



Beshalah

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MIRIAM'S SONG AND THE PERSISTENCE OF MUSIC IN DARK TIMES

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The Song at the Sea ([Exodus 15](#)) offers an opportunity to reflect on the role of music within the lives of *Bnei Yisrael* during their enslavement in Egypt. Various commentators have addressed topics such as the structure of the song, its relationship to the broader biblical art of poetics, and musical performance in the ancient world. I argue that a wider historical perspective on the use of musical instruments by enslaved peoples—in particular, enslaved Africans at the height of

the international slave trade in the eighteenth century—sheds light on important themes of the Exodus in Jewish tradition.

The Torah relates that Miriam complemented the singing of the general population—or perhaps only of the men—by leading music-making among the women:

And Miriam, the prophetess, sister of Aaron, took the *tof* in her hand, and all the women went out after her with *tupim* and *mahalot*. And Miriam answered them: “Sing to Hashem, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown in the sea” ([Exodus 15:20–21](#)).¹

¹ This essay quotes from historical sources on slavery that are troubling for their content and language as well as for the inhumane realities that they represent. It also quotes racist views of Thomas Jefferson as well as the eloquent writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, who used terminology that is considered inappropriate today.

Throughout this essay, I refer to *tupim* and *mahalot* using their Hebrew terms. Their precise identity has been a

subject of debate over the centuries; a full review of the sources must be left for another essay. In brief, I understand the *tof* as a frame drum made of wood and animal skin. Some commentators understand *mahalot* as related to *halil*, commonly understood as a flute. Others understand it as a circle dance; if this is correct, the usage here suggests that it was both the name of a circle dance and an instrument used to accompany them.

Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael asks why the Jews had these instruments in the desert in the first place. After all, they had escaped Egypt in extreme haste, under cover of darkness. Why would they take the time to pack such seemingly unnecessary items as musical instruments? The answer lies in their faith in Hashem's redemption:

Why did [Bnei] Yisrael (m.) have *tupim* and *mahalot* in the desert? They were righteous people, certain in the knowledge that the Holy One, Blessed is He, would perform miracles and triumphs. At the time when they left Egypt, they prepared their *tupim* and *mahalot* ([Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael 15:20](#)).

Rashi paraphrases this source, but he attributes the righteousness and steadfast faith exhibited here specifically to the women. This seems warranted, given that the Torah only mentions the accompaniment of musical instruments when describing the song of the women; the men apparently sang without instruments:

So certain were the righteous women (f.) of that generation that the Holy One, Blessed is He, would perform miracles for them, that they brought *tupim* out of Egypt ([Rashi on Exodus 15:20](#)).

Both *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* and Rashi seem to recognize an incongruity between the situation

of slavery and the possession and use of musical instruments. Shera Aranoff Tuchman and Sandra E. Rapoport underscore this question and ask an even more basic one: how did the Jewish women come to possess these instruments in the first place?

An inquiring reader might wonder that they even possessed drums and timbrels with which to dance and sing on the shore of the Red Sea. At the unexpected midnight signal to leave Egypt did the women actually pause to pack their tambourines along with the riches of Egypt and their personal effects?²

Tuchman and Rapoport emphasize that the book of Exodus repeatedly enumerates the items that the women took from Egypt ([3:22](#), [11:2](#), and [12:35](#)), which included *klei kesef u-khlei zahav u-semalot* (implements of silver, implements of gold, and garments). These lists do not include musical instruments.

I propose that an analogous case from more recent history, the enslavement of Black peoples in the early modern Atlantic world, suggests that it is perfectly reasonable and understandable for enslaved people to use musical instruments, both during slavery and upon their escape. The continued use of such instruments, along with traditions of song, serves as a means of maintaining resilience and a sense of national identity in the face of great adversity. The Black

² Shera Aranoff Tuchman and Sandra E. Rapoport, [Moses' Women](#) (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2008), 158.

peoples who were kidnapped from Africa in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries and forced into slavery had their own traditions of song and instrumental performance. Forcibly separated from their homes, and very often from their families, they fused the individual musical traditions of their original nations with those of other enslaved Black peoples, keeping those traditions alive as a means of building and maintaining a sense of community and human dignity. While there were many differences between the Jews' slavery in Egypt and the slavery of Black Africans and their descendants in Europe and the European colonies,³ consideration of this elliptical episode from the Torah in light of the more recent history of the enslaved Black peoples in the Atlantic world is instructive. Indeed, as I will discuss below, some of them understood themselves as heirs to the biblical tradition of music made during enslavement.

Among the most shocking and poignant sources that attest to the presence of musical instruments in the lives of enslaved Black people in the eighteenth century are the many advertisements placed in newspapers that demand the return of runaway slaves who could be recognized by their possession and skilled usage of musical instruments. Examples from English newspapers abound. They include, for instance, a 1768 advertisement in the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* seeking the return of "John Chalk, but who has lately gone by the name of JOHN SMART: He is about five feet five or six inches high, pretty lusty and fat, about 35 years of age, woolly head,

but often wears false curls; stutters much in his speech at times; **plays upon the French horn and violin**; had on when he went away a silver laced hat, blue coat and red waistcoat."⁴ In 1762, the *Public Advertiser* called for the return of a "black BOY, named King, about sixteen Years of Age, took with him when he went away, a black Velvet Jockey Cap, a blue Frock and Waistcoat, Leather Breeches, four Shirts, three Pair of new worsted Stockings, and a new Pair of Shoes; **he has also taken with him a good Violin.**" A Black man named Prince could be recognized by the facts that he "speaks pretty good English, and **blows the French horn tolerably well.**" When the enslaved man Joseph Williams ran away from his captivity, he "**stole out of the House . . . a French Horn**, a new Silver laced Hat; two Fustian Suits of Cloaths, a new Pair of Leather Breeches, two Pair of Shoes both lined; a blue Surtout much too big for him, four Shirts, six Pair of Stockings, some fine printed Linen Handkerchiefs, which he carried away with him." The cruelty to which these men were subjected is alluded to in the advertisement seeking the capture of William Suza, a "Negro Boy about seventeen Years of Age, short and stout made, marked on one or both of his Temples with Scars, also on the Forehead; wears a white Coat, reddish Waistcoat, black Breeches and Stockings, the coat rather too large, **blows the French Horn, and plays a little on the German Flute.**" (Emphasis in these passages has been added.)

Even in their terrifying and pressured moment of escape, these enslaved people paused to take their musical instruments with them. This act

³ For a thorough comparison, see Kenneth Chelst, [Exodus and Emancipation: Biblical and African-American Slavery](#) (Jerusalem: Urim Publication, 2009).

⁴ All these sources may be read in the searchable database [Runaway Slaves in Britain: Bondage, Freedom, and Race in the Eighteenth Century](#).

should be understood as signifying defiance of their captors and resistance to the dehumanization that had been imposed upon them.

