiah. But ch.16 also says the same things about the “little sister” Sodom. Jerusalem has exceeded the sins of both Samaria and Sodom, and must go through all their suffering and repentance before following them back to their origins. So according to Ezekiel, Sodom isn’t an extreme of hopelessness; on that scale it ranks below Jerusalem.

What Sodom does unquestionably represent is a failure of hospitality. Genesis 19 recounts the hospitality of Lot, who was willing to give up his own daughters to be raped, rather than let the wicked Sodomites attack the travellers who had arrived at their city at evening. The text calls the travellers angels, and we must imagine something special about them that attracted the entire population of the city, old and young, to them. The people fear that the visitors have come to judge them. Somehow this drives them to show themselves at their worst. Of course their guilt has already been determined, as God confided to Abraham in the previous chapter. It is proven by the fact that nobody in the town helps Lot—not the ten men set as the minimum in the argument with Abraham, not even one. But their fear of being judged shows that the Sodomites had a guilty conscience as well. There is a connection between this guilty conscience and the lack of hospitality: although the impulse to hospitality must come from the need of the guest, it also aims at a sharing of the world with at least a minimal agreement as to what it is to be human, and thus a minimal sharing of values.

How can one transgress even further than against the basic law of hospitality? (In case anyone were to take “hospitality” too narrowly as pertaining only to travellers, rather than to the core of morality that touches the life-journeys of everyone, Ezekiel makes it clear: it’s about our responsibility to the needs of others. The Sodomites “didn’t aid the poor and needy.”) Rabbah addresses this by way of an explanation of Jerusalem’s “greater punishment”. Of course this turns the initial puzzlement upside-down: whereas it seemed that Jerusalem, despite allegedly deserving greater punishment than Sodom, survived while Sodom didn’t, Rabbah says that Jerusalem’s survival made this greater punishment possible. The explanation of this is difficult, and has elicited some strange interpretations.

On the surface it seems to be saying that Sodom was lucky because it enjoyed prosperity right up to the hour of its destruction, whereas Jerusalem suffered for years (either the decade following the initial Babylonian conquest of

\(^{317}\) Sanhedrin 110b. see Prelude 1
597 BC, or the years of the exile itself), during which families were reduced to cannibalism. One commentator thinks that this extra suffering “balanced out” the lack of utter destruction, as if one could buy off a death sentence by submitting to torture. Another interpretation focuses on the word “compassionate” (describing the women who ate their children), suggesting that the Jerusalemites showed their moral superiority to the Sodomites by the way they shared their cannibalistic meals with others. This is either deeply symbolic in a way I don’t understand, or just idiotic.

It seems to me that we have to look once more to “the mouthful” to see what’s going on here. Is there a deeper meaning to the cannibalistic mouthful? The text says “better slain by the sword than slain by hunger.” The mothers are compassionate in that they are giving their children the better option. It is a better option, that is, from the perspective evoked by R. Shimon b. Yohai above\(^{318}\)—the perspective seen in Greek tragedy and Buddhism and the words of Qoheleth—that the world is bad, that life is suffering, and Nothing is better than Something. “Better never to have been born.” What’s new here is the insight that life can lead us to this ultimate pessimism; history can box us into dead ends. The converse of “never having been born” is having no future, consuming it for the sake of a terminal present.

This is indeed a mighty realism. It isn’t fatalism, for it only applies to those whom history gives no way out, such as certain destitute inhabitants of newly conquered territories, the boiled children, or any innocent victims of crime, disease, war, famine, etc. Of course in the case of Jerusalem, we know that many of those taken to Babylonia prospered, not only materially but in the preservation and development of their spiritual tradition. But since we know that they were more guilty than the Israelites and Sodomites, we have to regard their prosperity as a matter of luck, as undeserved as the ultimate tragedy of cannibalism. (The situation has the asymmetry noted in connection with Pastor Hagee: although it’s wrong to say that the cannibalistic mothers deserved their fate, it’s useful to regard ourselves as sharing in the guilt of those who would have deserved it.)

The dispossessed can’t be hospitable. The best they can do is say “not to you”, accepting their place in the tragicomedy of history without condemning it on their own account, and identifying with the better future of others. This “not to you” isn’t the beginning of dialogue, but something like a boundary-marker of the limits of speech and communication. Speech is bounded by silence, and blessing by the reality of the horrible. Our repentance likewise has silence and the realism of tragedy as its boundary and horizon. The magnitude of our blessing is determined by the “in spite of…” that the horizon imposes.

To be inhospitable while prosperous is worse than being inhospitable through desperation, but Jerusalem was also inhospitable while prosperous; its spiritual value doesn’t lie with merit bestowed on descendants but with the object lesson it provides: we must invert the history of Jerusalem, Samaria and Sodom, by using our empathetic experience of desparation to widen the sphere of our hospitality (which presupposes a wider sphere of communication).

\(^{318}\) part 2, sec.4
31. Devaluation

YHWH has trampled [silah נמל] all my mighty men in the midst of me: as one says to his neighbour, This coin is disqualified [nifsilah נמל].

I don’t know whether this comment also comes from Rabbah/Yochanan or the editor, and so whether to regard it as part of an original continuity (from the mothers eating children to the open mouths of the enemy poised to eat my people [in the next two sections]) or as interrupting and expanding upon it. Perhaps this will emerge from a study of the content.

The text continues unremarkably with the loss of the future generation, both male and female. The following verse emphasizes again the weeping this occasions (“my eye, my eye runs down with water”), and ties it to the loss of the divine presence:

because the Comforter, who should restore my life, is far from me. My children are desolate...

What is added, then, by the analogy to money? Rashi seems to me unhelpful in saying that God rendered the Judean soldiers ineffectual (as if otherwise they had a chance against the Babylonians!). More intriguing is the metaphorical connection between God’s absence and the coin rendered worthless by being trampled and effaced. The analogy suggests, first of all, that we are focused again, despite the massive loss of offspring, on the surviving remnant. The remnant is desolate and devalued, but alive. But God has abandoned it (at least temporarily). Not understanding its traditions and texts, its very identity is effaced, like the image on a worn-out coin.

The value of a coin is dependent on both a public consensus and hidden economic effects. And the value of spiritual understanding doesn’t lie in inner states of consciousness but in the networks of meaning and moral-historical reality, mostly beyond our control, with which that understanding engages. The coin is almost animated, as it were, by the economic system: when we gaze at it we can almost feel its value as an added force. How much more so the impression of intrinsic value in spiritual understanding—which is nevertheless an illusion if it doesn’t fit into the cultural system of its historical situation.

We have seen that the concept of wealth always implies the higher wealth of spiritual understanding and the most valuable object, the Torah. The worn-out coin can be taken as a metaphor for the misunderstood Torah, and the corrupted or destroyed cultural context of spiritual understanding. The inability to spend the coin fits with the lost future represented by cannibalism: even individuals who have some understanding of tradition find that they can’t teach it or practice it, so

319 Lam.1:15
their understanding is worthless. Realistic repentance includes an awareness of this tragic contingency, when it seeks out its own opportunities to relearn, rebuild and re-educate.

What is to happen to the worn-out coin? I suppose it must be replaced; it can’t be restored. It must be minted anew, with a new date and artwork. The tradition must be rewritten. And hospitality must be extended, when possible, as if for the first time. But how are we to know when that possibility exists?

32. Mouths and Eyes

All your enemies have opened their mouths against you. Rabbah said in R. Yochanan’s name: Why did he place the peh before the ‘ayin? Because of the spies who spoke with their mouths what they had not seen with their eyes.

The references to mouths, consumption and speech continue. Here the text uses colorful oral imagery: “they hiss, they gnash their teeth”. The enemies who consume us also proclaim their victory: “We have destroyed her! Ah, this is the day we longed for; now we have it; we see it!” Their declarations must be acknowledged so as to be taken up into our repentance.

Rabbah approaches these pregnant allusions obliquely, by way of a question about a textual anomaly: while the first letters of the verses of Alas are in alphabetical order, in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th chapters the order of the letters ‘ayin and peh are reversed. Unlike many textual anomalies in the Bible, this one seems to have been conscious, and so to have an explicit, though not obvious, intention. Rabbah’s theory is based on the way the text extends the web of thematic imagery from mouth (peh) to eye (‘ayin), as a kind of reversal of the natural order.

A review of the three sets of eye/mouth inversions reveals a common interest in time and our relation to it.

In the second chapter, the cry of the enemy in the peh verse (16) declares the evidence of the eyes: we see it. The eyes reveal what is present, what has come to be. Although they look forward, the eyes primarily take in a finished picture. The ‘ayin verse (17) only reinforces this evidence, in saying that God’s punishment is done: its finality is guaranteed by divine remorselessness, ordained long ago. The fact of God’s accomplishment “should have” come first, before the speech that declares it, as the past comes “before” the future. But the order of existence is replaced by the order of discovery: what is spoken and heard primarily pertains (in virtue of its implicit function as invitation to or cooperation in some kind of shared activity) to the future. Unlike the objects of sight, the objects of listening present less of a static presence than an unfolding coming-to-be-said. The future, then, has supplanted the past and present.

320 Lam.2:16
321 except for ch.3, which allots 3 verses per letter (a,a,a,b,b,b…), and ch.5
In the third chapter the verses come in triplets. The *peh* verses (46-48) begin with a variation of 2:16, with “we” replacing “you” (“all our enemies...against us”); continues with the assertion that punishment and destruction “have happened to us”; and connects this destruction with the tears of the eye. The ‘*ayin* verses (49-51) begin with a repetition of the weeping eyes, but add “until” (‘*ad*) God looks down and sees; and make a remarkable further connection between body and mind: *my eye abuses my soul*. Again the words of the mouth quickly point to the finality of what is seen and mourned; but now a different connotation of vision is added: the hope of being seen by God. The shift from “you” to “we” establishes a social dimension in which the lonely eye not only looks out on the world but is ultimately seen by it. The hope of an ultimate recognition, a seeing that becomes a being-seen, is needed to endure the pain of what is seen. The “abuse” of the soul by its openness to suffering is the basic vulnerability of sociality, the root of hospitality and compassion. Openness to the world’s tragedy, as an irredeemable loss, nevertheless reveals at the same time the possibility of the most radical openness to the future: the possibility of recognition by God. This possibility “should have” been established at the outset, but instead lies only ahead.

In the *peh* verse (16) of chapter four, mouth and eyes have been subsumed by faces—the faces of God, on the one hand, and priests and elders on the other. God’s “face” (*pani* כין) has scattered the people, whom he will no longer regard (*lehabitem* לֶהַבִּית). God’s recognition of man is the flipside of his angry punishment; we “see” His face in the face of the enemy, who mirrors our own lack of regard and respect for the just order (whereas the face of man is capable of mirroring the regard of God). In our state of guilt, the future is available only through this recognition. The ‘*ayin* verse (17), however, announces the failure of vision itself, which has been wasted in looking out for help from “a nation that cannot save”, when it should have been subordinated to listening to the divine. It leads into the *tzade* (18) verse with its final “our end has come”. A certain sense of finality must be paradoxically held in contact with our future “steps” (*tza’adinu*); the tragic “ending” precedes the journey.

This rhetoric of paradox is deeply rooted in ancient scribal traditions that had kings bragging, year after year, of “annihilating” the same enemy; that exaggerated the exile of 27,000 Israelites into the total removal of a whole country; or that described the total evacuation of Jerusalem into captivity—three different times—while yet acknowledging that many remained behind.\(^{322}\) It is captured well by *Alas* 2:22:

> You have called as in the day of an appointed feast my terrors in every side, so that in the day of YHWH’s anger none escaped nor remained; my enemy has consumed those whom I have cherished and brought up.

\(^{322}\) The erasure from history of the Judeans who were never deported to Babylonia was of course exacerbated by the interests of the returning upper classes who, under Ezra, questioned the genealogy of the “people of the land”.
**None escaped nor remained** (*lo’ ... palit w’sharid*). There was no escaping or remaining. Except, evidently, the speaker hovering over the scene. Perhaps he speaks with his last breaths. Or perhaps he anticipates his death in a deeper way. Then this anticipation would be the manner in which the ending “precedes” the beginning, and the future “precedes”, that is, functions more primordially than the past. It affirms the vulnerability of sociability and physical embodiment, and the abuses that seeing and remembering inflict upon our souls, because it listens for the possibility of divine recognition.

The problem Rabbah/Yochanan emphasizes is the speaking that precedes seeing and displaces it: the spies hadn’t seen the truth, and therefore projected a false future. This falsity is described by R. Hiyya b. Abba, in the extended discussion of the spies found at *Sotah* 34b:

> The spies aimed at nothing else than discrediting the land of Israel. Here it is written: *That they may search [we-y’chaperu] the land for us,* and elsewhere it is written: *Then the moon shall be confounded [we-chaferah] and the sun ashamed* etc.

A false searching and seeking, a false futurity, may be identified with greeting the world without love and respect. For the land of Israel is, after all, the world itself seen through the lens of religion. You don’t deserve to live in it if you don’t see it in the appropriate light, with the appropriate imagination and courage.

R. Yochanan emphasizes (in the *Sotah* discussion) that the key lies with the quality of our anticipation:

> *and they went and came.* R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Shimon b. Yohai, it compares the going to the coming back; as the coming back was with a bad design, so the going was with a bad design.

The spies were ready in advance to give a bad report. Because they were bad people? I don’t think so. They simply epitomized the general failure of the generation that had received the Torah, and who were, like their leader Moses, denied the promised land. They exhibit the wound that the giving of the Torah inflicted.

This was our initial surmise regarding the “sin” of Jeroboam: religion sows the seeds of its own corruption, merely by establishing itself in the world (institutionally, politically, ethnically, linguistically, etc.). Now, in addition to the problems of language and authority, dissemination and all the consequences of the paradox of interpretation encountered in the “sins of the kings”, we have issues resulting from the necessity of repentance and forgiveness: the necessity of a cry that accepts its exilic condition, despite its hyperbolic perception of total destruction and the complete loss of tradition, because it anticipates divine recognition.

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323 Deut. 1:22
324 Isaiah 24:23
325 Num.13:25
Truthful speech must welcome the world, acknowledging its passion and confusion as the conditions of its love. Even the consuming mouth of the enemy must be reflected in its eyes, then to be transmuted into blessing.

33. The Taste of Bread

_T hose who eat my people eat bread; YHWH they do not call._ Rabbah said in R. Yochanan's name: Whoever eats the bread of Israel enjoys the taste of bread; whoever does not eat the bread of Israel does not enjoy the taste of bread.

The interpretation of _Alas_ is completed with a quotation from _Psalms_ that echoes the themes of eating and blessing (that is, calling upon God). The psalm itself (the short #14) echoes the theme of hyperbolic desolation. But the comment is a riddle. Explanations by Rashi and the boys are again extremely disappointing. They seem to ignore the previous discussion and take “bread of Israel” literally, saying that gentiles who steal bread from Jews enjoy it more than they ever do their own bread. It is even suggested that this phenomenon is a tool God uses to induce attacks on Israel. This is almost as bad as the commentary that saw mothers offering their children as food for travellers. If you’re going to be literal-minded about the bread here, you’ll also have to ignore the implicit simile in the quotation, and say that it is simply noting that the conquerors eat bread (like everyone else)—a ridiculous non sequitur.

There must be a connection between “the bread of Israel” and the way in which the people are like bread for their conquerors. My surmise is that eating Israel’s bread means enjoying the kind of hospitality that redeems and reorients the confused moral-historical sense, through the reversals of perspective effected by human need at the extremes. But before trying to connect up with the main argument of the text, I must consider Psalm 14.

The psalm is famous for its first line, “The fool (or: scoundrel) says in his heart, there is no God (or: there are no gods).” As far as I can tell, calling this a representation of atheism is anachronistic, since fear of God, expressed as fear of acting immorally, is what mattered to the psalmist, not metaphysical belief. And indeed, the second part of the couplet focuses on the _deeds_ of the fools. It switches from singular to plural (“they are corrupt…”), and then makes a radically sounding statement: “none does good.” None of whom? The fools, of which we may assume there are plenty. But who are they exactly? The second and third verses seem to make it clear: _everybody_. God looked down from heaven and could find _no one_ seeking Him; _all_ have gone astray. Again we read “none does

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326 Psalm 14:4
327 see sec.15 above
328 see sec.18 above
329 Psalm 36:1 provides a corroborating variant: The word in the heart of the wicked person: no fear of God is before his eyes.
good”, but now with an emphasis to remove all doubt: *eyn gam echad*, not even one.

Nevertheless it is customary to deflate this radical condemnation of humanity, because in the next verse we find “they who eat my people…”, and thus an opposition between two groups, those who eat and those who are eaten. These could be the Babylonians (or some other oppressors) and the Jews. (The last verse of the psalm speaks of the salvation of Israel out of captivity. Some regard this last verse as an editorial addition to an otherwise utterly pessimistic piece.) But the Talmud doesn’t take it this way: in Rab and Samuel’s interpretation of “they” who call not upon YHWH, to be considered next, the reference seems to be to corrupt Jewish (and possibly other) fools. And this fits with the other identifiers of the psalm: in verse 4 the “eaters” are identified with “workers of iniquity”; and in verse 6 “you” (the psalmist seems now to address them directly) are identified as oppressors of the poor. If the radical condemnation holds, then this “you” would coincide with the audience of the psalm (including we who read it now). “They who eat my people” would be my people themselves, who eat each other in their dog-eat-dog society.

Of course we know that the hyperbolic condemnation always leaves a remnant (as indicated, again, by the final seventh verse). Where are they in the psalm? Hiding in the mysterious fifth verse: “There they were afraid”—where? Surely not during the devouring of the people, while they were failing to call on God? The only answer is: “For God is in the generation of the righteous.” Is that the generation being devoured? If so, they wouldn’t be devouring each other. So it seems that the remnant will only emerge in a new generation. Or can the corrupt generation renew itself, when it finally comes to fear God?

We have been following a progression (not quite temporal, and not quite logical) from extreme to extreme, in which moral-historical blindness permeates every level of awareness and all the connections between people, institutions and the world as a whole—even the essential moral phenomena of hospitality and charity symbolized by “the mouthful”. At the same time, we have been studying the complexity of phenomena that must function together if we are ever to enjoy God’s Presence (the advent of the ideal world)—phenomena that are only illuminated fully by the possibility of their absence. So the text exhibits a duality that can be represented by R. Ashi’s dream: 330 the Biblical text presents extreme horrors, the function of which is to educate us by provocation. It invites judgment, but a judgment always prone to rebound upon us. We enter upon the side of “all Israel”, guaranteed a share toward the world to come, and keep finding ourselves sharing instead the fate of the three kings. We can only escape through the cracks in the hyperbole.

“God is in the generation of the righteous.” I think we have to assume that our own generation is neither all righteous nor completely lost. And God is neither fully present to us, nor a mere meaningless word. But the possibility of His complete absence, apparent to us in the broken hospitality we see around and within us, forms a kind of negative horizon, or manifests an inner emptiness,

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330 Part 1, sec.19
that lets things appear in a new light … that lets the true taste of bread fill the mouth, whence a call to God may issue.

The primary sense of the bread-eating in Psalm 14 is that the oppressors ignore the humanity of their victims. But the Talmudic discussion has already called into play the Biblical associations between food and language, hunger and ignorance, the word of God and the word of man. And so when Rabbah evokes the “bread of Israel”, we know that he is talking about the essence of what Israel has to offer: the Teaching (both written and oral, that is, teaching by texts and by example). This isn’t about Jews and gentiles, but about the predatory and charitable elements of our generation, and of our souls. The emptiness and corruption of the world evokes spiritual hunger and fear, which completes the course of repentance that began with weeping over our loneliness and the unintelligibility of our tradition (not to mention mere physical complaints of torture, murder, starvation, etc.).

### 34. Calling to God

_YHWH they do not call_. Rab said: This refers to the judges. Samuel said: To teachers of children.

In one way, this seems pretty straightforward: the failure of a society, or of a generation, follows from failure to preserve its culture in such a way that the requirements of justice can be met. The preservation occurs through education, and through putting into practice what is learned. Working back to the context, it seems to identify the teachers and judges with “those who eat my people”. Through their ineptness or corruption, they fail to serve up the “bread of Israel”, which is its linguistic cultivation of a moral sensibility. Their false or futile eating corresponds to the false vision symbolized by the spies.

But why is this deduced from their failure to call to God? Previous considerations suggest that a true calling is fundamentally a blessing, that is, it speaks in order to praise God and His creation, even though it is a praise that proceeds in full remembrance of the world’s tragedy, blessing for the evil as well as the good. We have R. Chisda’s complex dialectics of blessing and decadent speech in sec.6, as well as the numerous intimations of despair in _Alas_ and _Psalms_, to help us envision the needed call. It must transcend superstition and materiality on its way to its affirmation of life and love. And it must praise and rejoice while never losing the quality of a lament … the kind of lament that we are now completing through our excursus on _Lamentations_, which has been a kind of performance.

But it is not so complete yet. The completion requires the practice of judgment and education. The problem of preserving tradition and judgment

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331 _Berachoth_ 54a
remains after the lamentation. And so, rather than having finished with an “excursion”, we have actually returned to the outstanding question concerning repentance, expressed as the judgment regarding Manasseh (and ultimately all the other kings, from David to Zedekiah, as well as we ourselves). The question about the validity of tradition and the right to judge is now raised in a surprisingly frank way.

G. Judgment and Defiance

35. Judgment Human and Divine (Solomon’s trial)


Rab Yehudah said in Rab's name: They wished to include another, but an apparition of his father's likeness came and prostrated itself before them, which, however, they disregarded. A heavenly fire descended and its flames licked their seats, yet they still disregarded it. Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out to them, ‘See a man diligent in his work: he shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before obscure men.' He who gave precedence to My house over his, and, moreover, built My house in seven years, but his own in thirteen, he shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before obscure men.’ Yet they paid no attention even to this. Whereupon the Heavenly Voice cried out, ‘Will He then make peace with you, because you reject it? For you must choose, and not I; [and declare what you know].’

We consider together the sayings of R. Ashi and Rab Yehudah, because they mark out the poles of the dialectical tension underlying the gemara: matters of eternal significance, if not to say truth, are to be decided by humans, by people like us; but there is a force operating on or in their judgments, constraining their reason and their feelings.

The first pole, then, is the authority or legitimacy of tradition, which is also the authority to judge and forgive, as is needed for repentance and for the expression of worship and blessing. We have learned that tradition is always in a state of crisis, whether it seems that way or not; it can only be saved through renewal and return. Now the prime historical example of response to the crisis of tradition is the re-establishment of Judaism under Ezra and Nehemiah. Informed by modern historical studies, we may be skeptical of the real continuities between religion in Persian Judea and the Assyrian-era kingdom of Judah (not to mention pre-monarchical Israel). The Persian era is in many ways the most obscure, undocumented period in Jewish history. We may also be skeptical of

332 Prov.22:29
333 Job 34:33
the Pharisaic statement of the chain of authority passing from Moses through the prophets to the “men of the Great Assembly”, that is, the leaders and scholars of the early Persian period. But we can admire R. Ashi’s frankness in locating the source of tradition, as it was practiced during the time of the Second Temple, in the organization of Judea by Persian-sanctioned officials. From the imperial commission charged with assembling canonical texts to the structure of the Temple and its ritual requirements, the Judaism known to the Talmud was created behind the veil of the Persian period.

R. Ashi uses the veil to distract attention from his provocative assertion, already implicated in R. Yochanan’s argument for pardoning Manasseh: scholars such as ourselves (that is, the Oral Tradition) can determine facts and render judgment on matters of eternal significance. The “men of the Great Assembly” are, in an important sense, ourselves. We are like those whom Moses addresses on the plains of Moab, who, though they have seen God’s miracles, have not been given “a heart to know and eyes to see and ears to hear until this day”; and who share Moses’ instruction with those who are “not here with us today”, that is, the future. In this question about access to the world to come, the rabbis are in some sense the gatekeepers—not because Manasseh was literally waiting in some limbo for the rabbis to render a long-delayed judgment, but because scholarly discussion (and the habits and perspectives it inculcates) can illuminate the presencing of the world as such, the conditions of access to the divine. And in a deeper sense, it is because each of us must both lament and render judgment in the process of repentance, so that we are our own gatekeepers—our own enablers and inhibitors of pure speech and praise.

But there are limits, of course, to our ability to rewrite tradition, subjecting it to logical analysis and empirical research, or to the moral and intellectual fashions of the era. We can derive these limits from the fixity of texts and laws, but such limits do not engage with the autonomy of the present, they merely block it. Therefore the gemara invokes a different kind of limit: direct revelation in the present (or if you prefer, inspiration; or again, poetry). Our rational moral calculations (concerning, in the example, the sinfulness of Solomon) are confronted by the arbitrariness of divine favor. This confrontation invites us to judgment and action (“you must choose”), in a way that arguments from external authority never can.

The passage presents four supernatural manifestations (King David, fire, the reading from Proverbs and the reading from Job), at least three of which are ignored by the men of the Great Assembly. The fourth may be presumed to have convinced them to give Solomon a pass (otherwise the Mishnah would condemn four kings instead of three). But it seems that R. Ashi and Rab Yehudah are inviting us to judge things for ourselves.

Let us consider then: Solomon violated the commandment to have no other gods before YHWH—this is the complaint of the Deuteronomist, and presumably what the men of the Great Assembly had in mind. But we can judge him even more. The Torah exhibits parallels between the cruel reigns of Pharaoh over the Israelites and Solomon over the northern Israelites, whose desire for independence was especially evident at the beginning and end of his reign.
Solomon was a tyrant. Taxes, conscription, forced labor, the census, the sale of Israelite territory—all the bad things Samuel had warned about came to a head with Solomon. Moreover he appropriated the religion of YHWH for political purposes, and began the process of religious centralization that would culminate with Hezekiah and Josiah. The ambivalence of the tradition, between populism and authoritarianism, social justice and ritual orthodoxy, would forever retain the shadow of Solomon’s hand, like Constantine’s in Christianity. And of course many of the real offenses of Solomon can also be attributed to his father.\textsuperscript{334}

When we reject the plea of the ghost of David, we are at once rejecting the institutionalization of the spirit, the violence necessary to the founding of the state, and the authority of the dead. Our moral sense can’t be swayed by kings or ghosts, or the dead hand of tradition followed slavishly. Nor must it be dissuaded by fear, whether of physical threats like fire or of the supernatural.

The third manifestation combines the supernatural with the Scriptural to present the argument that Solomon’s construction of the Temple puts him above mortal judgment. At the same time it suggests the view that kings are never subject to the judgment of “obscure men”. (If the men of the Great Assembly were obscure, how much more so ourselves.) In rejecting this, we reject the idea that divine favor can be bought, that God’s glory is perceived through impressive architecture. And can’t we reject as well the “Heavenly Voice”\textsuperscript{335} that interprets texts for us? Although the Talmud makes use of this device on a number of occasions, such as the statement of the general preference for Hillel over Shammai, it also frequently discounts it by reference to the famous story of Rabbis Eliezer and Joshua (\textit{Bava Metzia} 59b).

\textbf{The Rejection of the Heavenly Voice}

That story begins with R. Eliezer “arguing” his case by means of miraculous events such as the walls of the building collapsing, and R. Joshua’s rejection of the authority of miracles, which miraculously undoes R. Eliezer’s miracles. Finally we meet the miraculous revelation, the Heavenly Voice (\textit{bath kol}):

\begin{quote}
…Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: ‘Why do you dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the halachah agrees with him!’ But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: ‘\textit{It is not in heaven}.’\textsuperscript{336} What did he mean by this? — Said R. Jeremiah: That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because You have long since written in the Torah, after the majority to incline.\textsuperscript{337} R. Nathan met Elijah and asked
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{334} Several problematic issues associated with David have already been discussed in part 1, sec.17.
\textsuperscript{335} \textit{bath kol}, that is the divine “daughter voice”, which is a lesser phenomenon than God’s direct speech in the Torah, e.g. to Moses.
\textsuperscript{336} Deut.30:12
\textsuperscript{337} Ex.23:2
him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour? — He laughed, and replied by saying, ‘My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me.’ It was said: On that day all objects which R. Eliezer had declared clean were brought and burnt in fire. Then they took a vote and “blessed” him.

There is much more here than I can cover. I have quoted R. Joshua’s refutation, R. Jeremiah’s explanation of it, R. Nathan’s report from Elijah, and the initial statement that R. Eliezer was excommunicated (the meaning here of the euphemism “bless”), because these four points give clues to help us forward in our judgment of the bath kol that gets the last word with the men of the Great Assembly.

The story is sometimes cited as evidence that rabbinical Judaism turned away from the miraculous, or from the authority of mystagogues, to the supremacy of reason and consensus. But the text relies heavily on the miraculous, or mythic mode; and the reference to consensus or the “majority” is ambiguous at best.

R. Joshua’s citation is from a beautiful passage that contains the essence of Deuteronomy’s humanistic reform of Israelite religion:

For this commandment which I command you this day, is not hidden from you, nor is it far off. **It is not in heaven**, that you should say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it? Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it? But the word is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it.

This ancient wisdom not only tells us that the basic principles of justice, respect and charity have been laid out in previous Torah passages, but more fundamentally, that these principles are in a sense already known to us, that we find them in ourselves and, most crucially, in our encounters with other people. In most cases, we know the right thing to do; the difficulty is in doing it. And even when the right path is obscure, because the particular case is unexpected or abnormal, we must still begin (as Aristotle urged) with what is nearest and most familiar; with the practical basis of language, and the grounds of moral reasoning in our lives and our historical situation.

But is the message of “It is not in heaven” congruous with “after the majority to incline”? Doesn’t the self-determination championed by R. Joshua conflict with R. Jeremiah’s simple majoritarianism? Perhaps a clue is given by the strange way in which R. Jeremiah takes the words out of context. Acharei rabim l’hatath (אַחֲרֵ֑י רבִּים לְחֵַֽתַח), “after many to turn”, is associated by him with the victory of the majority in the argument against R. Eliezer. But the quotation is about not following the majority:

you shall not be [i.e. follow] after many to evil, nor answer in a lawsuit to turn (l’natath) after many to making-turned (l’hatath) [i.e. perversion] (of justice).
The double use of the verb *natah* (נאת), to turn or stretch out, first in the sense of “inclining toward” or following, second in the sense of twisting or perverting, is inverted or ignored by R. Jeremiah. Was he really so ready to turn and twist the text himself, leaving out the “not”? By this logic one could also deduce “you shall murder”, “you shall have other gods”, etc.

The teachers represented in the Talmud all assume that their audience is able to recognize Biblical quotations, even consisting of just two or three words, without asides or footnotes. It seems implausible, then, that R. Jeremiah was trying to slip one by anybody. His main point is that the Torah is complete, not awaiting divine additions or editing. The answer is there, if we use our mouths (language) and hearts, following what is already in them. The majority can be wrong. But if they are, the only course of action open to us is to try to persuade them—not retreat into the desert and wait for divine intervention. So I think R. Jeremiah is incorporating an ironic meaning here: even when the majority is wrong, we must still incline or reach out toward them; but not simply to accept whatever they say. It isn’t that R. Eliezer was wrong, but that, in his conservatism, he couldn’t reach out and adapt to the new post-Temple reality … to the creative demands made upon the present age, and upon the interpretive abilities of the individual.

