LEHRHAUS Over Shabbat

Devarim

Vol. 9, Issue 41 • 7 Av 5785 / August 1, 2025

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The Day After Pardes

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> *The Pardes, too, remains open, and that is the power of its spell — and its challenge too. Yes: they were four sages who entered the orchard of forbidden knowledge. Why did they try to lure us along? And why did we choose to stay behind? Excessive prudence? Perhaps. What frightens us is not the whiteness of the white marble pillars. What frightens us is the darkness of the fire.*[1]

There are few stories with more allure than that of the Pardes. Four sages ascend to the heavenly realm for reasons unknown, only to come back broken — if they come back at all. Its mystery demands inquiry, and scholars have spent centuries searching for theological truths within the perceived shortcomings of its characters. However, fixating on their theologies comes at the cost of the story it tells about their humanity and ours, as demonstrated by Elie Wiesel's treatment of the story. When contrasted with other interpretations, his approach to the story is transformative, stripping the story of its esoterica and turning it into a meditation on the ways

[1] Elie Wiesel, *Sages and Dreamers: Biblical, Talmudic, and Hasidic Portraits and Legends*. Summit Books, 1991, 255.

human beings respond to crises and uncertainties, and how easy it is to become the very things we despise.[2]

Peshat - What is the Pardes?

> *The Sages taught: Four entered the orchard [pardes]: Ben Azzai; and ben Zoma; Aḥer, [the other, a name for Elisha ben Avuya]; and Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva said to them: When you arrive at the upper world and you reach pure marble stones, do not say: "Water, water," because it is stated: "He who speaks falsehood shall not be established before My eyes" (Psalms 101:7). Ben Azzai glimpsed the Divine Presence and died. And with regard to him the verse states: "Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of His pious ones" (Psalms 116:15). Ben Zoma glimpsed the Divine Presence and was harmed [went insane]. And with regard to him the verse states: "Have you found honey? Eat as much as is sufficient for you, lest you become full from it and vomit it" (Proverbs 25:16). Aḥer chopped down the shoots of saplings [became a heretic]. Rabbi Akiva came out safely. (Talmud Bavli, Hagigah 14b)*

This story is ubiquitous in Jewish tradition. In addition to this Tosefta[3] cited in Bavli Hagigah, it appears in the the Yerushalmi[4], Shir HaShirim Rabbah[5], and Hekhalot Zutari.[6] It's the foundation of the four-tier interpretive system, ***P****eshat*/surface-level or the literal meaning of a phrase, ***R****emez*/hints or allegorical (hidden or symbolic) meaning beyond just the literal sense, ***D****erash*/the comparative (midrashic) meaning, and ***S****od*/th "secret" ("mystery") or the esoteric/mystical/deeper meaning.[7] But what was the *Pardes*? Its placement within the tractate among discussions about the qualifications for scholars seeking to study the esoteric, the dangers of doing so without proper preparation, descriptions of angels and demons,[8] and accounts of other sages successfully discussing the esoterica of the *Ma'aseh Merkava,* or Divine Chariot vision in Ezekiel,[9] implies a divine/mystical quality. According to Rashi, the *Pardes* is a divine

[2] I'd like to thank my friend, Alex Behar, for his characterization of Ben Azzai that prompted the idea for this paper. I'd also like to thank my friends Morgan Figa and Rabbi Zach Beer, and my father-in-law, Dr. John Klein, for reviewing and offering feedback on the paper.

[3] Tosefta Hagigah 2:2

[4] Talmud Yerushalmi Hagigah 2:1:9b Vilna Edition

[5] Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:4

[6] James Davila, *Hekhalot literature in Translation: Major Texts of Merkavah Mysticism*. Brill, 2013, 202.

[7] Zohar Chadash, Sifra Tanina 102

[8] Talmud Bavli, Tractate Chagigah 16a

[9] Talmud Bavli, Chagigah 14b

space located at the *Rakia* — the firmament serving as the divide between the upper and lower realms — only accessible using the divine names of God. He also read the story as a physical experience by the sages, while Tosafot asserted it was only a mental experience.[10]

Scholar Maria E. Subtelny, in the paper *The Tale of the Four Sages who Entered the Pardes*, offers historical context for the term that more finely defines the nature of the *Pardes*. Though commonly translated as "orchard," Subtelny explains that *Pardes* is a loanword from an Old Persian term, *paridaida* (via the intermediate form *paridaiza*, also the source of the cognate "paradise"), referring to enclosures surrounding royal palaces under the Achaemenids between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE. These gardens were an essential feature of palace architecture and separated the outside world from the royal suite. While the words *Pardes* and *paridaida* may not be used, descriptions of the royal Persian palaces and gardens in the Book of Esther "provide a remarkably accurate portrayal of the life of the Achaemenid court." In these palaces, royal processions and festivities happened in the garden, while the throne room "was an inviolable space located in the innermost reaches of the palace complex, accessible only to those permitted to 'see the face of the king.' For visitors, there were innumerable control points that had to be passed, which were manned by royal bodyguards and other guardians of the gates."[11] Furthermore, Subtelny notes that cutting down any trees in the garden was considered an affront to palace royalty in Achaemenidian society, which explains why Aher's rejection of the divine royalty, or heresy, is described as "chopped down the shoots [of saplings]."[12] The term "*pardes,*" in her view, was meant to evoke awe and reverence for a physical space akin to these royal palaces.

The descriptions of these royal Persian palaces also bear a striking resemblance to accounts of Rabbi Akiva's adventures in heavenly palaces recorded in the mystical Ta'anaitic work, *Hekhlaot Zutarti*, along with the story of the *Pardes.* In one instance, Rabbi Akiva guides an unnamed individual through a series of heavenly palaces.

> *Rabbi Akiva said: So-and-so had merit and stood at the entrance of the sixth palace and he saw the splendor of the atmosphere of the stones. He opened his mouth two times and said, "Water, water!" In the blink of an eye they severed his head and they cast on him eleven thousand iron axes. Let it be according to this sign for generations, so that no one err at the entrance of the sixth palace. God has been King, God has been*

[10] Talmud Bavli, Chagigah 14b

[11] Subtelny, *The Tale of the Four Sages who Entered the Pardes*, Jewish Studies Quarterly, 2004, Vol. 11, No. 1/2 (2004), 20

[12] Talmud Bavli, Hagigah 14b

King, (Ps 93:1 etc.) God will be King forever and ever (Exod 15:18).[13]

Like the sages of the *Pardes*, this individual ignored Rabbi Akiva's guidance and proclaimed "water, water," after seeing the stones of the palace, and suffered terrible consequences.

These approaches offer a picture of the *Pardes* as an entryway for worthy sages into an intense divine encounter, but what was the goal of these four sages' ascension to this divine realm? Its placement within the tractate suggests that they, like Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh and Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai earlier on the page, had no goal other than to study the divine.[14] Others assume they had more specific goals in mind. In *Shaar Maamarei Chazal,* Rabbi Chaim Vital records the position of the Arizal that their mission was to use esoteric knowledge to "correct the sin of Adam" and prevent some major catastrophe.[15] Some suggest the catastrophe was the Roman oppression that destroyed the Temple and eventually killed Rabbi Akiva.[16]

However, there is still the mystery of why the four sages met the fates they did — one dying, another losing his mind, another committing heresy, and another surviving unharmed. Understanding these details requires more information about who these characters were.

Remez - Who Were They?

The experiences each of our story's main characters had in the Pardes can only be understood through the lens of their individual histories and spiritual interests.

A. Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma

Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma were both respected figures in rabbinic tradition.

The diligent students ceased when ben Azzai died, and there were no more expounders (of the Torah) when ben Zoma died. (Mishnah Sotah 9:15)

However, despite their esteem they never earned semicha (rabbinic ordination), possibly because

[13] Peter Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*. In collaboration with Margarete Schlüter and Hans Georg von Mutius (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981), 172

[14] Talmud Bavli, Chagigah 14b

[15] *Shaar Maamarei Chazal,* Rabbi Chaim Vital, 3b (Chagiga 14b)

[16] For example, *When Less Is Truly More,* Rabbi Pinchas Winston, https://torah.org/torah-portion/perceptions-5763-naso/

they never got the chance to before their untimely demise, or because of the shortcomings that led to their demise.

Ben Azzai, the only character to die in the Pardes, is associated with piety.

> *There are three Torah scholars whose appearance in a dream is significant: One who sees Ben Azzai in a dream should anticipate piety; one who sees Ben Zoma should anticipate wisdom; and one who sees Aḥer, Elisha ben Avuya, should be concerned about calamity. (Berachot 57b)*

Elaborating on the nature of his "piety," Rashi explains that Ben Azzai "spent all day and night in the beit midrash," citing a *gemara* in Yevamot. There, he, Rabbi Eliezer, and Rabbi Ya'akov discussed the *mitzvah* of *peru u'rvu* (having children), and the consequences of neglecting that mitzvah. Rabbi Eliezer asserted that neglecting this mitzvah was tantamount to shedding blood, while Rabbi Yaakov said neglecting this mitzvah was tantamount to "diminishing the image of God in the world." Ben Azzai, however, took it a step further and claimed it was tantamount to both diminishing the image of God and shedding blood.[17] But, rather than respond to his particular point, the first two sages took issue with something else.