In the Caribbean and North America, too, enslaved Blacks took their musical traditions with them and kept them alive. Thomas Jefferson, who enslaved and abused numerous Black men and women, wrote about their arts in dismissive terms, but in doing so, he attested to the fact that they did engage in the arts. Regarding poetry, Jefferson disparagingly noted that “Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry.—Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar œstrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination.”⁵ He claimed that Black people may “astonish you with strokes of the most sublime oratory; such as prove their reason and sentiment strong, their imagination glowing and elevated. But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture.” He acknowledged that Black people had some talent for music: “In music they are more generally gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time, and they have been found capable of imagining a small catch [i.e., a song or round].” However, in the next breath, he claims that their talent for

music is limited to the sensory realm, not to the intellectual: “Whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony, is yet to be proved.”⁶ This comment shows how firmly Jefferson privileges the supposedly white, European art of composition above the oral tradition of music that enslaved Blacks brought with them from Africa.

In the course of this discussion, Jefferson provides a footnote explaining that enslaved Black people had brought an instrumental tradition with them from Africa: “The instrument proper to them is the Banjar [i.e., banjo], which they brought hither from Africa, and which is the original of the guitar, its chords being precisely the four lower chords of the guitar.” For Jefferson, this instrument seems to be a curiosity, yet the influence of the African banjo would soon become inseparable from the larger traditions of musical creation and performance in the United States and beyond.⁷ And, again, it offers a case of enslaved peoples persisting in the use of an instrument and its performance traditions in the harshest circumstances.

I further propose that considering *why* enslaved Blacks maintained these musical traditions in their captivity sheds light on the women’s musicianship in Egypt and on the shores of the Red Sea.

⁵ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia: Prichard and Hall, 1788), [electronic edition](#).

⁶ In fact, eighteenth-century Black musicians did sometimes compose. Further on this topic, see Rebecca Cypess, “[Notation, Performance, and the Significance of Print in the Music of Ignatius Sancho \(c. 1729–1780\)](#),” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* (2022):1-27. On composition as

a racialized category of artistic creation, see, e.g., Mary Caton Lingold, “In Search of Mr Baptiste: On Early Caribbean Music, Race, and a Colonial Composer,” *Early Music* 49, no. 1 (2021): 49–65.

⁷ See the essays in Robert B. Winans, ed., [Banjo Roots and Branches](#) (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018).

Perhaps no one captured the *why* of Black musicianship more eloquently than W. E. B. Du Bois in his monumental volume [The Souls of Black Folk](#):

They that walked in darkness sang songs in the olden days—Sorrow Songs—for they were weary at heart. . . . Out of them rose for me morning, noon, and night, bursts of wonderful melody, full of the voices of my brothers and sisters, full of the voices of the past. . . .

What are these songs, and what do they mean? I know little of music and can say nothing in technical phrase, but I know something of men, and knowing them, I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world. They tell us in these eager days [i.e. non-Black interpreters after the Civil War] that life was joyous to the black slave, careless and happy. I can easily believe this of some, of many. But not all the past South, though it rose from the dead, can gainsay the heart-touching witness of these songs. They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death

and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways.⁸

As Du Bois explained, the precise meanings of the words of the songs of Black slaves may have been lost over time, and the music, as an oral tradition, may have changed. But the living tradition of Black music bears witness to both the suffering and intractable hope of his brothers and sisters—his ancestors held in bondage.

Moreover, it is perhaps significant that some enslaved Black people in the Atlantic world understood themselves as heirs to the ancient Jews.⁹ They sometimes related their own slavery to that of the Jews in Egypt, and, as Kenneth Chelst explains, they understood their own song and dance as “symboliz[ing] critical events in the Israelite journey to freedom and the Promised Land. First and foremost, [their] late night dances symbolized the Israelite march through the Sea of Reeds with their former masters in pursuit rushing unknowingly to their deaths.”¹⁰ This analogy echoes themes in Jewish tradition.

Just as the music of enslaved Black peoples in the Atlantic world allowed their hope to persist, the music of Miriam and the other women might have served a similar purpose. Jewish tradition insists that the women in Egypt remained steadfast in their faith that their people would be redeemed. Not only, as noted above, did Rashi claim that the

⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, [The Souls of Black Folk](#) (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1903), ch. 14, “Of the Sorrow Songs,” [electronic edition](#).

⁹ For an example of a Black writer who compared the slavery of Africans in the Atlantic world to the slavery of the ancient

Jews in Egypt, see Olaudah Equiano, [The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself](#), ed. Robert J. Allison, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s 2016), 46 and passim.

¹⁰ Chelst, [Exodus and Emancipation](#), 137.

Jewish women took their instruments out of Egypt because they were confident that God would perform miracles for them, but many *midrashim* describe how the women insisted on having relations with their husbands and giving birth despite Pharaoh's decree to cast all the Jewish boys in the Nile. Rashi, following the Talmud ([Megillah 14a](#)), also relates that Miriam is called a prophetess because she had foreseen that her mother would give birth to the redeemer of the nation, thus prompting her parents to reunite. And famously, on [Exodus 38:8](#)—"He made the laver of copper and its stand of copper, from the mirrors of the women who performed tasks at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting"—Rashi cites [Midrash Tanhuma](#) to explain why the copper laver of the Tabernacle was made out of the copper mirrors of the Jewish women:

The Israelite women had copper mirrors into which they would look when they were beautifying themselves, and they did not hesitate to bring even these as a contribution to the Tabernacle. Moses was about to reject them since they appealed to the *yetzer hara*, but the Holy One, Blessed is He, said to him, "Accept them; for these are dearer to Me than all else, for through them the women gave birth to hosts of people in Egypt." When their husbands were worn out from labor, the women would bring them food and drink and feed them. Then they would take the mirrors, and each one would gaze at herself in her mirror

with her husband, and would say endearingly to him, "See, I am more lovely than you!" Through this, they awakened their husbands' desire, and they subsequently gave birth, at it is said, ([Song of Songs 8:5](#)) "I awakened your love under the apple tree" [i.e. in the fields where the men worked]. This is what it refers to when it states *mar'ot ha-tzov'ot*, "the mirrors of the women who reared the hosts (*ha-tzeva'ot*)."

Rashi's citation of this midrash underscores his position that the Jewish women should be given credit for maintaining hope for the future. Through their hope, the nation of Israel survived. By insisting on the continuation of family life, the women perpetuated the Jewish people when the men were too exhausted to think of anything but their day-to-day labor.