Likewise, even when confronted by the supernatural, we must rely on our own interpretive sense. It’s anachronistic to say that the story of the Eliezer-Joshua debate represents a triumph of reason over superstition, as if one who understands the parable must disbelieve in miracles. The importance of self-reliance in spiritual interpretation is all the more striking in the context of a worldview that has no division into natural and supernatural, scientific and spiritual. More important than the question of belief in the supernatural is the question of spiritual authority and the legitimacy of mythic language. The report of R. Nathan and Elijah, especially in this context, raises the question of who (if anyone) is supposed to take this literally, who is allowed to claim meeting Elijah (even if only metaphorically), and who is allowed to attribute such a meeting to another.

A further question is raised by Elijah’s report: if the assertion of reason over miracles is a “defeat” over God, how are we to understand this? I suppose that it must be more in the nature of a test, rather than the forcing of a change in the eternal; and that God’s laughter indicates not surprise but rejoicing at the passing of the test—an event that would mark the beginning of a new era, in which legal precedents can be overturned, and a new reign of principle instituted. In the new age the ability to rely on legendary authorities and uninterpreted precedents would be severely curtailed.

R. Eliezer’s conservative rulings were overturned, and he was “blessed”—which I fear means “cursed”—and shunned by the community. Subsequent accounts show that the community suffered most as a result, with R. Aqiva expressing their broken hearts and remorse over the “blessing” at R. Eliezer’s deathbed. The whole community (or let us say, the majority) was like a guilty child crying for its parent’s forgiveness. Although there was a necessity to their rejection of authority—the necessity of recognizing that the truth isn’t far away
from us, but present in the everyday—the validity of their understanding would only emerge from the forge of repentance, and in a “marriage of young and old”\textsuperscript{338} that could unite the tragedy of alienation and death with the comedy of divine laughter.

**Solomon's trial (continued)**

So consideration of R. Joshua’s rejection of the Heavenly Voice at once strengthens our confidence in the rejection of David’s ghost (and other supernatural manifestations in favor of Solomon), and warns us that this rejection will come with a cost. The Mishnah apparently judges that in this case the cost is too high. Let’s consider it for ourselves with the help of the two “heavenly” quotations.

I dismissed the reference to Solomon’s building of the Temple, and the implication that our (and the Great Assembly’s) standing in the case, and our competence to judge the founders of institutionalized religion, is only that of “obscure men”. But what about the quotation? It’s the last verse of the 22\textsuperscript{nd} chapter of Proverbs. It suggests first of all that we aren’t diligent enough in our work. Who could deny that? The previous verse says “Don’t remove the ancient (’olam ביאולם) landmark that your fathers made.” The landmark is not only ancient, it is a marker of the world (the other common meaning of ‘olam). The historical world isn’t a blank slate for us to write on; it’s a boat upon the open sea, which we have to repair. If we rip apart a section that hasn’t been properly supplemented, we may sink ourselves faster than we would have by leaving the old leaky hull in place.

We also find eyes and mouths, bread and language in this chapter: “He that has a good eye shall be blessed; for he gives of his bread to the poor.” I imagine that this “good eye” is not the eye that “abuses my soul” in Alas—or rather, it is not limited to the vision of that despairing eye, but also looks forward to the possibility of redemption; it is the eye of moral-historical understanding and imagination. “He that loves pureness of heart, favor of his lips, his friend a king.” The purity that seeks expression in religious language, in the praise of God and the world, is associated with political favor, the favor that the diligent businessman also enjoys (and which puts him above “obscure men”). But are we sure that the “king” here is an ordinary king like Solomon? It could also imply the divine King. Or “his friend a king” (re’ahu melech רוואה מלך could be read in the other direction: his pure speech makes his friend like a king. In any case, it is the purity of heart and speech that counts. And we know that Solomon’s heart was not pure, it was turned toward foreign gods, and that this angered God.\textsuperscript{339} The only caveat may be that we don’t forget to judge ourselves while we are judging Solomon.

\textsuperscript{338} see sec. 18(d) above
\textsuperscript{339} see 1 Kings 11
But now we come to the quotation (Job 34:33) that ostensibly persuaded the Great Assembly. It’s pretty obscure, and the first problem is translation. Here are a few:

[Should it be] according to thy mind? he will recompense it, whether thou refuse, or whether thou choose; and not I: therefore speak what thou knowest. (KJ)

Will he then make requital to suit you, because you reject it? For you must choose, and not I; therefore declare what you know. (RS)

Will He then settle on your terms, because you reject it? For you must choose, and not I; and declare what you know.

The Talmud quotation leaves off “…and declare what you know”, but at least that part seems clear. The part that makes a difference is …ki m’aseth ki ‘atah t’bachar (כִּי מָאָסֶתָ֖י אֲתַ֣חַ֑ר). Is it “whether you reject or whether you choose”, or is it “…because you reject it? For you must choose…”? The conventional interpretation prefers the former, because it wants to discount the value of the choice made by the men of the Great Assembly, even though this way of breaking up the lines is unpoetic and forced. But perhaps the Talmudic text has not presented such an easy ending; perhaps we do have to choose, and examine what it is that we really know about the matter.

Our deliberations must of course take Job into account once more. Previously we encountered two quotations (13:15 and 38:12) which we considered only in their immediate contexts. In the first case, the denial of hypocrisy pointed to a reasoned confrontation of tragedy without hope of personal salvation (“…I have no hope, yet I will argue my ways to His face…”), which nevertheless offers access to divine presence; in the second, the Voice from the whirlwind suggests the ambivalence of tragedy (as deserved and undeserved [for the “wicked” or the “poor” (resha’im or reshim]), and of sociability (as necessary but also giving rise to the necessity of “exile” or solitude). Together these suggest, if nothing else, the unavailability of easy answers, of hope for material salvation or a plan for social harmony.

But a broader understanding of Job must include the positive as well as the negative, the teaching on divine favor as well as the teaching on acceptance. In this connection I turn to the explicit discussion of Job in Bava Basra (15b). I won’t bother with the context, except to say that it is a discussion of the divisibility and indivisibility of the Bible, including the authorship and historical setting of various books. And I will extract three points only, to illuminate the Talmudic reading. The first is one of many opinions about when and where Job lived.

R. Eliezer says that Job was ‘in the days of the judging of the judges’,\(^\text{340}\) as it says, Behold all of you together have seen it; why then are you altogether vain [hebal

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\(^{340}\) Ruth 1:1 “And it came to pass in the days of the judging of the judges” (bayamei shofat hashofetim בַּיֵּמֵי שׁוֹפָט הַשְׁפָּטִים)
What generation is it that is altogether vain? You must say, the generation where there is a ‘judging of the judges’.

R. Eliezer exploits the poetic diction of the opening line of *Ruth* (prosaically understood to mean ‘in the time of the judges’) to discern a time when judges were themselves judged. This corresponds as well to the refrain of *Judges*, that it was a time when everyone did what was “right in his own eyes”—an expression whose dialectical character we considered in connection with the rebellious Sheba. The point here, however, is that we can take this to support the insight from our context in *Sanhedrin*, that the problem of *Job* (the so-called “problem of evil”) is essentially a matter of judgment.

We are called upon to judge God’s creation (which is tantamount to judging God): it is out of this necessity that the possibility of authentic praise arises. But it also entangles us in the paradoxes of wisdom encountered from the beginning of this study. The paradox can be reduced to its starkest form: who am I to judge God? (Not only because “what is man?” etc.; but even if you argue that Abraham and Moses argued with God, and that the name ‘Israel’ comes from Jacob’s wrestling with Him, etc., you still must ask “who am I?” compared to them.) The most difficult judgment is made dramatically more difficult by the persistence of the question about our ability to judge.

Now R. Eliezer hardly implies that we should judge the judges, or put ourselves in their place. He identifies the judging of judges with what happens in an “altogether vain” generation. (Job would have been the exception.) But is our generation not altogether vain (with the possible exception of…)? Certainly in our repentance from the extremities we have imaginatively identified with the hyperbole of *Alas* and *Psalms* that sees *eyn gam echad*, not even one worthy soul on earth. Nevertheless, don’t we have to admit that judges exist and are to some extent respected; that all we can do is to build upon the past; and that we ourselves are not altogether without judgment?

The quotation asks how we can act vainly when all of us have seen it for ourselves—seen what? The previous verse is: *I will teach you by the hand of God; that which is with Shadai I will not conceal*. The speaker is Job, who has previously declared that God has “taken away [his] judgment”, but nevertheless swears that he speaks only truth (he is no hypocrite). Now he is somehow in a position to speak of “that which is with God”. And yet this mystery is exactly what everyone has seen! We have all seen it, and yet somehow we are unable to acknowledge it, to live in accordance with it. Isn’t that why the Voice will tell us to choose and to “declare what you know”? What we know and have seen is the teaching that is “not in heaven”, but in our hearts and in our mouths, the teaching championed by R. Joshua. Without denying the validity of R. Eliezer’s insistence on established authority, we must again temporarily deny his authority, in order to perform the necessary exercise of our own moral-historical understanding. We have to identify with the altogether vain generation, to judge both established

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341 Job 27:12
342 an alter ego of Jeroboam; see part 1, sec.3(b)
343 see especially part 1, sec.3(b),8-9,17-20,23
authority and ourselves, in order to pursue the positive judgment in the most unhypocritical manner. The problem of Job is our problem.

What is meant by the words, The oxen were plowing and the asses feeding beside them? — R. Yochanan said: This indicates that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave Job a taste of the world to come. [شׁומֵטֵיוֹר ... מִצְנִיר הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא]

R. Yochanan uses a strange argument to prove that Job had access to or a share toward the world to come. (Others argue that Job committed the dealbreaker sin of not believing in resurrection. I say good for Job.) It pictures his experience of the world’s coming in a miraculous coexistence of causes and effects (eating the harvest even while sowing it). I take this as picturing the attainment of the ideal. But I also take it as ratifying Job’s claim to speak of divine things, and to speak of them as things that are already known and familiar to us. Job’s argument with God is part of his coming to the point of judgment and praise.

Although You know that I am not wicked, and there is none that can deliver from Your hand. Raba said: Job sought to absolve the whole world from justice. He said: Sovereign of the Universe, You have created the ox with cloven hoofs and thou hast created the ass with whole hoofs; thou hast created Paradise and thou hast created Gehinnom: thou hast created righteous men and thou hast created wicked men, and who can prevent thee? His companions answered him: Indeed, you do away with fear, and restrain meditation before God. If God created the evil inclination, He also created the Torah as its spice.

The standard translation of ‘al daithchah ki lo’ ar’sha’ (although you know that I’m not wicked), renders the verse somewhat senseless. It must be connected back with “why do You dispute with me… although You know that I am not wicked”; but then “and none can deliver…” seems like a non sequitur. Thus Raba reads “if You didn’t know, then I wouldn’t be wicked”—apparently assuming that divine knowing is equivalent to willing. Then “none can deliver” reinforces the idea that everything happens according to God’s will. Because God is responsible for the evil as well as the good, how can we be blamed?

Raba counters this anarchic extreme with the words of Eliphaz to Job: your ignorant complaint against God leads to further sin. Eliphaz of course thinks that Job’s suffering must be a consequence of prior sins, which is what Job—as well as Elihu, and ultimately God—all deny. At first Job accepts the causal connection and thinks that there must just be some kind of mistake. Only after Elihu’s speech does he reach a higher understanding of God’s relationship to the world, and thus of His presence to us. Our pursuit of God is not a pursuit of material well-being. And God’s creation of the wicked doesn’t absolve them;

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344 Job 1:14
345 Job 10:7
346 Job 15:4
meditation before God requires soul-searching, requires the urgent examination of one’s moral-historical situation, which must precede the understanding of God’s relation to it. It’s too easy to say “God created everything.”

So Raba\textsuperscript{347} adds an answer to everyone who ponders God’s creation of evil: He created the Torah as “spice” (tavlin) for the inclination toward evil, that is, the involvement in biology, psychology and history. This world is all about making choices, gaining understanding and engaging the moral-historical imagination; it necessarily involves the possibility of failure, as well as physical disruptions. But it can be developed—its proper taste brought out by the “spice” in such a way that the imagination and the will are illuminated.

Nevertheless, the answer of Eliphaz doesn’t stand as a refutation of Job’s desire to absolve the whole world. And we shouldn’t read this desire simply as an evasion of justice. A deeper interpretation would be that Job is seeking above all to absolve God—that he is reaching toward the positive judgment on the world, toward praise. As we have seen, true praise and blessing must have the reality of evil squarely in view, even as it savors its foretaste of the world to come. The desire for a positive judgment will be tempered by reality, but it is a necessary beginning—a dialectical moment—to which meditation and repentance (self-judging) must be added, if the foretaste is to permeate our lives.

So we must choose, as did the men of the Great Assembly. Returning to the quotation from the speech of Elihu to Job, we have to decide that the King James translation (“…whether you refuse or choose; therefore speak…) is to be rejected, as it provides no reason why he should speak. But in the preferred translation (“…you must choose… and declare what you know”), the choosing and the speaking belong together. The effort to make “what we know” (the truth that is not in heaven or across the sea) the focus of our decisions and behavior is one with the effort to purify our speech and come to a thankful judgment upon the world.

Therefore the rebuke of Elihu (“will he settle on your terms because you reject it?”) can’t be taken as a refutation of the Great Assembly, Heavenly Voice or not. Perhaps another explanation is required for the leniency of the Mishnah. But in any case the ambiguity of the situation is only heightened by the following text, which seems to assert the very idea for which Job was criticized: absolving all the sinners (or at least all the ones here under consideration)—as if that might really be the only way to get Solomon off the hook.

If you take away Solomon, then perhaps too much of the tradition is undermined. You will soon be condemning his father as well. But it seems to me that we need to be up to the magnitude of that rethinking.

\textbf{36. Universal Forgiveness}

\textsuperscript{347} or perhaps the editor, borrowing a line from \textit{Kiddushin} 30b
The Interpreters of Signs (Doreshe Reshumoth) maintained: All of them are coming to the world to come, as it is written, *Gilead is mine, Manasseh is mine; Ephraim also is the strength of mine head; Judah is my lawgiver; Moab is my washpot; over Edom will I cast out my shoe: Philistia, triumph because of me.*

*Gilead is mine* this refers to Ahab, who fell at Ramoth-gilead. *Manasseh* is meant literally; *Ephraim also is the strength of mine head*—this alludes to Jeroboam, a descendant of Ephraim. *Judah is my lawgiver*—this refers to Ahitophel, who is descended from Judah; *Moab is my washpot* to Gehazi, who was smitten on account of matters connected with bathing. *Over Edom will I cast out my shoe*—to Doeg the Edomite.

The ministering Angels exclaimed before the Holy One, blessed be He, ‘Sovereign of the Universe! If David comes, who slew the Philistine and gave possession of Gath to thy children, what will you do with him?’ He replied, ‘It is My duty to make them friends with each other.’

Needless to say, we are in a murky area. The “interpreters of signs” seem to be a 2nd or 3rd century BC group, most of whose sayings are lost, who initiated the practice of giving highly metaphorical interpretations of Biblical texts. From one point of view, this would make them seminal figures in the history of religion, to whom we owe a huge debt. From another point of view, they were just continuing the activities of not only the prophets but the Biblical writers themselves, who repeatedly reworked older material for new purposes. But they are clearly forerunners of the Pharisees and the rabbis. The difficulty is to locate the difference that the Talmud discerns between their methods and views and those of the Tannaim and Amoraim, and to assess the significance of this difference for the larger questions of guilt and repentance.

The plain sense of the text seems so univocal, and the interpretations so far-fetched, that we are surely meant to regard this as a fringe opinion. If “Ephraim” or “Judah” or “Edom” can refer to any member of the tribe (or country), the connection to Jeroboam or Ahitophel or Doeg seems too arbitrary. If “Manasseh” in context plainly refers to the tribal territory, how can it be transferred to the king of Judah? So the Interpreters overreach in order to support their extreme position of universal forgiveness—a position of dialectical instability, despite its necessity.

But an anonymous voice seems to be appended to the absolving interpretations. The last word of Psalm 60:10, *hithro’a’i* (היתרו’ai), is translated either as “I make to triumph” or “I triumph over [Philistia]”. The second translation would be unproblematic, the first would be mysterious and unconnected to the context; so of course someone chooses the first, in order to introduce a parable about reconciliation. David and the Philistines must be made friends (ri’im רעים)—the hidden meaning of *hithro’a’i*. You might think that this saying was thrown in here by the editor simply because of its similarity to the plea of David

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348 Psalms 60:9-10 (7-8)
349 I had occasion to note the humanistic reforms of Deuteronomy, for example, in connection with “It is not in heaven” above. See also part 1, sec.3(a) and 26.
on behalf of Solomon, above. But I think that more is going on here, and that once again the editorial arrangement advances a coherent argument.

One question concerns the original ending of the list of those forgiven by the Interpreters. Did the “Philistines” somehow relate to a final sinner granted clemency? Balaam is missing from the list. He had no connection with the Philistines. Could the final condemned one have been Solomon? I don’t know exactly how to tie him to Philistines, although the episode with Shimei fleeing to Gath\textsuperscript{350} would work.\textsuperscript{351} That would mean that the men of the Great Assembly condemned him after all, and that his reprieve was granted at a later date—perhaps at the time of Chronicles, with its glorification of the Temple and exaggerations of the virtues of Solomon and David.

In any case, the Talmudic text has extended the forgiveness of the three kings to the very enemies of Israel—surely a wide enough net to catch all the rest of us sinners. Now even if we question the political founders with their violence, the forgiveness required must extend to them as well. But it is now even clearer that the ghost of King David doesn’t carry much weight. The reconciliation of enemies is part of the work of repentance and forgiveness that is needed by those who would render a positive judgment and offer true praise: it is part of the judgment entrusted to us, as well as being the responsibility of God. For God is the focus and the horizon that draws out and gathers our praise and our judgment.

The degree of freedom appropriate to a particular interpretation is hard to determine with confidence. This is another formulation of our basic paradox. In restricting our own freedom out of fear of error, we grasp at tradition too tightly, and thus lose sight of what we already know—the divine spark that is nearer than texts and their interpreters. The key is to allow the right degree of self-confidence, to improvise without forgetting the theme. As in the patterns of fractal geometry, infinite complexity and interest lie close to the boundary between old and new, rather than in the areas dominated by one or the other. We must choose to respect the text, in our own way, if we are really to honor it.

In this connection I must note here that although I allow myself the freedom to guess at philosophical motivations, and mark out the distance between myself and the rabbis with reference to modern historical knowledge, my reading seems to me to respect the Talmudic text more than literal-conventional readings. This will become most clear in the final section below, where what the Schottenstein edition editors, Dovid Katz and Joseph Elias, call an “absurdity” (of the final comment on the paradox of wisdom) seems to me a profound teaching. Their tendentious translation already begins in the following paragraph.

\textsuperscript{350} 1 Kings 2:36ff.
\textsuperscript{351} A farther-out hypothesis might be built out of the thesis of Baruch Halperin that David actually was a Philistine, or at least involved in intra-Philistine and anti-Israelite politics throughout his career. Perhaps the Interpreters retained some memory of the censored David-Solomon-Philistine connection.
37. The Winning Answer

Why does this people of Jerusalem regress [šuv’vah] with an overwhelming regression [meshuv’vah nitzachath]? Rab said: The community of Israel responded [ḥashivah] to the prophet with a winning answer [teshuv’vah nitzachath]. The prophet said to Israel. ‘Return in repentance [ḥizru b’teshuvah]: your fathers who sinned — where are they?’ They replied, ‘And your prophets who did not sin — where are they? As it is written. Your fathers, where are they? — and the prophets, do they live for ever!’ He answered them, ‘They returned and acknowledged [ḥizru w’chodah], as it is written, But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, etc. [did they not take hold of your fathers? and they returned] and said, As YHWH Tzebaoth thought to do unto us, according to our ways and according to our doings, so has he dealt with us.’

Soncino tells me that this is a difficult passage. We have learned that textual difficulties are opportunities. But what is made of the opportunities must be examined carefully. The passage is a long series of puns on turning—turning towards or turning away, sliding back or repenting, acknowledging or rebutting. Clearly it continues the theme of the choice we have to make in the face of tradition, and in the face of the divine Author of that which we must judge. Rab puns on the quotation from Jeremiah to contrast the backsliding (meshuv’vah) with the Israelite answer (teshuvah). The connotation of nitzachath as “victorious” (as in “the winning answer”) is contrasted with the connotation of “egregious” or overwhelming (rendered as “perpetual” in the standard English translation, “perpetual backsliding”).

Rabbis Katz and Elias stretch it further. First they replace “perpetual backsliding” with “persistent rebellion”. Then they replace “winning answer” with “defiant rejoinder”. This accords with their previous admonition that it is God, not men, who renders judgments concerning the world to come; and with their view that the inclination to question God and tradition is a failing rather than a virtue. But it also removes the contrast, giving nitzachath the same connotation each time.

Is there a reason to believe that Rab was thinking dialectically here? The words immediately preceding “Why does this people…” in Jeremiah 8:5 are:

hiflu w’lo yakumu im yashuv w’lo yashuv
היפל ולא קומו.Sleeping is their occupation.
They fall and won’t get up, if they turn [away], but won’t [re]turn.

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352 Jeremiah 8:5
353 Zech.1:5
354 Zech.1:6 — the Talmudic text ends where I have “etc.”
Yashuv, to turn (which we have often translated as “repent”), is a dialectical word. The sense of return and repentance (also found at the end of verse 5, “they refuse to return”) is counterposed by the senses of turning away, backsliding and regression.

Now what is the point of commonality between the opposing senses? It seems that some aspect of the negativity involved in turning away is also involved in returning (in repentance). There is in effect a double negation producing a positive. As a first approximation we might call this negativity freedom: our freedom to “defiantly” defend our inclinations is also the autonomy we need to “return and acknowledge” the goodness of the world, and judge for ourselves the validity of tradition. The answer “wins”, not in the sense of reposing in its correctness, but in that it enables the necessary judgments. The ultimate returning that occurs in these judgments is signified by the final answer from Zechariah, which doesn’t change the “winning” status of the people’s answer.

The context in Jeremiah 8 supports the position of autonomy with regard to tradition. It contains the famous 8th verse:

> How can you say “we are wise, and the Torah of YHWH is with us”? Indeed behold he acted [or: made it] in vain, the vain [or: lying] pen of scribes.

Who is Jeremiah talking to? The nation as a whole, who are required to assent to the Law of the Yahwist king? Or more specifically the scribes—which scribes? Were they scribes of the circle around Josiah? Jeremiah is thought to have known or been a member of that circle; his language is very similar to the language of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History. Perhaps he refers then to an earlier Torah—perhaps the Priestly text, perhaps an edition incorporating the Elohist and Yahwist sources—whose text had become overly fetishized, and whose deficiencies Deuteronomy was intended to fix. For we note that the “vain pen” (‘et sheqer rq? fu) of the scribes isn’t blamed on them, but on “you”, the contemporary custodians of the texts. A text and tradition needs perpetual reanimation or it turns into a lie. It needs the double negation of freedom that freely embraces it in rewriting (either the actual rewriting of the Deuteronomists, or the virtual rewriting-through-interpretation of the rabbis).

In any case, the previous chapter of Jeremiah has already cast an equal contempt upon those who take comfort in the presence of the Temple of YHWH, and upon the ritual sacrifices performed there. “It’s the morality, stupid” seems to be his message. So the position of contesting tradition is confirmed. Let’s see what the specific content of this autonomy is in the exchange concerning ancestors and prophets. “Your fathers who sinned—where are they?” is a setup line for the comeback: “Your prophets who didn’t sin—where are they?” Death comes alike to saint and sinner, so why repent, why pursue the good that will exceed your grasp? Surely the prophet knows that his own text undercuts him in its continuation: and your prophets do they live forever? The dialogue has been constructed to allow for a final comeback: they returned and acknowledged. This characterizes the application of autonomy; but it leaves much room for thought.
The context in Zechariah is the need to rebuild the Temple. The Persian authorities were making a new effort to solidify the allegiance of the Judeans, as they prepared for war against Egypt. The Judeans had to be exceedingly nervous about the situation, but Zechariah told them that if they played along with the Persians everything would be okay. The Temple was part of the imperial structure, but nevertheless God would return to it. “Turn to me and I will (re)turn to you.” (Zech.1:3) The Persian-era Judeans, unlike those who had faced the Assyrians and Babylonians, need only embrace the ancient message in its nearness, and they would avoid the divine wrath that those ancestors endured.

Thus the question “where are they?”, applied to sinners and prophets of a former generation, is meant to distinguish the former failures from those who still have a chance at success. The prophets were failures as much as the people they failed to turn around. —This is the lesson we have learned in connection with Kings Manasseh, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah above. So it is a question of moral-historical opportunity. The present community and the present prophets must enable each other. Otherwise the divine word will “overtake” (hasigu הַשִּׁגי) them as it did the pre-exilic Judeans. It’s up to the new generation to reverse the old relation of scolding prophet to deaf sinners with their free embrace of the new prophetic word. Then it will “overtake” them as a blessing rather than a curse.355

The “comeback” is ambiguous; in fact it is the central textual anomaly on which Rab has built his parable: “they” who ultimately return and acknowledge the justice of God’s punishment—are they the Judeans who suffered the Babylonian conquest, remorseful in their extremity? Or are they the audience of Zechariah, who seek to avoid that extremity? The consistent condemnation of the ancestors (and the hyperbole of “none would listen”) in Zechariah makes the first interpretation questionable, but the second lacks support in any other reference to Zechariah’s audience; so that some are led to see the words as an “editorial addition” here. This leads to Rab’s further ambiguity: he identifies those who returned with the “community of Israel”—that is, with all of us. The ultimate affirmation of divine righteousness was already implied in the “winning answer” that contested the value of life, if we stand at the pivot point between exile and return, between the vanity of ossified tradition and its renewal. The “defiant rejoinder” is a necessary confrontation that precedes the ultimate upheaval of perspective. The confrontation is brought to a head in the concluding sections.

38. Repentance and Belonging

Samuel said: Ten men came and sat down before him [the prophet]. He said to them, ‘Return in repentence.’ (chizru b’teshuvah קְזוּרִי בִּתְשׁוּבָה) They answered, ‘If a master sells his slave, or a husband divorces his wife, —has one a claim upon the other?’ Thereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, said to the prophet, ‘Go and say to them, Thus saith YHWH, Where is the bill of your

355 in Deut.28 the word “overtake” is used in connection with both blessings and curses
mother's divorcement, whom I have put away? or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities have you sold yourselves, and for your transgressions is your mother put away. This agrees with Resh Lakish, who said: Why does Scripture write, David my servant, Nebuchadnezzar my servant? Because it was revealed and known to Him who spoke, and the world was created that Israel would argue thus: therefore the Holy One, blessed be He, forestalled [them] by calling him His servant, and when a servant acquires property — to whom does the servant belong, and to whom the property?

The freedom to render judgment on eternal matters has issued in an outright complaint against God: His punishment of our ancestors—the “exilic” condition into which we were born, subject to the flawed transmission of tradition, insufficient education and yes, the confused and conflicting desires and ideas to be found inside us—has ruined the sensibilities we would need to develop in order to have access to divine presence again (or for the first time). God no longer gives us a chance; he has left us.—At least this is the way it looks from the pivot point of the turnaround, in the first negation, while the possibility of a genuine return remains alive but unproven in our moral-historical situation.

Yet Resh Lakish assures us that the complaint in which our autonomy is expressed is necessary—that is, it has been foreseen from eternity. It is built into the structure of history. God has arranged things, including the Biblical texts, so as to play into the inevitable complaining and arguing. He has determined a way for humans to belong together with Him—not as a tool or an animal belongs to a person, but as two persons who begin in conscious difference and strife, only forging their belonging-together as a long-term project, whose ultimate success remains in doubt. The simple honeymoon of mystic unity lies in the past; we are now in a period of trial separation.

But we have tradition to assure us of the truth and legality of our belonging to God. It tells us that the separation has been all our fault. Is that helpful? The ever-present Isaiah again provides the context. He has, as usual, a hyperbolic pessimism at the fore: “Why when I came was no one there, and when I called none answered?” (verse 2) Not just the majority but no one has satisfied God, which inclines Him to “clothe the heavens with blackness, and make sackcloth their covering.” (verse 3) And yet the prophet himself surely constitutes an exception—“God has given me the tongue of the learned” (verse 4) and “God has opened my ear” (verse 5); and if there is one there are probably others, perhaps including some of “the learned”, should such still exist. The prophet himself is seeking them out: “Who among you fears YHWH? … Let him trust in the name” (verse 10).

The blame we have to accept for the separation from God corresponds to the hyperbolic condemnation, the view from the extremity of an immoral public order and an alienated private experience. But insight into the corrupt state of

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356 Isaiah 50:1
357 2Samuel 3:18 and elsewhere
358 Jeremiah 43:20
things is itself the beginning of repentance, which is in turn the beginning of a turnaround in society. The assertion that our obligations to God (and His to us) remain in force is in effect the assertion of a metaphysical connection—an openness to the divinity or ultimate value of the world, which is built into our nature, and into the nature of language, and the nature of the world. In order to develop the trust that is needed to pursue moral-historical redemption, we have to regard historical evils in their divine origin. This idea continues through the remaining paragraphs of the text.

Nebuchadrezzar worked for God. So did all his successors in Rome, Spain, Germany, etc. We discussed this situation in section 21(i) above, in reaction to Rabbah’s interpretation: “whoever oppresses Israel does not weary” (because they get supernatural aid). These evil “servants” of God were found to bear their own responsibilities, complicating our practical political problems. In saying that we belong to God indirectly, Resh Lakish emphasizes the now-familiar theme of finding wisdom at the extremities of the moral-historical situation, but adds a new note: as the complaint has been foreseen, built as it was into our fallible and aspirational nature, so has its resolution (not merely its refutation, as the common interpretation would have it). The sensibilities that seem to have been ruined by our exilic condition are actually only being cultivated there. Lamentation is part of repentance.

The parallel between David and Nebuchadrezzar can also be read in the opposite direction: it’s not just that the enemy shares something with the native king; the intermediary between God and the Israelites also shares something with their enemy. We have had many occasions to reflect that religion sows the seeds of its corruption in the very act of establishing itself publicly; and we have noted the connection between this paradox and the problem of the violence that establishes a peaceful state. We remain guilty for having demanded a king, and for having enforced our spiritual expressions against the will and understanding of others. And just as the “service” of Nebuchadrezzar aims at a time when the Owner of Israel will take over His possession directly, so the service of kings, religious institutions and religious orthodoxy ultimately does the same. The defiance of religious authority (in the sense exhibited by the men of the Great Assembly, the Doreshe Reshumoth, the Knesseth Yisrael and the “ten men” here) aims at this return to an immediate relation with the divine, the relation obtaining in the world to come.

39. Fury and Redemption

And what comes into your mind shall not be at all, that you say, We will be as the foreigner, as the families of the countries, to serve wood and stone. As I live, says YHWH God, surely with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm,
and with fury poured out, will I rule over you.\textsuperscript{359} R. Nachman said: Even with such anger let the Merciful be angry with us, but that He redeem us.