> *They said to ben Azzai: There is a type of scholar who expounds well and fulfills his own teachings well, and another who fulfills well and does not expound well. But you, who have never married, expound well on the importance of procreation, and yet you do not fulfill well your own teachings. Ben Azzai said to them: What shall I do, as my soul yearns for Torah, and I do not wish to deal with anything else. It is possible for the world to be maintained by others who are engaged in the mitzvah to be fruitful and multiply. (Yevamot 63b)*

Ben Azzai never had children, choosing his urge to learn over the commandment to start a family because of his love for Torah. Along similar lines, scholar Marvin Sweeney in *Pardes Revisited Once Again: A Reassessment of the Rabbinic Legend Concerning the Four Who Entered Pardes* sees an allusion to Rabbi Ya'akov and Rabbi Eliezer's critique of Ben Azzai in the verse associated with him in Hagigah, "Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of His pious." While it sounds like an accolade, Sweeney sees in it a subtle criticism of Ben Azzai. He writes, "In striking contrast to Akiva, whose marriage to Rachel and the birth of his children not only fulfilled the most fundamental command of Jewish tradition, but led him to become one of the greatest sages of Talmudic

[17] Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 63b

tradition precisely so he could teach his son… the term 'precious,' *yakar*, is best translated as 'costly,' and indicates that Ben Azzai's lack of children at his death cost the world dearly in lost potential."[18]

Ben Azzai's perspective is still perplexing, but it becomes clearer when you consider the way some interpret his position in an argument with Rabbi Akiva over what constitutes the greatest principle in the Torah.

> *"You shall not take revenge and you shall not bear a grudge against the children of your people": You may take revenge on and bear a grudge against others (idolators). "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself": Rabbi Akiva says: This is an all-embracing principle in the Torah. Ben Azzai says: (Bereshith 5:1) "This is the numeration of the generations of Adam" — This is an even greater principle. (Sifra, Kedoshim, Chapter 4)*

On the surface their opinions are unrelated to one another, but the nature of their disagreement depends on which part of the verse, *"This is the book of Adam's line — When God created humankind, He made it in the likeness of God"* Ben Azzai is emphasizing. Intuitively, the second half of the verse about mankind being created in the image of God seems more relevant to their disagreement and Rabbi Akiva's position than the section he quotes, and some commentators assume that's what he was referencing. Malbim, for example, shares critiques of Rabbi Akiva's position, highlighting how easily his principle can become self-serving. To love someone as yourself, he argues, is rooted in self-interest, seeing every encounter through the lens of your own needs and how you'd want to benefit, rather than another's well being. Ben Azzai, on the other hand, *"elevated the axiom to a more sublime matter when he based [it] on "This is the book of the generations of man." For all men are bound together like one body. All of them were created in the image of God to complete the highest image and form which contains the souls of all mankind… In this way, a person can truly desire for another what they desire for themselves, for that other person is their own flesh and bone."*[19]

However, other commentators like Rabbeinu Bachya see Ben Azzai's choice to quote the second half of the verse as reflecting his interests in the esoteric.[20] Commenting on this verse in Bereshit, Rabbeinu Bachya claims the seemingly superfluous word "book" is a reference to a literal collection of divine knowledge that would have been given to humankind had man not sinned. He subsequently identifies this divine knowledge as what Ben Azzai was preoccupied with in Yevamot, seeing a person's

[18] Marvin A. Sweeney, Shofar Vol. 22, No 4, *Pardes Revisited Once Again: A Reassessment of the Rabbinic Legend Concerning the Four Who Entered Pardes*, 2004, 52-53.

[19] Malbim on VaYikra 19:18.

[20] Special thanks to Alex Behar for sharing this reading of Ben Azzai at the Brownstone NYC.

accomplishments in Torah knowledge as their true descendants in this world.[21] Meaning that, while Rabbi Akiva saw interpersonal goodness as mankind's most important pursuit, Ben Azzai thought it was engagement with the divine through Torah study.

Seemingly, Ben Azzai's piety manifested in a deep attachment to the divine and a rejection of the physical world, refusing to marry and contribute to the population and perhaps even living an ascetic lifestyle.

In contrast to Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma was known for his attachment to the earthly realm. In Pirkei Avot, he explicitly defines wisdom as human-centered saying, "Who is wise, those who learn from all men." [22] Furthermore, while admiring the crowds of people in Jerusalem from the Temple Mount, he penned a blessing expressing gratitude for having the good fortune of living in a metropolis with resources like food and clothing readily available, unlike Adam who had to toil to produce those same resources.[23]

Ben Zoma is the only non-ordained sage mentioned in the Passover Haggadah, and is praised by Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria for his novel interpretation of the commandment to remember the Exodus.

> *Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria said: I am almost seventy years old, and never have I merited to find the command to speak of the Exodus from Egypt at night – until Ben Zoma interpreted: It is written, "so that you remember the day of your Exodus from Egypt all the Days of your life." "The days of your life" would mean in the days; "all the days of your life" includes the nights.*[24]

However, the sages aren't convinced by his interpretation.

> *But the sages say, "The days of your life" would mean only in this world; "all the days of your life" brings in the time of the Messiah.*[25]

Whereas Ben Zoma's grounded interpretation defined our obligation to remember the Exodus within the confines of our earthly existence, the sages believed our obligation continued into the messianic, redeemed future.

The verse Ben Zoma is paired with in Hagigah, *"Have you found honey? Eat as much as is sufficient for you, lest you become full from it and vomit it" (Proverbs 25:16)* also reflects an over-attachment to human thought and an inability to engage with divine wisdom. Explaining Ben Zoma's association with "wisdom" in Berakhot, 19th-century Lithuanian commentator

[21] Rabbeinu Bachya on Bereshit 5:1

[22] Mishnah Avot 4:1

[23] Talmud Bavli, Berachot 58a

[24] Passover Haggadah, Maggid, Story of the Five Rabbis

[25] Ibid.

Rashash cited this verse, claiming the honey in the verse Hagigah associates with Ben Zoma is a euphemism for wisdom. Within its context in Hagigah, this verse seems to imply an inability to appropriately handle the divine knowledge of the Pardes experience, but Marvin Sweeney offers insight into this verse that reveals the specificity of its critique. Sweeney suggests that this verse should be read in contrast to Ezekiel 3:1-3 where, in the context of the original divine chariot text, the prophet's reception of divine wisdom is described "with the imagery of his eating a scroll that tasted like honey. Whereas Ezekiel was capable of understanding properly the message that he ingested, Ben Zoma was not."[26] The Pardes story's association of Ben Zoma with this specific imagery of ingesting honey draws a direct comparison to Ezekiel, proving that the text's critique of Ben Zoma is centered on his inability to grasp divine knowledge in contrast to Ezekiel.

One final key to understanding Ben Zoma is his descent into madness following his experience in the *Pardes*. It reflects his attachment to earthly, human knowledge — so much so that his experience with divine knowledge broke him. Describing his life in the aftermath of the Pardes experience, the Gemara records an incident when he was so deep in thought that he failed to accord his teacher, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananya, the proper honor of standing up for him as he passed by. Rabbi Yehoshua asked Ben Zoma what he was contemplating so deeply, and he said he was "contemplating the size of the gap between the upper waters and lower waters." Something about this encounter disturbed Rabbi Yehoshua, and he turned to his other students and said "Ben Zoma is still outside."[27] According to the Tosefta, Ben Zoma died a few days later.[28]

The difference between Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma was that whereas one was defined as extraneously pious and divinely oriented — a spiritualist — the other was defined by an overly-earthbound approach to religion and spirituality. Normally, either approach to religious life is acceptable, but within the context of an intense divine experience like the Pardes they weren't appropriate. Describing their shortcomings, 13th century sage Rabbi Todros Abulafia wrote, "when he [ben Zoma] gazed at the brilliant light, it was more than his mind could handle and he became psychotic."[29] Ben Azzai, on the other hand, was so intensely dedicated to the divine that when given the opportunity to give himself over to the sublime rather than collect the knowledge it offered for mankind to enjoy, he chose the next world over this one, leaving the maintenance of this world to others like he promised in Yevamot.

B. Aher and Rabbi Akiva

Aher (also known by his original name, Elisha Ben Abuya) and Rabbi Akiva have far more detailed descriptions than either of their companions, and seem more connected to each

[26] Sweeney, 2004, 54.

[27] Talmud Bavli, Chagigah 15a

[28] Tosefta Chagigah 2:2. In this account, the formulation is "Ben Zoma is *already* outside," i.e. leaving this world.

[29] Otzar HaKabod 24A

other. Marvin Sweeney suggests that Elisha is meant to be a direct antitype to Rabbi Akiva.[30] Jewish tradition maintained biographical information about Aher and Rabbi Akiva much more so than Ben Azzai or Ben Zoma, although some details are dispersed between the Bavli and Yerushalmi.

Starting with Aher, the Yerushalmi records that Aher told Rabbi Meir how his father, Abuya, dedicated him to a life of Torah scholarship at his *brit milah,* but not for the right reasons. After witnessing the divine power of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua, Abuya dedicated Aher to a life of scholarship, hoping he would acquire that same power one day.[31]

Growing up, Aher grappled with questions of theology despite being a learned scholar. He had an intense obsession with Greek culture and philosophy, to the point that when he stood up in the *beit midrash* heretical textbooks would fall from his lap.[32] He was disturbed by questions of theodicy. The Gemara records a scene where Aher watched two men ascend separate ladders to retrieve eggs from bird nests, but only one of them properly performed the *mitzvah* of *Shiluach HaKan*, shooing the mother bird away so it wouldn't have to see its eggs being taken. However, despite being a mitzvah that carries an explicit blessing of long life for those who perform it according to the verse's plain meaning, the man who performed the mitzvah died while the other lived.[33] Others say his theodicy concerns emerged after watching Rabbi Judah ha-Nahtom's tongue get cut off and thrown to the dogs by Roman soldiers, whereupon he yelled, "is this Torah and this is its reward?"[34] Another telling on Chullin 142a relates this incident to the martyrdom of Hutzpit the Translator: "What did Aher see [that led him to heresy?] … Some say that he saw the tongue of Rabbi Hutzpit the *meturgeman* which was thrown into a trash-heap. Aher said: Will a mouth that produced pearls of wisdom lick the dust?"