Music was another means for the women to perpetuate both their sense of nationhood and their hope for a brighter future. The commentary of Amos Hakham in the *Da'at Mikra* edition of Exodus 15:20 makes clear that the Jewish women made music with instruments even during their captivity. The women heard Miriam beating her *tof* and *maḥol* and immediately understood it as their cue to sing, and to do so in a particular responsive pattern. This action demonstrates that they were accustomed to performing in this manner, as Hakham explains:

The *tof*—It says here “the *tof*,” with a definite article, and the meaning is “the *tof* that was ready by her side and that she used regularly.”

In her hand – Miriam took the *tof* in her hand and hit it. And when the women heard the sound of the *tof*, they gathered around her, as the Torah goes on to explain: “All the women went out after her.”¹¹

While the Jews who went into the Babylonian exile centuries later refused to sing “songs of joy” for their captors ([Psalm 137](#)) as a remembrance of the

destruction of the Temple, the Jewish women in Egypt must have made music in captivity, as signaled by the definite article attached to Miriam’s *tof*. As Hakham notes, the instrument “was ready by her side,” and she “used it regularly.” Miriam’s *tof* encapsulated the Jewish women’s hope for the future and their insistence on the national identity and perpetuation of the Jewish people. Hakham’s commentary underscores that Miriam did not take up just any instrument—“a *tof*”—but rather *the* instrument, *her* instrument, the one that she was accustomed to using and which the other women instantly recognized.

The Africans who were captured in the early modern era and forced into slavery in Europe and the Americas used music both to express their sorrows and to keep their hope alive, forging a

foundation in the new world for their descendents. Du Bois heard echoes of their sorrows and their hope when he heard the music of Black Americans at the turn of the twentieth century. This case sheds light on the role that music played for the Jewish people in their captivity long ago. The Jewish women who sang at the Sea were seasoned musicians, and they, too, had kept their traditions alive in the darkest times. Thus, Miriam’s *tof* was an instrument of solidarity and hope. At the moment of their salvation, she and the other women performed the music that they had practiced through generations of slavery.

OF SPLIT WOOD AND WATERS

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War and the Way of the Land of the Philistines

After the tenth plague, the Israelites are sent out of Egypt. The oppressed are oppressed no longer; God has redeemed His people. With girded loins, they leave their house of bondage. Following a temporary encampment in Sukkot, God leads the people in a roundabout manner toward the *Yam Suf*, the Sea of Reeds. As sensitive readers, we ought to note that the description of this renavigation is a deviation from that of the original divine plan given in *Parashat Shemot*:

¹¹ *Hamishah Humshei Torah im peirush Rashi ve-im Da’at Mikra: Sefer Shemot*, with commentary by Amos Hakham (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook), 280–281.

And He said, “I will be with you; that shall be your sign that it was I who sent you. And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.” ([3:12](#))¹

In the plan as originally told, the people are to travel directly to the mountain, without any mention of any stops along the way. Indeed, the providential plan of the journey to the Land of Canaan described at the beginning of *Parashat Va'era* makes no overt mention of the *Yam Suf* (or of *Har Sinai*, for that matter):

Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am the Lord. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, the Lord, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession, I the Lord.” ([6:6-8](#))

But instead of traveling straight to the land, they are redirected:

Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although/for it was nearer; for God said, “The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt.” ([13:17](#))

What is the aim of this redirection? How might we locate its significance within the larger narrative arc of the *Humash*? In other words, what is the place of *keriat Yam Suf* in the story of God’s covenant with His people?

The classical commentators interpret this rationale in a variety of ways. Famously, for [Ramban](#), the redirection of the people is rooted in geopolitical considerations. Had they taken the route that passed through the land of the Philistines, the Israelites would have been confronted by the Philistine military. Faced with the oncoming battle, they would run back to Egypt. Per Ramban, God redirects the people away from the potential conflict. In contrast, [Rashi](#) notes the people’s willingness to return to Egypt even along the indirect path (see [Bamidbar 14:4, 45](#)); had they taken the more direct path, they would have been even more inclined to return to Egypt after facing various military challenges in the desert. God navigates the people along a more complex path to deter their retreat to Egypt.

But these interpretations encounter challenges of their own. Rashi relies upon his awareness of later

¹ All verse translations are adapted from the [JPS Tanakh](#) (1985).

battles in the desert. But the *Humash* gives us no explicit reason to believe that any such battles would occur. And while one may argue, as does [Ibn Ezra](#), that God is aware of the future and leads the people away from conflict, it is highly unusual for the *Humash* to relate such divine plans. God knows many things; the *Humash* does not record how His actions relate to every possibility. Likewise, Ramban's approach is somewhat tenuous. Why would the Philistines not give them permission to pass through their land? On this front, the text is silent.

In general, these interpreters are concerned with military conflicts that the Israelites could encounter along their journey to Israel. They constitute the "war" that the people might see and then subsequently turn back to Egypt. [Rashbam](#) (13:17, [s.v. va-yehi be-shalah](#)), however, takes the people's destination into account:

Now when Pharaoh let the people go - And God intended to bring them to the Land of Canaan and did not desire to lead them along the way of the Philistines, for it was close. Meaning, it was the path along which they could immediately enter the Land of Canaan. And when they would be burdened by the wars in the Land of Canaan, they would relent and return to Egypt.

Rashbam notes that the people are on their way to the Land of Canaan, where they will have to engage in battle to conquer the land. Indeed, they are armed for battle ([Shemot 13:18](#))! But, if they

enter too soon, they will not be ready and will return to Egypt. God therefore leads the people along the longer route, such that they will be able to prepare before engaging in the conquest of the land.

The strength of Rashbam's approach lies in its appeal to covenantal considerations. The successful conquest of the land is a key theme in the biblical narrative. It is reasonable for God to take the people's readiness into account and for Him to take the appropriate steps to ensure their success. At stake is not the people's ability to engage in relatively ancillary battles, but rather their very conquest of the land promised to Avraham. Moreover, as I will show, the rest of the narrative—and particularly, *Shirat Ha-Yam*—further supports Rashbam's reading.