R. Nachman’s comment is unusually straightforward. He accurately observes the ambiguity in Ezekiel’s use of the word ‘fury’ (chemah רֶםָּה), which he echoes with the Aramaic ratch, to boil or be angry. A favorite word of the prophets, chemah is typically part of a phrase with the word ‘pour’ (shafach שִׁפָּך) — as it is here, “…and with fury poured out” (w’chemah shafochah סְפָךְ). Its common use can be found earlier in this chapter, as in “I said I would pour out my fury upon them, to accomplish my anger against them…” (verse 21). But here the pouring out of fury takes on a positive sense, in verses 33 (“…with fury poured out I will rule over you”) and 34:

I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you are scattered, with a mighty hand, with an outstretched arm, and with fury poured out.

It isn’t just that punishment is itself good for the soul or a goad to repentance. God will carry on the restoration and the righteous rule of the people with fury (and with power and a pervasive reach). Fury reaches from the extremity of exile all the way into the world to come.

The pervasiveness of moral-historical confusion, and thus the cruelty of history, will not cease. (I note in passing that R. Nachman has here made explicit an assumption that the conservative reading of the text belies: he says that what matters is that God redeem us; and thus he says that we—not some dead kings or obvious criminals, but we who study and seek God today—are in need of redemption.) We can, and must, complain about it; while nonetheless we accept the task of loving the world wholeheartedly, and blessing for the evil as well as the good. What makes us able to accomplish such a paradoxical blessing? What would let moral-historical clarity come about, in a mutual upwelling of public and private good will? We cannot say anymore than: it could happen. God might bring it about. God could manipulate the confrontation between us, so that we come to see the fury of history as redemption. God could teach us to see clearly.

40. God Will Teach Us

For He disciplines him to judgment; his God teaches him.\textsuperscript{360} [w’yisro l’ mishpat רְיָסִרו לַמִּשְׁפָּט ‘elohaiw yorenu אלוהי ירונ הָיּוֹדֶם] Rabba bar bar Chana said: The prophet urged Israel, ‘Return and repent.’ They replied, ‘We cannot: the evil inclination rules over us. He said to them, ‘Discipline your inclination.’ They replied, ‘His God will teach us.’ [’eloahiv yorenu].

\textsuperscript{359} Ezek.20:32
\textsuperscript{360} Isaiah 28:26
In the beginning of this study I connected the Talmud’s preoccupation with spiritual blindness (e.g. Nebat “beheld but he did not see”) to the dialectic of wisdom and authority, as expressed in the Platonic question “How can I distinguish the words of the wise from the ignorant, if I am not already wise myself?” The first part of the text conducted a kind of rigorous skeptical examination of the possible sources of authority, from trusted advisors and teachers to prophetic inspiration itself, before turning to the consequences of moral-historical confusion. That skepticism rendered us hesitant to attribute any authority to others or to claim authority for our own reasoning in the face of confusion. Now, after an attempt to see in the extremity of that confusion the moral impetus for a reversal of perspective (that is, repentance and returning)—a reversal that would enable us to offer authentic blessing, by speaking of what we really know in our hearts—we end the meditation on the kings with a restatement of the paradox.

Here it takes the form of our inability to repent on our own—or again, of the fact that there is always more to repent in our “perpetual backsliding”. God has to, so to speak, repent for us—just as He would have to make us trust the right authority, the right voice without or within, before we could become wise. He has to transform the “evil inclination” (yetzer haro’a יצר הראות), which is what stands in the way of our repenting, stands in the way of our clearly perceiving our moral-historical situation, and acting in good faith. The “complaint” or defiance of authority here—the defiant “winning answer” that will nevertheless submit to reality—is that our corrupt nature and tragic history themselves come from the Creator, and can only be redeemed in accordance with the meaning of their creation. But does that mean that God helps undo our spiritual blindness and lets us see clearly enough to go forward, to trust our moral-historical sense? Or that he simply “disciplines” us to the point of compliance? Is the imperfectly transmitted tradition enough of a start for us to reconstruct, imagine and assert a new beginning? Or must we simply await understanding while holding to the letter of the law as if it were contemporary revelation?

**a. Two Ways of Interpretation**

The ambivalence of the paradox (as demanding activity or passivity) is reflected in the two ways of interpretation that are possible here. One is the way that I have attempted to follow, in which I have been influenced by Emmanuel Levinas (although I in no way claim to represent him). This approach:

1) regards particular historical figures as representative of universal problems (that is, problems faced by you and me)
2) looks for underlying connections between the smallest textual units on a spiritual or philosophical plane, therefore
3) focuses on the interplay of perspectives rather than the establishment of fixed doctrine
4) regards creative interpretive leaps (taken by rabbis with regard to Scripture) as signs of authoritative teaching, and as encouragement to the creative imagination (even “defiance” or assertion of their own authority) of students such as ourselves.

In contrast, the approach represented by many of the editors and commentators I have encountered:

1) tends to take all Talmudic statements about historical figures literally (while allowing that there is a certain amount of “legendary” material there)
2) looks for the thematic unity of intermediate-length sections at the surface level of historical information
3) disregards minority opinions and interdependencies in favor of the “right answer”
4) displays great credulity with regard to parabolic statements, because of misplaced respect for rabbinical authority and unwillingness to speak authoritatively or creatively

Naturally I think that the second view, which I have called “conservative”, leads to grave errors. I think that it devalues the text in the manner Maimonides observed (“In their own minds, they think they are honoring and exalting the Sages, but they are actually degrading them to the lowest depths”).

In many cases, taking the ostensibly historical statements literally leads us to a picture of the rabbis as woefully ignorant and credulous. To take the primary example in our study, if Jeroboam, Ahab and Manasseh had actually been Torah scholars—and if the Torah had actually existed when they lived—then there would be more evidence of it in the Biblical record itself (as well as less evidence of its composite nature, anachronisms, etc.). But let’s give the rabbis a pass on this. What they could not have reasonably believed are things like the identification of Jeroboam’s father with Micah, a contemporary of Moses’ grandson. The Talmudic representation of the kings, like the identification of figures from different times, is an imaginary retrojection, whose proper motivations and context must be sought beyond the historical level. Instead of positing some long chain of corrupt and credulous oral history, a spiritual-metaphorical reading restores the dignity of the “legendary” genre of rabbinical discourse.

The problem with understanding the organization of the text in terms of narrowly conceived topics and specific historical referents is well illustrated by the Schottenstein edition’s treatment of the final paragraph of the commentary on Manasseh. After the exonerating argument of the Doreshe Reshumoth, dismissed as a minority opinion, the editors declare that the treatment of the Three Kings is now over. They don’t explain what the concluding text says about Manasseh’s share toward the world to come, or what we have learned in general. They introduce the final paragraphs (24-27 in my numbering) as examples of the fact that “the kings were not alone in their wickedness”, since their subjects were also wicked. Ignore for the moment the fact that all the Jews and Israelites of the
First Temple period (as well as contemporaries of Ezekiel and Zechariah) are thus reduced to mere bad examples. Ignore also the complexities of the relationship between rulers and subjects implied by the remarks of R. Yochanan and Shimon b. Yohai above. What is the value of merely reviewing these “bad examples”? Is it anything more than the admonition to respect authority? Have we nothing in common with any of the sinners we study?

As we have seen, the Schottenstein editors treat the concluding section as presenting “defiant rejoinders” (rather than winning answers). They preclude any examination of the rabbinic dialectic that would be given for us to emulate—not the sense of belonging within alienated history, nor the meditation on the death of the righteous, nor the wish for redemptive fury. And they present the final words of the text (*elohaiv yorenu*) as objects of scorn. Their footnote to the words reads:

> The argument of the Jews was, of course, absurd. Had the Jews chosen to resist the Evil Inclination they certainly could have done so. In reality they did not want to stop sinning, so they sought to defend their actions on philosophical grounds, in effect blaming God for their sins.

Soncino, on the other hand, refers us to Rashi, who seemed to have quite a different take:

> ‘Let God, who is master even over the Tempter, teach us to curb our desires.’ This was in Rabbah bar bar Chana’s view the ‘victorious answer’.

I don’t know whether Rashi agreed with Rabbah bar bar Chana, but I think his reading at least renders the answer something better than absurd.

The Soncino translation must have been led by this positive view of the answer to render *yorenu* as “teach us”, which I have also used above. Strictly speaking, the text doesn’t indicate that it is changing the Biblical *yorenno* in its meaning of “teach him” to the meaning “teach us” that would fit the dialogue with the prophet. The word in *Isaiah* 28:26 means “teach him” because a) its antecedent is “the plowman” who scatters his different seeds as God instructs; and b) if we take the letter nun in *yorenno* as a long or geminated nun, as the Masoretic *dagesh* point in the letter indicates, then the grammatical form must be read as third person singular rather than first person plural. Since the Talmudic text is unpointed, we are free to guess that Rabbah bar bar Chana said “us” the second time, but we have no evidence for it, other than the way it might seem to enhance the reading. If it is simply a matter of expressing stubborn defiance, then it probably makes more sense to retain “teach him”—as if those wicked Jews only wanted to avoid all responsibility and so regarded the Evil Inclination as something external, a demon compelling them against their will, when obviously the Evil Inclination is nothing but an aspect of our own personalities.

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361 part 2, secs. 1 & 4
362 The nun in this case is known to grammarians as “nun energicum” and indicates a sense of emphasis. I learned this from the Biblical Hebrew discussion list.
But if the point is rather that we need help (or luck) even to exercise our own will and good judgment—and that this “we” can cover both the “ancient Israelites” in the parable and those who hear the parable—then it makes sense to read “teach us”, since that would be what is really being requested. It would also parallel R. Nachman’s “redeem us” at the penultimate paragraph.

What strikes me as most inattentive on the part of the Schottenstein reading is the remark that the wicked Jews “certainly could have” stopped sinning. It makes sin and repentance sound as easy as choosing a breakfast cereal. It has the sound of self-righteousness and moral certainty. Have we learned nothing from R. Ashi? In fact, the Schottenstein commentary on R. Ashi’s dream asserts that the reason R. Ashi would have followed Manasseh is that in Manasseh’s day, the temptation to idolatry was overwhelming—unlike today, when idolatry seems ridiculous but other temptations are still powerful. But then doesn’t that exempt Manasseh along with R. Ashi? And if not, what does it mean for R. Ashi (and ourselves)?

The explanation for the disempowerment of the temptation to idolatry is given by a reference to the parable about the capture of the Evil Inclination in Yoma 69 (the subject of the second part of this book). Strangely enough, that parable actually ends with the statement that the foregoing events had led to the elimination of the temptation to incest, not idolatry. But in any case, should we not understand idolatry in a deeper sense than the literal worship of foreign gods through their statues (or through, as the Talmudic phrase literally says, “service of the stars”)? Haven’t we learned that idolatry can appear even in the forms of Torah study and prophetic utterance? And so mustn’t we regard R. Ashi’s commonality with his “colleague” as something that persists across the ages, and which must reach into R. Ashi’s teaching and relationship to his students, that is, to us, readers of the Bavli?

b. R. Yochanan and the Yerushalmi

In the beginning of part 2 of this study, I mentioned the dominance of R. Yochanan in the gemara on Manasseh. In my 7-part division (A-G) of it, he is responsible for all of the 1st, 4th and 6th parts (A,D,F), and the kernel of the 3rd (C). Thus it’s easy to imagine an early version in which these formed the core, later augmented with material from Babylonia. Since R. Yochanan is thought by some to be the compiler of the Talmud of Israel, the Yerushalmi, we might expect to find something of this early core in its section on Manasseh. If so we would mostly be disappointed, for it contains few of the sayings of R. Yochanan we have studied. We find a small overlap, but must look at the thematic connections to see the way the earlier discussion relates to the later.

At the beginning of my study of the Three Kings, I stole a glance at the first sentence on them in the Yerushalmi: they all invented new kinds of transgression.I understood this as a way of indicating that the discussion would be about general patterns of error, applicable to us all. This has been borne out repeatedly in the Bavli, even though it is less transparent there, forcing us to connect generic proverbs and parables with pseudo-historical information by
thinking through the implications on our own. If we look back at the Yerushalmi from the perspective of the Bavli, we find the same phenomenon of a relatively more explicit theme with regard to each common topic.

First we find, not surprisingly, that the Yerushalmi also puts a great emphasis on the nature of repentance, and not just the question about Manasseh. In addition to Manasseh’s repentance, attention is also paid to Ahab’s repentance, and there is a long section on the repentance of Hezekiah, and the many ways he may have “turned” back to God. Manasseh’s repentance, and thus a decision in favor of R. Yehudah and Chronicles over Kings, seems to be taken for granted in the Yerushalmi, where the section ends with Manasseh’s allocution that “There is justice and there is a Judge.”

The treatment of Achaz is superficially the opposite of the Bavli’s, in that Achaz seems to be condemned (the Mishnah notwithstanding). But it really deals in the same underlying subject-matter: the dependence of religion on an intergenerational cultural system with material support from the community. The degradation of any of the elements in the system degrades the whole. And I might have discovered my theme of moral-historical understanding, and its deprivation, in the consequence the Yerushalmi connects with this degradation: God hides His face from Israel. This becomes an overriding implicit theme in the Bavli, echoed in the opening section’s theme of moral blindness (Jeroboam beheld but did not see).

The Yerushalmi’s central passage has angels trying to block the ascent of Manasseh’s prayer and arguing to God that he be condemned, whereupon God says “If I do not accept him back as a penitent, I shall lock the door before all penitents.” (Recall that in the Bavli, this argument is attributed to R. Yochanan himself, who warns of “weakening the hands” of penitents.) Then he makes a “hole in heaven” to receive the prayer, as we have seen above. Instead of R. Yochanan’s argument from redundancy in the Bavli, connecting wa’ye’tar and wa’yechtar, the Yerushalmi anonymously offers an Arabic (!) etymology connecting “supplication” (t-reth) to “breaking through” (chetreth). But the gist is very much the same. (More evidence that the surface topic is secondary.) The Bavli’s substitution of R. Yochanan for God as the author of the pragmatic argument brings the paradox of wisdom and self-determination to the fore, in line with its emphasis on rabbinic self-consciousness and the contractual nature of language. But the Bavli retains the device of arguments between God and angels (as well as arguments involving the ghost of King David), which it expands into the whole sequence of “defiant answers”.

And it retains, in rewritten form, the device of a king confronting a rabbi in order to obtain a more favorable “interpretation”. The Yerushalmi’s visit of Ahab to R. Levi becomes the Bavli’s visit of Manasseh to R. Ashi. (This might help explain why R. Ashi reacts by talking about his “teacher” Ahab rather than Manasseh, in the midst of a discussion of Jeroboam.) And R. Levi’s consequent

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363 The chapter of Isaiah with the quote about God’s hiding was used by the Bavli in its treatment of Achaz as well -- see part 2, sec.13
364 see part 2, sec. 2
365 see part 2, sec. 3
decision to spend six months a year interpreting the history of Ahab in a “positive” way becomes the “equally balanced” characterization of Ahab by R. Nachman. Looking at these developments makes it crystal clear, if it had not been already, that the editorial process was concerned with issues that transcend any historical concern or intention to passively report sayings. The names and settings of the parables may change, but the underlying path of thinking is only refined and deepened.

The final section of the Four Commoners gemara in the Yerushalmi has become the final section of the Three Kings in the Bavli. (The kings have also taken on the attribute shared only by Doeg, Achitophel and Gehazi in the Yerushalmi: the fanciful notion that they were great Torah scholars.) The differences are minor:

1) The Bavli’s identification of the men of the Great Assembly as those who determined the list of the damned replaces the anonymous “they” who heard the celestial quotation from Job 34:33 (“Will He then settle on your terms, because you reject it? For you must choose, and not I; and declare what you know.”) That quotation now follows David’s defense of Solomon.

2) Whereas the Yerushalmi simply presents the story of David’s appearance before the court (accompanied by flames streaming out of the Temple) as sufficient explanation for Solomon’s acquittal, the Bavli augments the mythic element with a discussion of the standing needed to judge and to speak, and culminates this unit with the quotation from Job, the “you must choose” now charged with conflict.

3) The interpretation of the Doreshe Reshumoth, followed by the divine statement about making David a friend to those named in Psalm 60:7-8 (representing either the territories or the condemned kings and commoners), has been condensed, so that the phrase about Philistia immediately follows the interpretation of Edom as Doeg. The condensation drops an etymological reading of peleshe’sheth (Philistia) as “seeking” (to “make them friends”), which would have made our reading a bit easier above. And it obscures the complaint of David against his enemies by interpolating part of a sentence from an earlier paragraph. But nothing substantial has changed.

This core is augmented by the final four paragraphs, under the names of Rab, Samuel, Nachman and bar Chana. A Babylonian coda to the Palestinian meditation on forgiveness and reconciliation. We might say that it returns to the opening paragraph on the Three Kings (also a Babylonian addition), wherein the debasement of the people, developed into strife amongst them, is ultimately seen to amount to strife between the people and God. For the projected reconciliation between enemies with which the Yerushalmi ends is developed into a projected reconciliation between humans and God.

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366 The whole idea may originate with the case of Achitophel, the one Biblically-designated wise man of the bunch.

367 see part 1, sec.12 “He who slew the Philistine…” used also in part 2, sec.23
Similarly, the core of sayings from R. Yochanan found in sections A, C, D and F of the Bavli’s text have been augmented with Babylonian material in B and E (as well as the end of G). The core is, to speak generally, a meditation on mercy and repentance, the contingency of salvation, the primacy of human need, and a performance of lamentation as preparation for blessing. The additions augment these themes with further considerations on judgment and contingency, skepticism and self-assertion. We will see, in our reading of the passage from Yoma (part 3 below), that the self-assertion of the thinker who seeks to bless God properly must operate under “emergency” conditions that take great risks; and it is this kind of emergency that motivates the Babylonian additions to the final section. The “emergency” is that we must speak with imperfect tongues in imperfect language, hampered by the corrupt institutions of an alienated community, as well as our own limited educations and impure hearts. It stands to reason that this perspective would be emphasized, as it has been, in a meditation on mercy; and that it would be expressed in the form of complaints and arguments against the natural order.

After all this, it’s amazing that the conventional reading rejects R. Yochanan’s opinion about Manasseh, which he shares with R. Yehudah. It is in keeping, however, with the conservative mode of reading—an approach that can accept at face value the notion of hospitable cannibals, or the conjecture that without God’s intervention the army of Judea would have defeated the Babylonians, while remaining unwilling to explore the dialectic of universal forgiveness. And yet the text seems to teach that such exploration and creative autonomy are necessary to bless God properly.

c. The Pragmatic Theory of Truth

Finally, let’s return to yisro l’mishpat, “he chastises/disciplines/instructs him to judgment.” The conservative reading of the text, according to which wicked Israel simply refused to choose wisely, treats the plowman in Isaiah’s metaphor as a beast, who can only learn through suffering and punishment. But in fact even the beast can learn as well from the carrot as from the stick. So if we identify with “Israel” here, and acknowledge the ambivalence, contingency and fragility of the “choice” to repent, then we must consider how the plowman actually learns.

Does he who plows for sowing plow continually? Does he continually open and harrow his ground?
When he has leveled its surface, does he not scatter dill, sow cumin, and put wheat in rows and barley in its proper place, and spelt as the border?
For He disciplines him to judgment; his God teaches him.
Dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge, nor is a cart wheel rolled over cumin; but dill is beaten out with a stick, and cumin with a rod.
The Biblical metaphor expresses the capability of the plowman, and the appropriateness of his varied actions with regard to his various tasks. It seems that God has taught him how to be a farmer. What sense does that make? Of course God isn’t whispering in his ear. The farmer’s education is obtained at the school of hard knocks, through “discipline”—or, let us say, through trial and error. (Maybe he tried rolling a cart over cumin, and it didn’t work out.) But it isn’t simply knowledge that is in question, it’s judgment: in addition to factual and practical knowledge, he has the ability to evaluate different courses of action and different outcomes, given the current situation. He can decide what is appropriate—whether a specific case falls under a general category, and whether the category itself needs modification in light of the specific case; how the individual thing is defined by its context, and how the context is redefined by the thing.

Aristotle called this ability *phronesis*, the prudent judgment that comes only from experience. I have called it moral-historical understanding. With this term I mean to steer a course between the narrow objective meaning of factual knowledge and the subjective meaning of mere imagination or mental projection. In terms of philosophical theories of truth, I want to transcend both “correspondence” and “coherence” theories. The first looks for the nature of truth in the way words and ideas correctly represent or correspond to things in the world. It founders on the mystery of how the former can be “like” the latter, what words and things have in common. (Young Wittgenstein called it “logical form”.) The second looks for the nature of truth in the system of language and meaning, which confers validity on individual sentences in their contexts. The system as a whole is what fits together with the world as a whole. But what determines the “fit”?

The key to overcoming philosophical problems of the subject-object genre is to see how the “subject” is part of the objective world. Human language and technology and brain circuitry evolved out of the natural world. The environment (both natural and social) conditions human behavior, including language and inner thought. The philosophical perspective that focuses on this conditioning is called Pragmatism. (A pragmatic theory of truth says that true propositions are those which it proves worthwhile to believe). I think that the text of *Isaiah* 28 shares the insight into the natural basis of language that impels such a theory.

—But surely the author had no awareness of any “correspondence” or “coherence” theories of truth? Not unless we realize that the representational model of language is something that language itself forces on us; that we have a natural tendency to mistake the map for the territory; and that this mystifying power of representation is just what the Torah’s aniconism and prohibition of idols had in mind. (Therefore I was able to call Judaism a battle against language by means of language.) As for coherence theories, they embody the insight into the social ground of language that the Torah wants to disturb when it emphasizes the contingency and changeability of social constructs, and challenges the validity of allegiances to family, community and government.

The “fit” between language-systems and the world (which can also be thought of as the fit between humans and God) lies in our behavior, in the way

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368 Part 1, sec.3 (a)
that the world causes and conditions what we do and what we say to other people in it. Language, like the strategies of farming, is a coping mechanism. Its success is always a contingent matter. But for the most part it depends on remaining within that sphere of “what we really know and find familiar”, which we contemplated in connection with R. Joshua’s rejection (“it is not in heaven”, Deut.30:12) of the “heavenly voice”, when such a voice admonished the men of the Great Assembly to “choose and declare what you know” (Job 34:33). What we really know is what we grasp through prudent judgment and moral-historical understanding.

It is sometimes objected that Pragmatism leaves undefined what counts as practical success or utility. By contrast, both Aristotle and Judaism have a clear statement of the ultimate goal for humans: “knowledge of God”. Even though Aristotle defines this through theoretical cognition and Judaism defines it through moral behavior, they agree that all other kinds of utility are shaped by the ultimate goal. And they agree that it is always out of reach, always “too high for man.” Another way of saying this is that moral-historical understanding deals with the future as well as the past and present. Because the future will not be the same as the past, there is no perfect historical understanding; we don’t just pursue static goals but must re-evaluate and redefine our goals. Therefore it is appropriate to leave the definition of pragmatic “utility” somewhat open. We know that prudent judgment will aim at abstract goods such as kindness and gratitude, justice and mercy, and so forth; but it will only do so to the extent allowed by the particulars of the historical situation—assessing the shape that kindness toward this or that particular person should take, and cultivating gratitude in the context of the whole of life, with its essential tragedy (that is, “blessing for the evil as well as the good”).

Isaiah 28 says that God will rise up “to do his act, his strange act, and to work his work, his unknown work (l’asoth ma’asehu zar ma’asehu w’l’avod ‘avodatho necharyah ‘avodatho מנהגו רה מנהגו ל’אסו הדות ו’ל עבודה עבודה ו’ל עבודה עבודה ו’ל עבודה), God is a mystery to us not just because He is too big and we are too small, but because it is impossible for temporal beings to be done with the process of discovery—for sensitive people to be done with refining their appreciation of the world, or for moral agents to be done with the process of improving it. The world will continue to shock us. To my mind, this is the genius of Judaism’s religious realism. When confronted with a pile of shit, it neither holds its nose (waiting for the afterlife) nor starts spraying perfume (saying the smell is really quite good), but instead says: take a whiff; then get a shovel.

This realism has been developed consistently throughout the Three Kings gemara, in its rigorous examination of the various failure modes of religious expression and judgment; in its acceptance of the contingency of meaning, the always-present possibility of failure as the measure of human weakness; and in its “repentance” for the human condition. In order for this “repentance” to mature into affirmation, it had to undergo a veritable cross-examination of the divine, and

369 part 2, sec.35
a self-critical interrogation of tradition. It had to see the mercy sought by repentance from both sides, thinking through a judgment going beyond the letter of the law, as an exercise in self-recognition; and grasping the horizon of historical meaning from a perspective as tragic as it is comic. In the midst of all this realism, the central fact of hospitality, or the undeniability of the needs of others, becomes the bedrock of moral-historical understanding. The ability of “the mouthful” to shatter all our fantasies of the desirable life leads us to a pragmatic view of history, in which the ultimate judgments will always depend on moral situations in the real world.

Talmudic realism is optimistic, but only after a turn through the depths of pessimism. It thus shares the dialectical form of the question that appears in Western philosophy as “the problem of evil”—the question of how an all-good Creator could create a world of suffering and cruelty. In its higher form, this question is really another examination of the human condition in its rough realism, asking at each point how the temporal is related to the eternal, and confusion to the possibility of order and meaning. In Talmudic language this is a matter of “blessing”, with which R. Chanina b. Papa was concerned in part 1, sec.13. The final section of this book is concerned with the pure language of blessing, developed out of a meditation on the essence of evil.

But first let us reflect on the source of optimism, the “knowledge of God” that orients pragmatic truth. As much as we have alluded to it in connection with the ideality of the world to come, we have spoken only fleetingly of religious experience or theophany in our negatively-oriented discussion. Let us turn now to a famous Talmudic passage dealing most directly with such experience; as it happens, this passage has many resonances with the text of the Three Kings.
Interlude 2: Four men entered Paradise

…nor may the Chariot [be interpreted] in [the presence of even] one [person], unless he is a sage and understands of his own knowledge.
(Mishnah)

Even in the midst of extreme suffering and confusion, we have choices, and the possibility of a way forward. The projection that illuminates the way forward can be based on experiences as mundane as hunger for “the mouthful”\(^{370}\) or as ethereal as mystical ecstasy. Neither is an end in itself. For even the sense of divine presence only serves this projective-illuminative function: the ability to bless for evil; the cultivation of the feeling that in the midst of darkness there remains the ultimate possibility of light and joy, and in the presence of hate the possibility and reality of love.

We began with the phenomenon of spiritual blindness, and encountered the paradox that one cannot reliably pursue wisdom without already being (at least somewhat) wise—you can’t see without already having seen (however dimly). God hides His face (or puts a veil over our eyes); but that means that He is theoretically visible (and that the veil may be lifted). Moses spoke “face to face”. Ezekiel saw the “chariot”. And four rabbis in the era of the Mishnah “entered paradise.”

The Mishnah says that you must not attempt to communicate the highest understanding except to someone who also already understands “of his own knowledge”. But it turns out that the whole problem of theophany is dependent on issues of (imperfect) communication and the mediation of religious understanding. For just as one must have already found God in order to seek Him, the truth of having-found remains bound up with the openness and urgency of seeking; and the apparent self-sufficiency of the mystic in his ecstasy conceals his dependence on the course of history—on what comes next in the world with others.

Text (Chagigah 14b)

Our rabbis taught: Four men entered the Orchard\(^{371}\): Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher and R. Aqiva.
R. Aqiva said to them: When you arrive at the stones of pure marble, do not say “Water! Water!” For it is said, *He that tells lies shall not be established before my eyes.*\(^{372}\)

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\(^{370}\) see Part 2, sec.18

\(^{371}\) the orchard = *pardeś* סרדו — see following discussion of this word

\(^{372}\) *Psalm* 101:7
Ben Azzai peeked and died. Of him it is written: Precious in the sight of YHWH is the death of His saints.  

Ben Zoma peeked and was stricken. Of him it is written: Have you found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for you, lest you be filled and vomit.  

Acher mutilated the sprouts.  
R. Aqiva went out in peace.  

Where are they exactly?  
The word pardes is originally Avestan (Old Iranian), meaning an area with a wall around it, usually an orchard. Xenophon brought it into Greek when he described the lavish parks of the Persian nobility. The Septuagint used it for the “garden” of Eden; the English ‘paradise’ derives from that translation. In the Bavli’s context we should say that to enter this “garden” is to have an understanding of “the chariot” referred to by Ezekiel, that is, the “throne” or cosmic reality of God.  

I call it an understanding, rather than a vision or mystical experience, because the context is focused on the teachability, the interpretation (derash) of “the chariot” given by one sage to another. Nevertheless our text makes it clear that it is a matter of intense experience as well.  
The context indicates that, as the most secret and protected kind of knowledge, it is in some sense the highest knowledge, the closest thing to direct experience of God (if it is not that direct experience as such). In the context of the project of blessing for evil as well as good, it is a question of the fundamental sense, established in the soul, of the world’s divinity or ultimate value. Only a few individuals ever experience this deepest sense of divinity in full, and most of those few experience it only briefly. At the same time, there is a hint of this knowledge in their subsequent memory, and also in the understanding of their students, however incomplete and distorted.  

I understood the “Three Kings” discussion to be operating within a double temporality, in which ascent and descent took place simultaneously or intermittently. And I have spoken about the solution of the paradox of wisdom in terms of the position of both looking-out-for and already-having-seen, as if each relied on the other. When we approach the question of mystical experience directly, we can’t avoid the question of its “memory” in subsequent communication; and we must consider as well the kind of “memory” that Plato called “unforgetting” (what you already “know”), because it is “remembering” the eternal.  

Strictly speaking, the eternal can’t be remembered, because it is not in the past. And while it is likewise not in the future, it can be said to shape our horizon and manner of anticipating the future, by establishing a sense for the meaning of the past present and future—by establishing, in other words, our moral-historical understanding. To pursue wisdom, then, requires a kind of “memory” that anticipates. But this is contrary to the natural order of language.  

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373 Psalm 116:15  
374 Proverb 25:16
One way of “unforgetting”, of rendering the memory that anticipates in language, is the “negative way” found in Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity: the evocation of the divine through saying what It is not—“not this, not this.” And both the Torah and the Mishnah certainly insist on God’s transcendence of human categories and human experience. But in all such thinking, there is a positivity resulting from the nuances and contextual order of the particular things negated. In our text on paradise, the closest we come to positive characterizations of the experience are warnings and negative appraisals; but there is still much to be gleaned from them. Instead of “transcendence”, “joy” and “self-sufficiency”, our text says “don’t leave the world,” “don’t enjoy too much,” “don’t withdraw into yourself.” Therefore it is appropriate that we begin with R. Aqiva’s warning, which we may expect to give guidance on the Talmudic negative way.

**A. The Warning**

When you arrive at the stones of pure marble, do not say “Water! Water!”
For it is said, *He that speaks lies shall not be established before my eyes.*

Now what are the “stones of pure marble”? We would not expect to find these in an orchard. They sound something like the sapphire bricks that the 70 elders saw beneath God’s feet in *Exodus*. The scholars who penetrate the innermost meanings of the Torah are like those who see God—not face to face, of course, but shyly, obliquely, with averted vision.