However, these challenges to his faith reached their breaking point in the Pardes. There, the Bavli records his encounter with a divine being named Metatron, who was sitting and recording the merits of the Jewish people (instead of God doing so). Upon seeing him, Aher's faith was broken as he asked, dumbfoundedly, *"Perhaps, Heaven forbid, there are two authorities [in the divine realm?!]"*[35] Following this experience, he rejected his status as a sage and was henceforth known as Aher, *Other*, his identity becoming synonymous with the corruption he underwent.[36]

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[30] Sweeney, 2004, 52.

[31] Talmud Yerushalmi, Chagigah 2:1:9b Vilna Edition

[32] Talmud Bavli, Chagigah 15b

[33] Talmud Yerushalmi, Chagigah 2:1:9b Vilna Edition

[34] Ibid.

[35] Talmud Bavli, Chagigah 15a

[36] ibid.

It is further said that he was also abusive to Rabbi Meir, [37] the one student who maintained a relationship with him despite his excommunication,[38] that he murdered children,[39] and that he convinced other children to stop learning Torah. [40] But perhaps worst of all, the Yerushalmi claims he became a Roman informant, proposing adjustments to Roman law that purposely made it difficult for Jews to follow the Torah and keep Shabbat.[41] All of this amounted to heaven declaring, *""Return, rebellious children" (Jeremiah 3:22), apart from Aḥer."*[42] However, the Yerushalmi and Bavli differ over whether or not he repented later in life. According to the former, he did repent after falling ill, [43] while the latter recorded no such repentance.[44]

Rabbi Akiva's life, in many ways, stands in contrast to Elisha's life. He, unlike Elisha, was not born into a life of Torah. Instead, he pursued Torah scholarship later in life[45] after either reflecting on the possibility that like water erodes rock, Torah could seep into him,[46] or (other accounts insist) at the behest of his wife.[47] He mentored thousands of students,[48] whereas Elisha only raised one and constantly discouraged him, questioning his interpretations and belittling him. Rabbi Akiva continued to learn Torah despite it being outlawed,[49] whereas Elisha used his knowledge of Torah to abuse others. Akiva was an optimist who laughed at the ruins of the Second Temple while his compatriots cried, and comforted them by explaining that the destruction wasn't a final calamity but the first step towards redemption.[50] And famously, while being tortured at the hands of the Romans, Rabbi Akiva saw through the disunity and injustice of that moment and declared God's oneness by reciting the Shema before he died. [51] Elisha, on the other hand,

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[37] ibid.

[38] ibid.

[39] ibid.

[40] Talmud Yerushalmi, Chagigah 2:1:9a-b Vilna Edition

[41] Ibid, 9b

[42] Talmud Bavli, Chagigah 15a

[43] Talmud Yerushalmi, Chagigah 2:1:9a-b Vilna Edition

[44] Talmud Bavli, Chagigah 15b

[45] Some suggest that Elisha was cognizant of this dynamic, and that his famous contribution to Pirkei Avot, "Elisha ben Abuyah said: He who learns when a child, to what is he compared? To ink written upon a new writing sheet. And he who learns when an old man, to what is he compared? To ink written on a rubbed writing sheet. (Avot 4:20)" was actually an insult to Rabbi Akiva.

[46] Avot DeRabbi Natan 6:2

[47] Talmud Bavli, Ketubot 62b

[48] ibid.

[49] Talmud Bavli, Berakhot 61b

[50] Talmud Bavli, Makkot 24b

[51] Talmud Bavli, Berakhot 61b

witnessed injustices that didn't involve him but nonetheless renounced his faith.

Derash - What is this Story About?

With a deeper understanding of these characters, we can consider the purpose of this story within our canon. Marvin Sweeney saw this work as a multi-step process towards establishing proper criteria for textual interpretation, each of the three initial sages and their accompanying Torah verses acting as a representative of some form of subpar interpretation. He argues that "given the potentially heretical character of much of the mystical, theurgical, and Hekhalot literature of the early Talmudic period, this suggests that the purpose of the legend concerning the four who entered pardes is to attempt to gain some control over the proper exposition of the mystical texts, the account of creation in Genesis 1 (Ma'aseh Bereshit) and the account of Ezekiel's vision of God in Ezekiel 1 (Ma'aseh Merkavah)." [52] His approach has synergy with other approaches to this story that see it, albeit more positively, as the foundation for the Pardes four-layered system of textual interpretation.

Others see the Pardes solely as a warning against studying and engaging with the divine without proper preparation, serving as an example of the consequences of approaching those subjects ill-prepared or unworthy. Protesting more complex readings of this text, Gershom Sholem wrote that modern commentators offer readings that are "extremely far-fetched and not a little irrational in their determination at all costs to preserve the characteristic essentials of rationalism. We are told that the passage refers to cosmological speculations about the materia prima, an explanation which lacks all plausibility and finds no support in the context or in the subject matter itself… there is no reason whatsoever to doubt that the mystical experience of the dangers of the ascent is really the subject of the anecdote." [53] According to Sholem, any reading of this story that tries to expand its intent beyond a cautionary tale against mystical encounters without proper preparation is unfounded.

The Tikkunei Zohar, focusing on Rabbi Akiva's warning to not say "water, water" upon entrance into the Pardes, claimed this story presents readers with a warning against a more specific form of heresy that saw humankind and God as detached from one another using the upper and lower yud-shaped branches of the letter alef bound together with a diagonal vav-shaped line as a visual representation of their connection. According to Ramak, this alef is representative of the sefirot, a Kabbalisic theory of reality that explains God and humankind's connection to one another through a series of ten stages of divine emanation that reveal Godliness in our world. He explains that the upper and lower yuds are representative of the uppermost and lowermost stages of this system, while the vav represents the stages that connect them. To

[52] Sweeney, 2004, 55-56

[53] Gershom Sholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Schocken, 1995, 52-53.

proclaim "water, water" — water being understood as another term for these stages— was to break this connection and see man and God as separated.[54] Scholar Heinrich Graetz saw this story as a warning against a similar heresy of disunity, gnosticism: a popular cosmogony that generally presented a distinction between a supreme, hidden God and a malevolent lesser divinity who is responsible for creating the material universe, or a dualist approach that doesn't see God as all-powerful.[55]

These approaches focus on the story's spiritual, mystical, and/or theological elements. However, Elie Wiesel uncovers the more human elements of this tale. Viewing the story through the lens of someone who witnessed the near-destruction and oppression of his own people, he understands the sages as attempting to either prevent the kind of calamity that he suffered through, or at least to try to understand it. These characters present "four basic responses to what today we call extreme situations: madness, heresy, death, and faith… four men can pass the same gate at the same moment, live the same experience, but what they derive from it depends on their nature. Have they "seen" the same pillars?"[56] His reflections on Rabbi Akiva and Aher present this approach most powerfully.

Starting with Rabbi Akiva, Wiesel has a surprising amount of contempt for him.

> *He [Akiva] appeals to the imagination of the learned and the unlearned alike. He is loved by the mystics and rationalists. He is the perfect hero in everyone's book… and yet—I have some difficulties with Rabbi Akiva. His attitude toward suffering disturbs me… Didn't he understand that he could set an example for generations of martyrs… inside the kingdom of night, Hasidim not only sang Ani Maamin, but also "Amar Rabbi Akiva, amar Rabbi Akiva, Ashrekhem Israel—and Rabbi Akiva said, Blessed and happy are you, Israel—for you are purifying yourselves before Him who purifies you…"*[57]

Having witnessed substantial martyrdom performed in Rabbi Akiva's name, Wiesel couldn't help but associate him with death. However, Wiesel proceeds to explain how he ultimately realized his mistake. Despite his reputation as a martyr par-excellence who recited the *Shema*

[54] Tikkunei Zohar, Tikun 40, with points of clarity between bolded words from Moshe Miller, https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/380344/jewish/Four-Who-Entered-Paradise.htm

[55] Graetz, Heinrich. Gnosticismus und Judenthum. Germany, B. L. Monasch, 1846, 65

[56] Wiesel, Sages and Dreamers, 242-243.

[57] Ibid. 232; 240.

while being tortured by the Romans, Rabbi Akiva wasn't actually someone who loved or welcomed suffering — at least, not for others — and so Wiesel cites source after source detailing the pragmatic and humanitarian nature of Rabbi Akiva's life and thought. When teaching Torah became illegal he refused to stop and was thrown in jail, but refused to teach those who came to learn from him in jail lest they get in trouble on his account. He held the position that if two people were walking in a desert and only one of them had enough water for a single person to drink and survive, they should drink their water rather than forfeit their life.[58]

> *Rabbi Akiva was ready to endanger himself but not others. He was ready to advocate suffering for himself but not for others… His argument with Ben P'tura on the duties and obligations of friendship? His decision teaches us something important. When the surviving friend emerges from the desert, he is no longer alone; he will have to live two lives, his own and that of his dead friend. Isn't this applicable to the American Jewish community? Six million Jews live in this land; let every one of them choose to live his or her life and that of a victim who died in battle or in a mass grave… Obsessed with the suffering of our people, Rabbi Akiva so wanted to curtail it. But he could not.*[59]

In reality, Rabbi Akiva was someone who valued life above all else. Elie Wiesel specifically endorses Saul Lieberman's reading of his final moments, i.e. that reciting *Shema* wasn't meant to be an act of rebellion to be idolized. It was just time to recite the *Shema*, and had it not been, he wouldn't have said it. But most notably, Rabbi Akiva championed the belief that loving your neighbor was paramount in Jewish tradition.