Battle at the Sea

To where has God directed the people? "So God led the people roundabout, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds" ([13:18](#)). Shortly thereafter, God commands Moshe to tell the people to encamp by *Pi Ha-hirot*, near the sea. At that point, He also notifies Moshe of His plan:

Pharaoh will say of the Israelites, "They are astray in the land; the wilderness has closed in on them." Then I will stiffen Pharaoh's heart and he will pursue them, that I may gain glory through Pharaoh and all his host; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord. And they did so. ([14:3-4](#))

Through His roundabout navigation of the people, God notifies Pharaoh that the people have fled. Over and over again, Moshe had demanded that Pharaoh release the Israelites so that they could serve God in the wilderness, three days away from Egypt. When Pharaoh finally acquiesces, he agrees to the conditions that Moshe had presented to him: “Go, worship the Lord *as you said!*” ([12:31](#)). Thus, Pharaoh’s expectation is that the people will go worship God in the wilderness. However, once the Israelites diverge from the way of the Philistines and encamp near the sea, Pharaoh has reason to be concerned. The people have run away; they have not traveled to worship their God ([Ramban, 14:5](#)). This is exactly what occurs:

When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his courtiers had a change of heart about the people and said, “What is this we have done, releasing Israel from our service?” ([14:5](#))

His heart stiffened by God, Pharaoh sets out to pursue the Israelites. The Egyptians approach the camp; the people are in turmoil. Philistines and Canaanites aside, the Israelites are forced to face the Egyptians at the sea. God’s plan to redirect the people, as we have understood it until now, does not result in a lack of confrontation of war; rather, it enables it! The people have encamped near the sea, in a narrow strait, where the Egyptians can close in on them. Surrounded by the Egyptian forces, the Israelites are bombarded by the sights of war: weapons, chariots, horses, and all the king’s men. What are we to make of this plan?

God’s will, that the people avoid the sights of war (*bi-re’otam milhamah*), is seemingly reversed!

God’s Salvation

The people’s reaction to the arrival of the Egyptian army is telling:

As Pharaoh drew near, **the Israelites caught sight** [emphasis added] of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out to the Lord. And they said to Moses, “Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, ‘Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?’” ([14:10-12](#))

Faced with war, the people regret leaving Egypt. God’s ‘prediction’ comes true. However, the Israelites do not have the opportunity to go back, as the Egyptians have caught up with them. There is nowhere to hide; God has pushed them into the encounter. This reaction is a reflection of their faith; they do not trust that God will save them. In fact, they do not even acknowledge God’s role in their redemption from Egypt. They direct their complaint to Moshe: “What have *you* done to us, taking us out of Egypt?” ([14:11](#)).

While the Torah ([14:4](#)) directly addresses the purpose of *keriat Yam Suf* vis-à-vis the Egyptians

(“and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord”), its purpose in relation to the Israelites is less clear. Abarbanel writes that *keriat Yam Suf* was rooted in two primary motivations. One aspect of the event was the further punishment of the Egyptians for throwing the Israelite children into the Nile. Tit-for-tat, they are drowned for their sins. But the experience at the *Yam Suf* was also designed to strengthen the nation’s faith. While it is true that the Israelites were privy to God’s wonders in Egypt, their experience at the sea fortified their faith to the point that they fully put their trust in God.

It emerges that the events at the *Yam Suf* serve as an educational experience for the Israelites.² Instead of directing them along the shorter path—toward Horeb and ultimately Canaan—He leads them to the *Yam Suf*, where they will learn about His providence and salvation. There, faced with the sights of war, they will be unable to return to Egypt, even if they want to. Up until this point, the Israelites were unable to fight the Egyptians because they still related to them as their masters and to themselves as slaves ([Ibn Ezra, 14:13](#)). As slaves, they did not have the confidence to fight in any battles. Nor did they trust God to fight for them. Now, they have witnessed the power of God’s salvation in war. This is what Moshe tells the people:

But Moses said to the people,
“Have no fear! Stand by, and
witness the deliverance which the

Lord will work for you today; for
the Egyptians whom you see today
you will never see again. The Lord
will battle for you; you hold your
peace!” ([14:13-14](#))

God sees that the people are not ready for any sort of battle: “The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt” ([13:17](#)). The plan, nonetheless, is for them to enter the land after a short stop at Horeb. In order for them to conquer the land, God must educate them in His ways, such that their attitude toward Him changes. After their experience at the *Yam Suf*, the people’s knowledge and understanding of God’s providence are strengthened. Their former masters have drowned; God has acquired His people ([15:16](#)). In this manner, God trains the people to recognize His support. Faced with the conquest of the land, instead of *seeing* battle and running away to *Egypt*, they will *see* the salvation of *God* and His providence. With His help, they will be able to conquer the land. *Shirat Ha-Yam*, the Song of the Sea, testifies to this newfound faith:

You will bring them and plant them
in Your own mountain, The place
You made to dwell in, O Lord, The
sanctuary, O Lord, which Your
hands established. ([15:17](#))

Split Wood and Waters

According to our proposed reading, the story of *keriat Yam Suf* is about the development of faith

² [Rashbam](#) interprets the people’s faith in 14:31 as referring to their faith that God will provide food for them on their journey. This is consistent with his interpretation of the people’s complaints at the beginning of the narrative as

referring to a lack of food and water in the desert. Nonetheless, Rashbam views the events of *keriat Yam Suf* as an educational experience.

and experiential knowledge of divine providence. The idea of experience as a method of arriving at faith or knowledge is not unique to this narrative. Perhaps most notably, the story of *Akedat Yitzhak*, the Binding of Isaac ([Bereshit 22](#)), radiates this conception of faith and experience. God puts Avraham in a difficult situation, not to garner some previously unknown information but to provide Avraham with the opportunity to develop his inner potential ([Ramban, 22:1](#)). The [Sefat Emet](#) (*Parashat Vayera, s.v. atah yadati*) similarly argues that the purpose of the *Akedah* was to actualize an aspect of Avraham's faith, his reverence of God. Likewise, as we have noted, *keriat Yam Suf* actualizes aspects of the Israelites' faith: their dependence on and knowledge of God's ultimate providence.³ How might the *Akedah* help us further understand the covenantal significance of *keriat Yam Suf*?

[Bereshit Rabbah \(55:8\)](#) directly ties our narrative to the *Akedah*:

Rabbi Hiyya b. Rabbi Yosei said in the name of Rabbi Meyasha, and it was also repeated in the name of Rabbi Benaiah: As a reward for the two cleavings with which our father Avraham split the wood of the burnt-offering, he earned that God should split the Sea before his descendants, as it says, And he split the wood for the burnt offering" [[Bereshit 22:3](#)], and it

says there, "And the waters were split" [[Shemot 14:21](#)].⁴

R. Benaiah and R. Meyasha identify a linguistic connection between the two stories. The sea is split by God (*vayibakeu*), and Avraham splits the wood (*vayvaka*) for the offering. They interpret this to mean that Avraham's splitting of the wood is rewarded with the splitting of the sea. What does this mean?

In order to understand this *midrash*, we must look toward the end of the *Akedah* narrative. After Avraham is told not to sacrifice Yitzhak, God presents him with a promise of blessing ([Bereshit 22:15-18](#)):

The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By Myself I swear, the Lord declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command."

³ Strikingly, the Mishnah in *Avot* ([5:3-4](#)) juxtaposes the ten tribulations of Avraham to the ten tribulations of the Israelites in the desert.

⁴ Translation adapted from Sefaria.org.