Aqiva speaks specifically of marble (*shesh שיש*). Marble is mentioned three times in the Hebrew Bible: *Song of Songs* 5:15, *1 Chronicles* 29:2 and *Esther* 1:6.

The first occurrence seems to confirm the association with God’s feet or the oblique view: “his legs are marble columns set on bases of gold.” (We presuppose, as do the rabbis, that the Song is to be read metaphorically, carnal love figuring the soul’s union with God.)

The second mention of marble is in the context of David’s provisioning of the as-yet-unbuilt Temple, the earthly throne of God.

The third occurrence refers to the palace of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) in the ancient city of Susa; specifically to the rooms furnished with couches for elegant

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375 *Psalm* 101:7
376 “Averted vision” is a term used by astronomers. Because of the physics of the eye, it is possible to see some celestial objects that are too dim to be seen directly (the Andromeda galaxy is a good example) if you look at a point some distance away from the object, and attend to the periphery of the visual field.
and sensual entertainment and wine-drinking. This occurrence exhibits both the literal and base aspects of the metaphors of lover and king.

So we may surmise that “pure marble” is the solid reality of the earthly “throne”, that is, mundane things seen in the light of eternity or as signs written by their Creator (which signs are always subject to base misinterpretation). The subtlety concerns the tendency to confuse the throne with its Occupant, so that the earthly solidity seen in its truth suggests the opposite of solidity: the fluidity of fantasy or the freedom of the ideal.

*Don’t say “Water! Water!”*

The suggestion of fluidity is to be resisted, for to let the earthly “throne” be seen only as a sign, without the solid realism of the moral-historical context, is a danger that must be avoided.

Why would the divine vision carry this suggestion of fluidity, or detachment from the moral-historical context? Heraclitus said, *Everything flows*. The sage sees through the solidity of the world, by seeing the Big Picture, the transience of existence, and the absolute dependence of the world upon God, the ground of being. From this extreme point of view, the world is already perfect, and the urgency of communication is lacking. But this lack of urgency is itself morally problematic. For the weight of Aqiva’s warning falls on the saying (“don’t say…”), on the public character of the discourse engendered by mystical experience…and on the anticipation of the blessing we pursue.

The emphasis on discourse is reinforced by the prooftext’s reference to the “speaker of lies”. So we might take the aqueous metaphysical image as a false description of the divine; but this would be too hasty. For one thing, we would have to confront the slippery difference between descriptions that are simply false and those that fail because of the indescribability of their object—or better, because they try to offer descriptions where what is required is another type of speech (or other behavior) entirely. But at least we can say that the linguistic reaction is to be controlled in such a way that the solidity of everyday reality is to be recalled and affirmed precisely at the moment when its being-seen-through is communicated, or when the mind instinctively tries to conceptualize it. And this rather subtle concern can be grounded in a more obvious moral intuition: one person’s sense of liberation and blessedness are not to be held up in conceit before others who are not experiencing things so fluidly and gracefully.

At any rate the prooftext seems to relate clearly enough to the theme of understanding mystical experience or theophany: it seems to say that liars will be expelled from the divine presence. Aqiva would be warning mystic seekers about a pitfall that sends one away from the vision as soon as it is interpreted or conceptualized inappropriately (or perhaps conceptualized at all).

But again it is not so simple. In fact the speaker in the psalm is not God but David. The king is the enforcer of God’s justice; he seeks to purify his whole
kingdom of crime and other base behavior. What has that to do with “Water! Water!”?

Let’s recall our previous encounters with *Psalms* 101:7, where we also noticed the voice of the king merging with the voice of God. In the first case Rabina assimilated the “going forth” (from the heavenly court) of the “lying spirit” (whom R. Yochanan had identified with the vengeful Naboth, wronged by the king) to the “not tarrying” of the liar whom the king vows to expel from his domain. I suggested that the Talmud thus envisioned the principles of deception and vengeance as grounded in the divine—that God “sends them out” in the metaphysical sense of emanations that account for and terminate in the lower levels of reality. The imperfections and self-interest of the king, in his administration of justice, thus figure the “imperfection” of God that allowed Him to create our imperfect and unjust world; and they point to the role of mercy, the opposite of vengeance, in the thought that seeks to follow the “emanations” of justice and reality back to their Source.

In the second case, “he that tells lies shall not be established before my eyes” was part of R. Chisda’s complex sequence of predicates of kings, sinners (including *liars*) exiled from the Shechinah, and familial blessings. Here I connected the decay of human institutions (typified by the king, but intending religion itself) with the context of Psalm 101, where the emphasis is on mercy and song (“I will sing of mercy and judgment: unto you, O YHWH, will I sing”), and with its central line, “When will You come to me?” (וַחֲמָתִי תַּחַבּוֹא הָאָלֵי). “Song” is another name for the pure blessing that the seeker of God tries to achieve. I noted its contrast with the mockery that R. Chisda used to characterize institutional decay, a contrast not between play and seriousness, but rather between playfulness that is self-interested or unkind and playfulness whose joy impels it beyond literal meanings, as its love extends beyond its natural familial foundations to the universality God requires. A playfulness, in other words, animated by the ideal; but with the patience to await the ideal through the decay and suffering of history.

So the “lying” in question here is not a false or excessive description of the divine presence, but characterizes the essence of the metaphysical “barrier” between heaven and earth, sacred and profane. The “lie” is the reality of history considered as something different from the ideal in its fluidity, rather than as the “pure marble” of the earthly throne.

But one can hardly begin speaking about the ideal without first making this very distinction. And one can hardly communicate the intense revelation of theophany without expressing its extraordinary character. Aqiva’s warning is really a way of emphasizing the Mishnah’s call for reticence as a key to the mental discipline of anticipating the ideal.

In certain situations, to be silent is itself a mode of speech, that is, an action within a linguistic context, with implicit reference to the rare words on

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377 Part 1, sec.25 and Part 2, sec.6
378 another translation for *lo yikon* כִּי, which is more literally “he shall not be established”. Also recall Psalm 5:9 *eyn b’pichu n’konah*, translated “there is no truth [or faithfulness] in their mouths”, examined in Part 2, sec.6
gnosis between teacher and student. And the care required, in speaking or not speaking, arises from the fundamentally moral character of gnosis itself. Just as the administration of justice is always subject to being fixed in subjective and literalistic description, forgetting that its purpose lies only in the service of humanity, so the communication of the highest knowledge must guard against fixating upon an “experience” of the divine as an end in itself. And for this reason when the Jew looks at God, she sees only the feet and the throne of judgment. To see beyond justice, beyond good and evil, to the pure “waters” of the infinite, is to lose sight of the dynamic moral reality in favor of the static metaphysical image.

Our parable implies that the three companions failed to heed Aqiva’s warning. Let’s see if these failures also say something positive about mystical experience, when it is bound to historical consciousness as the warning suggests.

B. The Three Dangers

1. Suicide (Ben Azzai peeked and died)

 Sounds like simple cause and effect. But what is the cause and what the effect here? We cannot refer to so-called “primitive beliefs” about the physical dangers of the holy. The only clue we are given is the word hetzitz הֶזְצִית, to glance or peek. This suggests that Ben Azzai did not overstep the limits of modesty by staring. Was he not even supposed to peek?

 The prooftext “Precious in the sight of YHWH is the death of His saints” suggests nothing dishonorable here. Neither does it say that God killed Ben Azzai. The psalm contains the positive line “I will walk before YHWH in the land of the living.” This seems to be the part Ben Azzai forgot to do.

 The situation reminds me of the accounts of such saints as Sri Ramakrishna, who became so oblivious to the physical world for days on end that he was only kept alive by disciples pouring water into his mouth. This is tantamount to suicide. It is objectionable in that it abandons all others who might benefit from his experience. (In Ramakrishna’s case, since he would revive and resume teaching, we can interpret the whole thing as a kind of performance art. Not so with Ben Azzai.) And not only does it abandon them; it sets a bad example. It gives an implicit negative evaluation of the world.

 The blessing we both seek and remember, the pure language that would adequately praise God and His creation, is forsaken by one who becomes too pure for this world. If instead such a person retained the playfulness of song that the pursuit of truth and justice requires, she would still be able to speak to those mired in confusion—even if, from her point of view, it would be like speaking to
children, in myths and fables. For the strongest argument in favor of the value of the world (the practical solution to the "problem of evil") is that we have a moral duty to affirm it to those who might rely on us for guidance or encouragement. Even the most hardened cynic knows better than to communicate his pessimism to children. And the truth is that we must respect the child in others, and in ourselves.

It seems like a paradox: Ben Azzai experienced the ultimate value of the world, but his death communicates its worthlessness. He failed to complete the dialectic that moves from transcendence back to immanence, from experiencing absolute value independent of the contingencies of history, to pursuing that value as it is manifest in the moral requirements of those contingencies. He "went up" but did not, like R. Aqiva, come back down.

2. Divine Hedonism or Madness (Ben Zoma peeked and was stricken)

The prooftext suggests that he “ate” too much—that he indulged himself in the pleasurable aspects of religious experience, beyond what was good for him. The positive implication of the negative statement is that religious experience is the ultimate pleasure. But what can we learn about the nature and function of such pleasure?

The tradition understands “stricken” here to mean that Ben Zoma went crazy. How does one go crazy from pleasure? We might try to get clearer about the pleasures in which he overindulged. One of them must already be apparent from the case of Ben Azzai: liberation, release from suffering, and thus ultimately from the world.

But another pleasure must surely be related to expressing the meaning of the experience. There is a creative joy in naming the infinite. But this joy is inevitably tempered by the misunderstandings encountered in those who only hear the creative word in its old, literal sense. Stuck in the moment of direct expression, stuck in his own idiom, Ben Zoma could not let go of his joy enough to engage in the labor of dialogue. Like a crazy person endlessly fascinated with his own monologue (which was nevertheless for him a dialogue with God), he could not incorporate the confusion of his listeners into his own discourse. He couldn’t make use of his pleasure so as to extend it properly.

Now can his craziness be connected with “peeking”? It seems to me that in both cases of “peeking”, the glance became frozen, the dialectic arrested. It isn’t that even a momentary gaze was illegitimate; it is rather that this moment was not incorporated into the flow of life. Instead it got re-presented in the fixed stare held aloof from negation and change, the idea of “eternity” shining briefly through a veil. Kierkegaard called it the “spurious eternal well-roundedness” resulting from the power of contemplation to “foreshorten” time. Someone living in this bubble can’t communicate with those whizzing past on the train of history.

Animals live outside history. The text tells us about Ben Zoma’s efforts to extend the legal protection of animals, beyond the laws of sacrifice. Perhaps this
is a clue to his state of mind, in which natural existence reflects the glory of the
divine simply and directly, without a moral dimension, without the "lie" of historical
existence that is necessary for humans.

In the Three Kings discussion, we encountered the dialectic of pleasure
twice. The first time was when R. Yannai’s disciples blamed the making of the
golden calf on the excessive “gold” lavished upon the Israelites until they said
“enough.” Since it makes no sense that God was literally dropping gold into the
wilderness, I interpreted this to mean that the benefits and pleasures of religious
understanding became a distraction from its ongoing pursuit. Wisdom has a
natural tendency to decay into something merely useful. This makes even more
sense in the light of our temporal analysis: instrumental thinking turns the
experience into something merely remembered, not also anticipated. And when
one aims solely at repeating pleasurable experiences, one no longer anticipates
reality.

Our second encounter with the dialectic of pleasure was in R. Yochanan’s
defense of Ahab as a lover of Torah, based on the argument that Torah is the
“most pleasant” thing. The implication was that Ahab enjoyed that which he
was denied, the world to come (assuming again that the pleasure of religious
understanding in “this world” is already the basis for the proper anticipation of the
world to come). He enjoyed it improperly, to be sure; but his improper enjoyment
is in the nature of the thing, of religious experience itself. Ben Zoma went crazy
because love of God or wisdom is itself a kind of mania.

So the dialectic is relentless, and the subtlety needed to be “properly”
crazy—to rest firmly in the contentment of having seen while nevertheless
urgently anticipating the advent of a justice that has never yet been realized—
seems possible only for the greatest of heroes. Nevertheless there is a further
indication in the text of just how close Ben Zoma was to the ultimate
understanding. He is said to have told R. Yehoshua, who found him lost in
meditation on the Temple Mount, that he was gazing between the “upper and
lower waters” (cf. Genesis 1:6-8).

…He replied: I was gazing between the upper and the lower waters, and
there is only a bare three fingers between them, for it is said: And the spirit
of God hovered over the face of the waters—like a dove which hovers
over her young without touching them. Thereupon R. Yehoshua said to his
disciples: Ben Zoma is still outside. See now, when was it that the spirit of
God hovered over the face of the water? On the first day [of Creation]; but
the division took place on the second day, for it is written: And let it divide
the waters from the waters! And how big [is the interval]? R. Ahab Jacob said, As a hair's breadth; and the Rabbis said: As [between] the
boards of a landing bridge. Mar Zutra, or according to others R. Ashi,

379 part 1, sec.15. All this derived from the mysterious place-name dai zahav.
380 part 1, sec.23. Thus Ahab must have been referring to the Torah when he resisted the Syrian
king’s demand for whatever was “pleasant” in Ahab’s treasury. (1 Kings 20:6)
381 Gen.1:2
382 Gen.1:6
said: As [between] two cloaks spread one over the other; and others say, as [between] two cups tilted one over the other.

Here Ben Zoma’s disorder is expressed as a philological error. He claims to be “seeing” the intersection of the sacred and the profane, heaven and earth. And that is indeed where the previous critique would have admonished him to look—not simply toward heaven, but into the historical future on earth, where heaven’s reign is to be anticipated. So he’s trying! But R. Yehoshua argues that his Torah reference is illogical, because it refers to the time before the waters were separated—before history began, so to speak. Ben Zoma is still out of history, enjoying God’s eternal essence.

The subsequent discussion then focuses on the “distance” between heaven and earth. It concurs with Ben Zoma’s observation that they are very close together; if anything, he didn’t emphasize their proximity enough. The subtlety required of religious understanding is such that it must see every step on its historical path in the full weight of its realism, yet with the full anticipation of its ideal potential. Presumably Ben Zoma’s reference to “the spirit of God” hovering over reality still points too much in the upward direction; the real “hovering”, like a mother bird over her young, looks primarily “downward”, to the infinite details of historical existence, infusing each one with the spirit of the ideal.

We have to be crazy in the right way. For just as historical existence is in a certain metaphysical sense a “lie”, so our everyday behavior is in a sense insane—turned away from the eternal, focused on meanings that have no ultimate context or moral clarity. Only a hair’s-breadth separates this everyday insanity from the realism infused with divine mania that R. Aqiva maintained.

3. Self-sufficiency (Acher chopped up the sprouts)

“Acher” (="other" or “after”) is the nickname of Elisha ben Abuyah, the Talmud’s mysterious heretic, the student of R. Yehoshua and the teacher of R. Meir. It might surprise us to find such acknowledgment of a heretic as one who also glimpsed the divine—especially since his excommunication supposedly removed his share toward the world to come. Aren’t these things (divine presence and share toward the world to come) really the same? But recall that the great R. Eliezer also was excommunicated, and only granted a reprieve on his death-bed. In Pirqe Aboth (Sayings of the Fathers) Elisha is quoted as one of the sages without any indication of his apostasy; and legend reflects the esteem in which he continued to be held by his student Meir as well as by R. Yochanan, who “rescued” Elisha from perdition (as we will see) even as he rescued King Manasseh from the judgments of the rabbis. So let us say that what is in question is, again, a problematic, double-edged relationship to the divine.

We do not know what Elisha’s actual offense was. Speculation has pegged him as a Sadducee, Christian, etc.; but no evidence ties him to any such
group. The Talmud describes his inability to accept the suffering and death of the innocent; accuses him of collaboration with the Romans against his own people; and charges him most cryptically with the singing of Greek songs and reading of unapproved books.\(^{383}\) There is also the later myth of his meeting in heaven with Metatron, on which much speculation regarding his adherence to some form of “dualism” is based. And Milton Steinberg wrote a wonderful novel about him, in which he appears rather too much like René Descartes.

None of this really helps. Instead I will take at face value the implication that Elisha’s fault lay directly with his mystical experience and response to it, because my immediate purpose is only to grasp the meaning of the parable.

At the same time, I can’t help but note how the case of Acher, even more so than the case of Manasseh which originally incited my readings, seems to mirror the situation of those modern Jews who are not only scientifically-minded but also morally committed to a universal ethic, and open to the value of other cultures. And it’s not only I who make the connection between Manasseh and Acher; the Talmudic discussion (Chagigah 15b) of Acher’s failure makes explicit reference to Sanhedrin’s condemnation of the ancient scholar/villains.

Samuel found Rab Yehudah leaning on the door-bolt weeping. So he said to him: Sharp one, why do you weep? He replied: Is it a small thing that is written concerning the rabbis? Where is he that counted?\(^{384}\) Where is he that weighed? \(^{385}\) Where is he that counted the towers?\(^{385}\) … Three hundred questions did Doeg and Ahitophel raise concerning a tower which flies in the air. Yet we have learned: **Three kings and four commoners have no share toward the world to come.** What then shall become of us? He [Samuel] said to him: Sharp one, there was clay in their hearts. —But what of Acher? Greek song did not cease from his mouth. It is told of Acher that when he used to rise to leave the schoolhouse, many heretical books would fall from his lap.

Even if the dream of R. Ashi and the many clues concerning the scholarship of the seven villains had not convinced us of the self-referential character of the “judgments” rendered upon them, the remarks of Rab Yehudah should settle it. He asks “What then shall become of us?” He weeps for himself and all scholars, whose scholarship cannot save them. He has no confidence in the difference between himself and Acher.

Samuel, his teacher, tries to reassure him, first by impugning the characters of the scholar/villains, and, when it apparently proves impossible to impugn the character of Acher, by accusing him of being enamored of foreign

\(^{383}\) Recall that the Mishnah on those denied the world to come included, on the authority of R. Aqiva, those who read “external” books, which may mean simply pseudo-canonical books like Ben Sira, or the books of Gnostics and Christians, rather than secular books in general.

\(^{384}\) or recited

\(^{385}\) Isaiah 33:18
cultures and forbidden books. But does he succeed with these reassurances? Samuel is essentially saying: don’t worry, you’re one of us. You’re in the tradition. The same thing that went wrong with Acher’s mystical experience was what was wrong in his moral life: he “chopped up the sprouts”—for the neti’oth, the “sprouts” or “plantings”, would seem to refer to the tradition (or to the Israelites considered as potential bearers of it). The Mishnah gave, as its proofof for “all Israel has a share toward the world to come”, Isaiah 60:21:

Your people shall all be righteous, they shall possess the land forever; the branch of my planting, the work of My hands, that I might be glorified.

Acher’s crime must be that he impeded the growth of tradition and the maturation of Israelites as Israelites. The risk we modernist Jews take is the same.

And yet we know that Elisha was a great teacher, of Meir and others. He didn’t simply abandon the tradition. Yet his error, to which we and the rabbis are also exposed, had to do with a certain kind of relation to the tradition. Whereas the first two failed responses to theophany involved hetzitz (peeked), Acher’s response involved qitzatz (minced, mutilated). Surely the alliteration is not a mere coincidence. Instead of peeking at the godhead, Acher achieved his liberating insight precisely through transcending the tradition. But if our supposition concerning Ben Zoma is at all correct, then the latter is already counted as leaving tradition, in that he no longer communicated in its language or furthered its development (and of course this would go for Ben Azzai as well). Elisha, on the other hand, continued teaching after a fashion. He lost neither vitality nor sanity. The exchanges between R. Meir and Elisha “after he went out to cultivate evil” (Chagigah 15b) show him not only as superior to Meir in learning and in knowledge of R. Aqiva’s teachings, but as penetrating to the deepest moral levels of interpretation (as compared to Meir’s more metaphysical and platitudinous efforts). Even as we see him transgressing the limit ordained for Shabbat travel, he warns Meir against doing the same. (And yet Meir ultimately asserted the supremacy of reason over personal authority and was all but excommunicated himself.)

So he stepped out of tradition in a particular and (at least partly) controlled way. It might help to consider here how a tradition is like a person: a presumptive unity guiding a stream of changing material and symbolic elements. Acher’s loss of tradition is a loss of self. Elisha became another person. This is what the prostitute (who knew him as a great rabbi) said to him when he became her customer.

She said to him: Aren’t you Elisha ben Abuyah? [But] when he tore a radish out of its bed on Shabbat and gave it to her, she said: It is another [acher].

He did not integrate the absolute perspective into the flow of his life, but experienced a kind of break in character. After experiencing the relativity of concepts and the emptiness of form, he could not continue to play the game, so
to speak (could not insist on the transcendental necessity of the arbitrary historical form of tradition). But in this attitude he was already departing from that which made the momentary liberating insight possible: tradition and the cultivation of character. He thus mutilated the sprouts of his own insight at the same time as he harmed tradition itself. For it was not only a desire for knowledge that let him enter the “orchard”; it was a fundamentally moral drive as well. Morality pertains to the temporal unity of one’s life: the integration of the past with essential futurity. The pure openness of a future disconnected from its past yields only—again—the spurious eternity. Like Ben Zoma, Acher was too fond of eternity; but this fondness must also have contributed to his aptitude for it in the first place.

Elisha’s view of his own life was of something unique, a category unto itself. The connection between mystical experience and this sense of uniqueness was expressed by Wittgenstein, who said that “consciousness of the uniqueness of my life is the origin of religion, science and art.” But the text tells us that this had an especially unfortunate result: Elisha saw himself as uniquely unworthy of forgiveness—or, what is the same in terms of the Talmudic dialectic, he saw himself as uniquely incapable of repentance. He tells Meir that he has heard “from behind the veil” (i.e., as in a theophany) the words, “Return, backsliding children”—except for Acher.” We might say that he enacts another dialectic that we have seen before: that repentance requires not only understanding the possibility of divine mercy, but also being merciful toward oneself.

And it is with this question of mercy, which proved central to the Three Kings discussion, that the Talmudic text gives its most profound teaching on the continuity of tradition.

When Acher died, they said: Let him not be judged, nor let him enter the world to come. Let him not be judged, because he engaged in the study of the Torah; nor let him enter the world to come, because he sinned. R. Meir said: Better that he should be judged and that he should enter the world to come. When I die I shall cause smoke to rise from his grave. When R. Meir died, smoke rose up from Acher's grave. R. Yochanan said: What a mighty deed to burn his master! There was one amongst us, and we cannot save him. If I were to take him by the hand, who would snatch him from me! When I die, I shall extinguish the smoke from his grave. When R. Yochanan died, the smoke ceased from Acher's grave. The public mourner opened [his eulogy] about him: Even the guardian of the opening could not stand before you, our teacher!

The “four men” text occurs in the middle of the gemara on “…nor the chariot to one, unless he is wise…”. And it follows without break upon a subsection about R. Eleazar b. 'Arak, and the question of whether his discourse on the Chariot “counted”—for it is argued that such a profound speech only occurs in the truest sense when it is spoken by a student to a teacher who has previously likewise spoken to his own teacher. There must be a chain of transmission. Thus the

386 Jeremiah 3:22 shuvu banim shovavim
Acher worries about his student Meir (and Meir’s intellectual heirs)—it worries about the chain when one of the links is weak or broken. This paragraph addresses the repair of the weak links.

We see that Meir is not afraid to judge Elisha, or submit him to the judgment of the divine. He isn’t afraid to impose penance. He has faith that Elisha ultimately has a share toward the world to come. We are reminded once again that the ideal judicial process includes the moment of mercy, and thus that judgments aren’t final.

But Meir doesn’t submit him to judgment with foreknowledge of his redemption; he is willing to take the risk and “burn his master”. The Bavli takes care to separate the dialectical moments of judgment and mercy by assigning them in this parable to Meir and Yochanan respectively, who lived a century apart. Acher had to burn for a hundred years! In contrast, the Yerushalmi had simply portrayed Meir as quenching the flames coming from Elisha’s grave—flames that had just come down from heaven—and saying that if God wouldn’t redeem Elisha then he, Meir, would do it.

The Yerushalmi thus puts forward the shocking proposition (no longer so shocking after we have read about the Three Kings) that rabbis can in some sense usurp the divine power of redemption, or extend the reach of mercy beyond the natural order. But the Bavli shows this shocking result as the outcome of a dialectical process, in which the defect of Elisha’s solipsism is reconnected to the painful reality of history through a process that transcends the perspective of the individual: for the redemption, as well as the benefit accruing to tradition because of it, occurs outside the horizons of Elisha, Meir and Yochanan alike, whose works occur after their deaths. Besides giving us yet another proof that the Talmuds were not concerned with factual reporting (and that the Bavli especially feels free to change the “facts” in order to construct a more powerful pedagogy), this parable shows us how the meaning of history subsists across the generations.

For what else is Elisha’s “redemption” but his reappropriation into tradition (and the adjustment of tradition it requires)? Reading the parable literally, we get a picture of the dead existing in some scheme of heaven and hell simultaneous with historical events. But that can’t be the world to come, which is essentially futural, being either subsequent to or contemporaneous with the coming of the Messiah. So Elisha’s redemption isn’t a move from one zone of the afterlife to another. It is rather an absorption into the living history that aims at the world to come—toward which he thereby has a share.

I have referred previously to R. Yochanan’s close association with the Yerushalmi, and the Bavli’s allusion to this in its admiration for him. Here we might observe that Meir’s mythic salvation of Acher in the Yerushalmi is reread by the Bavli as an action taken by R. Yochanan himself, as if to say that what Meir achieved in parable, R. Yochanan, as the presumed author of the parable, achieved in reality through telling it.

We can see that the three dangers are closely related. In each case the temporality of the divine is missed because of the overwhelming moment. In the
first case the temporality of life as a whole is abandoned; Ben Azzai could see no future at all. In the second case the open give-and-take of dialogue is abandoned for the closed circular thinking of a private idiom. In the third case, the liberating effect of mystical experience, making the individual feel sufficient unto himself and independent of particular traditions and history, loses all sense of hope, loses his future. But far from being something merely to be avoided, the Talmud makes clear that its own chain of transmission depends as much on the vitality of the liberating insight as on the bonds of tradition and history. Acher “repents” at last when his self-sufficiency is itself a part of tradition.

The three dangers are as much an entry into the knowledge of “the chariot” as they are descriptions of its misunderstanding. And the subsequent discussion of R. Aqiva’s positive reaction retains many characteristics of the “negative way”. We may expect it to illuminate the mystic insight which neither “peeks” nor “uproots”, and to indicate how its appropriate temporal integration is to be achieved.

C. The Secret (Rabbi Aqiva went out in peace)

Text (Chagigah 15b/16a)

R. Aqiva went up in peace and went down in peace; and of him Scripture says: Draw me after you, let’s run.  
And R. Aqiva too the ministering angels sought to push back; [but] the Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: Let this elder be, for he is worthy to avail himself of My glory.

What was his interpretation?
Rabbah b. Bar Hanah said that R. Yochanan said: And He came from myriads holy  — He is the Sign among His myriad.
And R. Abbahu said: He is preeminent above myriads  — He is the Example among His myriad.
And Resh Lakish said: YHWH of hosts is His name  — He is YHWH among His host.
And R. Hiyya b. Abba said that R. Yochanan said: But YHWH was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but YHWH was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but YHWH was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.  And behold, YHWH passed by.

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387 Song of Songs 1:4
388 Deut. 33:2
389 Song of Songs 5:10
390 Isaiah 48:2
391 1 Kings 19: 11-12 (The sentence, “And behold, YHWH passed by” occurs earlier in verse 11.)
1. “Draw me after you”: Divine Temporality

Rabbi Aqiva went out in peace.  
_ravi ‘aqiva yatza’ b’shalom_  
רב אָקִיבָא יָצָא בָּשָׁלוֹם

Not much of a clue—“in peace”. The Soncino translation “departed unhurt” makes it into a purely negative indication: whereas bad things happened to the other three, Aqiva got away with it. But surely there is a deeper meaning. The verb _yatza_ must be considered in its positive connotation, contrasting with _hetzitz_ and _qitzatz_ (and continuing the alliteration). We tried to understand _hetzitz_ and _qitzatz_ as simultaneously characterizing the advent of insight and the (defective) mode of its cultivation. In this case an anonymous Talmudic editor clarifies by paraphrasing:

_R.A. ‘alah b’shalom v’yarad b’shalom_  
רָבָּה יָלֶה בָּשָׁלוֹם וּיָרַד בָּשָׁלוֹם

“R.A. went up in peace and went down in peace.” So here too the result of the theophany is already found in the manner of approach.

This is not accidental but has to do with the peculiar temporality of the search for wisdom we have been studying. In terms of metaphysical representation, the “emanation” of levels of logical form from the Absolute, which was originally a metaphor using a temporal process to stand for a timeless structure, is understood literally as a fall in time, which then has to be undone or healed through a corresponding ascent (the journey of the religious seeker). Rabina’s “go forth from within My barrier” plays on this metaphoricity, and on the mystery of justice as the mystery of the separation between heaven and earth, which we must strive to both enact and to resolve. Acher “went forth” to evil out of theophany—meaning that he illustrates the possibility of evil itself as the gap between knowledge and morality. And R. Aqiva’s “going forth” or descent in peace implies his learning and teaching according to a path both just and conciliatory, conforming itself to the “original” emanation of the moral order from the simplicity of the Highest, and the subservience of knowledge to justice. His anticipation of a proper “descent” enables and conditions the ascent.

The prooftext given for “R.A. … in peace” is _Song of Songs_ 1:4: _draw me after you, let’s run_. The whole verse is:

_Draw me after you, let’s run_  
The King has brought me into His chambers  
Let’s be glad and rejoice in You  
Let’s remember Your love  
More than wine  
Upright ones love You.

392 cf. Rabina
This single verse, with its provocative grammar, is perhaps overly rich. Again we have the elements of love and justice, in both earthly and heavenly forms. The dialectical character of love, expressed by Plato as the impossibility of desiring what one already has, here results in another temporal peculiarity: the expression of desire (“draw me after you”) is conjoined with the expression of enjoyment (“the King has brought me into His chambers”). The seeker is at once far off and in closest proximity. The ambiguity of the Hebrew imperfect tense contributes to the effect. The end of the verse answers directly to our question about R. Aqiva’s secret: unlike the other three, he loved God “rightly”, with that uprightness (yashar ישאר) that defines Israel (yisra’el יהושע) (also called Yeshurun ישרון), and which comes from God. God is “rightly” loved because He is the most lovable.

A further clue perhaps links this characterization of the “method” with the dialectics of love: “more than wine”. This can be taken as belonging either with the previous words or the following, as modifying the remembrance of divine love or as characterizing the love that is upright; it amounts to the same thing, but the temporal ambivalence is appropriate. To know God is intoxicating. We may presume again that there is a good and bad, spiritual and literal side to intoxication: openness, warmth, and stepping outside the habitual; or blindness to the real, untempered passion and loss of one’s roots. We could rephrase the problem of the parable as that of being rightly intoxicated, avoiding all the bad effects of wine and other earthly intoxicants. The intoxicating mystical love draws us on more strongly the more we already possess it—to the extent that it is upright: facing up to reality openly and compassionately, engaging according to the requirements of justice.