> *In conclusion, I love Rabbi Akiva. I love him for his humanity, for his passion for study, I love him for his love of the Jewish people.*[60]

Ultimately, Elie Wiesel comes to love Rabbi Akiva for his humanity, compassion, and love of life despite popular misconceptions of his martyrdom that often define him. On the other hand, his initial reflections on Elisha are surprisingly sympathetic.

> *And here I must make a confession: At first I was drawn to this tormented Master, drawn to his extraordinary lucidity and honesty… I found him the most stimulating of his group, more humane than Rabbi Akiva.*[61]

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[58] Sifra Behar 5:3

[59] Ibid. 240-241.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid. 267.

Wiesel asserts that most readers should feel kinship with Elisha. *"Surely his angry questions are valid… we admire his courage. We admire his demands."* [62] But, highlighting the purported evildoings of Aher in the Talmud — Wiesel turns on Elisha whose *"shadow covered the light… his cruelty weightier than his human warmth."*[63]

> *I find his attitude toward his devoted disciple Rabbi Meir unacceptable… by rewarding good with evil, Elisha did exactly that which he accused God of doing... In the second place… all his provocations took place on Shabbat… If God did wrong, why offend the Shabbat?*[64]

Furthermore, he questions the selflessness of Elisha's concerns with theodicy and injustice.

> *Appearances are deceiving. When he saw the man fall from the tree, Elisha rebelled. Why? Because he felt sorry for him? No. He rebelled because justice—the abstract concept of justice—had been flouted before his eyes. What concerned him was not man but the idea of divine fairness.*[65]

Finally, he condemns Elisha for his need to answer his questions.

> *His quest is ours, his thirst is ours. Yet our paths separate when he deems it necessary to provide answers… had he not indicated his solution, his drastic solution, to the problem — he would have emerged as a beacon and a guide. After all, Jewish tradition permits man to question heaven, but one cannot pronounce judgment, one cannot boast of knowing everything… Having seen evil, having witnessed the intolerable injustice inherent in the death of a man, he proclaimed the verdict: Reward does not exist, and neither does eternity. Therein lay his mistake. He wished to acquire knowledge and thought that he did.*[66]

Facing the horrors of his era, Elisha, *"mad with pain, he never recovered from this trauma: he broke with his Jewish past."*[67] Despite sharing his

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[62] Ibid. 268-269

[63] Ibid. 267

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid. 268

[67] Ibid. 260

concerns, the decisions Elisha allowed himself to make were too despicable to bear for Wiesel. Elisha's need for certainty and answers to impossible questions of theodicy and human suffering they were experiencing came at the expense of his own humanity and his faith community.

> *What was his answer? "Yatza ve-hata" says the Talmud. He went outside and sinned." Against God? If that has been all, we would have found an excuse. But he sinned against his brothers, and that is inadmissible. If you quarrel with God, it is your concern—His concern. But why implicate your brothers? You protest against heaven? So be it. But why express such protest by turning against your own people?... The only cry which is justified in our tradition is that uttered on behalf of man—and not against man…*[68]

In conclusion, Elie Wiesel emphatically states that despite the superficial allure of Elisha's anger at the injustices of his era, he is not a model for us to follow in times of turmoil.

> *No: his anger was not Jewish. No: his rebellion was not meant to help Jews. No: he was not an example to be followed.*[69]

In the end, despite his reservations about his supposed martyrdom, the person we should emulate amidst calamity is Rabbi Akiva.

> *All things considered, I prefer Rabbi Akiva.*[70]

Sod - What Can We Be Certain of?

The true test for these characters was not what happened to them the day they ventured into the Pardes, but what happened the day after. Seeing this story through Elie Wiesel's eyes humanizes them and lets us see ourselves in them and their responses to the Pardes experience. When we have experiences that disturb us, face doubts or threats that destabilize us, or are plagued by uncertainties that haunt us, how do we respond? Do we turn inward like Ben Azzai and become self-destructive? Maybe we become self-involved to the point that we completely isolate ourselves like Ben Zoma, losing ourselves in the process of trying to grasp things we can't understand. Or, like Elisha, do we delude ourselves into a false sense of certainty and security to cope with things we cannot understand or escape from, regardless of the consequences?

[68] Ibid. 268

[69] Ibid. 269

[70] Ibid.

Elisha spoke proudly of his apostasy, parading by Rabbi Meir's study hall only to try to outwit his former student with his own Torah teachings — but it was a false bravado. Elisha repeatedly projected his uncertainty onto others. In one instance in the Bavli, Rabbi Meir brought him to the synagogue and asked the children present what they were learning — a form of primitive prophecy. One child answered, but the gemara makes a point to say that the child stuttered and misquoted his verse in a way that sounded like an insult to Elisha. This mistake gave Elisha the chance to mishear him and violently lash out. That is the behavior of someone acting out of fear and self-hatred, not certainty.[71] And in the Yerushalmi we are privileged to a conversation between Elisha and Rabbi Meir at the end of his life where he lays in bed, ill and broken, seeking repentance for what he'd done.[72]

It's worth noting that this behavior is possible regardless of whether someone chooses to become less or more religious. The Kuzari even suggests that Elisha saw his heresy as an elevation in religiosity, not a downgrade, viewing himself as having attained a superior level of spirituality that no longer required mitzvah performance. [73] Tragically, cowardice and cruelty are non-denominational, and you don't have to leave religion to become cruel, and becoming more religious doesn't make you any less cruel. You just have to think you're right. [74] Anyone who has undergone a spiritual journey knows how easy it is to slip into self-righteousness and become an Aher while thinking they're a Rabbi Akiva.

But, should we have the strength of character and resilience to live with uncertainty, we can persevere. Regarding Rabbi Akiva, the gemara asks, *"Mai Daresh,"* "What did he expound that helped him survive the Pardes?" Rashi offers two interpretations of the gemara's question and subsequently, two versions of what actually happened in the Pardes. According to Rashi, the gemara is either asking what it was that Akiva knew that helped him survive the experience despite seeing the same thing as Elisha, or else what he knew that made him not look at all.[75] Emphasizing Rashi's second interpretation, I'd like to suggest that what made Rabbi Akiva worthy of surviving the Pardes was that he didn't look into the unknown for an answer to human suffering. Perhaps because he had the foresight to recognize what the experience would do to him, or maybe because he simply realized that survival isn't contingent upon divine truths about theodicy that can break you, but rather upon kindness and community. When God wanted to make the world, He asked Kindness and Truth if He should. Kindness said He should because people would be

[71] Talmud Bavli, Tractate Chagigah 15b

[72] Talmud Yerushalmi, Chagigah 2:1:9a-b Vilna Edition

[73] Kuzari 3:65

[74] On a related note connected to halacha, the Gemara in Eruvin 13b explains that the reason we uphold the rulings of Beit Hillel over those of Beit Shammai a majority of the time is because when they would debate, Beit Hillel would be more amicable and explain both sides while Beit Shammai was rude and only saw their side.

[75] Talmud Bavli, Chagigah 16a

kind, but Truth said not to because they would lie, but God created the world anyway. When asked why He didn't listen to Truth, God threw Truth to the ground and said "Truth will grow from the earth."[76] In other words, truth will come later, but kindness will come sooner, and that was enough.

Rabbi Akiva, despite facing the same existential threats as his compatriots, lived a life loving his neighbors and caring for his community. While Elisha became an *other*, Rabbi Akiva showed us how to dedicate ourselves to *one another*, and that the only thing we can be certain of is how we treat each other.

> *Only Rabbi Akiva saved himself. He sought peace for his people and for the world — and that is what saved him.*[77]

Jewish tradition presents us with a profound challenge. On several occasions we are asked to remember the pain we've endured and meditate on the traumas we're continuously facing, but not let it change us. When our pain is immense and life is uncertain, we need to take care of each other, and ensure our decisions are driven by our love for one another rather than our fears of the unknown. Ultimately, it is by maintaining our connections that we survive calamity.

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the spring.

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.

But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plow.

And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.[78]

God's Estranged Wife: Rashi on Song of Songs, Lamentations and Hosea

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In Rashi's introduction to his commentary on Song of Songs, he states clearly that his goal is to work with the preexisting materials from midrashic literature and weave them together into a coherent story. As he writes:

> And I have seen for this book many midrashic interpretations. There are those who explain all of this book in one midrash, and there are

[76] Bereishit Rabbah 8:5

[77] Wiesel, Sages and Dreamers,. 255.

[78] Yehuda Amichai, "The Place Where We Are Right." *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell. University of California Press, 1986-2013.

> those that interpret each verse with a different midrash, those scattered among various midrashim, and there are those that interpret individual texts and do not make the interpretation fit the language of the biblical text and the order of the biblical texts. So I decided to grasp the meaning of the text by setting the explanations in order, and I will make each midrash of our sages fit in its proper place.

Although he states here that his commentary draws on disparate midreshei aggadah, he sets the different interpretations into an order which follows the Targum.[1] The Targum, an interpretive 'translation' of Song of Songs into Aramaic, midrashically frames the Song of Songs as entirely about the relationship between God and Israel. It retells the Song of Songs as an account of the history of the Jewish people, from revelation to the present day. So he takes the midrash and fits it to the order of the text, following the Targum. But he also tells a different story:

> And this book is based, by Divine inspiration, in the metaphor of a woman bound in living widowhood (2 Samuel 20:3), longing for her husband, leaning on her beloved, remembering the love of her youth for him and admitting her sins. Her beloved is also suffering with her in her pain (Isaiah 63:9), and remembers the love of her youth and the beauty of her beauty, and the rightness of her deeds, that with them he was connected with her in a powerful love, so that she might know that he is not causing her suffering from his heart (Lamentations 3:33) and her exile is not exile (Isaiah 50:1), for she is still his wife and he her husband (inversion of Hosea 2:4), and he will return to her.