As a result of his actions during the *Akedah*, God promises Avraham that his descendants will be great in number, that they will seize the gates of their enemies, and that the nations of the earth will be blessed through them. Many commentators note that God's promise that Avraham's descendants will "seize the gates of their enemies" is the only unique element of this blessing/oath unit; the other blessings had already been given to him on earlier occasions. While this is true in terms of content, one of the repeated blessings is presented in a new fashion. In past blessings, Avraham was promised that his offspring would be as numerous as the dust of the earth ([13:16](#)) and the stars of the heavens ([15:5](#)). After the *Akedah*, he is promised for the first time that his descendants will increase like the sand on the seashore—*ka-hol asher al sefat ha-yam* ([22:17](#)). Why the sudden change in simile?

Notably, the next time the expression "*al sefat ha-yam*" appears in the Torah is at *keriat Yam Suf* ([Shemot 14:30](#)):

Thus the Lord delivered Israel that day from the Egyptians. Israel saw the Egyptians dead **on the shore of the sea** [emphasis added].

The Israelites stand, as numerous as the sand on the seashore, on the seashore. God has fulfilled part of His covenant ([Bereshit 15](#)) with Avraham. His descendants were redeemed from a foreign land; their oppressors have been judged. What of the new element, the guarantee that the Israelites will inherit the gates of their enemies?

As we have demonstrated, the experience of *keriat Yam Suf* should enable the people to engage in the conquest of the land. Following *keriat Yam Suf*, they know that God will fight for them. In the ideal history, it takes the people eleven days to arrive in Canaan ([Devarim 1:2](#)), where, with God's help, they speedily conquer the land. The source of this merit is the promise that Avraham receives as a result of his actions during the *Akedah*: his descendants will "inherit the gates of their enemies." The fulfillment of this promise requires the education of the people. Otherwise, they will run away, afraid, back to Egypt.

Quaking Canaanites

But *keriat Yam Suf* does not only involve the Israelites. The event also notifies the other nations of God's power. This, too, promotes the successful conquest of the land. Much of *Shirat Ha-Yam* pertains to this theme. And, as Abarbanel highlights, the story leaves its mark on subsequent narratives in the *Tanakh*. Its reverberations are still felt a generation later, when Rahab grants Yehoshua's spies her hospitality:

Through the miracle of the splitting of the sea, the Land of Canaan was conquered by the Israelites. As stated in the Song of the Sea, "In Your loving-kindness You lead the people You redeemed... The peoples hear, they tremble; agony grips the dwellers in Philistia. Now are the clans of Edom dismayed; the tribes of Moab—trembling grips them; all the dwellers in

Canaan melt... Until Your people cross over, Lord, until Your people cross whom You have acquired.” And so said Rahab the harlot: “I know that the Lord has given the country to you, because dread of you has fallen upon us, and all the inhabitants of the land are quaking before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds when you left Egypt, for we heard about it, we lost heart, and no man had any more spirit left because of you” ([Yehoshua 2:9-11](#)). **Thus... [the splitting of the sea] was part of God’s great wisdom to terrify the residents of Canaan so that the Israelites could conquer [the land] with great ease** [emphasis added]. ([Abarbanel on Shemot 14:1](#))

God’s drying of the sea dries out the nations’ spirits. The eastern wind ([14:21](#)) splits the sea and carries news of God’s might toward the land. The Israelites are full of faith; the nations are without spirit. Faced with war, God’s people will hopefully emerge victorious.

Conclusion

Rashbam’s reading of the opening *pasuk* facilitates this understanding of the narrative. From start to finish, the story is about God’s plan to develop His people’s faith in Him with respect to the conquest of the land. It also sets the stage for their victory. With the nations frightened, that conquest is somewhat simplified. Moreover, read this way, *keriat Yam Suf* fits comfortably with the

remainder of the narratives in *Beshalah* leading up to the revelation at Sinai. Abarbanel summarizes the significance of these narratives:

As God was going to give them the Torah and mitzvot at Mount Sinai, these initial travels were needed to bring [the people] into narrow straits so that they would beseech Him and He would fulfill their needs. They would thereby know that there was a God in Israel and that He is the One who brings forth flowing waters out of rock and grants them bread — that all is in His hand as clay in the hands of the crafter. Through this, they would acquire a valuable lesson — that when they are in distress, they should seek Him, and He will provide for them. ([Abarbanel on Shemot 15:1](#))

This is the first of many such lessons; the faith uncovered at the sea does not endure on its own. At the end of the day, the eleven-day journey from Horeb to the Land of Israel expands into a forty-year-long educational experience. The *Humash* charts this journey.

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MOSES AND JOSEPH’S BONES

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Chapter 13 of Exodus narrates the events occurring immediately after the Hebrews' departure from Egypt, revealing important details about their itinerary during this time.¹ [Verse 19](#) tells us the following:

Moses took away Joseph's bones, for [Joseph] had formally adjured the children of Israel, saying, "God will take charge of you and then you will take away my bones from here."

Commentators² explain that it was not Joseph's descendants alone who were charged with carrying these bones; by making the "children of Israel" as a whole swear, Joseph gave the responsibility to the entire nation. It is hence understandable that the one who carries the bones is not specifically one of Joseph's descendants.

But why does the verse take the trouble to tell us that it was Moses himself who took the bones of Joseph, rather than someone else?

The answer that we propose is rooted in sources introduced several chapters prior, in the book of

Genesis, and harks back to the origins of Joseph's misfortunes.³

The sale of Joseph

Chapter 37 of Genesis describes how Joseph was thrown into a pit by his brothers and sold to the Ishmaelites, who brought him down to Egypt.

Joseph had twelve brothers. Which brothers were involved in the sale? Evidence points to the involvement of at least four brothers.

For two of Joseph's brothers, Judah and Reuben, we have direct textual proof of their involvement in the unfolding of these events:

Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood! **Throw him into this pit that is in the wilderness** but lay not your hand on him." ([Genesis 37:22](#))

Judah said to his brothers, "What good is it if we kill our brother and seal his death? Come, **let us sell him to the Ishmaelites** and let our hand not be on him, for he is our brother, our flesh!" ([Genesis 37:26-27](#))

¹ This article is adapted from a chapter of a book of original commentaries on the Pentateuch that will be published in French in 2021, with God's help. My deep thanks to Myriam Ackermann-Sommer and Avital Harris for their help in translating this commentary, and to Davida Kollmar for her kind review and comments.

² See [Rashi on Exodus 13:19](#), quoting *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*, as well as [Baal Ha-Turim on Genesis 50:25](#). [Rabbeinu Bahya on Genesis 50:25](#) goes further, saying that Joseph made not only his brothers, but also the future "children of Israel" swear, which explains why when Joseph

made his brothers swear, they are referred to as "the children of Israel" rather than "his brothers" ([Genesis 50:25](#)).