2. “Worthy to make use of My glory”: Four interpretations of interpretation

raoui l’hishtamesh b’kavodi רואויławהשמש ב’כבודו

The paradoxical interchange of before and after, search and discovery, in the dynamics of theophany is due to the fact that the search itself is animated by the goal. And this means not just the straightforward attraction envisioned by Aristotle when he said that God moves the universe through love; it means that He also created the catastrophic rupture in the order of things, created suffering and confusion and the capacity for cruelty, in order to provide the engine of desire and curiosity that draws us on after Him. Even more specifically, the world is set up to frustrate the spiritual seeker. The gemara says that R. Aqiva also (that is, in addition to lesser worthies such as Elisha ben Abuyah) was resisted by the angels, requiring that God tell them “Let this elder be, for he is worthy to make use of My glory.” Traditions from R. Yochanan are then brought in, completing the commentary on “R. Aqiva went forth in peace”, to give a final statement of or on his “secret” of loving God with uprightness, in the form of four interpretations of Biblical verses. These interpretations relate to perceptual problems of theophany, that is, the obstacles to wisdom in the nature of things and of God. But as with many perceptual puzzles, the experience of overcoming
obstacles is here something positive, something that belongs to the whole of what it means to see and love God. The structure of religious temporality dictates that the “obstacles” are never overcome once and for all, that they apply to teaching as well as learning.

After the divine pronouncement that Aqiva is “worthy to avail himself of My glory”, the text has: ma’i derash מאי дерש, “what was his interpretation?”, which Soncino translates “By what Biblical exposition was he able to learn this?” This makes sense, but obscures the temporal symmetry or ambivalence expressed in the text. It makes it sound as if theophany were a prize attained by Aqiva through the interpretations. But l’hishtamesh לפנייתמש, as “make use of” implies the full religious temporality: he will go forth from the theophany to use it in teaching, living and learning (i.e. approaching it again, as if for the first time)… all for the glory of God. Here too an ambiguity, between glory as reputation and as brilliance or weight, can indicate the coincidence of experience and task, past and future. The text does not ask how he “learned this”, it just says “what was his interpretation?” (The Mishnah’s prohibition was itself stated in terms of interpretation: eyn dorshin אין дерשין, you must not interpret [the chariot]). So what follows is no more a puzzle which he solved in order to gain the vision than it is a result of that vision, already engaged in teaching and learning as a reaction to it.

The four interpretations all say how to see God against or through the background of worldly appearances. What is seen is characterized as: 1) sign, 2) example, 3) master (or ruling principle) and 4) transcendence. The phenomena, supernatural and natural, are inherently confusing and misleading, but also inviting. We need to see how they contribute to uprightness in love.

a. Sign

And He came from myriads holy (Deut.33:2)

R. Yochanan interprets atah אוות, “he came”, in w’atah m’rababoth qodesh ("and he came from myriads holy [or, with myriad holy ones]") as otoh אוות, “his sign”, thus: “he is a sign in his myriad”. His seemingly far-fetched reading answers to the mysteriousness of the Torah text, which is known as the Blessing of Moses. To the critical eye this text appears as a pastiche of very ancient poetry and tribal epigrams. Verses 2-5, with their grammatical peculiarities and strange vocabulary, make the greatest impression of antiquity and oral origins. The northern Israelite provenance of the Blessing is suggested by the emphasis on Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, as well as Jacob (rather than Abraham or “Israel”); and by the idea of YHWH coming from the south (Seir and Paran). The references to “Yeshurun” are no longer understood, missing too much context, but seem to harken back to some ancient political moment, and to a distinctive concept of kingship and trans-tribal unity. We have already noted the possible etymology of uprightness.
Moses commanded us instruction, a possession, community of Jacob. And he [who? Moses? God?] was king in Yeshurun. When the people's heads were gathered, the united tribes of Israel.

R. Yochanan's emendation of the text (assuming an unusual orthography for אֲנָאִים (h) can be) is invited by the mysteriousness of the text, which seems to refer to some notion of angelic beings, but not clearly so: מראבberoхот קדש could mean “from his myriad holy ones”, but קדש could also refer to YHWH, in which case the “myriads” could mean practically anything. Nor does the immediate context help:

He shone forth from Mt. Paran, and came from myriads holy, Slopes (ashdath אשתר) at His right for them.

No one knows what ashdath means, and some translations give “fire” or “fiery knowledge”. But the mythical context is simply lost.

So R. Yochanan says: God is a sign. No matter what the phenomenal background of boundless multiplicities and complexities, whether in the natural world or in the most intense feelings and experiences of religious meditation, God is not to be perceived as a phenomenon. He is rather the meaning to be read in the phenomena. He is in the world, and in us, in the same way He is in the Torah. He is not a thing, to be touched or seen. Nor is he a concept (as if the highest meanings came out of our heads rather than from beyond us) or spirit, subject to representation. He appears rather through the effort of interpreting that which is heterogeneous and seemingly random (in the text, the world, ourselves); He is the horizon within which meaning is ultimately possible, calling forth our will to make sense of things, and allowing them to be present.

R. Aqiva went up in peace because, rather than dwelling on the “pure marble”, he attended to its implications, as one attends to the words rather than the ink on the paper.

b. Example

He is preeminent above myriads (Songs 5:10)

R. Abbahu found a similar prooftext in the same chapter of the Song of Songs we encountered in connection with “marble”.

My beloved is all radiant and ruddy, distinguished among myriads.

“Distinguished” here is דגואל מרבבות, literally “flagged”, that is, provided with a banner, like an army in battle. The verb means to set up a flag or standard. The next chapter of the Song twice applies the expression ארצות כנぱלות “terrible as embannered ones [i.e. an army]” to the beloved, i.e. God. The banner provides
an aspect for an army, by which they frighten and impress. It would be possible to take God as one being appearing in the midst of (or if you prefer, above) many others, like the flag itself, the material sign rather than the signifying act (the army in its frightening aspect). But surely it’s better to say that He is present as the meaning or cause for which the standard is carried. *Psalm* 20:5 says “We will rejoice in Your salvation, and in the name of our God we will set up banners (דגל).” God isn’t in the world but is the meaning of the world; and not as information, but as the horizon and motivation of meaning-making and interpretation.

But then why does Abbahu, contracting *dagool m’rebabah* דוגול מרכבך to *doogmah* דוגמה assert that God is the *example* in His myriad? This seems to revert to the image of an anthropomorphic chief Spirit in the midst of a celestial army. But of course it’s even stranger than that, as soon as we ask ourselves what God could possibly exemplify. God is the most *sui generis* of *sui generis*. He isn’t one deity among others, no matter how subservient to Him they may be. He cannot possibly be an instance of anything—not even holiness or goodness or divinity. For if He were, then we would have to prefer the principle to God. Plato recognized this as a dilemma, but Judaism wasn’t tempted by it.

So God isn’t an exemplary spirit among spirits. Must He rather be that which the multitude exemplifies—the “example in the myriad” as universal in particulars? We know this will not do; although both we and the angels are created in God’s “image”—which Maimonides explained to mean that our essence, which is intellectual apprehension, is analogous to though not of a kind with the divine intellect—it remains the case that God is not a concept.

I think that “example” must be meant by Abbahu in its moral connotation, as when one takes another person as a model whose behavior is to be emulated—except that here there is nothing to emulate (although there are commandments). Abbahu must mean that, whatever exalted experiences one has in pursuit of wisdom, they should only serve the same function as do moral exemplars such as the sages: namely, to encourage us in our own moral responses to life.

Like the angels in mythic vision, mystical experiences are not God, however much the mystic wants to speak of unity and the One. R. Aqiva avoided this error by taking all such experiences only as motivations along the moral path.

c. Ruler

*YHWH of hosts is His name* יהוה כבשן שם *(Isaiah 48:2)*

Resh Lakish’s contribution is based on the practice developed by the Jews in late antiquity, of not pronouncing the holiest or “explicit” name of God, Yahweh
or YHWH, and instead saying “Lord” (adonai), that is, master or ruler. He takes an instance of the name YHWH Tzabaoth (literally “YHWH of armies”, although tzabaooth is sometimes considered a proper name), and by reading the substitute name “lord” as if it were written, comes up with the rather unremarkable “He is lord among his tzaba”, His army. Again we will have to get past the mythic image of a king leading an army, a being amongst other (inferior) beings, and consider the implications of “lord” in terms of a ruling principle, a cosmic reality which both motivates and enables understanding.

But let us pause a moment over the textual basis. In the name YHWH Tzabaooth we have another historical obscurity, with insufficient data to confirm any of the hypotheses concerning its provenance and original meaning. Although its military symbolism is clear, it is peculiar that it never appears in the Torah, and thus probably came into usage after the period when the tribes conducted warfare with only YHWH as king. It first occurs in Samuel in connection with the Ark, which is pictured as an instrument of magical warfare, in a source-text that takes David as its hero. By Isaiah’s time (a possible era for the composition of Samuel as well) it may have been in use by the house of David to connote Jerusalem’s divine protection against all the mighty armies contending for world domination. Our prooftext, however, is from “Second Isaiah”, a chapter predicting the victory of Cyrus (which happened in 539 BCE). It berates the Judean exiles “who swear by the name of YHWH … but not in truth or right.”

For they call themselves after the holy city,
And lean on the God of Israel,
YHWH Tzabaooth is His name.

The prophet is not celebrating this refuge-taking in past glories and traditions, if it is not done “in truth and righteousness.” Thus the assertion “YHWH Tzabaooth is His name” has an ironic ambivalence. It is both promise and warning.

Did the warning that R. Aqiva heeded entail, in addition to avoiding the general problem of reification, a specific prohibition against “leaning on the God of Israel” or His mythic-military aspect? The historical Aqiva’s support of the Bar Kochba rebellion would tell against it. But in the argument of the Bavli, it makes sense that the ironic reference to a warlord should be taken abstractly, as connoting the principle or spirit that animates the multiplicity of phenomena (“the myriads”) and determines their necessary limits—the peaceful rule of the natural order, and the silent imperative of history.

d. Transcendence

and behold, YHWH passed (1Kings 19:11)

393 I have represented the Name by the four letters YHWH in this book, partly because of the lack of certainty about the exact ancient pronunciation, and partly out of deference for those who would be offended.
The fourth and final *derash* is again attributed to R. Yochanan. It amplifies the original interpretation in terms of signification, in a way that also includes the references to morality and controlling principles. The “interpretation” here is given simply by a Torah quotation, unexplained. And yet the quotation has been slightly rearranged, which must give us a clue to its connection with R. Aqiva.

The quotation is famous in several ways, beginning with its context: the appearance of God to Elijah. Like many aspects of the Elijah stories, it is reminiscent of the parallel event in the life of Moses. Both theophanies took place, of course, on Mt. Horeb (the seldom-used name of the mountain otherwise referred to as Sinai). Both men were partly hidden in an indentation of the rocks atop the mountain (Rashi tells us it was the exact same spot). And in both cases the key verb used to describe God’s action in showing Himself is ‘avar, to pass by—the word R. Yochanan has transposed to the end of the quotation from *Kings*. The context in *Exodus* emphasizes that no one may see God’s face—thus the hiding in the rocks, and God’s covering Moses with His hand, then letting him see His “backside”. This fits with our previous surmise, in connection with the “stones of pure marble”, that the Jewish theophany must have the character of averted vision. But with our subsequent focus on temporality, we can also see that it emphasizes movement over stasis: God doesn’t stand directly before us, but passes by, drawing us into His wake (“draw me after You, let’s run”), setting us in motion … weaving us into our moral-historical context.

The passage from *Kings* is also famous as an especially ancient expression of the transcendence that characterizes the monotheistic god: he is not like the storm god (even though some of his traditions obviously have storm gods in their background), or the gods of other natural phenomena— notwithstanding the fact that these phenomena can serve to make us aware of him. And at the same time there is the appearance of the “still small voice”, which has long been understood to be something like the voice of conscience. Thus we see a transcendence of natural phenomena emerging together with an essentially moral conception of the divine.

The “still small voice” at first seems easily understood. To be quiet and still, silent and at rest, is an ingredient in wisdom we have examined before in connection with the dialectic of comedy and tragedy, and as reflected in the wisdom writings. We must withdraw from the hubbub in order to really hear, in order to remember or “unforget” what we know most deeply. The voice in *Kings*

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394 Ex.33:18 And He said, I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name YHWH before you…
Ex.33:22 and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by…
Ex.34:6 And YHWH passed before him, and proclaimed, YHWH YHWH God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth…

395 see especially Part 2, sec. 5

396 Koh.9:17: The words of the wise in quiet are heard, more than the cry of a ruler over fools.
Prov.29:9: If a wise man contend with a foolish man, whether he rage or laugh, there is no rest.
Psalm 4:4 Stand in awe, and sin not: commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still.
isn’t really “small” (the KJ translation of daqah) so much as it is thin (like the manna that fed the Israelites) or fine (like grains of dust); perhaps the best translation would be “subtle”. This makes the interpretation in terms of conscience even more appropriate; and it also admits the greater subtleties involved in evaluating the world. (Elijah, in 1Kings 19, has just been been on the point of suicide, in despair at his historical prospects, when God steps in to motivate him.)

But is it so clear that the voice, manifesting after the wind, earthquake and fire, stands in simple contrast to them? After the “negative way” has said “not this, not this” to the natural phenomena, does it mean to say simply that God was in the voice as He had not been in the fire? Or is it possible that the voice too is subject to a “not this”?

If we look to the context, we will at first be tempted to identify the voice in verse 12 with the voice in verses 13-18. The latter gives Elijah his commission to anoint Hazael, Jehu and Elisha, in order that a mass slaughter of idolaters might take place. If we take this seriously, we will in short order have run the gamut from the sublime to the genocidal, from the transcendent Absolute to “YHWH of Armies”. But we must notice that the text here is a pastiche. Verse 14 (Elijah’s complaint) is a repetition of verse 10, as is the question (“what are you doing?”) posed to him in verse 9 and 13. Modern scholarship regards much of the Elijah story as a retroactive justification for the mass killings perpetrated by Jehu, both through the story of Elijah’s slaughter of the Baalists, and through the commission given by the divine voice. It may be that this voice in verses 13-18 is better regarded as the voice of a royal apologist than as the rendering of a holy man’s experience. And it may be that the sublime words quoted by R. Yochanan come from an earlier text more authentically associated with Elijah himself.

In that case, the announcement of the voice may well have been followed by a resolution that transcended even the most subtle voice, as the apprehension of our moral-historical context requires a vision that sometimes transcends the preconceived promptings and “voices” of moral intuition. The “voice” would then be neither negated, like the natural phenomena, nor simply affirmed; it would be heeded but restrained. Unlike a military commission, the voice of the real theophany would have to maintain its stillness and its openness. It would have to be pursued “in peace”, with the same attention to meaning that first situated us so as to be able to hear it.

**Transition**

Both before and after theophany, restraint is required; the “restraint” is the “return” (teshuvah) of dialectical experience and thinking. But the negation of the negation is required to complete the cycle: making the “restraint” into a liberation from literalism, seeing the perpetual oscillation of high and low as itself grounded in the Most High.

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397 see Marsha White, *The Elijah Legends and Jehu’s Coup*
The Parable of the Eggs is conventionally read as a lesson in restraint, but we will see that the discussion uses the dialectic of parables in its teaching on the act of blessing, that is, the ideal incorporation of theophany in language.
The Problem of Evil and the Parable of the Eggs

...and also the Holy One, blessed be He, will join them in wondering [at evil], as it is written: Thus said YHWH Tzeba'oth: That it may be wondrous in the eyes of the remnant of this people in those days, so too shall it be wondrous in My eyes.
— Sukkah 52

Introduction: Optimism and Astonishment at Evil

Religion can be optimistic or pessimistic, life-affirming or world-denying. It can celebrate the wide range of human experiences, or ascetically narrow them down. It can induce wonder and gratitude for everyday existence, or it can disparage “this world” in favor of another. The attitudes of specific individuals, movements, literary works or threads within a tradition can be located on the continuum between these poles. But even at its most enthusiastic, there is an essential negativity to the religious project: it follows an ideal vision of the world that perpetually conflicts with reality. How this conflict is managed determines the extent to which the religious approach to life is marked by love or by resentment.

In philosophy, the conflict between real and ideal takes many forms. One of these concerns the contradiction between the assumed omnipotence-and-benevolence of God and the facts of human suffering—the so-called “problem of evil” or theodicy (the “justification” of God). More generally, philosophy is concerned with the understanding of the world as a whole or in its unity, with attributions of ultimate meaning or value, and with the mediation of conflicting perspectives. It must mediate between the view that the world is good (or even the best it could possibly be) when seen “as a whole” or in the light of eternity, and the awareness of all the negative aspects of life (pain, ugliness, cruelty, etc.) that we experience every day.

Theodicy is therefore an aspect of cosmodicy: philosophy aims at loving the world. It can’t hope to do this by ignoring evil, nor by trying to regard tragic events as somehow “for the best”, but must love the world in spite of its negative aspects, as one loves a person. The best approach is thus to bring the cosmic and everyday perspectives into contact without trying to reduce them to elements in a grand scheme, or diminish their mutual astonishment. For all explanations of evil tend to be sterile and banal. But astonishment at the very existence of evil can be taken as an index of one’s vision of the ideal.

In religion, the conflict between real and ideal is framed in terms of the incentives and obstacles to moral behavior. In the simplest case, these are represented as two cosmic forces—God and the Devil, etc. But monotheistic religion, as much as philosophy, is driven by a concern for the world in its unity; and so it exaggerates the asymmetry between the opposing forces until the ability of the lesser to withstand the greater becomes a mystery. Why does God allow the obstacles to moral behavior, much less the suffering of the innocent?
Since the way to goodness is (intrinsically or from the true perspective) so clear, how is it even possible to choose evil? Here again, it seems to me, it’s the development of a sense of questionability (the ability to find evil surprising) that matters, not adherence to an answer. Complacency and certainty are found only in the pessimistic parts of the religious continuum.

The Hebrew Bible provides a vehicle for questioning evil in the myth of the “tree of knowledge”, with its suggestion that good and evil are somehow a matter of perception (even if we are locked into a particular perception). Judaism has for the most part escaped the explanation of evil based on a literalistic reading of the myth (the Christian doctrine of “original sin”). Jews haven’t accepted the notion that a guaranteed solution to the problem has become available. In this respect they keep the question open.

But Judaism also has the statement of Genesis 8:21 that “the inclination of the human heart is bad from its youth” (yetzer lev ha-adam ra’ min’urayu מְנַעֵרְךָ לֶוֶת הַאָדָם רָע), which was taken in the Talmudic age as support for a doctrine of two innate “inclinations”, good and bad. On the one hand, this seems to reflect the ancient notion of twin cosmic principles. On the other, the Talmudic rabbis are clear about their opposition to any doctrine of “two powers in heaven.” Such doctrines were familiar to them not only from the ancient Persian sources but from contemporaneous Gnosticism, Manicheism and some flavors of Jewish mysticism and Christianity. On the grounds of this apparent contradiction they fought to maintain the questionability of evil and sharpen the conflict between real and ideal.

A classic example is the discussion surrounding a famous parable. What I would like to show is that, whereas this parable, out of context, lends itself to readings of a pessimistic and dogmatic nature, the Talmudic text itself is a lesson in openness, realistic optimism, and the uses and abuses of the ideal.

**Synopsis of the Parable**

The Evil Inclination, in the form of a demon, was handed over to the elders of Israel; but they were warned that if they killed it, the world would be destroyed. They kept it imprisoned for three days, during which time no eggs were laid anywhere in the land. So they were forced to let it go. But they blinded it, with the result that people lost their incestuous desires.

Popular accounts agree that the parable implies a belief in the necessity of the Evil Inclination, because of its identification with creativity and desire—especially sexual desire. This teaching then seems to settle the matter: it’s a case of “can’t live with ‘em, can’t live without ‘em”. A matter of keeping things in check.

To me this result would be disappointing, first of all because of my conviction that questions matter more than answers here; and substantively in that the result sounds like Buddhism in its most pessimistic and simplistic form: life is suffering, suffering is caused by desire (therefore desire should be suppressed). When I first read an account of this parable, I thought, Surely the
rabbis were more committed to loving the world than that. Surely they recalled what is divulged of the divine perspective for us to emulate: the divine judgment “that it’s good” (ki tov נבר סב) throughout the days of creation. (Hadn’t they considered the idea that divine creation is not something simply past, but is active in the present?)

I would discover that the Talmudic text indeed expresses a commitment to loving the world, even to the point of “blessing for the evil as well as the good” and that in spite of acknowledging God’s absolute transcendence it takes seriously the divinity-in-humans that encourages us to emulate God, to “walk in His ways” (Deut.28:9), and to see things against the background of the ideal.

**Parable and Context**

In order to counter the impression of the pessimistic “result”, I think it’s only necessary to read the parable in context. But that’s not necessarily so easy. Every Talmudic context is embedded in other contexts, and they multiply out to infinity. Luckily, the text is broken into sections punctuated by quotations from the Mishna; and while by no means independent of the surrounding sections (or the more distant ones, or the whole Torah, for that matter), most of these sections present a unified meditation that can be surveyed as a whole. Even so, there is a special complication: our parable appears, with a few slight differences, in two places.

One is in the midst of a discussion (Sanhedrin 64) of capital punishment as it pertains to cases of idolatry. More specifically, it is a discussion of idolatry committed by uttering the names of false gods. On first reading, the only obvious relevance of the parable to this topic lies in the identification of the Evil Inclination, in that text, with the “temptation to idolatry”. The function of the parable here seems to be to teach the ineradicability of that temptation.

The other context of the parable (Yoma 69) is a discussion of the Temple service, specifically the reading from the Torah by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. An apparent digression on the limitations of worship outside the Temple expands to the question of communal “magnification” of God and the use of His “explicit” name. Here the connection to the parable at first looks even more obscure. Although it opens, in both versions, with the citation (Nehemiah 9:4) of the people crying out to God with a “great voice” (kol gadol קול גדול)—which normally would just mean “loud voice” but is taken to imply much more—nothing in the story about the capture of the Evil Inclination is easily related to questions of worship or the greatness of God, which resume immediately following the parable in the text under the guise of an alternative interpretation of Nehemiah 9:4. And no simple application of the parable to the topic (like my guess that “the temptation of idolatry can’t be eliminated” in the first context) is readily available.

Even without worrying about the contexts, there is a lot more to ponder in the parable. The simple 3-part structure of the synopsis, as often encountered in

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398 Mishnah Berachoth ch. 9
popular accounts—the demon captured, a halt in reproduction, the demon set free—doesn’t correspond easily to the actual text(s). In the first place, it ignores the quotation from Nehemiah, the cry to God, which makes the ostensible connection to the respective discussions as they touch on the subject of names (sacred and idolatrous). If there is a deeper thread holding the contextual discussions together, then the points of linkage must be important.

Furthermore, the general notion of the “capture” and materialization of the Evil Inclination corresponds to not one but four different passages. These may be roughly summarized as capture through 1) renouncing any benefits gained in connection with the Evil Inclination; 2) fasting; 3) following the vision of Zechariah (who imagined evil sent as a scapegoat to Babylonia); and 4) praying for mercy with respect to (or on behalf of?) the Evil Inclination. Assuming that the text has been thoughtfully edited, rather than being a jumble of different versions, the four passages should bear a logical relation, as in all the best Talmudic arrangements of conflicting perspectives.

Another seemingly extraneous element of the text, signaling philosophical preoccupation, is the concept of truth, interrupting the narrative as a note dropped from the sky. What does truth have to do with evil?

Finally, the synopsis ignores an element in the setting-free of the Evil Inclination, beyond the reference to incest, which seems to supply a cryptic moral to the story: “there are no halves in heaven”. No doubt this statement relates to the concern for the world as a whole and in its unity. But what does it mean to teach about the development of this concern?

The parable must be read in context, but which one? Both have something to do with language in its duality, its capacity for idolatry as well as worship, falsity as well as truth. And both versions of the parable express (but in different ways!) a special concern with the concept of truth. Because of these connections, I ultimately chose the context in Yoma, with its more extensive development of the theme of the greatness of God, and its concluding statement about truth. But the Sanhedrin variant, which is in some ways the shadow or photographic negative of the one in Yoma, remains significant. The overriding themes of punishment (Sanhedrin) and atonement (Yoma) are in some ways interdependent.

**Text (Yoma 69b)**

**MISHNAH:** And the High Priest stands.

**GEMARA:** From this you can infer that he was sitting before; but surely we have learned that none may sit down in the [Temple] Court ['azarah] except the kings of the house of David alone, as it is said: Then David the king went in and sat before YHWH.399

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399 1 Chronicles 17:16
It is as R. Chisda explained [elsewhere]: In the women's court, so also here. ‘In the women's court’.—Where was R. Chisda's statement made? In connection with the following: An objection was raised, it was taught: Where did they read therein? In the Temple. R. Eliezer b. Jacob said: On the Temple Mount, as it is said: And he read therein before the broad place that was before the water gate; and R. Chisda said: In the women's court.

...And Ezra blessed YHWH, the great God. What does ‘great’ imply? R. Joseph said in the name of Rab: He magnified Him by [pronouncing] the Ineffable Name. R. Giddal said: [He recited], Blessed be YHWH, the God of Israel, from everlasting even to everlasting. Said Abaye to R. Dimi: But perhaps it means that he magnified Him by the Ineffable Name? He answered: One does not pronounce the Ineffable Name outside [the limits of the Temple]. But may one not? Is it not written: And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose. And R. Giddal said: He magnified Him by the Ineffable Name? That was a decision in an emergency.

And they cried with a great voice unto YHWH, their God. What did they say? “Woe, woe, it is he who has destroyed the Sanctuary, burnt the Temple, killed all the righteous, driven all Israel into exile, and is still dancing around among us! You have surely given him to us so that we may receive reward through him. We want neither him, nor reward through him!” Then a tablet fell down from heaven for them, on which the word ‘truth’ was inscribed. (R. Chisda said: One may learn therefrom that the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He, is truth). They ordered a fast of three days and three nights, whereupon he was surrendered to them. He came forth from the Holy of Holies like a young fiery lion. Thereupon the Prophet said to Israel: This is the evil desire of idolatry, as it is said: And he said: This is wickedness. As they took hold of him a hair of his beard fell out, he raised his voice and it went [was audible] four hundred parasangs. Then they said: How shall we act? Perhaps, God forbid, they might have mercy upon him from heaven! —The prophet said to them: Cast him into a leaden pot, closing its opening with lead. Because lead absorbs the voice, as it is said: And he said: This is wickedness. And he cast her down into the midst of the pot, and he cast the weight of lead upon its mouth. They said: Since this is a time of Grace, let us pray for mercy for the Tempter to evil. They prayed for mercy, and he was handed over to them. He said to them: Realize that if you kill him, the world goes down. They imprisoned him for three days, then looked in the whole land of Israel for a fresh egg and could not find it. Then they said: What shall we do now? Shall we kill him? The world would then go down. Shall we beg for half-mercy? They do not grant ‘halves’ in heaven. They put out his eyes and let him go. It helped inasmuch as he no more entices men to commit incest.

400 Nehemiah 8:3
401 Nehemiah 8:6
402 1 Chronicles 16:36
403 Nehemiah 8:4 – with the continuation to verse 6 implied
404 Nehemiah 9:4
405 Zechariah 5:8
406 ibid.
In the West [Palestine] they taught it thus: R. Gidal said: [And Ezra praised...the] great [God]: i.e., he magnified Him by pronouncing the Ineffable Name. R. Mattena said: He said: The great, the mighty, and the fearsome God. The interpretation of R. Mattena seems to agree with what R. Joshua b. Levi said: For R. Joshua b. Levi said: Why were they called men of the Great Assembly? Because they restored the crown of the divine attributes to its ancient completeness. [For] Moses had come and said: The great God, the mighty, and the fearsome. Then Jeremiah came and said: Aliens are destroying His Temple. Where are, then, His fearsome deeds? So he omitted the word ‘fearsome’. Daniel came and said: Aliens are enslaving his sons. Where are His mighty deeds? So he omitted the word ‘mighty’. But they came and said: On the contrary! Therein lie His mighty deeds that He suppresses His wrath, that He extends long-suffering to the wicked. Therein lie His fearsome powers: For but for the fear of Him, how could one nation persist among the nations! But how could Rabbis [Jeremiah and Daniel] abolish something established by Moses? R. Eleazar said: Since they knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, insists on truth, they would not ascribe falsehoods to Him.

The Mishna that is in the midst of being explicated had discussed the clothing of the High Priest on Yom Kippur, and the personnel who fetch the Torah scroll for him to read. It would go on to prescribe the readings and benedictions, and then to mention that the animal sacrifices were conducted during the readings, at some distance. But first the gemara pauses over a single moment in the proceedings, the moment before the reading begins:

**And the High Priest stands…**

The whole section surrounding our parable is only to explain this simple statement—three words in Hebrew (v’kohen gadol ‘omed). What could it have to do with the problems of religious language, truth or the Problem of Evil?

**A. Where to Take a Stand**

**1. Beginning with the Ideal**

We begin with a linguistic ambiguity: “to stand” can mean either the act of standing up (after lying or sitting) or the maintenance of a standing position. The Talmudic editor, loving a contradiction, understands it the first way.

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407 Deuteronomy 10:17
408 Jeremiah 32:18: “...the great, the mighty God, YHWH Tzeba’oth is His name.”
409 Daniel 9:4: “…and I said YHWH, the great and awful God…”
From this you can infer that he was sitting before, but surely we have learned: Nobody may sit down in the [Temple] Court ['azarah] except the kings of the house of David alone, as it is said: Then David the king went in and sat before YHWH.

So the High Priest must have been standing all along, assuming that the reading takes place in the ‘azarah, the inner court. But then why mention it? It seems to be an indirect way of saying that the reading does not take place in the ‘azarah. R. Chisda is cited to the effect that readings from the Torah took place in the “women’s court” (‘azarath nashim), an area outside the ‘azarah proper. In that case there is no issue about standing. But then why bother with it? And why base it on a quotation about David sitting down, when the Temple wasn’t built until after David’s death?

Of course we can always ask, Why bother with the Temple? Judaism has done without it for almost 2000 years. But the Mishnah is all about making the ideal active in the real. Even further from actuality (by another thousand years) is the Davidic monarchy; its presence for us lies only in the imminence of the messianic age, the “world to come” that is always coming (but never here). The quotation about David sitting comes from the scene of his contemplation of the not-yet-built Temple and his “eternal” dynasty. So the gemara seems to me to be saying that before standing up for public worship and atonement—perhaps also before going forth with any thoughtful linguistic act or attempt to confront reality (insofaras you strive to make each act a blessing)—you have to rest in the ideal, in the realm of possibility. You must see the is against the background of the ought. Even the priests in the Temple of Herod (or Solomon) needed to regard the holy place in its metaphysical ground-plan, its ultimate meaning or ideal form, prior to dealing with its material reality. The destruction of the Temple didn’t change the most fundamental conditions for the reading (and interpretation) of sacred texts.

2. Contradiction and Compromise: Propagation of the Ideal through...

In any case, R. Chisda’s point concerns the resolution of a different contradiction, between what might be called elitist and democratic positions regarding the place of reading. But this too relates to the dialectic of ideal and real.