Rashi here constructs a love story based on his reading of Song of Songs as a cohesive narrative. He deals with the inconsistencies in the stories and the differences in relationship status by placing the story in the first-person subjective narrative of a woman and by having her account move backwards and forwards in time.[2] In this way, passages in which the lovers appear distant from each other, such as 1:7, where the man and the woman are not together and the woman needs to ask the man where she can find him, can

[1] Although Rashi does not state his reliance on the Targum as clearly as he does his reliance on traditionally composed midrash, he seems to have read the Targum and to be following it closely and even responding to its exegesis. For Rashi's knowledge of the Targum on Song of Songs see P. Alexander, *The Targum*, 2003, 45 and Ivan G. Marcus, "The Song of Songs in German Hassidism and the School of Rashi: A Preliminary Consideration," in *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume 1*, ed. Barry Walfish (Haifa: 1994), 182-83.

[2] Baruch Alster, "Human Love and Its Relationship to Spiritual Love in Jewish Exegesis on the Song of Songs" (Hebrew), PhD dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 2006, 68.

be explained as describing the present reality where the husband and wife are living separately (or, allegorically, where Israel is in exile). Later, in 1:16-1:17 when they are described as living in a home together, that is the wife looking back longingly to the past (or, allegorically, Israel in the newly-built Temple).

Rashi devotes particular attention to 5:2-7, and it seems to have driven how he imagines the story as a whole. He describes it in his comment on 5:3 as "a wife grieving the husband of her youth and searching for him." He imagines her as living separately from her husband because she is committing adultery and they have separated and she has moved in with someone else, but when he knocks on her door, she cannot help but be moved to seek after him. This is a turning point in their relationship, and although it does not lead to their reunion it makes her want to be with him, and to tell other women about him and about their past, in the hope of finding him.

The story that Rashi tells out of the disparate songs of the Song of Songs is distinctive. While some other exegetes have found a love story between a young man and young woman, Rashi finds a middle-aged (or older) couple, although some of the story is set in the past when they were younger. Unlike many commentators who tell a fairly linear story, Rashi's story is nonlinear and meandering. Most strikingly, Rashi's story emphasizes the suffering that the protagonists have undergone, and both of their respective responsibilities for it. Rashi goes far beyond the text of the Song of Songs in imagining the wife as adulterous and the husband as rejecting and yet, despite this, their love for each other as powerful enough to still drive them to hope that one day they will be able to reconcile.

What is most shocking in Rashi's commentary is the implication, when one looks up the verses that Rashi quotes, that the husband is sometimes cruel as well as rejecting. Rashi quotes a verse in which King David acts as a cruel and rejecting husband and applies these verses to Song of Songs. 2 Samuel 20:3 describes King David keeping women as captive concubines 'in living widowhood', that is neither divorcing nor cohabiting with them, after his son Absalom had gone to lie with them as a way to claim power. It is clear that Rashi understands being left as a living widow to be terrible from his comment on Exodus 22:23, where he interprets the biblical statement that those who oppress the widow will be punished by their wives becoming widows by interpreting that their wives will become living widows, who will be married to someone who is not available to cohabit with them.[3] From Rashi's perspective, David is also in violation of the halakha established later that if a man does not

[3] Rashi's source here is Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael Nezikin 18:22 which also connects widowhood here with living widowhood.

wish to continue to have relations with a wife because she committed adultery, he must divorce her.[4]

The implications of God's harshness towards Israel become stronger when it becomes clear that Rashi is noticing the parallels between the Song of Songs and Lamentations, in which God's harsh behavior towards Israel is most strongly felt:

> The Lord has acted like a foe,
> He has laid waste Israel,
> Laid waste all her citadels,
> Destroyed her strongholds.
> He has increased within Fair Judah
> Mourning and moaning.
> (Lamentations 2:5)

Song of Songs and Lamentations are read on the high point and the low point of the Jewish liturgical year: Passover and Tisha B'Av, respectively.[5] Like Song of Songs, the book of Lamentations is spoken in multiple voices. The book of Lamentations is a collection of poems without a narrative thread, marked by the chapter divisions and by the alphabetic acrostics in the first four chapters. Four of the five chapters are spoken in the third person and describe the suffering of the 'daughter of Jerusalem', which stands in for both the city and its people. Her suffering is described graphically, sometimes horrifically, and is left unresolved. Chapter three, in the center of the book, is spoken by a man in the first person about his own suffering. It is three times as long as the other chapters through its structure as a triple rather than a single acrostic. But most significantly, up to about a third of the chapter is hopeful in tone, describing God's mercy and the man's belief that God will help him. This element is almost entirely missing in the other chapters aside from the second-to-last line of chapter five.[6]

Song of Songs and Lamentations are thus both books that speak in different voices and do not attempt to reconcile them. Song of Songs describes different kinds of relationships between lovers, Lamentations describes different kinds of relationships between suffering people and God. These two voices are placed at the liturgical high point and low point of the Jewish year: Passover, the day of celebrating God's redemption, and Tisha B'Av, the day of mourning destruction. There are many other texts that Rashi could have used

[4] For the requirement to divorce a wife that one is certain is adulterous see Gittin 90a, on which Rashi also wrote a commentary. In the case of King David there is an additional complication that the wife of a king may not remarry, see Sanhedrin 18a, so these women would not have been able to remarry even if divorced.

[5] For a source for liturgical reading of Song of Songs and Lamentations, see Soferim 14:3 (8th cent.).

[6] The difference between chapter three and the other chapters is so striking that when Lamentations is read liturgically in synagogue the third chapter is chanted using a different chant.

that promise God's unequivocal fidelity to Israel in a clear and unambiguous way. The choice to instead pair Song of Songs with Lamentations puts these two multivocal texts in conversation. Just as Rashi constructs a single narrative out of Song of Songs, he also constructs a single story out of Lamentations. It is in fact the same story, as he explains in his interpretation of Lamentations 1:1, "[The city] has become like a widow." Rashi explains, "But not really a widow; rather, like a woman whose husband went abroad and he intends to return to her."[7] So Rashi begins his commentaries on Song of Songs and Lamentations by turning them both into the same story: a woman who is abandoned by her husband is missing him and telling stories about him.

The references to Isaiah help bring Song of Songs and Lamentations together. Isaiah 50 and 63 are both part of passages that speak of return after exile, and which draw on marriage imagery to describe what this return from exile will look like. Isaiah 50 describes the relationship between God and Israel as a marriage that can never end in divorce:

> Thus said the LORD:
> Where is the bill of divorce
> Of your mother whom I
> dismissed? (Isaiah 50:1)

Isaiah 63 is part of a prophecy of consolation that describes God and Israel as a newly married couple:

> As a youth espouses a maiden,
> Your sons shall espouse you;
> And as a bridegroom rejoices over
> his bride,
> So will your God rejoice over you.
> (Isaiah 62:5)

But it is the references to Hosea at the beginning and the end of the passage that provide the clearest thematic bridge between Song of Songs and Lamentations. The beginning of Hosea 2 describes God (or Hosea) committing sexualized violence against Israel (or Gomer):

> Else will I strip her naked
> And leave her as on the day she was
> born:
> And I will make her like a
> wilderness,
> Render her like desert land (Hosea
> 2:5)[8]

This is similar to the description of the sexualized public humiliation of the daughter of Jerusalem in Lamentations:

[7] Rashi here draws on a similar interpretation in Sanhedrin 104a.

[8] This language has come under a great deal of feminist critique. For a starting point, see Yvonne Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet: Hosea's Marriage in Literary-Theoretical Perspective.* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

All who pass your way
Clap their hands at you;
They hiss and wag their head
At Fair Jerusalem:
"Is this the city that was called
Perfect in Beauty,
Joy of All the Earth?"
All your enemies
Jeer at you;
They hiss and gnash their teeth,
And cry: "We've ruined her!"
(Lamentations 2:15-16)

Hosea chapter 2 ends with a dramatic turn into union between human and Divine, which is compared to a marriage. The imagery towards the end of chapter two includes agriculture and nature imagery, a "covenant with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air and the creeping things of the ground" (Hosea 2:20) and a promise that the earth will "respond with new grain and wine and oil" (Hosea 2:24). The marriage here is also to be more egalitarian, with God promising that Israel will call God by a word for husband that does not connote master, Ba'al, because that word is also a name for the false gods that will be abolished. The difference between the beginning and end of Hosea 2 is so striking that some contemporary scholars have gone so far as to consider them to have been written by different authors.[9] But the difference between the beginning and the end of chapter 2 of Hosea is also the difference between Lamentations and Song of Songs. Hosea provides a narrative key to how to read Lamentations and Song of Songs as a single story.

Rabbinic exegesis of Hosea, which Rashi cites in his commentary, adds layers to the story. Pesachim 87a, cited by Rashi in his comment on Hosea 1:2, reads the prophet Hosea, rather than his wife Gomer, as the one who does wrong in chapter one and two and needs to be led by God to repent:

> The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Hosea: Your sons, the Jewish people, have sinned. Hosea should have said to God in response: But they are Your sons; they are the sons of Your beloved ones, the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Extend Your mercy over them. Not only did he fail to say that, but instead he said before Him: Master of the Universe, the entire world is Yours; since Israel has sinned, exchange them for another nation. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: What shall I do to this Elder who does not know how to defend Israel? I will say to him: Go and take a prostitute and bear for yourself children of prostitution. And after that I will say to him: Send her away from before you. If he is able to

[9] For an overview of some of the possibilities for multiple authorship of Hosea 2, see Brad E. Kelle, *Hosea 2: Metaphor and Rhetoric in Historical Perspective*, (Brill: Leiden, 2005), 8-13.

send her away, I will also send away
the Jewish people.[10]

God then commands Hosea to divorce Gomer and he refuses, because by this point they are married and he cares for her and they have children together. God's commands to Hosea are a test, a way of provoking him to realize that jealousy is actually not a particularly strong motivation in practice.