³ Seforno (Exodus 13:19) makes the simple claim that "Moses was the ruler of the generation, therefore the task fell to him." While this answer is logical and demonstrates Moses's leadership, it seems too simplistic in view of the emphasis that the text places on the idea that it was Moses himself who carried the bones, not as the leader of the people but as a private individual.

The involvement of two other brothers can be deduced from Jacob's blessings to his sons at the end of his life. Jacob takes this opportunity to admonish Simeon and Levi:

For in their anger they have slain men and for their passion they **have struck a bull.** ([Genesis 49:6](#))

What is the bull to which Jacob is referring? If we look at Moses's final blessings to the tribes of Israel, we see that he refers to Joseph using the term "like a firstborn bull is his majesty" ([Deuteronomy 33:17](#)).

From this blessing, we see that the bull is Joseph's token animal. It is therefore likely that in his final words, Jacob is also referencing Joseph when he mentions the bull, and is blaming Simeon and Levi for Joseph's sale.⁴

While the participation of Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah in the transgression of the sale of Joseph is certain, the extent of the involvement of the remaining seven brothers is unclear. There is no direct textual mention of their implication, and Jacob does not mention this sin in his appraisals/blessings to them.

⁴ In general, there are many parallels between Jacob and Moses. Many of these parallels occur specifically within their respective last words, including the use of token animals and phrases such as *le-rosh yosef u-lekodkod nezir ehav* ([Genesis 49:26](#), [Deuteronomy 33:16](#)) and *gur aryeh* ([Genesis 49:9](#), [Deuteronomy 33:22](#)). It is therefore likely that Jacob and Moses would refer to the same person when mentioning a bull.

⁵ Note that the Or ha-Haim on Exodus 13:19 also mentions this idea of reparation, based on the term "from here" used by Joseph. Or ha-Haim interprets this phrase not as an indication of the place from where the children of Israel

We have seen that four brothers have sinned. But are all four brothers punished? Any transgression may require atonement/reparations or punishment, even for

seemingly similar actions. For example, someone who kills another person is put to death, a punishment, whereas someone who kills an animal must pay, an atonement/reparation (see [Leviticus 24:21](#)). The main difference between atonement and punishment is that the atonement benefits the victim, whereas the punishment does not.

Joseph's brothers sinned by selling him into slavery. This transgression seems to have been done by a collective, so any punishment and atonement must be borne by the group. But when we look more closely, we find that two pairs emerge within the four brothers whose involvement in the offense is certain: the Reuben-Judah pair and the Simeon-Levi pair. Within each pair, one bears the punishment and the other enacts the reparation.⁵ This indicates that within each pairing the sins of each of the brothers were in fact somewhat different.⁶

should retrieve Joseph's bones, but rather as the reason for the retrieval of his bones.

⁶ This is not to claim that the punishment and reparation is or is not "divine"; intriguingly, God does not explicitly intervene in this specific episode.

If we look more closely, we can see that the punishments and atonements for one pair are carried out directly by Joseph and for the other pair are carried out indirectly. Reuben's punishment and Judah's reparation are not directly caused by Joseph. Reuben undergoes his punishment without the slightest intervention on the part of Joseph, as we will see later on. For the reparation of

We will now examine the sins and consequences of each pair more closely.

Reuben and Judah

The relationship between the tribes of Reuben and Judah is one of subtle rivalry. Indeed, all that Reuben and his descendants could have hoped to obtain by birthright, it is Judah who secures through his deeds,⁷ because Reuben behaved inappropriately on several occasions (see [Genesis 49:4](#)).

Reuben's punishment of losing his position of authority makes sense, considering that within the Joseph story alone he is twice shown to be powerless as a leader of his brothers:

1. His attempt to rescue Joseph was unsuccessful since Joseph was sold in his absence (see [Genesis 37:29-30](#));
2. He was unable to convince his father to let Benjamin go down to Egypt. We can note that his proposal, that his father kill his two children should he fail to bring Benjamin back to him (see [Genesis 42:37](#)), makes no sense: if he

Judah, Joseph certainly intervenes, but in a very indirect way, and there is no evidence that Joseph's actions were with the intent of allowing the reparation to occur. On the other hand, the punishment of Simeon and the reparation of Levi are *directly* provoked by Joseph: it is Joseph himself who punishes Simeon by putting him in prison, and it is Joseph himself who requests that his bones be brought out of Egypt with the children of Israel, a wish fulfilled by a descendant of Levi. This difference may be due to the differing guilt of the Simeon-Levi pair and the Reuben-Judah pair. It was Simeon and Levi who directly and actively

failed, Jacob would find himself with three missing sons and two more dead grandchildren, in addition to the death of Er and Onan (see [Genesis 38](#)). This proposal seems to indicate a form of despair on Reuben's part: he has sunk so low that he cannot offer a rational argument to his father convincing him to entrust his son to him.

Judah enacts the atonement, by displaying his willingness to sacrifice himself so that Benjamin can return to his father (see [Genesis 44:33](#)). He makes a physical commitment in order to avoid putting his father through the same ordeal that he brought about the first time with Joseph. Now, Leah's children are willing to sacrifice themselves for Rachel's children. Judah also accepts that Jacob may prefer Rachel's children, and ignores it. Note that in doing this, Judah succeeds in saving his brother Benjamin - thus keeping his promise to his father that he would protect him.

At first glance, these punishments and reparations seem to be disproportionate to the respective involvement of Reuben and Judah. After all, Reuben intended to save Joseph from

participated in Joseph's troubles, with ill intentions towards him, as is evident from Jacob's admonishment of them alone for the incident. Conversely, Reuben intended to save him, and Judah did indeed save him from death.

⁷ The theme of the elder getting less than his younger brother(s) is omnipresent in the Torah from Cain and Abel, through Ishmael and Isaac, or Esau and Jacob. Let us note here, however, that this is the first time that the elder loses a position he once held because of his acts AND that the younger one recovers that place because of his acts.

death! And Judah is the one who suggested and convinced his brothers to accept the idea of selling Joseph! One might have thought that the opposite outcomes should have taken place: atonement for Reuben and punishment for Judah. And yet if we look more carefully at the sale of Joseph and its aftermath, we see why the result was warranted.

What was Reuben's fundamental mistake in his attempt to save Joseph? His main fault was that he did not clarify his intention enough – he was not specific enough with his brethren to avoid any misunderstanding. The brothers' initial plan is to kill Joseph and throw him into a pit to conceal the body. Reuben suggests throwing him directly into the pit instead.