Where did they read therein?
(1) In the Temple.
(2) R. Eliezer b. Jacob said: On the Temple Mount, as it is said: And he read therein before the broad place that was before the Water Gate;
(3) and R. Chisda said: In the women’s court (azarath nashim).
The three locations suggest a range of political opinion, based on different views of the proper seat of moral authority and responsibility for upholding the tradition. Does it rest with the elite (those allowed in the ‘azarah), with the general population (who are allowed on the Temple mount outside the courtyard complex), or with the Israelites (who alone are allowed in the middle zone, the ‘azarath nashim)? All the different social conditions for opening up the real to the ideal must be taken into account.

**a. Elitism**

The default, unattributed opinion confines responsibility to the priestly class. The truth of this view is that in order to conceive the ideal in its purity and rigor, you need a tradition maintained by a dedicated sub-group (hereditary or not), supported by the larger population. Not everybody can be a scholar. You need a system of education and advancement to guarantee that responsibility will be vested in those with the fullest appreciation of the ideal.

**b. Universalism**

But the realism of the first position conflicts with the ideal itself; for the ideal requires the participation of everyone. When Ezra revived the public reading of the Torah in Jerusalem, he built a platform near the Water Gate, away from the main Temple precinct, where as many people as possible could congregate. It was assumed that most of them spoke Aramaic rather than Hebrew, and that many were uneducated; so in addition to the reading of the text, various interpretive activities were conducted.

The point here is that the rigorous education of the elite isn’t an end in itself, but aims at eventually making the ideal active throughout society, to create “a nation of priests”. Everybody can appreciate, at least in some degree, the ideal that the scholars contemplate.

**c. An Educated Community**

So why the insistence on R. Chisda’s unsupported assertion that the proper place of reading was the “women’s court”? In late antiquity this was the outer region of the ‘azarah where male and female Jews were allowed. Although outside the priestly zone of the ‘azarah proper, it was walled off in turn from the larger “court of the gentiles” on the Temple mount. R. Chisda’s position would seem to represent some kind of compromise between the positions of elitism and universalism. Is it simply to maintain an ethnic barrier, or does it represent a recognition of the fact that universal education (or education with a 100% success rate) is unattainable? It might also point to the numeric limits on a community functioning with an understanding of an ideal: what is true of a few hundred or a few thousand people isn’t necessarily true of groups in the millions.
What is clear is that the editor has arranged the text in a significant pattern: the reign of the ideal is announced, then subjected to a contradiction and resolution. The pattern will be repeated, not just because it’s a handy tool, but because it is demanded by the subject matter itself: first we have to “negate” reality in the sense of awakening to the possibility of a higher understanding of it (the esoteric understanding); but the purpose of such understanding is to produce a second negation, in which reality is changed and affirmed by a faithful, educated community, who make the esoteric into common knowledge. How can such a thing occur?

B. How to Acknowledge the Greatest

And Ezra blessed YHWH, the great God. (ha-elohim hagadol) [Neh.8:6] What does ‘great’ imply?

The discussion takes off from the scene of Ezra’s reading in Nehemiah 8, which seemed to be introduced to prove the second opinion about the location of the Yom Kippur Torah reading. Now, however, Ezra’s unusual reference to “the great god” (ha-elohim hagadol) becomes the occasion for a meditation on how to “magnify” (shegadol)—that is, articulate the greatness of—God and His name. Now it looks like the whole ’azarah (ה芻רה) business had the aim of introducing the words of Ezra (הזרה).

R. Chisda’s point is left hanging. Instead of proceeding from his compromise or resolution, we return to the extreme of universalism, the unsanctioned second position of the triad. The rest of the discussion will linger in this moment of extremity. It doesn’t aim at Hegelian “synthesis” but at something more open. But the realistic constraint on universalism will not be forgotten. It will persist in the question about the use of the Name outside the Temple where everybody can hear it. Ezra’s “magnification” of the Name by the Water Gate is an apparent transgression that will need to be justified.

What does it mean to make God and/or His name great? God Himself can’t be increased, but knowledge of God can. At the same time, the recognition of God’s greatness (and its moral implications) is the substance of such knowledge. Gratitude and optimism, obligation and affirmation are the essence of religion.

Now the question is, to what extent does such affirmation proceed by way of God’s transcendence—His absolute difference from the mundane and the human—and to what extent by way of God’s creation, the flawed world of human experience? As far as I can see, the problem of “magnification” is nothing other than the problem of confronting the conflict between the real and the ideal, and the infinite superiority of the latter. It’s the problem of conditioning the imperfect real with the perfect ideal—making the latter apparent as the meaning of the former—while yet maintaining the ideal in its transcendent purity.

Therefore the language of “magnification” must somehow be both pure and impure; it must be grounded in everyday experience and usage, while
conveying the sense of that which is beyond all experience and description. The linguistic character of the problem comes to the fore when we are forced to decide whether the relation of reference or meaning that obtains between the real and ideal is a literal or metaphorical relation, or something else. The gemara presents three theories of language and blessing, or the realization of meaning.

1. Direct Reference

R. Joseph said in the name of Rab: He magnified Him by [pronouncing] the Explicit Name. (shegdalu b’shem ha-meforash)

The first theory is the literal: according to R. Joseph, Ezra “magnified” God by means of the “distinguished” or “explicit” name, i.e. by pronouncing the name YHWH (יהוה) as written—something that had become taboo in Second Temple Judaism, ultimately being reserved for priests in the Temple, and associated with all kinds of legends and magical effects. (In contrast, the evidence of the Biblical texts points overwhelmingly to the widespread utterance of the Name in First Temple religion.)

The resultant paradox is enhanced by the etymology of the Name given in Exodus: “he will be” (or “cause to be”). It suggests that even the Name isn’t a proper name so much as a description—one that captures the duality of language: for the concept of being is at once most intelligible and most obscure. Being is presupposed in all descriptions and assertions of existence, yet remains essentially hidden to thought (as we discover when we ask what it means for something to be). Similarly, the Name is both a designation and a pointer beyond language. Spoken only by the priest in private, never heard by the common people, it represents the point of contact between language and the ideal, prior to actual speech and behavior, in the realm of intuition and intention.

Direct reference and immediacy thus correspond to the first position, the ‘azarah.

2. Language Beyond Language

a. Conceptual Description

R. Gidal said: [He recited], Blessed be YHWH, the God of Israel, from forever until forever. [min ha-‘olam v’ad ha-‘olam] [1 Chron. 16:36]

The second opinion, in two parts, seems to be offered by R. Gidal as an assertion of the necessity of language and the public realm. The point of Ezra’s “magnification” was educational (which is what motivated him to leave the ‘azarah). Therefore it must have relied on conceptual description: min ha-‘olam v’ad ha-‘olam (“from forever until forever”)—God’s greatness is the greatness of eternity.
The quote is from 1Chron.16:36, where David initiates a service for the Ark; but it also corresponds to, and was undoubtedly suggested by a text from the next (9th) chapter of Nehemiah, which will be taken up after the paragraph about R. Gidal: “stand up and bless YHWH your God from forever until forever” (kumu barechu eth YHWH elohechem min ha’olam v’ad ha’olam). Beyond the silent contemplation of the ideal symbolized in a name, we must engage in discursive metaphysics, using concepts like time and world, if we are to bring its meaning into our social reality. We can only “stand up” (the theme of our text) if we have a cognitive orientation, a direction to face.

But here too we run into the paradox. First of all, the text doesn’t exactly describe God as eternal; strictly speaking, it predicates eternity of the act of blessing. Now obviously, we can’t stand up endlessly; in blessing God we must in some sense transcend the place and time of the blessing (and transcend ourselves). Moreover, the paradox is announced in the very next words of Ezra: blessed be your glorious name which is above all blessing and praise. The acts of blessing and praying don’t accomplish their goal, but are nevertheless necessary. Language is needed to point beyond language.

This can be illuminated by another interpretation of min ha-‘olam v’ad ha-‘olam. Now ‘olam means both “forever” and “world” (a point to which we will return). Accordingly we can read “from the world to the world”; and the two “worlds” can be regarded as the present world and the “world to come”. Here the notion of two worlds, if thought through, must refer not to a temporal distinction (“to come” indicating a date in the definite future), but to a metaphysical one. The “world to come” is really the ideal, is the meaning of “this world” that can never be adequately articulated or fully realized. Thus R. Jacob could say410 “Better is one hour of repentance and good works in this world than all the life of the world to come.” R. Jacob well understood the dialectical nature of the ideal, for he completed his saying with a turn: “better is one hour of refreshment of spirit in the world to come than all the life of this world.”

b. Momentary Teaching

Said Abaye to R. Dimi: But perhaps it means that he magnified Him by [pronouncing] the Explicit Name? He answered: One does not pronounce the Explicit Name outside [the limits of the Temple]. But may one not? Is it not written: And Ezra the scribe stood upon a tower of wood, which they had made for the purpose.[Neh.8:4] And R. Gidal said: He magnified Him by [pronouncing] the Explicit Name? That was a decision in an emergency [lit. “of the moment”].

Now we return to the question of the Explicit Name, and the question of the regions and population outside the Temple. If Ezra uttered the Name by the Water Gate, before the uneducated masses, he would seem to have violated the taboo (notwithstanding the fact that, as we now suspect, the taboo might not yet have existed in the time of Ezra). R. Gidal’s comment on this debate is that what Ezra did was a “teaching of the moment”—an exception to the rule.

410 In the prefatory tractate Avoth
But why would Gidal have made this excuse if he thought that Ezra’s “magnification” consisted in the blessing “from forever until forever” (in which case he could have said “baruch adonai” or “baruch hashem” rather than “baruch YHWH”)? Was I wrong to assume that R. Gidal disagreed with R. Joseph? Perhaps his original comment wasn’t meant to disagree but only to expand upon the utterance of the Name and its role in language. Or perhaps he changed his mind after reconsidering the text as adduced by Eliezer and Dimi. It may even be that the gemara is corrupt (as some modern scholars believe).

But another possibility (which I find probable) is that the editors assembled our text with an eye on deeper and more general questions than those surrounding Ezra and the practices of the Second Temple, and that the logical connections are thus partly hidden. Thus the straightforward answer—the Name is magnified by being uttered—would just be a setup for the argument as a whole. And if, as I supposed, the Name here represents the point of contact between language and the ideal—a point only, signifying the withdrawal of the ideal more than its presence—then the two-part second answer would be a further specification of that relationship of contact and separation or transcendence, requiring the use of extended metaphor.

In the first part we saw how conceptual language (“from forever until forever”) points beyond itself just as much as the simple assertion of Being (or He who makes be); and the imperative of a “blessing beyond all blessing” makes this explicit. Now in the second part we are told that the paradoxical assertion of Being, the direct representation of the transcendent ideal, is justified in special circumstances—in an emergency. On the surface this means that we can’t take Ezra as a precedent or model; but in the context of R. Gidal’s first opinion and the larger train of thought, it implies just the opposite. It implies that we too face an “emergency”: the general plight of creatures cut off from the ideal, who nonetheless need to name and understand it, to draw its meaning into the real like manna from heaven.

For we are not only outside the Temple. The Temple is gone, and no one stands up for us within it, magnifying the Name in the Holy of Holies. Our society, despite the presence of many sages and holy books, makes no progress toward realization of the ideal. This is an emergency. We have to stand up and speak up, outside the lines of tradition. But that doesn’t remove the paradox of Being, or the self-negating character of language in the service of the Absolute. It only means that we have to speak without the security of a perfectly transmitted cultural foundation. Like Ezra instituting practices that hadn’t been observed for 200 years (if ever), our efforts always respond in some degree to cultural discontinuities and absences. The distance between the real and the ideal confronts us as something new (or something ancient with a new face)—requiring improvisation, experimentation, and decisions of the moment.

The two parts of R. Gidal’s opinion are thus compatible. (1) The paradox pertains to discursive language as well as to the sacred Name. Therefore (2) language must respond to the exigencies of the moment, in apparent violation of the paradox. How can it do that? How can we pursue a truth which is neither literal nor metaphorical? I believe that the gemara addresses these questions in
the third theory of “magnification”, the third teaching on the conflict between the ideal and the real.

3. Dialectic

   And they cried with a great [loud] voice unto YHWH God. [Neh.9:4] What did they say?

   Immediately following R. Chisda’s words “decision of the moment” the gemara quotes Neh.9:4. Here again some scholars see textual corruption: the cry in Neh.9 takes place three weeks after the public reading in Neh.8—so how can it explain the “emergency” surrounding Ezra’s magnification of God? Some editions of the text go so far as to replace the first quote (Neh.8:6) to which R. Gidal responds, with a duplicate of the second (Neh.9:4). In that case the “magnification” derives solely from the phrase כָּנָבָל גַּדְּלָה (b’qol gadol) “with a big [i.e. loud] voice”—taking the loudness of the Levites as a metaphor for pure and effective worship.

   But clearly the unusual expression “the great god” (הָאֱלֹהִים הָגָדוֹלִים) in Neh.8:6 was a stimulus for the original discussion, which wants to begin and end with the greatness of God. The surface problem is to avoid the impression that this foreign-sounding phrase (brought by Ezra from Babylonia?) implies that YHWH is the head of a pantheon. God’s greatness can’t be a property shared by other beings. (God isn’t “a” “being” at all.) We can’t predicate generic qualities of the One who is sui generis.

   At a deeper level, however, the discussion has been contrived to pursue the complex dynamic obtaining between the cosmic/divine “greatness” we may apprehend and the “greatness” of the human voice. The shift from singular (Ezra) to plural (the Levites) and from Blessee to blessers must signify an advance in the argument. It was prepared by the move from symbolism to discursive language in the second step. We want to direct our mind and will to the Highest alone, the One; but we need language and the movements of thought, which we learn from others and practice with them. The simplicity of the name, of private intuition, the personal resolve to pursue the good—all remain abstract and unreal until plunged into time and the public world, expressed in language and subjected to the judgments of others. Then we can’t help but dwell on the “emergency” of alienation and confusion in which we find ourselves, can’t help dwelling on ourselves.

   The voice “cries” (צָעַוק); it is an expression of suffering—an expression of the emergency announced by R. Gidal. (The details of the emergency adduced next—exile, no Temple, death of innocents, etc.—confirm our suspicion that the “emergency” confronts us just as much as it did Ezra.) But as a child learns to replace crying with words describing her pain, so the existential human cry issues in speech. “What did they say?” becomes the

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411 and not, as the Soncino edition translates, “What did they cry?”
question. Through the saying, the meaning of the ideal infuses our social reality, and the voice is changed.

The articulation of the cry aims at turning it into a blessing (this is the connection to our topic). It implies that what lies beyond direct reference and extended metaphor is dialectic: thinking that imaginatively inhabits a series of different positions in succession, so as to fully appreciate the more comprehensive truth underlying them. Here the first position is represented by a cry or lament. The way to wisdom runs through the imperfect human landscape; the perspectives of pessimism precede those of optimism.

We have already seen such sequential thinking, indicated by the controversy (in rabbinic parlance, the machloqeth) over the location of the Yom Kippur reading, as well as that concerning Ezra’s blessing at the Water Gate. In both cases it is the sequence that reveals the sense of the text, beyond the set of possible answers and decisions. But now the marking of stages by machloqeth is replaced by the twists and turns of narrative.

**a. The Parable of the Eggs**

1. Pessimism

Woe, woe, it is he who has destroyed the Sanctuary, burnt the Temple, killed all the righteous, driven all Israel into exile, and is still dancing around among us!

The alleged corruption of the text confronts us again as we enter into our parable, presented as the third theory of “magnification”. The “it is he …” sounds like something—the beginning of the story—might be missing. Nor is there any logical way of fitting the parable into the events of Neh.8-9. And on the surface, it’s hard to see how this story answers to the question “what did they say?” For instead of considering the greatness of God, it’s all about the “Evil Inclination”; and instead of blessing, it begins with a complaint: “Woe! Woe!”

On the other hand, the existence of the same text in Yoma and Sanhedrin tells us that the quotation from Neh.9 was considered an integral part of it. This reinforces our assumption that the genesis of blessing in a cry—and thus the articulation of “greatness” only through a progression out of pessimism and understanding of evil—is what the text really intends.

The forces that destroyed the Temple and drove Israel into exile, that have resulted in the murder of innocents in all times and places, are quite obviously still dancing among us today. How can they be viewed in the light of the ideal?

2. No Reward Through Evil

[…]and is still dancing around among us.] You have surely given him to us so that we may receive reward through him. We want neither him, nor reward [through him]!
The first stage of the parable centers on the statement made about the Evil Inclination, once it has been defined in terms of its effects: *we want neither him* (the Evil Inclination) *nor reward* (through him). What kind of statement is this? It must signify a particular attitude, a particular spiritual possibility; and it is this attitude or moment of insight that gets the parable moving—not some magical event that happened in the time of Ezra.

Now we are immediately confronted by a problem, if we take the two versions into account. For they seem to understand or evaluate the statement “we want neither him nor reward” in opposite ways. In *Yoma* the statement is followed by

*A note fell from heaven, on which was written “truth”.*

This would seem to indicate a positive view of the rejection of “reward through evil”. It could apply at the basest level, implying a rejection of evil means in the pursuit of good (or merely desirable) ends; but this seems trivial. Or it could mean that there is virtue in rejecting any benefit that might be given (presumably by God) even for resisting the temptation to evil. Just as doing good for its own sake is higher than doing it for gain or to escape punishment, so evil should be refused for its own sake.

But does the denial of reward really make sense? Virtue is its own reward—a “higher” reward than material gain, but still a reward. If even the higher reward is refused, it must be because evil hasn’t truly been appreciated. It is presumably for this reason (put more simply: you don’t refuse what God offers) that the version in *Sanhedrin* follows the statement not with the image of the heavenly message “truth” (which instead follows the act of fasting a couple of lines later), but with the negative judgment: “that too was after they were seduced by it”.

This ties the statement back to the preceding section of that gemara, concerning an uneducated idolatrous orphan who refused to recite the shema because he said, quoting Amos 6:10, “Be silent, for one must not mention [commemorate] the name of YHWH.”

The orphan’s attitude is condemned as a consequence of idolatry, using the same words previously used (in the *Sanhedrin* context) to explain how those who practice idolatry, simply as an excuse for openly cavorting in the nude, end up actually believing in idols: “after they were seduced by them.” The implication would be that the refusal of reward through (resisting) evil is a consequence of already having failed to resist. The redemptive view—the insight into evil that acknowledges and identifies with it—is precluded by the refusal, so that we have merely a blindness to evil, and simple avoidance.

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412 Not only is it unclear how the uneducated orphan was familiar with *Amos*, no one seems to notice the irony here, that what was horrible to Amos had become the norm in Second Temple Judaism. Literally speaking, the rabbis agree with the orphan; but they talk about the substitute names (*adonai*, etc.) as if they were talking about the Name.
The meaning of “truth” in the Yoma version is thus problematic. Perhaps it isn’t as unsubtle and Woody Allenish as it appears. Perhaps it is even somewhat ironic. It can’t be anything more than a preliminary to the project of “magnification”, the proper recognition and acknowledgment of God’s greatness. Here it might help to recall the Problem of Evil, understood as the problem of loving the world, God’s creation. You can’t love the Creator and hate the creation. God created the Evil Inclination for a reason; the “reward” lies not just in resisting it, but in appreciating that reason. The “truth” from heaven must indicate something other than a simple affirmation of the attitude of rejection. The rejection must only be the first step on a path involving more than one negation.

3. The Origin of Evil

They ordered a fast of three days and three nights, whereupon he was surrendered to them. He came forth from the Holy of Holies like a young fiery lion. Thereupon the Prophet said to Israel: This is the inclination toward idolatry, as it is said: And he said: This is wickedness. [Zech.5:8]

The next stage of the argument moves from rejection, now represented as fasting or the extinction of desire, to the divine origin of evil. The Evil Inclination is “delivered” to the ascetics in a process of reification that is also an emanation, not unlike the emanations Plotinus saw proceeding out of the transcendent and formless One down through all the levels of form, substance, desire and suffering. Taking the shape of a fiery lion cub, the Evil Inclination comes roaring out of the Holy of Holies—the point on earth where the divine presence rests, the point of contact between the real and the ideal. It had been living there all along! We need to dwell on this fact before becoming fascinated with the demonic images.

The possibility of evil originates in the holiest of places, where the ideal impinges most directly on the real, at the focus of our highest aspirations. This isn’t to say that scholarly and pious people are more prone to evil than common criminals and sociopaths. The point is rather that reality comes marked with its own negativity, its own shortcomings pointing toward the ideal, and only has its meaning and essence at the horizon of human capability and understanding. Thus the ideal, as the negation of the real, only happens as the resolution of a double negative (the true recognition of evil, and its overcoming). The ideal isn’t something apart from the real, a separate reality; it is the meaning and life of the one reality—full of injustice, illuminated by the possibility of justice.

But the double negative is difficult. We would much prefer a shortcut based on the advance knowledge that two negatives yield a positive. We would prefer a truth without lies. And this attitude results in a separation: evil becomes something demonic, something I confront without understanding or empathy—even when it is really a part of myself. The defect in the refusal of evil has led to an even greater error; the repressed has returned as a monstrosity.
4. The Scapegoat

As they took hold of him a hair of his beard fell out, he raised his voice and it carried four hundred parasangs. Then they said: How shall we act? Perhaps, God forbid, they might have mercy upon him from heaven! —The prophet said to them: Cast him into a leaden pot, closing its opening with lead. Because lead absorbs the voice, as it is said: And he said: This is wickedness. And he cast her down into the midst of the pot, and he cast the weight of lead upon its mouth. [Zech.5:8]

The third stage is full of colorful imagery from the book of Zechariah, but it is again based on a simple concern: what are we to do, given that Heaven may intervene on the side of the Evil Inclination? The possibility contemplated here is shocking. The course of action represented in mythic imagery is to be undertaken in defense against God! As with the idea of refusing the benefits offered by God for resisting temptation, this is a clue that something is wrong. And yet God, through Zechariah, supposedly offers a strategy—is it to be trusted?

The vision of Zechariah involves a woman in a measuring-pot who functions as a kind of angelic scapegoat, flown to Babylonia in order to be worshipped by idolaters. First we suspected God of being inclined toward forgiving idolatry; we now see God actively promoting it! (Just not for Jews.) The gemara picks up on the sealing of the basket (“...and thrust down the lead weight upon its mouth”) and adds an element (suggested by the mouth of the basket): “because lead absorbs the voice”. Although the stopping-up of the mouth in the sense of fasting is relevant to the Yom Kippur context, the primary emphasis here is on the seductive quality of the voice: the Evil Inclination is essentially temptation. This idea seems to be grounded in Zechariah’s text as well, which contains, before the explicit statement “this is wickedness”, the obscure line “this is their eye in all the land.” Presumably the identification of evil desire with an eye also refers to an avoidance of seductive sights or lustful ways of looking at things. (The rabbis would also have associated it with the widespread myth of the Evil Eye that arouses certain unwholesome desires.)

Atonement (Yom Kippur again) for having yielded to temptation involves quieting that voice within. But here the voice is positively exorcised. That’s not the way to deal with temptation. And so, as the denial of evil led to its reappearance in externalized form, here the repression of temptation leads to an even deeper externalization: scapegoating.

Of course the Yom Kippur scapegoat is an ancient and fundamental piece of Jewish tradition. The rabbis can only bring it into question obliquely. In Zechariah’s vision the negative aspects of the concept are highlighted. Presumably God promotes lust, idolatry and general wickedness in Babylonia, so the Jews don’t have to suffer such things in Israel.—But to whom do we really want to attribute this attitude?

Such a parochial view may in fact have belonged to Zechariah. His obsession with the Temple, and his misplaced messianism with regard to King Zerubabel and Joshua, the High Priest, seem to mark his vision as flawed and
excessively ethnocentric. And while the rabbis wouldn’t agree with my assessment, the editor of Yoma does seem to have arranged the words of “the prophet” as an illustration of the error of dualism: the error of raising evil to the level of an independent divine force, separate from God and ourselves, enshrined in Babylonia or elsewhere—all in a misguided desire for the purity of the ideal.

Thus the parabolic possibility that God might have mercy on the reified Evil Inclination, and God’s promotion of idolatry for Gentiles, are signs of a deeper reality waiting to be understood. The reification and separation of evil needs to be seen through, and the origin of evil and temptation in the divine—that is, the Problem of Evil—needs to be appreciated.

5. The Higher Asceticism

They said: Since this is a time of goodwill, let us pray for mercy for the inclination toward transgression. They prayed for mercy, and it was handed over to them. He said to them: Realize that if you kill him, the world goes down.

As if to highlight the erroneous character of the advice of “the prophet”, the fourth stage reverses the concern of the third. Whereas the latter defended against the possibility of mercy for the Evil Inclination, the former now explicitly asks for that very thing! This is explained—obscurely—by it being a “time of goodwill.”

Now the phrase nav’ay rachemi ayetzra d’avirah (רחמי ארצרא אטצרא ד아버א) allows, as I understand it, for an alternate reading, “They asked for mercy from the inclination”, which makes less sense after the Evil Inclination has already been sealed up in the basket, but avoids the reversal of thinking and implicit repudiation of “the prophet” that I have suggested. And since the Evil Inclination is indeed “delivered into their hands” in response to the people’s petition, the juxtaposition of the third and fourth sections strikes some readers as another case of textual corruption or sloppy editing—a redundant pause (not only redundantly narrating the capture, but also repeating the element of “three days” in the imprisonment [see (f) below]) on the way to the most striking part of the parable, the eggs (or rather their absence). But we have already seen enough evidence that the real logic of the argument lies beneath the surface narrative, and that reversals of thought and perspective belong to the path demanded by its underlying subject matter; so we should be ready to make sense of the shift from defending against divine mercy-for-evil to asking for it.

By asking for mercy for the Evil Inclination, the people in a sense put themselves in God’s position (within the limited parameters of our argument); they put themselves on the path to understanding the meaning of evil, which can only be seen from the God’s-eye-view; and they begin to overcome the externalization of evil that resulted from their initial refusal of its “reward”. The whole scapegoat thing will be rethought! Mercy for evil also suggests a standard way out of the philosophical Problem of Evil: everything is (ultimately or to God)
“for the best”. We must consider whether this position is adopted or transcended in the course of the argument. But if such a refined standpoint has now been reached, then why is the reified Evil Inclination “handed over” to them? Presumably it is to affirm and make explicit the imitation of God implicit in the request for mercy: the “handing over” is an invitation to judgment. Only because they are inclined toward mercy are they put in this position.

They have, through transcending the reifications of the previous stages, arrived at a vision of the world as a whole, against which evil and temptation are to be seen and judged. The connection between judgment and world is signaled by the next line of our text in Yoma (but not Sanhedrin, whose editor seems to find the statements heavy-handed or unnecessary, letting the eggs speak for themselves.). It features an anonymous voice saying “if you kill him…”—as if this is the point of the “handing over”. If you destroy the Evil Inclination, kalya’ ‘alma (καλλα άλμα) … the world stops. Kalya’ might suggest kalah (καλλα), to end, and Hebrew keiliyyah (כלייה), destruction; but strictly speaking it means to contain or prevent. Previously we translated ‘olam (עולם) as “forever” or “eternity”. The statement pertains, not just to humans or living things, and not just to the world of a moment or a generation, but to the eternal Whole. To think of restraining or repressing the Evil Inclination at the most fundamental level is to think about a world that was prevented; it is to entertain the denial of everything—past, present and future. (“Better never to have been born,” in the ancient Greek formulation.)

This is the apex of pessimism. But it converges with the philosophical experience of the Whole, expressed in the question “Why is there something rather than nothing?” The deepest appreciation of the Whole has to contemplate its absence, the ultimate negation, so as to think of Being as a contingent and urgent event in which we are now involved.

Ultimately the judgment isn’t just upon evil and temptation but upon the Whole, upon God’s creation. If the judgment turns out to be that it’s good, then even temptation will be good in some sense. Here we must acknowledge the basic validity of the Buddha’s insight: we experience the world through the lens of interests and fears. And we must acknowledge that the universalism of rationalist ethics only develops, gradually and organically, out of the self-love of the family and clan, state and religion. Universalist prophets like Isaiah are preceded by ethnocentric prophets like Zechariah. Even the desire for justice and wisdom is a kind of temptation, and has something in common with greed and lust. And even the purest observance of religion has something in common with idolatry and superstition.—Only an extreme mental asceticism can (momentarily) reach a judgment that regards the world “from outside”, disinterestedly. From such a standpoint, desire might be suppressed at its root.

6. No Halves in Heaven

They imprisoned him for three days, then looked in the whole land of Israel for a fresh egg and could not find it. Then they said: What shall we do now? Shall we
kill him? The world would then go down. Shall we beg for half-mercy? They do not grant ‘halves’ in heaven.

Finally I get to the eggs. You know what happened. The “imprisonment” of the Evil Inclination resulted in a warning condition. Everyone can see that it won’t end with the eggs but with human reproduction, then general creativity and finally the soul, the uniqueness of the individual person. Again it looks like the whole world, animated by desire, is subject to a negative judgment: suffering, evil. We have followed a path from the radical rejection of evil to the rejection of the world. The project of “magnification” has failed.

So we need a new direction, one that won’t abandon or suppress the real for the sake of the ideal, but will honor the ideal in the temperance of its judgment. The suggestion is made that the Evil Inclination be “halfway” restrained, leaving it just enough liberty to keep the world running. We won’t turn the real into the ideal but will have a reality seasoned with the ideal; language that refers to the ideal only insofar as it may be adequately described; and of course sexual desire that aims only at procreation within marriage. But the unattributed voice answers: heaven won’t give half (or: there are no halves in heaven). What is the meaning of this dead end?

The first thought that suggests itself is: God is one (YHWH echad). The ideal is indivisible. The understanding and enactment of mercy, which led to nothingness in the fifth stage, can’t be set to filter out half the desire, half the language, half the reality, and still gain access to the meaning and value of the world as such. The wish or thought that half the world might never have existed is no more workable than the thought that nothing might ever have existed. In the project of affirning (and ultimately loving) the Whole (past, present and future), our state of transgression and uncertainty must be accepted. We can’t launch ourselves into the ideal and vanish in it, neither can we have a world that is half-real; instead we must stand in the real and measure the distance to the ideal at every step—even insofar as this makes us go beyond the bounds of language and tradition.

“No halves in heaven” also gives us a first indication that the easy way out of the Problem of Evil won’t be available. Human tragedy that is “ultimately for the best” would have a half-good, half-evil character that is not only untrue to our experience (providing the kind of ephemeral comfort afforded by the assurance that a murdered innocent is “in a better place”, for example), but also incompatible with the ideal.

7. Cultural Evolution and the Religious Project

The “emergency” alluded to by R. Gidal, which introduced the idea of “magnification” as a response, is real. We have to pursue the ideal in advance of the conditions of adequate intelligibility or legal clarity. The attempt to keep things under control and in bounds (inside the ‘azarah) leads to dualism, self-alienation,
scapegoating, mysticism and nihilism. It runs into a dead end that must be overcome by a renewed attention to “magnification”.

But first there is an odd coda to the parable.