Numbers Rabbah 2:15 goes further by mocking God for succumbing to what appears to be male jealousy in Hosea. It parallels the story of Hosea to the story of the Golden Calf, and imagines Moses saying to God: "This calf can help you! It can send the rain while you send the dew!" When God retorts that the calf is a statue and can't do anything, Moses asks why it makes God so angry. This is compared to a king who finds his wife kissing a eunuch. His advisor says that she will bear him strong children from this extramarital relationship, and when the king replies that nothing like that can happen, the advisor asks why the king is angry.

Both interpretations, in different ways, subvert the metaphor of Israel as the adulterous wife in Hosea by making it clear that even if the wife is adulterous, the husband has choices as to how to proceed and rejecting her is a choice that can be judged morally wrong or even mocked.

Hosea, for Rashi, provides a few important narrative elements. It adds the adultery of the wife and the subsequent abandonment of the husband, which then leads into explaining Song of Songs 5:2-7 as the woman's decision to return to the man after living separately from him with another lover.[11] This helps explain why it is a difficult decision for her to get up and open the door for him and why, once she finally does, it is so difficult for her to find him. The physical abuse that she endures by the guardians of the walls is the echo of the violence that she endures when she tries to return to her husband in Hosea's narrative. The rabbinic interpretations of Hosea add that the man is also not innocent in his decision to abandon her and to leave her as a 'living widow.'

Rashi's story takes these elements from Hosea and constructs another story around them. Unlike Hosea's story, which starts at the beginning of a relationship, Rashi's story of love and grief in Song of Songs and Lamentations starts in the middle, between a couple that already has a long history together. While Hosea is told from the perspective of a male narrator (which allows the rabbis to introduce the possibility that he may be unreliable), the story behind Song of Songs and Lamentations is, in Rashi's retelling, spoken by a grieving woman. Changing the perspective of the story changes its meaning. If, for the Targum, the Song of Songs is about God's ongoing love for

[10] Pesachim 87a, Steinsaltz trans. There is a parallel in Eliyahu Zuta 9, which also adopts the narrative of Hosea as sinful and repenting.

[11] Rashi on Hosea 1:2 remarks that Gomer will bear children who may or may not be legitimate.

Israel, for Rashi the Song of Songs is about Israel's enduring love for God. Reading the Bible as a narrative whole requires facing the challenge that the God of the Exodus and the God of Lamentations are the same God. Believing in the Bible as a narrative whole requires believing in that God. The Song of Songs, for Rashi, is about the decision to love the God of the entire Bible.

Constructing a coherent narrative about God, Rashi suggests, is not unlike constructing a consistent narrative about any other long, complicated, and somewhat damaged relationship when looking back on it. The wife looks back at her relationship with her husband and thinks about the ways that she has harmed him and the ways that he has harmed her, but also about the ways that they have loved each other. Israel sits in exile and reads the book of Lamentations and the book of Hosea. It thinks about God. It thinks about revelation and about destruction. It hears a knock at the door. What story will it tell?

The Daring Theology of the Kinnah of the Maharam

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This is the third posting in a series about the Kinnot of the 9th of Av. For the first two postings, click here and here.

Rabbi Meir of Rottenberg (Maharam), leader of Ashkenazic (German) Jewry in the latter half of the thirteenth century, is most well-known as a Tosafist, halakhic decisor, and author of numerous responsa. In addition to these legal contributions, he also composed one Kinnah for the Ninth of Av, *"Sha'ali Serufah Ba-Eish,"* about the burning of the Talmud in 1242. Typically recited as one of the last Kinnot of the day, this lament reflects on the pain felt upon the Talmud's burning.

The historical background of the tragedy is briefly summarized in lines 17-18 of the Kinnah, and is explained at length in other sources.[1] The apostate Nicholas Donin made a series of accusations against the Talmud in 1240, leading to a famed disputation between him and the Rabbis, led by Yehiel of Paris. Two years later, the Talmud was burned during the month of Tammuz. The Kinnah laments how the 3rd month, when the Torah was given in Biblical times, later became forever connected to the 4th month, when it was burnt in medieval times. The burning of the

[1] For a brief summary of the historical background and Maharam's role in commemorating the event, see E.E. Urbach, *Ba'alei Ha-Tosafot: Toldoteyhem, Hibureyhem, Shitotam*, (Jerusalem, Bialik Institute, 1954), 448-455.

Talmud is foreshadowed by the historical breaking of the tablets on the 17th of that month (as per Taanit 26b): "he repeated in his foolishness[2] to burn Law in fire…"[3]

Sha'ali Serufa Ba-Eish is a literary triumph whose true depth of meaning is often missed by those reading the words on Tisha B-av. The Kinnah is patterned after "*Tzion Halo Tish'ali,"* the famous Kinnah of Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi, and its structure (68 lines, of ten long syllables each, and every other line rhyming with each other) and rhyme scheme (with each line ending *-rayikh* in Ha-Levi's Kinnah and and *-layikh* in Maharam's) echo the earlier lament of the loss of Zion. The selection of this specific poetic form makes a thematically profound statement that the loss and love of the Torah and Talmud parallels the loss and love of Israel in the life of the religious Jew. Beyond the formal qualities, some of the lines even make allusion to Ha-Levi's lament. Maharam's first line mirrors Ha-Levi's, opening with a direct address to a female addressee, begging that she ask (the root *sh-a-l*) for the peace of the Jewish people, with the word *li-shlom* as the fourth word of each Kinnah.[4] Later, Ha-Levi speaks of the graves of Moshe and Aharon (located at Mt. Ha-Avaraim and Mt. Ha-Har), while Maharam (ln. 15-16) also says that he will cry until his tears reach the graves of Moshe and Aharon at Mt. Ha-Har. Both ask rhetorically how can food be pleasing ("*eikh ye'erav ekhol*" in line 19 is a direct quote from Ha-Levi) following this tragedy.[5] In the 4th line of his Kinnah, Ha-Levi says he is a *tanim,* hyena, providing eulogies for Jerusalem, an idea Maharam reiterates in his 5th line. Finally, since Ha-Lavi asks how light can be *sweet* to the eyes, Maharam says it would be *sweeter* than honey to the mouth to drink tears, and more pleasant to the eyes than anything else (ln. 22-23).

What is most striking about the Kinnah, though, is not its literary sparkle, but rather its radical theology, which is conveyed through the content of the Kinnah. The theological assertions of the Kinnah are hidden, however, and only through a close reading will the reader appreciate its stance. This essay will explore three major theological

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[2] The Hebrew word used here, "*evil,"* means a fool throughout the Bible, and that is clearly the meaning of the word in Proverbs 26:11 which is the source of this phrase "Like a dog who returns to his vomit, is a fool who repeats his foolishness." It is challenging to determine who the referent of the pronoun "he" is in this line. Moses broke the tablets while the Christians burnt the Talmud. God may have been the ultimate cause of both events, but the lamenter would not call God's actions foolish.

[3] These two short words serve as a play on words to Deuteronomy 33:2 where the Torah is called "a law from fire." The two words are inverted here, as God's original intent has been inverted, and the Torah from fire is now the Torah burnt in fire. The phrase "law from fire" also appears earlier in the Kinnah in line 9.

[4] The word *u-shelom* also begins Ha-Levi's 3rd line and Maharam's 4th.
Ha-Levi is addressing Tzion, Jerusalem, while Maharam is addressing the Torah, "she who is burnt in fire"; Ha-Levi calls the Jewish people those bound (*asirayikh*), while Maharam calls the Jewish people those who mourn (*aveilayikh*), but the idea is the same.

[5] The two words "*eikh ye'erav"* appear prominently elsewhere in Ha-Levi's poetic oeuvre, as the final two words of the second line of the poem *libbi ba-mizrah.*

topics, broadly speaking, which Maharam investigates. First, whether the burning of the Talmud can be seen as evidence of a larger claim that the Christian religion has replaced, subverted or become the new form of Judaism. Second, whether the burning of the Talmud rebuts the notion that the God of the Jew is omniscient, omnipotent, and always present and engaged in the affairs of the world. Third, the role the Christians are supposed to play in the moment of the redemptive future.

Has Christianity Replaced Judaism?

Since the founding of Christianity, that faith has presented itself as the true representation of the wishes of God, having replaced Judaism as the system of belief that God truly desired. Maharam addresses this argument, technically called supersessionism, in three ways. First, he explains that the Oral Law and the Talmud, not the Christian Scriptures, are the true legacy and interpretation of the Written Law. Second, he expresses how Judaism is the true, more prominent religion, and how Christianity's centrality in the Middle Ages should not be seen as proof that it is the correct faith. Third, he bemoans the fact that the process of the burning of the Talmud brings with itself failures of Jewish law as well; the law within the Talmud cannot function properly when the Talmud has been burnt.

Oral Law and Written Law

Historians have noted that one of the reasons the Christians burned the Talmud was because the very existence of the Talmud challenged the notion that Christianity had replaced Judaism and rendered it out-of-date. Christians believed that the Christian Scriptures, what they call the "New" Testament, was the authoritative interpretation of our Tanakh, and so Christian interpretation of the Bible was *the* valid interpretation of the words of God for a modern era. No other interpretation of the Hebrew Bible was valid.[6] The very existence of the Talmud complicates this Christian contention, because it exists as an alternative – and to the Jew a more valid – interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures, composed *after* the Christian scriptures! Burning the Talmud, thus, was not just designed to punish and convey a practical harm to the Jews, it also advanced a theology that was counter to Judaism, which centered the Christian Scriptures as the authoritative interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.