[Joseph's brothers] saw him from afar, and before he came close to them they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes that dreamer! Now this, come, let us kill him and throw him into some pit, and then we will say that a fierce beast has devoured him. Then we'll see what happens to his dreams!" When Reuben heard this, he wanted to save him from them. **He said, "Let's not take his life." So Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood! Throw him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but lay not your hand on him."** It was to save him from their hands and bring him back to his father. ([Genesis 37:18-22](#))

Reuben does not *explicitly* state his aim of saving Joseph's life. The text tells us this, so as readers

we know his good intentions, but his brothers remain unaware. Let us reread Reuben's statement from the point of view of Reuben's brothers. The brothers had just suggested killing Joseph directly. Reuben seems to be saying, "Let us throw him into the pit so that he may die there, and we'll avoid getting our hands dirty. Let us not kill him *ourselves*, let us not lay hands on him *ourselves*, let us not spill his blood *ourselves*." Without any additional information about his intentions – without the "subtitles" that the text gives us through internal focalization on Reuben – we may have construed the sentence in the same way as Reuben's brothers did – that he did not want to kill Joseph directly but rather wanted to let him die in the pit. In the eyes of the brothers, Reuben is not saving Joseph from death.

We know that this is in fact how the other brothers understood Reuben based on Judah's proposal to sell Joseph. Judah tells his brothers, "What good is it if we kill our brother and seal his death?" ([Genesis 37:26](#)). Judah is implying that they originally intended to let Joseph rot and die in that pit. Now Judah proposes two things to his brothers: to save Joseph, or at least *not kill him*, and to sell him to the Ishmaelites, that they may be rid of his presence. The brothers consent. Here, it is Judah who has just saved Joseph from death! It is the first time that he succeeds where Reuben failed. Even though Reuben's intentions were praiseworthy, his performance was not up to the task, causing the chain reaction that led to the sale of Joseph. As for Judah, while he certainly erred in proposing and participating in the sale of Joseph, he did successfully convince his brothers not to kill him - quite a feat in this loaded context.

This may justify a more "lenient" treatment than Reuben's.

Let us finish with Reuben's ultimate misunderstanding: having spent three days in Joseph's jail, and after Joseph expresses his will to bring Benjamin to Egypt, this is the dialogue that occurs between the brothers:

And they said to one another, "Truly we are being punished for our brother's sake; we saw his despair when he cried out to us and we were deaf. That is why this misfortune has befallen us." Reuben said to them, "Didn't I say to you at that time: Don't you be guilty of this child! **And you did not listen.** Well then! Now his blood is required of us." ([Genesis 42:21-22](#))

While all the brothers (and at least those who actually participated in the crime) seem to admit their responsibility, the same cannot be said of Reuben. Worse still, he berates his brothers for ignoring his plea, without ever analyzing himself. Perhaps that is why he was punished twice, losing both the trust of his father and his position of authority: once for being unclear, thus enabling the brothers' act without his knowledge, and a second time because he did not admit to his mistake.

Within the Reuben-Judah pair, we can now understand why Reuben's actions warranted punishment, whereas Judah's actions warranted atonement, although at first glance their sins seem the same. The different consequences stem

from the fact that Reuben's deeds almost got Joseph killed, whereas Judah's "only" led him to slavery.

Simeon and Levi

There are numerous passages which explicitly give evidence to the fact that Simeon and Levi are a team. First, it is Simeon and Levi who massacre the city of Shechem. Additionally, Jacob begins his admonishment of them at the end of his life by saying that "Simeon and Levi are brothers" ([Genesis 49:5](#)), and therefore must be disbanded.

Of the two brothers, Simeon was the one who was punished, being forced to remain in Joseph's cell until his brothers returned. The text explicitly states that Simeon was in captivity for the whole period between the departure of the brothers from Egypt and their return with Benjamin:

On the third day Joseph said to them, "Do this and you shall live, for I am a God-fearing man. If you are honest men, let one of you brothers be held in your place of detention, while the rest of you go and take home rations for your starving households; but you must bring me your youngest brother, that your words may be verified and that you may not die." And they did accordingly... [Joseph] took Simeon from among them and had him bound before their eyes. ([Genesis 42:18-20, 24](#))

[Joseph] said, "Be at peace, don't be afraid. Your God, the God of

your father, has made you find treasure in your sacks. Your money had come to me." And he freed Simeon to them. ([Genesis 43:23](#))

The word *vayotzei* used in the Hebrew text is a word of deliverance; Joseph "brought" Simeon out of his shackles to return him to his brothers. And this imprisonment was not a short one. Simeon remained in jail for a substantial amount of time:

Famine weighed on the country. So when all the grain which they had brought from Egypt was consumed, their father said to them, "Go again and buy us a little food." But Judah said to him, "The man warned us, 'Do not let me see your faces unless your brother is with you.' ... **If we hadn't been delayed, we would have come back twice by now!**" ([Genesis 43:1-3, 10](#))

Regardless of the conditions relating to his detention, Simeon must have been separated from his father and brothers for a considerable period. And this separation from his family is significant. In addition to being a son and brother, Simeon was also the father of six sons (see [Genesis 46:10](#)).⁸ Thus, by being imprisoned for this length of time, he experienced the pain of separation both from the perspective of a father (like his father Jacob had experienced with

Joseph) and from the point of view of a son (like Joseph to Jacob).

We have shown that Simeon is the brother in the pairing who receives the punishment, but why? There is little compelling data that would provide a satisfying answer to the question. However, by looking at Simeon, Levi, and their respective tribes later on, we see a pattern showing a clear separation of their paths.

Throughout the rest of Pentateuch, Simeon and his tribe experience a descent:

- Perhaps Joseph imprisoned Simeon to isolate the brother who had demonstrated a greater potential for violence in the past.
- It is Zimri son of Salu, prince of the tribe of Simeon, who defiles himself with the Midianite Kozbi daughter of Zur, thus indirectly defying the authority of Moses and God.
- The count of the tribe of Simeon goes from 59,300 at the beginning of the book of Numbers ([Numbers 1:23](#)) to 22,200 during the fortieth year in the desert ([Numbers 26:14](#)), a loss of 37,100 people. There were various epidemics that struck the Hebrews during their journey through the Sinai desert, all a result of sin; the large decrease in Simeon's numbers indicate that they were likely disproportionately affected by these epidemics, implying that they likely disproportionately sinned.

⁸ It may be that Simeon also had daughters, but the verse does not mention this.

- Simeon is the only tribe not to be blessed by Moses at the end of the book of Deuteronomy.

Meanwhile, throughout the latter part of the Pentateuch, the tribe of Levi is ascendent:

- It was the Levites who all fought for God during the event of the golden calf, resulting in the deaths of three thousand people. While the Levites certainly committed an act of violence, it was in the service of God, demonstrating that their violence can be channeled for a noble purpose.
- The Levites are the ones who serve in the Tabernacle/Temple in place of the firstborn. As a result of this, they are regularly referred to as God's heritage and are given gifts such as *terumah* and *ma'aser*.