_They blinded it and let it go. This helped, for men no longer lust after their relatives._

It’s hard to know what to do with this. The parable has been reduced to a myth explaining the power of the incest taboo. Even worse, the scope of evil has been narrowed until it threatens to be identified with sexual desire (rather than taking sexual desire as merely an example of ways in which good judgment can be overthrown—greed, jealousy, cruelty, superstition, lust for power, narcissism, etc.). This was, of course, already suggested by the eggs; for the parable doesn’t say that the banks closed, the army disbanded or the leaders of the world failed to show up for work when the Evil Inclination was imprisoned. It doesn’t even say that religious worship ceased. Only sexual reproduction was stopped. Is the whole thing basically an expression of prudery and patriarchy?

We realize that just the opposite is true when we recall what has gone before. The idea of a sexual impulse aiming strictly at procreation is exactly the kind of half-measure that God won’t allow, according to our text. By implication, then, the Talmud affirms the transgressive character of sex. It affirms the craziness of love. And by extension, it affirms the necessity of acquisitiveness, pride, the desire to influence others, and the use of language that invokes the ideal unconventionally or idiosyncratically. Sex is only the most universal, biologically rooted example of a wild and transgressive impulse.

But an even more important example of the necessarily wild and transgressive is the inclination to idolatry (as “the prophet” says before the invocation of Zechariah’s vision)—the reason our text is included in the discussion of idol-worship (specifically the use of idolatrous names) in _Sanhedrin_. We may infer that the impulse toward superstition, the misunderstanding of metaphors, the urge to multiply words and to go beyond what can be clearly said, the love of mystery and hero-worship, and the mentality of the herd, all are necessary to true religious worship, true magnification of God and His Name.

This is a radical result—perhaps requiring the mask of a pious etiology of the incest taboo. For it ultimately extends even to the Torah, which by implication was itself written in an emergency—in bold, innovative and surprising language, full of ambiguity and dissonance—as the next section of the gemara will make explicit.

Moreover, the power of the incest taboo—or the ability of culture to make certain behaviors and perceptual frames second nature—plays a role in the underlying dialectic. Although the path initiated by renunciation of evil leads to a dead end, the sequence of perspectives from alienation to mercy characterizes the project of magnification as it pursues its ultimate goal: a culture in which righteousness and charity are second nature to all members of society. The

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413 We won’t quibble about the extent to which incestuous impulses still exist, or whether their relative absence is due to “first” nature, being shared with other animals.
reference to incest lets us appreciate the long evolutionary time-frame of the religious project, which depends on more than just rule-following and making the proper distinctions—depends on wild language, crazy love, spiritual pride and a feeling for the great mystery—and which can only be woven into a second nature through generations of experimental education.

b. The Restoration of Loose Language
(The second answer to the question about pure blessing and the simplicity of the Name)

1. The Complaint

   In the west they teach it thus...

   A new beginning is announced. On the surface it just looks like a matter of recording an alternative interpretation of Neh. 8:6, attributed to the “western” sages (who live in the land of Israel), in addition to the views of the Babylonian sages (R. Joseph, Rab, Abaye, Dimi and of course R. Gidal). But the hand of the editor becomes more apparent in the final section, as he brings the Problem of Evil more clearly into focus, and orders his citations not chronologically but according to the logic of the “complaint” against the Greatest. For that (and not simply the words of Ezra) is the subject of the teaching here. We are continuing the argument, not just collecting related views.

   We revert to R. Gidal’s second statement above. He had first substituted the discursive specification of blessing “from forever until forever” for the Name; but in his second statement he allowed that the Name might be used in an emergency. In the West, however, he is only remembered for permitting the Name, and his assertion of an emergency isn’t explicitly mentioned. R. Gidal’s assertion is only here to contrast with the view of R. Mattena and R. Joshua b. Levi.

   Oddly enough, the parable in its hallucinatory manner dealt with rather specific attitudes and conceptions, whereas the seemingly straightforward argument that complements it aims at the subtlest aspects of symbolism and meaning.

   R. Mattena returns to Neh.9 and Ezra’s speech, but jumps to the part where God is explicitly called “great”, rather than having His greatness implied (“forever”, “above all praise”, etc.).

   R. Gidal said: [And Ezra praised...the] great [God]: i.e., he magnified Him by pronouncing the Explicit Name. R. Mattena said: He said: The great, the mighty, and the fearsome God. [Neh.9:32] The interpretation of R. Mattena seems to agree with what R. Joshua b. Levi said: For R. Joshua b. Levi said: Why were they called men of the Great Assembly? Because they restored the crown of the divine

\[414\] See sec.D below
attributes to its ancient completeness. [For] Moses had come and said: The great God, the mighty, and the fearsome. [Deut.10:17] Then Jeremiah came and said: Aliens are destroying His Temple. Where are, then, His fearsome deeds? Hence he omitted [the attribute] the ‘fearsome’. [in Jer.32:17ff] Daniel came and said: Aliens are enslaving his sons. Where are His mighty deeds? Hence he omitted the word ‘mighty’. [in Dan.9:4ff]

R. Joshua’s answer is analogous to R. Gidal’s second statement (minus his “decision of the moment”), and rolls us back to the point before the “great voice” of blessing was explained with reference to the denial of evil. Now we know that evil is not to be denied, and that proper blessing (our personal and communal grasp of the ideal) must include the negative, which works on the understanding in stages. We are back to the paradox of Being, and the self-deconstructing representation of the transcendent ideal (or the ineffable Name which is no name). We are back to the limitations on universal education and communication (which the parable has made even more problematic, with its requirement of linguistic creativity). And we are back to the roots of human conflict—the state of violence that precedes all moral understanding, which must struggle to transcend it. God’s greatness is coupled (according to both Ezra and Moses [Deut.10:17]) with the properties of “might” (גבערה) or ferocity in battle, and fearsomeness (נוראה).

This coupling is a classic example of the Torah’s poetic, often anthropomorphic language, summarized in the Talmudic dictum: “the Torah speaks the language of the sons of men.” Human language is rough, ambiguous and improvisational, especially when it looks beyond predictable mundane experiences and tries to grasp the ideal. The preceding parable, as well as the problem of “magnification”, indicates that this is ultimately not a defect of religious expression, but rather its enabling condition. Many of us, especially in the post-Enlightenment world, are keen to remove all the usual meaning from such anthropomorphic terms as applied to God; nor is our concern new—in the 12th century Maimonides praised the statement^415 of R. Chanina (who lived in the 3rd) that we shouldn’t use these terms at all, if not for their presence in the Torah. The argument for keeping them depends on an appreciation of the “wildness” of language under influence of an ideal vision.

But there is more here than an insight into the historical-material nature of language, and its incommensurability with the ideal. The religious use of words that seem to apply only to men and women and their sufferings serves to emphasize the peculiar intertwining of humans and God in the Jewish tradition: the notion that moral understanding and experience are the means to knowing

^415 A certain [reader] went down in the presence of R. Chanina and said, O God, the great, mighty, terrible, majestic, powerful, awful, strong, fearless, sure and honored. He waited till he had finished, and when he had finished he said to him, Have you concluded all the praise of your Master? Why do we want all this? Even with these three that we do say, had not Moses our Master mentioned them in the Torah and had not the Men of the Great Assembly come and inserted them in the Tefillah, we should not have been able to mention them, and you say all these and still go on! It is as if an earthly king had a million denarii of gold, and someone praised him as possessing silver ones. Would it not be an insult to him? (Berakoth 33b)
God. This is the deeper reason why we can’t acknowledge God’s greatness without taking a detour through human misery and confusion, bound up with language. This is why the most serious blessing must confront the Problem of Evil.

The men of the Great Assembly, says R. Joshua ben Levi, were great because they restored Might and Fearsomeness to the approved blessings after Jeremiah and Daniel had removed them. What does this mean? It seems to amplify R. Chanina’s doubts about the anthropomorphisms, confronting them head on. God’s fearsomeness suggests the causal realm, the domain of “what can He do to/for us?” Thinkers such as R. Chanina and Maimonides (in addition to modern “demythologizers” of religion) would like to remove these suggestions relating to the material world, attributing powers to God that are distinct from His unitary essence. We might like to understand “fear of God” simply as the apprehension of the world in a meaningful, moral-historical manner. But the words attributed to Jeremiah (“Foreigners have appropriated His Temple. Where are His fearsomenesses?”) go right to the literal and the causal.

The kind of fear that would have deterred Nebuchadrezzar from sacking Jerusalem seems to belong to a more primitive level of religion. Nevertheless R. Joshua seems to imagine Jeremiah’s complaint in just this way. Jeremiah, of course, blames everything on the faithlessness—or fear-(of God)-lessness—of the Jews. But the point here is rather that God has permitted such fearlessness, and therefore its consequences, from the corruption of language and culture to the horrors of the Babylonians. The ideal that R. Joshua pursues must illuminate the most banal and the most unmitigated tragedies.

The same point is made using Dan.9:4, which calls God “great” and “fearsome” but not “mighty”. The absence of God’s “mightiness” is attributed to Daniel’s awareness of “foreigners enslaving His children”. Presumably Daniel’s view was that God should have prevented Jewish enslavements, notwithstanding all the Jewish sinning. Or perhaps the text alludes to the prophecy in Dan.9, according to which anointed ones should have brought about Jewish salvation some time in the first century BC—in other words: some punishment was justified, but enough is enough. And again, the sins that brought the punishments themselves shouldn’t have been allowed to get so egregious.

The Complaint cannot be denied; it grows directly out of the necessity of loose language, and the concomitant mixing of the causal and the philosophical in common understanding. Literal belief and metaphorical comprehension are never firmly or permanently distinguished, in our world of flawed education and cultural discontinuities. Thus our grasp of the ideal, presupposing these conditions, is actually dependent upon the Complaint. Just as universal ethics grows out of love of one’s own, so the ideal vision of the world grows out of more primitive apprehensions, renderings and explanations of the Mystery—including the picture of God as a manipulator of nature and puppeteer of international

416 His cleverness in pointing out Jeremiah’s prayer (Jer.32:17) with “great” and “mighty” (but no “fearsome”) isn’t really backed up by the rest of the prayer, which promises that “God will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me forever.”
politics. The real greatness of the blessing appropriate to the Greatest must lie in the way it deals with the Complaint and works through it dialectically. The next dialectical turn—and plunge into metaphor—follows.

2. The Restraint of Goodness

We need to remember the causal understanding of prayer, and the view of life as a simple business of reward and punishment, because the problem of adequately praising God and the world can only be solved by confronting and overcoming them.

But they came and said: On the contrary! Therein lie His mighty deeds, that He suppresses His inclination, that He extends long-suffering to the wicked.

Some Biblical writers were overly fond of the view of prayer as magic, and the expectation of justice in history. History endlessly refutes this expectation. Job, Lamentations and Koheleth refute it as well. The wicked prosper, the innocent suffer—happens every day. The higher type of prayer tries to apprehend and realize the meaning that lies behind and before the phenomena of suffering—tempted though it may be by magical thinking and superstition. The same kind of restraint that holds off temptation also lets our blessing transcend the causal perspective. When that happens, we might be able to give thanks, as someone said, simply for the opportunity to give thanks—not picturing God as a being to whom we ascribe properties like “greatness”, but coming closer, in feeling and thought, to the divine perspective.

R. Joshua’s saying is a dialectical representation of this transcendence; it posits God’s inaction as higher than the actions demanded by magical thinking. How does it do this? The divine self-control imagined by R. Joshua would seem at first glance to be merely a restraint from punishment, giving sinners extra chances at repentance (“unto the 1000th generation” [Ex.34]). This interpretation is plausible on the surface, but proves unilluminating; for if it’s a great virtue to extend the level of forebearance God mixes into His justice, then an impulse to further punishment makes little sense, emanating from the All-Wise.

On the other hand, the restraint on the divine yetzer may be understood as a restraint on goodness itself. Such a restraint would first make moral freedom—and thus evil deeds—possible, neither stopping them in advance, nor eliminating their metaphysical possibility. Then the divine “inclination” would be identical with the divine essence, and the “mightiness” would stretch back from forgiveness of evil to its very origin—its bed in the Holy of Holies. It’s as if evil were God’s “mightiest” creation, because it involved a negation of His own nature—a “contraction” (the zimzum of Kabbalah) that left room for the unholy. This is the greatest mystery.

So the true meaning of “might” lies not with miraculous acts but with their absence. The negative is the meaning of the positive. What was literal is now understood as metaphor. We aren’t dealing with a descriptive statement about
God, but with a conceptual inversion that changes our perspective. Now anthropomorphism isn’t so much a danger as a clue to the nature of blessing. The idea of God subduing His *inclination* (the good one? the bad one? does He have two? does He even have one?) suggests once again (as in the case of passing judgment on the world and its evil) that there is a divine model for human behavior, and that patience toward evil (in nature, other people, ourselves) is part of the divine perspective that we must try to comprehend. The blessing must also extend patience toward the literal understanding of transcendence, the misrepresentation of the ideal, which is the ground on which the higher understanding flourishes. As God’s mightiest act is the mental act of subduing His inclination to prevent evil, thus making wisdom a goal rather than an everyday reality, so our highest achievement lies in restraining our strict rationalism and finding, in Wittgenstein’s phrase, “the road from error to truth.” We aren’t born wise, ready to love strangers, or to interpret language spiritually rather than literally; we have to turn confusion into wisdom, self-interest into love, and superstition into parable. R. Joshua demonstrates again:

Therein lie His fearsomenesses; but for the fear of Him, how could one nation persist among the nations?

The explanation of “fearsomeness”, like that of “might”, is ambiguous. Does it mean that “the nations” haven’t destroyed Israel out of fear of God’s retribution; or that Israel’s own fear of God is what has let it survive? The first possibility fits better with the complaint about enslavement; but are we to think that survival as a slave is miracle enough? Maybe the author of this statement naively thought of Jewish enslavement as a thing of the past. But more likely again is the general or philosophical explanation: the survival of a community, as well as of individuals, depends on the strength of its culture—on its communal apprehension and taking-seriously (“fearfully”) of the world’s meaningfulness or degree of correlation with the ideal. Our blessing must aim at the ideal precisely as a measure of evils such as slavery, and as a means of enduring them so long as they can’t be removed. It must aim at survival, even in the face of the certainty of personal death, and the uncertainty of the national future.

For mortality is the ultimate reason to complain. Its natural or initial expression takes the form of denial. But R. Joshua turns it around: he replaces *Why do I have to die?* with *It’s a miracle you’re alive!* It’s a miracle as well that, despite the looseness of language and human antagonisms, cultural continuity and the recognition of kinship across millennia is still possible. And conversely, it is the miraculousness of the world—its power to induce wonder and awe and “fear of God”—that inspires and draws out this higher kind of conscious life, and cheerfulness in the face of death.

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4. Meaning Beyond Truth

But how could rabbis [i.e. Jeremiah and Daniel] abolish something established by Moses? R. Eleazar said: Knowing that God insists on [or owns] truth (תנ"א), they wouldn’t attribute falsehood to him.

The end of our gemara emphasizes the authority of Jeremiah and Daniel, notwithstanding their seemingly erroneous embrace of the causal view of prayer. The issues of punishment and reward need to be transcended but not left behind. Evil will continue to manifest itself both from the outside and from within. New efforts and new acts of blessing will be needed. Like the questions that seemed to refer simply to a particular day in the life of Ezra, the final remark\textsuperscript{418} is framed as a mere historical curiosity; but it addresses this perpetual dialectic of wisdom and confusion.

“They wouldn’t attribute falsehood to him”—this would seem to mean that Jeremiah believed—mistakenly?—that God was no longer “fearsome” (or, you could say, was hiding His fearsomeness), and Daniel that God was no longer “mighty”. It would appear that the prophets didn’t grasp the higher meanings of “might” and “fearsomeness” divined by the men of the Great Assembly. And yet we know by now that the order of presentation by the editors is important, and that each new unit is presented as a qualification of what has gone before. At the end we return to literal meanings and causal interpretations, we return in some sense to the “language of the sons of men”. The assertion that the anthropomorphic attributes were false can’t simply mean that the prophet-rabbis were so focused on the literal as to ignore the “truth” intended by the metaphysical and dialectical interpretations (“might” as self-restraint, etc.). We need to grasp an even higher truth here: the dialectical.

As we saw in the opening sequence about where the High Priest stands to read, it is not exactly a Hegelian dialectic. Here again in the ending sequence about the legitimacy of the anthropomorphic/causal aspect of blessing, the final, preferred decision remains in a tension with the position it hasn’t quite superseded. Returning to the opening sequence…

— It is as R. Chisda had explained [elsewhere]: In the women's court, so also here. ‘In the women's court’.—Where was R. Chisda's statement made? In connection with the following: An objection was raised, it was taught: Where did they read therein? —In the Temple. R. Eliezer b. Jacob said: On the Temple Mount, as it is said: And he read therein before the broad place that was before the Water Gate; and R. Chisda said: In the women's court.

The surprising thing here is that R. Eliezer gives a proof from Scripture, whereas R. Chisda simply makes an unsupported assertion; and yet the editor sides with R. Chisda, without explanation. This causes some scholars to view the text as

\textsuperscript{418} strangely attributed to R. Eleazar — presumably ben Azariah, of the early 2\textsuperscript{nd} century — as a comment on the sayings of Babylonian rabbis of the late 3\textsuperscript{rd}
corrupt. But we have seen that both the “normal” and “emergency” conditions of blessing must be taken into account. By both explicit pronouncement and placement in the third position, the text privileges the normal (the “women’s court”, the zone in the Temple compound reserved for Jews); and yet it goes on to occupy itself not with the norm but with the ramifications of the emergency, exemplified by Ezra’s outreach to the uneducated and speakers of foreign languages, in a place where Gentiles are allowed.

Similarly, the text ends by implying that the “lower” understanding of the anthropomorphic attributes, with its expectation of God’s interventions in history, is truer than the more sophisticated, moral-aesthetic understanding of educated religious language. And yet this cryptic opinion is still subordinate, in one sense, to the subtle reasoning that made the Great Assembly great. So the higher understanding really is higher, but it is not the normal case. The normal case unites adult and child, educated and uneducated, in language that is factual and unequivocal. Only those who have been educated in interpretation can reverse the normal understanding without disrupting the tradition.

Language as it is commonly used and understood ultimately counts for as much as meanings that are available only to extended reflection and social privilege. This accords with our conclusions from the Parable of the Eggs, that religion itself grows out of the creative and impulsive, and that creative interpretation is the engine driving the generational project of human improvement. But what then is the status of truth?

Recall that the word “truth” fell from the sky in the parable. In the Yoma version this occurred when the people refused “reward through evil”; whereas in Sanhedrin the refusal of evil was condemned as the consequence of already having been seduced by it, and the apparition of “truth” was instead applied to the act of fasting. In both cases the apparition is followed by R. Chanina’s saying, that truth is God’s “seal”, his mark or signature. This is the same R. Chanina who urged such caution with regard to anthropomorphic language in praising God! Presumably the remark about God’s “seal” is connected with the remark about God’s insistence on or identification with truth; and presumably there is an ironic dimension to this connection, since R. Chanina can be assumed to have recoiled, on one level, at the clumsy anthropomorphism of the parable.

The image of a seal recalls our paradox, if we reflect that God is an author needing a seal in two senses: He speaks to the prophets, and inspires righteous acts, puts rainbows in the sky; but He is also the author of the Whole, and thus of suffering and evil. And the phenomenon of truth, in the context of religion, itself contains this essential ambiguity, in that spiritual truths always point beyond themselves, and thus in a sense deny themselves. They bless that which is beyond all blessing. There is a certain truth to the denial of evil; but the denial itself reifies evil, and thus contradicts itself in practice. And the truth of God’s “forebearance” (or the injunction to read the Torah metaphorically) conflicts with both the plain meaning of the ancient texts and the necessary understanding of children and the uneducated.

The attempt to understand the world as an expression of the Greatest, most deserving of blessing and praise, must be truthful, but it must go beyond
truth, in the common sense of the term. It must look beyond what the world is like to the miraculous fact that it exists. It must look beyond the facts of exile and holocaust, the truths of coldness and cruelty within us. It must look beyond the sphere of causal explanation. And yet it gets its intelligibility and motivation from all these realities.

So it seems that Jeremiah and Daniel weren’t mistaken. The “language of the sons of men” (the language of Moses and Ezra) does need to be reformed; and the idea that moral rewards and punishments are meted out from heaven conflicts with the facts of experience. And yet we must behave, and sometimes speak, as if reward and punishment were to be expected. We have to look beyond the real to the ideal. In the ideal, one is good for the sake of being good and thanks for the evil as well as the good (or just thanks for being able to thank); but in reality, one works from common meanings and self-interest toward metaphysics and ethics. Therefore ordinary language must both be practiced and overcome. There is a time for asceticism and for creative indulgence, for meditating on the origin and for making decisions of the moment, for embracing your duty toward all mankind and for honoring your parents.

Only scholars understand how pervasive the emergency really is, for only the educated can appreciate that the emergency is really a blessing. R. Gidal teaches that you must praise the Greatest as if in a moment of urgency and extremity, using language that exposes the ideal to misunderstanding and profanation. That’s the price we pay for lacking a universal, spiritually adequate (that is, ideal) system of education. Sometimes you have to venture outside the ‘azarah and engage other languages and ways of life—even if everyday life still engages most securely with women and men of one’s own community in the ‘azarath nashim.

At the same time, scholars know that the emergency must be contained, or if you will, tamed. R. Joshua portrays the Great Assembly taming and reversing the extreme reforms of the prophets. For indeed we can’t have everybody using the Name outside the holy precincts—can’t have people seizing upon the most refined language as if it were the daily news. And we have to distinguish vigilantly between the literal and spiritual senses of words, interpreting them as is appropriate for a given audience. The ideal itself must be tamed, so as to guard against its enticements to asceticism, prudery and silence. Perhaps it is tamed by being rendered in human language, where the desire for truth forces a compromise between the eternal perspective and the facts of nature.

C. Atonement and Blessing in Society

The paradox has not been resolved. It remains the case that man and God, real and ideal, justice and mercy are in dialectical tension. Each side comes into focus at the expense of the other, despite attaining its own meaning only through that other. The scales never stay balanced. But being aware of the paradox may make us more nimble in negotiating its rhythmic instability. We
have to steer the ship, but we may grip the wheel more lightly, more sensitively. We have to resist evil, but we may remember its origin in holiness, and regard it as a basic part of ourselves (or a basic feature of having a self). We can try to avoid externalizing and reifying our impulses (sexual, political, commercial, aesthetic) so that they take on lives of their own. We may resist scapegoating. And we may also become better at distinguishing actual evil from the merely dangerous or indulgent.

The problem of evil only appears against the background of the ideal. The Talmud has set it in the context of praising God, perceiving His perfection in the midst of catastrophe and human strife, on the Day of Atonement. It lays out an itinerary from pessimism to optimism, which admits of no shortcuts, and which is never finished. In contrast, the approach of dogmatic religion, with its scorn for “this world”, renders pessimism as its effective verdict, saving its optimism for the afterlife. It would abandon the real for the ideal, not understanding that the ideal is the spirit of the real and nothing else. It sees evil as an implacable external force, and thus tends to demonize its enemies, rather than being astonished at the Creator’s invention and employment of them.

Instead of apportioning optimism and pessimism into separate “worlds”, the Talmud understands the dialectical relation between the real and ideal, which it renders through sequences of perspectives. When R. Gidal first specified the nature of blessing as min ha-‘olam v’ad ha-‘olam (“from forever until forever” or “from the world unto the world”), he implicitly invoked a network of ambiguous meanings, including the ambiguity between the subjects and Object of blessing (i.e. between our perspective and that of God), all of which demonstrate the underlying unity of the “worlds” in human experience. We saw this unity captured in the saying of R. Jacob: “Better is one hour of repentance and good works in this world than all the life of the world to come; better is one hour of refreshment of spirit in the world to come than all the life of this world.” In the gemara here considered, it is captured in the pithy saying, “There are no halves in heaven”, which in context implies not only the unity of the ideal unto itself but the unity of heaven and earth, and the unity of the religious life, lived amid injustice and senseless suffering. (From its context in Sanhedrin, the discussion of idolatrous names, we can also say that the ultimate unity is the unity of language, the logos or common ground beneath all deceptions and perversions of meaning.)

The blessing on the Day of Atonement tries to atone for the world as well as for itself; it must in a sense “justify” God or put Him on trial (alongside itself). In the trial the strongest evidence, the truths motivating the deepest and most bitter pessimism, must be given their due. Thus the attitude implied here actually contains a deeper pessimism than the stoic dismissiveness in which “this world” is disparaged. It maintains this negative consciousness in tension with its acknowledgement of the Greatest, the ultimate value and ground of Being (a unity, if you will, of tragedy and comedy). The degree of tension is proportional to the education of the individual, the degree to which one replaces magical (and demonic) thinking with interpretive insight, and assumes authority for reforming the religious language of the sons of men.
Coda: Giving Thanks for the Bad

Man is obligated to bless for the bad just as he blesses for the good.

חיהי Adam l’barech ‘al haro’ah k’shem sh’m’barech ‘al hatov (Mishnah Berachoth 9)

Arguments and Commandments

In their show trials of the kings and prophets, the rabbis have put themselves, their community, and God Himself on trial. In their view above, in connection with Job: “We are called upon to judge God’s creation (which is tantamount to judging God): it is out of this necessity that the possibility of authentic praise arises.” What this means is that the “problem of evil”, experienced as an existential crisis rather than an abstract question, is essential to the pursuit of wisdom as the rabbis understand it. I have also called this attitude religious realism.

In the modern philosophical analysis of the problem of evil, the divine attributes of absolute power, goodness and wisdom are shown to be incompatible with our experience of the world. You can either limit some of these attributes, or you can say that the world is better than the analysis has made it out to be, that suffering and evil are not quite as they seem—that this is potentially if not actually the best of all possible worlds. The second option may seem absurd. But in philosophy the answering of questions already framed is a secondary, often trivial phase of the work. More fundamental is the development of the questions themselves (e.g., is it possible to honestly and perceptively give thanks for the world as it is?), and the cultivation of perspectives that bring the questionability of basic premises into focus.

In the present case this means bringing ourselves to the point of being astonished at the horrors of existence...so that this very astonishment can be taken as an index of one’s vision of the ideal. Against the background of the ideal, the perception of evil becomes a challenge—a challenge to make one’s attitude conform to the ideal even when this heightens the conflict with reality—a challenge to give thanks for reality as the anchor of the ideal. The Talmud calls this “blessing for evil”. Mishnah Berachoth 9, the section on interpretation quoted in Interlude 1, says:

Man is obligated to bless for evil just as he blesses for good, as it says, And you shall love YHWH your God, with all your heart and all your soul and with all that

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419 see especially Part 2, sec.35 (“Judgment Human and Divine”)
420 ibid. (“Solomon’s Trial”)
421 see Introduction to The Problem of Evil and the Parable of the Eggs
you have.\textsuperscript{422} “With all your heart” – this is the two inclinations, toward good and toward evil. “And in all your soul” – even if He take your soul. “And with all that you have” – With all your money. Alternatively, “With all that you have” – with every measure that is measured for you, thank Him very much.

I have retained the usual translation of \textit{l’baretch ‘al haro’ah} as to bless for evil, but this can be misleading (thus my alternate translation under the chapter heading). \textit{ro’a} is used in the Bible in many instances where the translation \textit{bad} makes more sense than \textit{evil}. And in fact the “problem of evil” might more accurately be described as the problem of the bad. For we are concerned not just with the cruel intentions of humans, but also acts of nature, the reality of old age and bad fortune in general. \textit{yetzer haro’a} is undoubtedly the inclination toward evil; but might in addition be the inclination toward the bad—toward whatever diminishes our potential or deviates sharply from its ideal function and form.

I have resolutely resisted discussing the question of God’s “existence” in this book, not only because it is alien to the Talmudic perspective, but because I think that the category of “existence” (or nonexistence) is inapplicable to God in any case. Nevertheless I want to mention one such “argument” for God: the assertion that we are born with the concept of God, and that this concept itself necessarily entails the reality of that which it signifies. Here again the deductive reasoning is not the main point; the “argument” really amounts to the insight that human understanding aims at a unification (or “perfection”) of experience and at a ground of meaning—at the world as such or as a whole. And in its full form the “argument” attaches the insight that we have a powerful innate capacity for love, which we may bring to our unifying comprehension—we may love the world in something like the way we love each other. We are naturally seeking a best of all possible worlds, and are naturally inclined to love the world that is our home, even though it has disappointed us.

The Jewish tradition has no such argument, but it has a forceful analogue: we are commanded to love God, and His world. This sounds natural if you have heard it from childhood; but if you think about it, the general form “command to love X” is illogical: love can’t be coerced, because it can’t be willed. It is something to which we are subject. Nevertheless Judaism insists on this command, and further insists that it is the basis of morality; for loving God is in an important sense the same thing as loving other people (as the discussion of Jeroboam’s name first reminded us). We must conclude then that love of God is a special innate capacity, as natural as the love of mother and child. The command to love God, like the proof of His existence from the concept, is a device to make us “un-forget” our need for meaning, our divining of the ideal…to make us surprised at the fact that our understanding is not immediately able to see the value of the bad, that divine wisdom or the cosmic order is seemingly incommensurate with our own intelligence.

\textsuperscript{422} Deut.6:5
Receiving Evil with Gladness

Gemara (Berachoth 60b): “Man is obligated to bless” etc. What is meant by being bound to bless for the evil in the same way as for the good? Shall I say that, just as for good one says the benediction ‘Who is good and bestows good’, so for evil one should say the benediction ‘Who is good and bestows good’? But we have learned: For good tidings one says “who is good and bestows good”; for bad tidings one says “blessed be the true Judge”.

Raba said: What it really means is that one must receive the evil with gladness. R. Acha said in the name of R. Levi: Where do we find this in the Scripture? I will sing of mercy and judgment: unto you, O YHWH, will I sing.423 whether it is ‘mercy’ I will sing, or whether it is ‘judgment’ I will sing.

R. Samuel b. Nachmani said: We learn it from here: In YHWH I will praise His word, in God I will praise His word.424 ‘In YHWH I will praise His word’: this refers to good dispensation; ‘In God I will praise His word’: this refers to the dispensation of suffering.

R. Tanhum said: We learn it from here: I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of YHWH;425 I found trouble and sorrow, but I called upon the name YHWH.426

The Rabbis derive it from here: YHWH gave and YHWH has taken away, blessed be the name of YHWH.427

Raba’s statement is remarkably straightforward: the whole business boils down to having a good attitude. It almost sounds like “Don’t worry! Be happy!” Except that it has all the weight of Lamentations (Alas!) behind it, and thus is committed to presenting a realistic solution to the paradox—to preserving tragedies as tragedies while looking to the bigger picture, as one sees the faults of the beloved without loving less—and as one incorporates experience into tradition, dialectically, without diminishing the coherence of traditional language and themes. The result of bringing religious practice into the moment of disaster is a kind of satisfaction or gladness; but the process still involves all the difficulties of interpretation. (R. Yo’chanan’s statement of the paradox of wisdom—God only gives wisdom to those who are already wise—was given just a few pages earlier in this section of Berachoth.) And it involves the responsibility we have to interpret things positively—to “bless” for each occurrence.