Maharam seems to be aware of this contention, and in this Kinnah he often returns to the question of one text replacing the other, challenging and countering the Christian view. Line 16 explicitly asks "I shall ask, is there a new Torah, for that

[6] See Urbach and also see David Berger, "Christians, Gentiles, and the Talmud" (158-176) in *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010), 159. Though this line of reasoning is not central in the polemical tracts related to the disputation over the Talmud, it is clearly present, even if only in the background, and was clearly on Maharam's mind when he composed his lament.

reason your pages were burned?" Similarly, in Line 18, the Kinnah asks regarding the burning, "is this the fitting recompense for your doubled nature?"[7] For the Maharam, the double-nature of the Torah refers to its inclusion of both an oral law and a written law, not to the Christians' old and new scriptures. The controversy erupted because the Torah is doubled, and the Kinnah questions how the burning of the Talmud can be a fitting effect of the dual nature of the Torah.

The Primary Religion

The Jewish theology of the ideal world is one where the other nations recognize the truth of Judaism, and therefore give Jews and Judaism a primary position compared to other faiths. The Kinnah highlights how, at the time of the disputation over the Talmud and the burning of the Talmud, this, too, was inverted, with Christianity positioning itself as the faith that had been chosen by God and Judaism relegated to a lesser, inferior status.

One example of Christianity claiming primary status at the time of the Talmud's burning is the primacy of the Christian courts. Line 8 bemoans how the Christians "sit in great haughtiness to judge sons of God[8] in your laws…." The Christians sit in calm and quiet while "the faces of my young youths have been covered with your thorns" (ln. 7, based on Proverbs 24:31). Jewish Law prohibits Jews from taking their disputes before Christian courts because doing so provides honor to a foreign deity (Rashi, Exodus 21:1), and here the Jews are judged in a foreign court. Yet in exile, the Jew has no choice but to honor the summons to the Christian tribunal to defend the Talmud from those prosecuting it.

Inversions of Jewish Law

If the wrong faith is seen as the true faith, then the natural consequence is that Jewish Law no longer functions in the way it is supposed to. For that reason, the Kinnah also explores ways in which the burning of the Talmud did not just represent the destruction of the physical record of Jewish law, but also the inversion of Jewish law itself. The artifact containing the law was destroyed, at the same moment the law, itself, became perverted. Line 20 notes that the idea of a burning in a Jewish city square is reserved for the burning of an idolatrous city (Devarim 13:17), yet here the Talmud is burned as if it were idolatry.[9] Adding

[7] "*Tashlum k'feilayikh*" puns off of the Jewish legal concept where some victims of theft are paid back double-value for the item stolen, but in this context it refers to the doubled nature of the Torah, not the doubled payment.

[8] The Jewish people are here called the sons of God, on the basis of Deuteronomy 14:1-2. Calling the Jews the children of God in an anti-Christian polemic is clearly daring, because the Christians considered one of their deities the true 'son' of God. See Yaakov Jaffe, "Who Was the First Jewish Commentator to Connect Psalm 50 With Christianity?" *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 51:3, for further discussion.

[9] Even in an idolatrous city, '*shelal shamayim,*' essentially holy objects, are never burned (Sanhedrin 112b), yet in this case the Torah, '*shelal elyon*,' was still burned.

insult to injury, the perpetrators are forbidden even from marrying into the Jewish people,[10] yet here they consider themselves above the law that excludes them.

The Kinnah also portrays the inversion of Jewish law by using words that appear in the Talmud to mean something disturbingly different from what they mean in their Talmudic context. Regarding the Sabbath prohibition of burning, the Talmud states, "*hav'arah lehaleik yatz'ah*" (Shabbat 70a), which is a technical legal principle that the Sabbath prohibition of burning is separate from other Sabbath violations, such that each violation requires its own sin-offering.[11] This rather arcane ruling, only relevant to the sacrificial order when the Temple stood, is not relevant to the Kinnah; what is important is how the phrase is a piece of Oral Law, explaining a confusing verse in the Written Law. Maharam uses the same words in Line 31 of the Kinnah, in order to ask the Torah to wear sackcloth, on the occasion of the "burning that went out to divide [you]." The translation of the phrase is awkward, as Maharam is trying to preserve the uninterrupted wording of the Talmudic phrase at the expense of making the line easy to read. The sense of the line in the Kinnah is that the fire was destructive, dividing books or hearts. The words are part of the Oral Law, but in the Kinnah they cease to function as they are intended, serving now as a depiction of the burning and not as an explication of the Torah. Instead of explaining the Torah, the Talmud can now only explain our tragedy.

Rabbi Meir of Rottenberg turns to Mount Sinai and reflects on how the themes and ideas associated with the giving of the Torah have also become their own opposites. Though these lines do not directly address Jewish law, they highlight how, with the burning of the Talmud, things appear to exist as the exact opposite of their intended purpose. For example, Maharam asks in lines 11-12 why Sinai was chosen at the same time God rejected the greater mountains for the giving of the Torah (Sotah 5a). Normally this is connected to God's humility, and so Sinai is a symbol for the positive character trait of human humility. Yet, the burning of the Talmud suggests the Torah was given on a lowly mountain as a typology for the fact that one day the Torah, through the Talmud, would be lowered from its place of honor, during

[10] The Torah blocks four particular nations from entering into the Jewish community: Egypt, Edom, Moav, and Bnei-Amon. Christendom is often identified with Edom, so that may be why Maharam includes French Christians in the prohibition. According to technical Jewish law, only definite biological descendants of Edom are forbidden, and only for the first two generations after conversion. Therefore, Daniel Goldschmidt, *The Order of the Kinnot for the Ninth of Av* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1972), 136-137 believes this line "that you are disgusted from entering your congregation" refers to Lamentations 1:10 rather than to the rules about marrying Jews in Deuteronomy, but in that case it is not clear how this relates to Medieval Christians.

[11] As a result, an individual who violated Shabbat in 39 major ways would need to bring 39 sin offerings.
Maharam makes reference to this principle in his commentary to Yoma 40b s.v. "mah." Maharam is the author of the Tosafot printed on every page of Yoma, and in that way his own words of Torah teaching today have actually become ensconced as a part of the Talmud itself, in a way, though it would not yet have been true at the time of the Talmud's burning.

its burning, a symbol for a negative future. Similarly, Maharam wonders whether the Torah was given through a fire in the first place (Deuteronomy 5:19) in order to signal that one day the Torah would be burnt in a fire (line 10). The Torah was given in a consuming fire by a God compared to a devouring fire (Deuteronomy 4:24, Yoma 21b) as a sign of its glory, and now it is burned in human fire as a sign of its frailty, while the sinners have not been burned by the flaming coals of God's blaze (line 6).

Is the God of the Jews still Engaged in the World?

Even were one to reject the idea that Christianity had replaced Judaism, the very fact that the Talmud was burned would seem to challenge the idea that the God of the Jews retained any power over the affairs of the world. Maharam addresses this theological claim on two levels, addressing both whether God had departed from the world, and whether God has foreknowledge of future events.

Departed from the world

A major theological question of the Ninth of Av, explored in many of the Kinnot, is the feeling of the absence of God from the world in the time of destruction and the perceived defeat and forsakenness of the Jewish people.[12] Maharam addresses this point, adding how the downtrodden state of the Diaspora Jew is seen by our enemies as proof of the absence of the God of the Jews compared to the god of the Christians.

Maharam voices this seemingly heretical claim through allusion to a series of Biblical verses which speak of absence and departure. Three lines in the Kinnah, excerpted below, work off of three Biblical verses.

- Proverbs 7:19-20 is directly quoted in line 25 "[For the man is not in his home,] he took his money belt, and traveled along a faraway journey." This verse is connected to God by Sanhedrin 96b.

[12] This topic is discussed in the 9th stanza of the Kinnah of the 24 priestly families ("the captain of the ship has ascended above"), the 7th stanza of the Kinnah of the Temple vessels ("where is the Master of these things?"), the 5th stanza of the Kinnah of the first crusade ("and they shall say 'where is their God' "), and throughout the Kinnah about Titus's visit to the holiest of holies.

- Jeremiah 9:9, from the Haftarah of the 9th of Av, which speaks of the departure and absence of life from Israel (as explained by Yoma 54a), is referenced in line 24, "my mercy burns[13] for the departure of your husband," God (see Isaiah 54:5).

- Isaiah 49:21, as line 26 explains, "I am like an individual whose children have perished and who is lonely [without a spouse] from them, having been left alone, like a mast at the top of the mountain of your towers."[14]

For the Christians, the very fact that they could judge the Jew and destroy the Talmud is evidence of the rejection of Israel and of the fact that the God of the Jews is no longer present or active in the affairs of humanity. The God of the Jews was either powerless to act, absent, or indifferent to the suffering of the Jews. Maharam gives voice to that claim, and notes that he emotionally feels the inherent critique offered by the Christians. Though he still believes in God, and compares God's absence to a spouse who has departed and not to a spouse who has died or left permanently (see Rashi to Lamentations 1:1), he still feels lonely, as God's presence is no longer felt.

God's Omniscience

Another claim by the Christians in response to the Talmud burning is that the God of the Jews is not omniscient. A famous Midrash in Bereishit Rabba (27:4) also features the heretical claim that God lacks foreknowledge of the future. The midrash reads:

> An Epicurean once asked Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korkha, saying to him: do you not say that the Holy-One-Blessed-Is-He sees the future? He replied: We do. He asked, but does the verse not say that he was saddened to His heart [before the flood]? He replied [by asking the Epicurean] – have you ever had a son? He replied, yes. He then asked, and what did you do? He replied – I was happy and made others happy. [Rabbi Yehoshua]

[13] These two words are borrowed from Genesis 43:30. For a translation of this word see Yaakov Jaffe "Shavat Suru: The First Kinnah, Matter and Form" at thelehrhaus.com. In this context, it seems Maharam intends the word to mean providing heat, because he says his tears evaporate as they roll down his cheek because of the burning emotion he feels.