If we assume that the descent of Simeon indicates personal lacking and the ascent of Levi indicates personal merit, then it is fitting that Simeon is the one who receives punishment and Levi would be the one who receives atonement.

We have demonstrated that within this pairing, Simeon is the one who receives the punishment, and have attempted to explain why. But what about the other member of the pairing? Levi's atonement is missing! It is not impossible that Levi made some sort of "atonement" during his lifetime and that of Joseph, but the verses do not mention it, and so it is likely that a personal atonement had never occurred. Once Levi is deceased, it is logical that the atonement would fall to one of his descendants. And to atone for the sin of removing Joseph from his family, the

ultimate reparation to benefit the victim is to ultimately return him (or his bones after he dies) to his home.

Why Moses

But Levi had many descendents. Why was Moses specifically the one tasked with carrying out the atonement? There are several clues that can point us in the right direction.

Firstly, although Levi had many descendents, the text emphasizes that Moses is among them. Even before his conception, Moses is connected to Levi; he is introduced to us as the fruit of the union of an unnamed Levite and the unnamed daughter of Levi

(see [Exodus 2:1](#)). Although they are named elsewhere, at Moses's birth his parents are not defined by name, but by their tribe, and this tribal connection is passed on to Moses. Even though Aaron is also called "*ha-levi*" ([Exodus 4:14](#)), this occurs immediately after he is called Moses's "brother"; he is connected to the tribe of Levi because Moses is.

Another clue that it is Moses who will atone for Levi is given at the event of the (non-)burning bush, where God reveals Himself to Moses and asks him to lead His people out of Egypt. There, Moses is appointed the "trustee" of the form of deliverance enunciated by Joseph:

Joseph said to his brothers, "I am going to die. Know that the Lord **will take charge of you** and bring you back from this land to the land he swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." And Joseph made the

children of Israel swear, saying **“Yes, the Lord will take charge of you, and then you will take my bones out of here.”** ([Genesis 50:24-25](#))

Go and gather together the elders of Israel and say to them, “The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, ‘**I have taken charge of you** and of what they are doing to you in Egypt.’” ([Exodus 3:16](#))

Moses’ actions following this command also highlight a connection with Joseph.

Moses returned to Jethro, his brother-in-law,⁹ and said to him, “I would like to go away and return to my brothers in Egypt, to see if they are still alive.” And Jethro said to Moses, “Go in peace.” ([Exodus 4:18](#))

Moses returns to Midian to see Jethro, whose flock he is in charge of. Surprisingly, he asks Jethro’s permission to go and rescue his brothers, and his brother-in-law agrees.

If we examine Moses’s request to return to Egypt, we see that it closely parallels Jacob’s request of Joseph that begins all of Joseph’s troubles:

He (Jacob) said to him (Joseph), “Go and see, please, how your brothers are, how the flocks are, and bring me news of them.” So he sent him from the valley of Hebron and he came to Shechem. ([Genesis 37:14](#))

Although the order of phrases between the two verses is not the same, the similarities are numerous:

- The root *sh-u-v* is used in both verses: Moses comes back (*va-yashov*) to Jethro, and asks to return (*ve-ashuva*) to his brothers, and Jacob tells Joseph to report information back to him (*va-hashiveini*);
- The phrase *va-yomer lo*, “he said to him,” is used in both verses¹⁰;
- Moses says *elekhah na*, “I would like to go,” and Joseph is commanded *lekh-na*, “please go”;
- Moses wants to check on *ahai*, “my brothers,” and Joseph is

⁹ The relationship between Moses and Jethro is the subject of debate among the commentators. I argue for the interpretation that they are brothers-in-law in my book.

¹⁰ It is unusual to use such a common expression as an element of comparison between verses because of its

abundance in the whole Bible. While this expression on its own may not be enough for comparison, it does contribute to the similarity between the two verses when taken in context of the rest of the parallels.

commanded to check on *ahekha*, “your brothers”;

- In both stories, an indication of the place of departure and the place of destination is given: Moses departs from Midian and goes to Egypt, and Joseph departs from the valley of Hebron and goes to Shechem;
- Both Moses and Joseph are to “see” their brother’s welfare: Moses says *ve-er’eh*, “and I will see,” and Joseph is commanded *re’eh*, “see”;
- The word “peace” is used in both verses: Jethro tells Moses to go *le-shalom*, – “in peace,” and Jacob commands Joseph to see *et shelom* “the peace/wellbeing of” his brothers.

In addition to containing linguistic parallels to the specific verse where Joseph is requested to check on his brothers, Moses’s request also contains linguistic parallels to other parts of the Joseph story.

- ***Ha-odam hayyim* – are they alive?**

The question asking whether someone is alive using this type of language appears in the words of only three characters in the Bible, including Joseph (indirectly in [Genesis 43:7](#), directly in [Genesis 43:27](#) and [Genesis 45:3](#)) and Moses here. They are the only ones in the Pentateuch.

- ***Ve-ashuvah* - and I will return:** This term appears only six times in the Bible, only two of them in the whole Pentateuch: here, concerning Moses, and in [Genesis 50:5](#), when Joseph tells Pharaoh that he will return to Egypt after burying his father.
- ***Seneh* – bush:** this word appears in the entire Bible six times: five during the (non-) burning bush episode, which starts Moses’s journey ([Exodus 3:3-4](#)), and the sixth at the end of Moses’s life, when he blesses Joseph’s tribe ([Deuteronomy 33:16](#)).

At the end of Moses’s life, we see a final clue that Moses is the one who atones for Levi, one other event that connects him strongly to both Levi and to Joseph. When Moses blesses the tribes at the end of his life, the longest blessings that he gives are to those two tribes. These blessings are significantly longer than the blessings given to the other tribes (see [Deuteronomy 33](#)).

Conclusion

Now that we have examined Moses’s connection to Levi and to Joseph, we are able to explain why the text emphasizes that Moses specifically was the one to take Joseph’s bones out of Egypt. Of the known protagonists of the sale of Joseph, only Levi, Moses’s ancestor, had not brought any atonement. Recovering Joseph’s bones and transporting them out from Egypt and into the land of Canaan is the ultimate compensation for

the damage Joseph has suffered. Because of Moses's strong connection to Joseph, it makes sense that he is the one to fulfill this task. While he may have no obligation to do so, by burying Joseph, Moses is "paying" what can be seen as his ancestor's centennial debt.

We have seen that at first glance the verse about Moses taking Joseph's bones seems to be a throwaway detail, informing us that the tribes' promise to Joseph was kept. However, by analyzing the precise terms used, we learn that in fact it hints to much larger implications regarding the character of Moses and his relationship to

those who came before him. But this is not the only verse in the Torah with these types of insights hidden beneath the surface. By frequently asking questions and probing the exact uses of words and terms across the Torah, exploring why one term is used rather than another, we will be able to further discover the wonders contained therein.

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