R. Acha’s quotation is from our often-visited Psalm 101, encountered twice in the Three Kings gemara,428 and again in the discussion of the Four Who Entered Paradise.429 I have associated it with the grounding of deception in the divine, and also (especially in light of the verse quoted here) with the creativity

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423 Psalm 101:1 [discussed in part 2, sec.6]
424 Psalm 56:11
425 Psalm 116:13
426 ibid. v.3
427 Job 1:23
428 Part 1, sec.25 and Part 2, sec.6
429 section A
needed to reconcile ourselves with or have “mercy” upon the tragic aspect of things; and yet again, with the reticence and responsibility required of both the sage and the king. But here let us focus on the singing as such. Of course it is also a matter of praising God, and thus also of obeying the command to love God. But it is first of all a matter of entering into the proper mood, of cheering ourselves up, so that we may cheer up others. It is a matter of discovering/creating the soundtrack to our moral-historical drama.

The best argument for a positive evaluation of the world lies with our moral obligation to cheer each other up. We have to say to each other, as Moses said to the Israelites: choose life. And we have to do this even in the midst of “judgment”—by which the text would at first seem to mean our suffering, interpreted as punishment, but which may also be taken as the acts of judgment we have to carry out, upon others and ourselves, and upon the world. For we have to be cheerful even when registering and passing judgment upon the imperfections of the world.

“Sweet Jane”

Here I would like to take a detour into a modern popular song. I hope I’m not judged as Acher was when he sang in Greek. The song I have in mind has something to say about singing, and the choices we make about singing or not singing. I will only quote the final verse in full:

Some people like to go out dancing,
Other people like us, we gotta work.
There's even some evil mothers
They’ll tell you that life is just made out of dirt,
That women never really faint,
That villains always blink their eyes,
That children are the only ones who blush
And life is just to die.
But anyone who ever had a heart
They wouldn't turn around and break it;
Anyone who ever played a part
They wouldn't turn around and hate it.

The song seems to group people into three classes: dancers, workers, and those who disparage life. I would identify the third group, the “evil mothers”, with those who have failed the dialectic demanded by the Talmud—who have faced the problem of evil and gotten stuck in the phase of lamentation and the

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430 cf. “Four Men” section B(1): we have a moral duty to affirm the value of the world to those (especially in the younger generations) who might rely on us for guidance or encouragement.
431 Deut.30:19: I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live...
432 “Sweet Jane” by Lou Reed (original recording by The Velvet Underground, Loaded, Cotillion 1970)
requirements of justice, never moving on to mercy and thanksgiving. As for the first two classes, they seem at first to be mutually exclusive: those who have to work can’t go out dancing. Jane and Jack, the heroine and hero of the song, are officeworkers who sit at home listening to classical music in the evening rather than going out. Nevertheless their love for each other gives their life a celebratory quality: “Heavenly wine and roses seem to whisper to her when he smiles.”

Furthermore the singer himself (Lou Reed or his persona) straddles the boundary between work and music. In the original recording he says “other people they gotta work—just watch me now!” The song is itself a piece of work.

So the working self and the dancing/singing self can and must coexist in the same person. It is a question of getting them to cooperate, and of their mutual influence. But then it must be that the third type of self—the one who thinks that romance and tender feelings are just childish fantasy, since “life is just to die”—is also not excluded from the mix. Just as the rabbis acknowledged the presence of the “evil inclination” within themselves, we have to face up to our inclination to disparage life, to render a negative verdict upon God’s creation and our place in it.

The song gives another indication of how the negative attitude establishes its credibility. In its first verse it identifies the romantic view of life, adopted by studious poets and ladies who “roll their eyes”, with another era: “those were different times”. We tend to view our own moral-historical situation as different in some basic way from the situations of characters in the mythic past—the age of prophecy and miracles has ended—or even in history as recent as the “Stutz Bearcat” era referred to in the song. (The sages of the Mishna idealized the Temple whose relatively recent ruins they could still see.)

But Reed says why this attitude is wrong, and why we can and must retain the drama and meaning that a narrow “realism” would consign to the past:

Anyone who ever played part wouldn’t turn around and hate it.

We mustn’t disavow the moral-historical context in which our identity is grounded, as if we were free simply to create new selves, new roles out of thin air. This idea of self-creation ex nihilo is, I believe, a basic flaw in modern thinking, especially among those who say that morality in no way depends on religion. Their motivation is understandable, given that the fundamentalist opponents who draw their attention often offer no reasons for their moral conclusions, beyond simply pointing to religious authority. If my Talmud study has revealed anything, it is the unavoidability of the hard work of interpretation and self-criticism that fundamentalists avoid. But from this it hardly follows that morality can flourish in the absence of tradition, being thought out afresh on each occasion from first principles.

I am reminded of a physicist friend who once joked that he didn’t need any tables of formulas for things like integrals or trigonometric identities, since he could just derive them himself as needed. (Whereas Wittgenstein argued that even the use of a pencil and paper can’t be discounted in understanding the real practices of mathematics.) In fact the time he would need for all those derivations
would overwhelm his actual work. Or again, the deduction of morality from first principles is like the invention of new, “rational” languages like Esperanto: one falsely imagines that a language is simply a way of encoding pre-existing concepts, rather than a network of practices arising from the depths of natural history, influencing concepts as much as reflecting them. In my view, the pursuit or creation of moral principles in the absence of tradition is as difficult as the creation of a language, and is bound to be shaped by tradition in unconscious ways.

So we don’t create ourselves out of whole cloth, and we don’t completely invent or even choose the parts we play. We work with what is given, even when it is imperfect, sometimes even oppressive. To turn around and hate the parts we find ourselves playing is to abandon ourselves—to dismantle the ship upon which we are sailing, without having a liferaft available. It is to abandon our heart, the fundamental feeling and sense of value we have about our lives. Of course if I am a slave I won’t just accept my part, I will struggle to be free; but the free person I aim to be will still have a heart that once belonged to a slave (as the Torah tries so often to remind us.)

The song says that “anyone” who had a heart wouldn’t turn around and break it. Is this “anyone” really everyone? In a sense it is; and yet clearly there are those who do deny their parts, and thus betray or bury their own hearts. There are those who say that they didn’t ask to be born, to live in this society, etc. They disparage their opportunities as vain, false, mere roles in a pointless play or game. Such people—who again are not just others, not just “evil mothers”, but are also voices inside us—need the teaching that life itself has a game-like quality; that the divine drama is most real and most serious when its dramatic character is embraced; and that we are commanded to play, and to sing.

**Blaming the Victim**

I am back to the insight of O.K. Bouwsma, who said that the Bible is a story in which we find ourselves to be characters—except that by now it must be understood that in this regard the Bible itself stands for all of history—for life itself. The Mishna’s instruction to bless for the bad as well as the good might be taken as a license to read history as we wish it to be. Then we would simply call everything good, despite the harshness of reality. But the gemara reminds us that we are supposed to call a spade a spade—to distinguish between justice and mercy. We can be true to our hearts, and keep up our spirits, without falsifying reality.

R. Samuel b. Nachmani and R. Tanhum point to verses in which the divine name is praised in the midst of suffering. The danger here is that of “blaming the victim”, that is, thinking that every misfortune is a result of some past misdeed—even if those misdeeds occurred before we were born, in a “past life” or in the lives of our ancestors. After all, the Torah sometimes says that God visits the
sins of the fathers upon the children, generation after generation. Thus the rabbis are careful to remind us that the innocent and the virtuous also suffer, as the great book of Job is there to testify. Blaming the victim is another mistake of interpretation, and an evasion of the hardest responsibility. It is another case of putting all the responsibility on God, when we are also co-creators of the historical drama, as well as judges of its meaning and value. And it is an evasion of dialectic: an unwillingness to keep judgment and interpretation open, through the dialectical turns and contradictions that are the engine of history, and the rhythm of its music, which we are commanded to hear and to sing.

**Their share is in life (The martyrdom of R. Aqiva)**

When R. Aqiva was taken out for execution, it was the hour for the recital of the shema’, and while they combed his flesh with iron combs, he was acknowledging the sovereignty of Heaven over himself. His disciples said to him: Our teacher, even to this point? He said to them: All my days I have been troubled by this verse, with all your soul, [which I interpret] ‘even if He takes your soul’. I said: When will this be within my power? Now that I have the opportunity shouldn’t I take it? He prolonged the word ‘one’ [echad] until he died while saying it. A Heavenly Voice (bath qol⁴³³) went forth and proclaimed: Lucky you, Aqiva, that your soul has gone out with echad!

The ministering angels said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Such Torah, and such a reward? [He should have been] from the dead [by] Your hand (mimothim yadecha יד ומעון), YHWH.⁴³⁴ He replied to them: their share [is] in life.⁴³⁵ (cheleqam b’chayim דעלקם בحياة) A Heavenly Voice went forth and proclaimed, Lucky you, R. Aqiva, that you are destined for the life of the world to come. (Berachoth 61b)

I have read the Talmud as a work of dialectical interpretation, in which extreme realism is integrated with an unwavering vision of the ideal. R. Aqiva shows just how unwavering that vision can be—how it can allow one to bless for evil. We may assume that this has something to do with the mystical experience or theophany described in Chagigah.⁴³⁶ What remains to be examined is the nature of his realism—the manner in which he “went down in peace”.

R. Aqiva can almost be regarded as the inventor of the style of Talmudic interpretation that dominates the passages I have been reading. It is characterized by a tremendous creativity, producing results that strike some as

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⁴³³ literally “daughter voice”; see discussion above (“The Rejection of the Heavenly Voice”, Part 2, sec.35)
⁴³⁴ Psalms 17:14 Verses 13-14 in full:
[13] Arise, O YHWH, confront him, cast him down. Save my soul from the wicked, by your sword;
[14] From men [or dead], [by] your hand, O YHWH, from men [or dead] of the world [or age] their share [is] in life, and whose belly you fill with your hidden [treasure], who have many children, and who leave the rest to their babies.
⁴³⁵ ibid.
⁴³⁶ see Interlude 2, “Four Men Entered Paradise"
far-fetched and others as profound. To the school of R. Ishmael (the other great early master of interpretation), it seemed like something radically new. But the line from Nestroy set by Wittgenstein as the epigraph to his *Philosophical Investigations* is appropriate here: “It is in the nature of every step forward that it appears much greater than it really is.” Metaphorical and associative leaps, wedded to insights operating at a level beneath the explicit and referential, had been going on throughout the centuries of Pharisaism, when the home and synagogue were regarded as metaphorical extensions of or substitutes for the Temple. It had been going on much earlier, in the reworking of tradition in *Deuteronomy*, when moral education was emphasized as the meaning of myth and ritual. And if we had more information about the compositional history of *Genesis*, we would undoubtedly see it there as well.

Nevertheless it remains clear that R. Aqiva represents the creative pole of dialectical thinking more strongly than the pole of objectivity and faithfulness to (or humility toward) tradition. In this respect he is aligned with the tendency exhibited by R. Yehuda and R. Yochanan, to ultimately favor mercy over justice by creatively transcending the letter of the law. The “problem of evil” itself calls out for this ultimate tilt toward mercy: for we must have mercy in our judgment upon the world. Still we must recognize that an excess of creativity, of interpretive confidence and desire to save the appearances, can lead to error. If we are unwilling to err on the side of justice, we may have to err on the side of mercy.

The death of R. Aqiva in *Berachoth* is a Jewish version of the death of Socrates in Plato’s *Phaedo*. The scenes are moving; but they are also warnings. Philosophers, like religious scholars, have erred the most when they overestimated their own influence on their contemporaries, and underestimated the distance between their ideals and the current historical situation. Socrates was put to death for meddling in politics (and for the actions of his student Alcibiades), and Plato barely escaped from the clutches of his “student”, the tyrant Dionysus of Syracuse. The misadventures of far less exemplary philosophers could also be cited. But R. Aqiva’s error, however well-intentioned, may have led to worse consequences than any of them.

The evidence is inconclusive, but suggests that he was a strong supporter of the nationalist rebel Shimon Bar Kochba, and that his voice, as leader of the Sanhedrin, contributed significantly to the rebellious that resulted in something like 600,000 of his countrymen dying at the hands of the Romans. The very name “Bar Kochba” is said by the Talmud to echo Aqiva’s invocation of the messianic “star from Jacob” line from the prophecy of Bala’am (while elsewhere the Talmud calls him Bar Kosiva, the son of lies). In other words he said that Shimon was the Messiah whom God would bring to power in Judea.

The truth was that they had no chance. He misread the moral-historical situation. The coming world Aqiva foresaw was surely not this catastrophe, so it seems to me that his share in the real world to come is thereby diminished. To a

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437 Numbers 24:17
certain extent, he must have been driven “out of the world” like Jeroboam, by his contempt for the Roman order that God had allowed to subsume the Jews.

But our text doesn’t seem to see it this way. At first, it refers implicitly to Aqiva’s mystical experience, by saying that he is lucky to have his soul expire with “one”, i.e. being at one with himself and with God, with his life and with history, even in the face of death. All well and good. But then the final paragraph seems to suggest that Aqiva is lucky precisely because he is leaving the world and life; for the unlucky are those whose share is in life (chelegam b’chayim הַכְּלֶגֶם בֵּ’חַיִּים). Isn’t this the “two worlds” theory that has been dialectically overturned throughout this book? Or is it one more dialectical device?

Now it may be that their share is in life isn’t meant by the Talmud in the sense of the psalm at all, if one can narrow the plural “their” to the singular and thus take it as referring to Aqiva himself—his share is in life. The text might just want to emphasize that Aqiva wasn’t made dead by God (that would just be left to the Romans), but was rather brought into the future life. But such a reading would not only be inconsistent with “even if He takes your soul” from the preceding paragraph, it would lose all connection with the strange psalm it interprets.

For the reading of Psalms 17:14 that is used to represent the objection of the angels—another case of divine confrontation, the dialectic within heaven—is a creative leap worthy of R. Aqiva. It takes the letters מִמְּסֵת הַמֵּת יָדֶךָ as standing for מִמְּסֵת הַמֵּתים, “from dead [ones]”, despite the fact that both the context and tradition suggest the word is מֶסֶת הַמֵּתים, another word for “men”. The phrase מִמְּסֵת הַמֵּתים יָדֶךָ is then understood as “from the dead [by] your hand”: God takes the lives of some people directly; Aqiva should have died by the hand of God.

I fail to see how the verse can make sense in this way. The following clause identifies the מֵתים as being “of the world” (or “age”), and says “their share is in life”—so how could they be dead? In fact, the context makes clear that the מֵתים are “the wicked” from whom the psalmist asks God to save him. So the divine rejoinder (in the Talmudic parable) is just restoring the straightforward reading, which contrasts the resigned and persecuted psalmist with the prosperous wicked ones, who not only rule today but are destined to die happy with their children’s futures secured.

The Talmud is thus responding to the strangeness of the psalm itself. What sense does it make for David, the alleged psalmist, to resign himself to the success of his enemies? The Biblical David never left his enemies in very good condition. It makes about as much sense as his resigning himself to death, and awaiting only some kind of afterlife wherein he will see God’s face and “likeness” (temunah).

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The word temunah is used 8 times in the Torah: 5 times in prohibiting the representation of celestial and earthly objects (presumably for religious

438 see Part 1, sec.7
439 Psalms 17:15 As for me, I will behold Your face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Your likeness.
440 Ex.20:4, Deut.4:16, 4:23, 4:25, 5:8
purposes), twice\textsuperscript{441} in emphasizing that the theophany at Horeb was a purely auditory experience with no visual content, and once\textsuperscript{442} in the passage asserting the supremacy and uniqueness of Moses, who alone saw (or “saw”) the \textit{temunah} of YHWH. Now we have seen how the dominant ideology of hearing over vision, with its image-free setting for worship and its warning that none shall see God and live, repeatedly runs into obstacles like the fact of the iconic cherubs in the Temple and the assertion that Moses (and others like Elijah, Isaiah and Ezekiel) saw God. We studied\textsuperscript{443} the Talmud’s trial of Isaiah precisely on the grounds of this apparently transgressive seeing; and we even looked into the exploitation of this paradox by the Torah itself, with its examples of averted vision and talk of God’s “backside”. The paradox of representation—that we cannot represent the Absolute, yet without any form of representation we are reduced to silence—is in essence the engine of the whole religious dialectic, as noted in the study of Jeroboam. \textit{Psalms} 17 is another example of the excessive “language of the sons of men”, a kind of wild speech which must be tamed by criticism and comparison.

The psalm is equally transgressive whether we understand David to be anticipating death or salvation in life. For indeed the plea in verse 13 to “cast him [the wicked enemy] down” makes it look like the characterization of the enemy as one whom God sates and preserves is only temporary; that those who have tracked and surrounded David will soon be disappointed as they have not been in the past. In that case David’s “awakening” to God’s \textit{temunah} is an event on his way to the throne, and he must join Moses, Isaiah, and the other transgressors upon the holy (including, no doubt, Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma and Acher) in their lust to see. And it seems that, in a sense, R. Aqiva belongs with them as well.

In studying R. Aqiva’s “exit in peace” at the conclusion of the “Four Men” mishnah, I emphasized his unending process of interpretation and self-criticism. This vigilance should in theory have kept him from understanding the divine form as something visible rather than intelligible (contrary to the statement of the psalm). At the least, it should have spurred him to an extrasensory reading of \textit{temunah}. Maimonides gives a rather unconvincing defense of this distinction in the third chapter of his \textit{Guide}, when he says that the use of \textit{temunah} in \textit{Numbers} 12:8 (and presumably \textit{Psalms} 17 as well) has a meaning that is different from all the other uses: whereas the others refer to visible or imagined forms, this use refers only to the intellect (”he grasps the truth of God”). But he gives no way of distinguishing these senses other than by fiat. Simply declaring that whenever the Bible uses sensory language about God, it must be meant non-literally, does nothing to explain why sensory language is relied upon in specific cases.

Why do I dwell on this use of \textit{temunah}? Because I sense that it analogizes R. Aqiva’s misjudgment regarding the Messiah: he \textit{saw} the Messiah in the person of a guerilla warrior, rather than \textit{understanding} the Messiah as part of the world to come—the world that is coming…but not today. His method of perpetual criticism wasn’t carried through to the political end. The text would then have an ironic dimension. Excluding Aqiva from those “whose portion is in life” praises

\textsuperscript{441} Deut.4:12, 4:15
\textsuperscript{442} Num.12:8
\textsuperscript{443} Part 2, sec.10(a) “The Trial of Isaiah”
him somewhat faintly, in using the sense of “world to come” as an afterlife, in opposition to “this world” or life. So, when the Heavenly Voice says that he is “destined for the life of the world to come”, I have to hear it in the semi-ironic mode established by the criticisms of R. Joshua, R. Jeremiah and others. It expresses an ideal still subject to the dialectic that integrates the two “worlds” and the two “lives”. The voice may be resisted in argument, even if the walls fall down.

We may wonder why the editors conclude the section on “man is obligated to bless for evil…” with the martyrdom of Aqiva. There is of course his reported saying about “…with all your soul”, quoted in the Mishnah, and the story that sets the quote at the scene of his death. But his recitation of the shema’ hardly seems like a blessing for evil. The interpretation of “…with all your soul” implies that the act of martyrdom is itself a way of loving God—and thus perhaps that such action “blesses” in a non-linguistic way, that is, it “makes a statement”. But in that case, what is the “statement”, and how does it magnify God? Isn’t it that life under the Romans isn’t worth living? And isn’t that a flawed attempt to praise God while denigrating His creation in the present age?

So I wonder whether the Talmud is using the subtly flawed example of R. Aqiva to say something about the notion of “blessing for evil” itself. Perhaps it is telling us that “blessing for evil” belongs in the ideal; that applying it rigorously to the present must lead to a lack of discrimination between greater and lesser evils—a night, as Hegel said, in which all cows are black. This would fit not only with Aqiva’s mystical echad, but with the focus of the preceding paragraphs of the text (not quoted here) on the reality of the evil inclination, and their implication, as in the Parable of the Eggs, that evil must be accommodated just as sexuality must be accommodated. The life of this world, stretching from the mythic past through the debased present age toward the world to come, demands our engagement and our love.

It’s worth noting that the “men of the world” (methim micheled מ瑪ימ מיכלד) whose “share is in life” could also be men of the age, since cheled usually connotes a period of time, with an emphasis on its transitory character. Or it could be that the request is to be saved “from men, from the age” (mimethim micheled). In either case the danger would lie in being caught up in the moment rather than seeing the big picture, the full moral-historical context.

R. Aqiva, by contrast, certainly sees a big picture, but it is in a sense too big. In the long run we’re all dead. But in the medium-term of real history we are concerned with those who will outlive us, the coming generations. As far as I can see, R. Aqiva failed the Jews of the latter 2nd century (though he continues to benefit us of later millennia).

R. Aqiva abandoned his lovingkindess (“Ten Tribes” cont’d.)

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444 Part 2, sec.35 “The Rejection of the Heavenly Voice”
445 cf. Psalms 89:47 zakar ani meh-chaled (זכר אני מחלד) translated variously as “remember how short my time is”, “remember my span of life”, etc.
In support of the idea that there is a subtle irony to the Talmudic treatment of R. Aqiva vis-à-vis the coming generation, we may consider the text that continues the “Ten Tribes” gemara considered in Prelude 1 above. Recall that R. Aqiva disagreed with R. Eliezer about the “return”, or share toward the world to come, of those exiled from the kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, and their descendants. Eliezer was lenient, Aqiva was strict—in contrast to his generosity toward Samaritans, and indeed, in contrast to the whole thrust of his creative methodology, seemingly engineered to tilt toward mercy. In my earlier study I passed over the problem by saying that we had moved to the mythic level. But a later sage is led to wonder about the inconsistency:

[Rabbi said: They are coming to the world to come…]
Rabbah bar bar Chana said in R. Yochanan's name: R. Aqiva abandoned his lovingkindess [chesidotiah יְדֵי חָכָם], for it is written, Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say, Return, backsliding Israel, says YHWH; and I will not cause my anger to fall upon you; for I am merciful, says YHWH, and I will not keep my anger for ever.⁴⁴⁶

Now, to what does ‘his lovingkindess’ refer?—Even as it has been taught: The young children of the wicked of Israel are not coming to the world to come, as it is written, For, behold, the day comes that shall burn like an oven; and all the proud, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that comes shall burn them up, says YHWH of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root or branch.⁴⁴⁷ ‘root’, refers to this world; ‘branch’—to the world to come. This is Rabban Gamaliel's view. R. Aqiva said: They are coming to the world to come, as it is written, YHWH preserves the simple [petha'im],⁴⁴⁸ and in the island cities, a child is called pattia; and it is said also, Hew the tree down, and destroy it: yet leave the stump of the roots thereof in the earth.⁴⁴⁹

Again we meet Rabbah bar bar Chana, who told the story ending “His God will teach us”,⁴⁵⁰ as well as asserting that “the soul of one righteous man is equal to the whole world”.⁴⁵¹ He is another partisan of mercy, and of chesed, the profound kindness later perceived (in Kabbalah) as one of the ten divine emanations. Nor is his inclination surprising, given that he speaks in the name of R. Yochanan. He heightens the contradiction by pointing to another saying of Aqiva’s, in which he had taken the side of mercy against the harsh, “unto-the-third-and-fourth-generation” sort of saying put forth by Gamaliel. Since Aqiva supports the children of the wicked of Israel, why doesn’t this include the “Ten Tribes” (and their descendants who would return to Palestine)? Aren’t they just the victims of Jeroboam and their other forefathers?

⁴⁴⁶ Jer. III, 12
⁴⁴⁷ Mal. III, 19 [English 4:1]
⁴⁴⁸ Psalms 116:6
⁴⁴⁹ Dan. IV, 20
⁵⁰ Part 2, sec.40
⁵¹ Part 2, sec.10
The example of Aqiva’s *chesed* illustrates not only his leniency but his interpretive creativity, indeed his willingness to stretch a meaning the extra mile. He reads “God preserves children” from *Psalms* 116:6 by dredging up a substitute meaning of *pethaim* from some random language. Wow. Then he adds a contradictory text about leaving the roots. This seems like overkill to make the simple point that everyone should be punished for his own sin\(^{452}\)—or that our present historical situation, though permeated by corruption and ignorance stretching back into prehistory, must be regarded as redeemable, and as bearing the seeds of a future just society.

The context in *Psalms* 116 contains a relevant line that we encountered in connection with Ben Azzai:\(^{453}\) *Precious in the sight of YHWH is the death of His saints*. We also glanced at the counterposed line: *I will walk before YHWH in the land of the living*. As with Ben Azzai, the hint here seems to be that the kind of death that is a blessing to the one who dies (whether through mystic detachment, nationalism or mystically-motivated martyrdom) might not always be a blessing to the living. We should also notice a striking line in the context of the “neither root or branch” quotation in *Malachi*:

> And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse. [4:9]

The end of a life is not the end of the significance and effects of that life; they remain in that public world, that “land of the living” by which the Talmudic philosophy takes its bearings. The living children may still have to make peace with their dead parents.

R. Aqiva’s *chesidotiah*—the objects of his lovingkindness—constitute the future generations. He let them down in the case of the Ten Tribes, as well as in the case of the “generation of the wilderness” from *Numbers* (where bar Chana makes the same remark, and cites Jeremjah to show the benefit subsequent generations obtain from their merit), and perhaps in the case of Korach as well.\(^{454}\) And in all these cases he contradicts the merciful teaching of his master Eliezer. I can’t help wondering if this little sequence doesn’t encode the flaw of Aqiva’s political activity, and give a hint about his interpretive methods, beneath the surface veneration he seems always to be accorded.

For here we not only have a sequence containing elements of the war against Rome—a charismatic revolutionary leader challenging the powers that be, a guerilla war in the wilderness, and a generation of resulting exiles—we also have indicators of how Aqiva, hero of interpretive freedom, could sometimes be very strict and literal-minded. Literal enough to call a living man the Messiah. And what would account for such a lapse? Only that he had temporarily lost his feeling for the moral-historical situation of the younger generation—the twenty-

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\(^{452}\) as per Deut.24:16: The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers; every man shall be put to death for his own sin.

\(^{453}\) see Interlude 2, part B(1)

\(^{454}\) see “Outline of *Pereq Cheleq*”, Prelude 1
year-olds who would do the real fighting against the Romans, goaded by the words of an old man.\textsuperscript{455}

At the end of the first part of my study of the Three Kings I ran into a sort of impasse, beginning with my sympathy for the home- and community-centered elements of folk religion (in which women had played a much greater role) that were suppressed in Judaism when it became a religion of Temple and priests. Many of these functions have been subsequently restored through rabbinic interpretation itself, which in many ways substitutes home for Temple. (The restoration of female participation has of course gone more slowly.) Nevertheless the criticism of Ahab turned out in large part to be a criticism of “balance”, which implied something like liberal tolerance of differences; and this made me perceive an echo of the Deuteronomistic fanaticism in what I saw as a rabbinic unwillingness to accommodate the reality and inevitability of human weakness. Taken together with the more explicit ideal of perfect mindfulness or resoluteness examined in connection with R. Chanina b. Papa’s admonition to give thanks for everything,\textsuperscript{456} the stringency of rabbinic justice presents a moral perfectionism that I admire but accept only with caveats.

I first used this term of Cavell’s as part of an explanation for the dialectical relation obtaining between those who represent the ideal (the wise) and everyone else. Perfectionism, in Cavell’s words, places a “tremendous burden” on the individual, not only with regard to ordinary morality but also “the possibility or necessity of the transforming of oneself and of one’s society.” The sense in which this burden is too great (like Aristotle’s statement that wisdom is “too high for man”) fuels the dialectic. I returned to the concept in connection with the seriousness of interpretation and the argument against being serious all of the time;\textsuperscript{457} and in connection with my rejection of the Talmudic acquittal of King David (where an “imperfectionist” view is more conducive to appropriate forgiveness);\textsuperscript{458} and again during the trial of Isaiah, where a misplaced perfectionism (attributed to Manasseh) was seen as leading to a loss of balance (and where R. Aqiva was on the perfectionist side regarding the moral requirements for the fulfilment of “destiny”).\textsuperscript{459}—All this was in keeping with the general theme that religion itself is on trial in the most serious religious reflections, which serve to “solve” the problem of evil each time anew, even as they keep their own moral status in question during the execution of judgments upon others.

Perhaps the martyrdom of Aqiva represents for me a measure in which my own judgment upon religion and the world remains suspended, if not on my behalf then on behalf of all those whose understanding has been blocked by accidents of nature, culture and history. It was with this impasse in mind that I

\textsuperscript{455} Aqiva’s birth is estimated at 40-50 AD. The revolt culminated in 135, and he must have been executed not long before then. So he was in his 80’s when he supported the false messiah.

\textsuperscript{456} Part 1, sec.13

\textsuperscript{457} Part 2, sec.8

\textsuperscript{458} Part 2, sec.9

\textsuperscript{459} Part 2, sec.10(a)
happily studied the teachings of R. Yochanan and R. Yehudah, offering aesolution of the dialectic of justice and mercy through an insight into the
pragmatics of religious debate. Just as what one says about King Manasseh
must be measured by the effect it has on those for whom it is morally relevant, so
our philosophy, our most comprehensive thought and speech, should be
assessed on the basis of its contribution to the worldview of those undergoing
their moral education. (In one sense this is everyone; but of course it is primarily
the young.)

I accept this requirement, and have acknowledged it as the most serious
ground of, and spur toward, a justification of suffering. And the texts have given a
set of nuanced considerations regarding how to balance tragedy with comedy,
how to turn repentance into thanksgiving, and why moral urgency (“the mouthful”)
is more fundamental than any explanation. The caution I urge in the end is just
that these teachings must be pursued endlessly (therefore always in need of
improvement, reassessment, etc.), but not necessarily without pause. We can’t
always be in a religious frame of mind, and we can’t perceive every hour and
minute in the context of a moral-historical drama. We have to cut ourselves some
slack.

In the case of the quotation YHWH preserves the simple, I would like to
suggest that the straightforward reading is more fundamental than the strained
reading of pethaim as “children”. For the psalmist himself identifies with “the
simple”: YHWH watches over the simple; I was brought low, and He saved me.
The word pethai occurs in 18 Biblical verses, 14 in Proverbs, 3 in Psalms and
one in Ezekiel. It is striking that the uses in Proverbs are all pejorative; for
example: Abandon simpleness, and live, and walk in the way of
understanding. Proverbs is about the pursuit of wisdom, and simple-
mindedness is its opposite. But the psalmist says that even in his simple state he
was saved. Presumably this salvation included education, also courtesy of God
(for God can “make the simple wise”); but his awareness of his frailty and
dependence on God prevent him from putting his simple-mindedness in the past
tense.

If the psalmist can accept his own simplemindedness, his own mediocrity
and, yes, childishness, then so can you and I. We can aspire to give thanks for
the bad, for tragedy and catastrophe, while yet speaking and feeling naturally.
After all, the Talmud’s religious realism forbids falsely suppressing grief and fear.
The necessity of honest communication counts for as much as the necessity of
cheering each other up—if only because the praise of God’s creation we utter
must be plausible in order to be persuasive. R. Aqiva’s martyrdom may give
credibility to his acts of blessing, but we in our simplicity should be careful before
speaking or acting as he did.

END

460 Proverbs 9:6
461 Psalms 19:7