[14] The translation of "*galmud*" as bereft of a spouse is based on Malbim to Isaiah. The speaker thus feels lonely without their children, and without the spouse of the Jewish people, the God who has seemingly traveled away as depicted in the previous line.

The idea of a lonely mast on a mountain comes from Isaiah 30:17. It is hard to understand what a mast, normally part of a ship, would be doing sitting on top of a mountain, both in the verse and in the Kinnah.

The word 'migdal,' or tower, is not found in Isaiah, and is an addition of Maharam to match the needs of the meter and the rhyme. The word provides ghostly foreshadowing, as Maharam would decades later be held captive in the Christian prison tower of Ensisheim, himself a victim of Christian antisemitism. See Maharam's concluding note to his commentary to the 9th chapter of Ohalot.

> asked: but did you not also know that he would die?

In this Midrash, the heretic looks at God's pain at the destruction of humanity as evidence that God did not know the future; any eternal being that knows all of time at once would not experience a change in emotion at the failure of His creations. The Rabbinic reply is that each time calls for its own emotion, even if it might be temporary and might eventually be replaced by other emotions. This reply might not be philosophically sufficient – though a human being celebrates during happy times and is sad at sad times, knowing that each time is temporary, this is a harder idea to apply to God! Indeed, Maimonides (*Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:11-12) seems to have a different solution for the heretic's problem. Yet, for our purposes, it suffices to note this parable of the father and the celebration of his son captures one of the problems around God's omniscience.

Maharam paraphrases this Midrash in his Kinnah (lines 12-14): "a parable about a king who cried at his son's party, foreseeing that he would die…. Instead of a cloak, Sinai, wear a sack, the garb of a widow." Here, Maharam responds to the polemical claim of the lack of God's foreknowledge by indicating that God foresaw the burning of the Talmud already at Sinai. However, his viewpoint runs counter to the presentation of the aforementioned Midrash, as the sadness of the burning of the Talmud now clouds the occasion of the giving of the Torah. Instead of having joy at that time of joy, mourning is brought back to the moment of Sinai. Maharam knows the Christian claim and affirms that it is not true; God clearly foresaw the burning of the Talmud in the past. But the Talmud's burning impacts the earlier rejoicing of the giving of the Torah because God foresaw this tragedy even in that joyful moment of the past.

Role of non-Jews in the redemptive future

Maharam's Kinnah doesn't explicitly sketch a future vision for what the world will look like when this time of tragedy has passed. Such a sketch would be inappropriate given the genre of this lament; the 9th of Av is not a time for hopeful dreams of tomorrow, and the pain is too close to give voice to a better time. Yet, two allusions suggest a radical theological vision for what Maharam thought would follow this time of tragedy.

Grabbing at the coattails

Zecharya's vision of redemption, spanning his 7th and 8th chapter and focused on a future when the 9th of Av will no longer be a time of sadness, says that at the time of the redemptive future, all of the nations will grab the cloak of the Jew,[15] wishing to study Torah with him (8:23). Zecharya's vision echoes a vision found across Isaiah (see 2:1-4 et al.), that the Messianic future includes a time

[15] Maharam uses the word "*me'il*" here, to match the needs of the rhyme, the same word used above regarding the cloak of Sinai, though the verse in Zecharya reads "*kanaf*," a somewhat common word for clothing in the Bible.

when gentiles will study the Torah from Jews, although Zecharya adds that this vision will happen at a time when the fasts are no longer days of tragedy.

Maharam writes (line 24) that he wishes to shed tears for all those who grab the cloak of the Torah. Goldschmidt believes the line alludes to the moment when Saul grabbed Samuel's cloak (I Samuel 15:27),[16] but that story fails to connect to Torah study, the theme of the Kinnah. A better explanation would seem to be that, at a moment when the other nations reject the Torah, Maharam cries for the loss of the Torah both from the Jews as well as from those very nations who ought to be grabbing the coattails of the Jew to study Torah and Talmud. Thus, at a time when Christians sat triumphantly over the Jews and would arrest and persecute them, Maharam hints to a vision of the future which would reflect a radical shift, and cries for those righteous gentiles who would then wish to study Torah. Theologically, the relationship of the gentile and the Torah should be one of patient study, not burning rage.

Christians in the Hills of Ephraim

The last three lines of the Kinnah contain Maharam's hope for the consolation of Israel, although at first glance, they do not connect at all to the argument with the Christians that so pervades the rest of the Kinnah:

> Commensurate with the days of your affliction (Psalms 90:15) your Rock shall console you, and shall return the captivity (Jeremiah 30:3)[17] of the tribes of Jeshurun, and lift your lowliness. Again, you shall dress in ornamental garments of scarlet and take a tambourine, going in dance, rejoicing in your dances. My heart will rise at the time that your Rock shall be a light for you (Isaiah 60:19), illuminating your darkness and giving light to your cloud of darkness. (ln. 33-35)

This ending to the Kinnah comes full circle to the third line of the Kinnah, which had described the Jews of the time as sitting in darkness without light, hoping for the light of day to dawn upon them, an idea also repeated in line 29.

The ending alludes to the 31st chapter of Jeremiah, the Haftarah for the second day of Rosh Hashanah, the holiday in the Jewish calendar that immediately follows the 9th of Av. Jeremiah 31:3 reads, "Again, you shall be ornamented with your tambourine, and go out in the dance of those that play." Maharam uses all but one of the six Hebrew words in this clause in his penultimate line. Jeremiah often uses the word "*od*," "again" or "furthermore," to capture the reality that in the time of the redemption, the people will again do

[16] Goldschmidt, *The Order of the Kinnot for the Ninth of Av*, 136-137.

[17] For some discussion of the translation of this phrase see Mitchell First, "'Be-Shuv Hashem et Shivat Tziyon': A Widely Misunderstood Biblical Phrase" *Hakirah* 34 (2023), 309-317.

the things they had previously done before exile, and Maharam uses the word in the same way.[18]

Though most Kinnot conclude with a turn to the consolations of Isaiah, one could hardly object to the use of Jeremiah's prophecy of redemption. Yet, use of the vision of a return to dance and tambourine seems largely disconnected with the heavy polemical content around the burning of the Talmud. Also, it focuses the reader on a rather small piece of the redemption, and not on the wider themes of a rebuilt Jerusalem, peace, Jewish sovereignty, or the freedom to study Torah. Indeed, Maharam seems oddly captivated by this one vision, as line 27 notes that at his time of mourning he no longer ("*od*") listened to singers and tambourine players.[19] It is noteworthy that Maharam references the same prophecy of Jeremiah twice, once in mourning and once in hope for consolation.

What did Maharam have in mind? I would suggest that Maharam really intended to allude to a verse in Jeremiah that follows 31:3, but could not do so explicitly – either because of concern of antisemitic reprisals, because the theological implications would be so dramatic, or because the idea was not appropriate for the 9th of Av. Jeremiah 31:5 reads: "Because there is a day when the watchmen will call in the Mountains of Ephraim, 'Let us Rise up and go up to Zion, to Hashem our God.'" For centuries, Jews have noted that the word for watchman in the verse in Biblical Hebrew, "*notzerim*," is also the word used in Mishnaic Hebrew for the Christians.[20] In that case, the verse can be taken to refer to a future time when the Christians, not just the watchmen, will say that the time has come for them to go to Zion to visit Hashem, the God of the Jews.

The idea is tantalizing and fitting for his context, but Maharam couldn't give it explicit voice, and so he left an allusion in the text, hoping the reader would understand. The fitting conclusion to the events of the burning of the Talmud would be the moment when even the Christians would ascend

[18] See Jeremiah 31:3 (two times), 31:4, 32:15, 33:10, 33:12. The aforementioned prophecy of Zecharya similarly makes allusion to this array of Jeremiah's prophecies by using the word "*od*" in the same way (8:4, 8:20).

[19] Line 27 is challenging to translate for two reasons. Firstly, it speaks of the "*tof*" of your "*halil*," typically translated tambourine and flute, but the translation "tambourine of your flute" is nonsensical. Second, it notes that the chords of these instruments have been detached, but these instruments are not string instruments. Goldschmidt makes note of the problem, and just says the language should be read non-specifically.

[20] Sanhedrin 43a makes a similar point, although using a different Biblical verse; see Jaffe, "Psalm 50." Abrabanel to Jeremiah reads that the intended meaning of the verse was to refer to the Christians, although he lived after Maharam composed this Kinnah. Translation of the word also caused some confusion in the 1997 Diaspora Competition of the Chidon Ha-Tanach; see Mifkedey Katzin Chinuch Ve-Gadna Rashi, *Chidon Ha-Tanach Ha-Olami Le-Noar Yehudi Ha-Shloshim Ve-Arbaah* (Defus Ayalon, Jerusalem, 1997), 110, where the translation of *notzerim* in Jeremiah 31:5 had to be supplied, to avoid a mistranslation indicating Christians.

to Jerusalem to study Torah there. The idea was so close, though the moment seemed so far, and Maharam seized upon this vision to conclude his Kinnah.

Conclusion

On the 9th of Av, we typically focus on the emotions of the Kinnot – their powerful poetry and their gripping themes. But in the case of the Kinnah of the Maharam, the Kinnah also considers major philosophical principles of Judaism as well, investigating the role of the Oral Law, God's continued presence in the world, and the role the other nations play in the Messianic era. The reader might be too tired to appreciate all of the ideas on Tisha B'Av itself, but Maharam put the words into his lament, to be considered by future generations.

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