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MODEST, ETHICAL, SCHOLARLY, OR INVENTIVE PERSPECTIVES ON RUTH, A BIBLICAL HEROINE

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Few biblical heroines or heroes rise to the level of Ruth, a Moabite former princess[1] who forsook the conveniences and luxuries of her life as a gentile and elected to convert and join the Jewish people, ultimately becoming the ancestor of King David and the line of Davidic kings. Indeed, *Midrash Mishlei* (chapter 31) extolls the virtues of nineteen biblical heroines before concluding about Ruth that "you have reached higher than all of them,"[2] cementing her status as one of the major role models for the Jewish people for all of time.

The stories we tell about our heroines and role models reveal as much about ourselves and our own values as they do about the actual biblical figures. We expect that our heroes will conform to our ideas of proper Jewish living, and so we interpret the biblical verses to match our expectations of how a Jew should act. This essay will look at one short story about Ruth found in the book that bears her name,[3] and it will consider how different interpretations of the story reveal different ideas of Jewish heroism and the most important characteristics for one to be considered a laudatory Jewish person.

The Biblical Verses

After Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem of the South at the start of the barley harvest, Ruth begins

[1] The text of Ruth never connects her lineage with Moabite royalty, but the Talmud does consider her a Moabite princess who descended from Eglon. See *Nazir* 23b, *Sotah* 47a, *Sanhedrin* 105b, *Horayot* 10b, *Ruth Rabbah* to 1:4 [2:9].

[2] This *midrash* is based on the observation that both Ruth and the woman of Proverbs 31 are called an "*eishet hayil*," a description applied to no other woman in Tanakh.

[3] Who is the main character of the book? The book begins with Naomi (1:2) and ends with Naomi (4:14-17); her name appears a significant 21 times in the short book (Ruth's name appears only twelve times). Naomi also undergoes a typical heroic arc from fortune, to disaster (1:19-22), to a renewed future (4:17), and so she is a better candidate to be considered the main character than Ruth is. Indeed, many of Ruth's actions in the book are directed by Naomi, who mentors her and drives most of the action (see 2:22-3:1, 3:18, 4:3, etc.). Finally, *Sanhedrin* 19b seems to suggest (based on 4:17) that Ruth died in childbirth before seeing her child grow up, further supporting the idea that Naomi is the central character (although the end of *Ruth Rabbah* 2:2 disagrees). *Lekah Tov* famously argues that the purpose of the book's writing was to provide for David's lineage. In that case, no specific character matters as much as the general narrative of knowing how David's great-grandparents came together.

to gather grain among the harvesters and finds herself in the field of Boaz. A seemingly wealthy landowner, Boaz could easily have failed to notice a poor gatherer taking leftover grain in between his workers; even if he noticed Ruth, we imagine he would have quickly registered the fact and then moved on, without giving it more than a moment's thought. Surprisingly, Boaz notices Ruth, and his interest is so piqued that he asks his assistant about her identity, asking: "To whom is this young woman [attached]?" (Ruth 2:5). The assistant replies that Ruth had returned with Naomi, and she was thus connected to Boaz's distant relative (Ruth 2:1).

The text fails to explain, however, what about Ruth stood out so much that Boaz was motivated to ask about her. Was it her gender at a time that most of the field workers were male? Her foreign clothing (*Ibn Ezra* 2:5)? Was it her beauty or appearance? The text fails to say, and this inspired Jewish commentaries across generations to supply the missing detail of what indeed gripped Boaz's attention. This lacuna in the text becomes the entry point to describe the virtues of Ruth and explain why she leads the way as one of the Bible's chief heroines.

Modesty

The Talmud is bothered by the aforementioned verses, explicitly asking, "Was Boaz accustomed to ask about a young woman?" (*Shabbat* 113b). To address the question, the Talmud gives two explanations as to what unique thing Boaz saw in Ruth. A *baraita* teaches that Boaz saw that Ruth comported herself in a modest fashion, standing while gathering the standing grain and sitting while gathering the grain that had fallen to the floor. Most of those working in the field—even if they dressed modestly—did not gather the grain in the most modest way possible, but Ruth stood out on account of her modesty. This view is also taken by *Ruth Rabbah* (4:6 [to 2:5]), which expands further how her modest conduct stood out when compared to the other gatherers: how she dressed modestly, and how she talked with the other workers.

Modest action is a general value of Judaism: *Makkot* 24a lists modesty in the short list of most essential principles of our faith, and *Yevamot* 79a says that bashfulness is a definitional aspect of being a Jewish person. Modest conduct of many biblical heroes and heroines is highlighted and amplified by the text of Tanakh itself, or the Midrash.[4] Ruth is a model for our conduct as Jews today because she, too, behaved in a noticeably modest way, one that other individuals in the field failed to achieve.[5]

Legal Scholarship

The aforementioned Talmudic section (*Shabbat* 113b) gives an alternative view of what Boaz noticed, although the position is somewhat cryptic: "Rabbi Elazar said: [Boaz] saw wisdom within her—she gathered two, but she did not gather three." This view indicates an alternative view of

[4] For example, see also Sarah (*Bava Metzia* 87a, Rashi to Genesis 12:11), Tamar (*Megillah* 10b), or Saul (Samuel I 10:22).

[5] There is a certain irony that it was Ruth's very modesty that caused her to be noticed. At the very least, she was noticed for her fine character and not for her appearance.

Ruth's heroism, beyond modesty, and later commentaries debate about what exactly Rabbi Elazar had in mind.

Rashi interprets the Talmud as saying that Ruth had an unusual depth of Jewish legal scholarship, and Boaz noticed her knowledge and erudition. Ruth knew that the law only permitted her to gather two stalks that had been dropped by the harvesters and now lay together, not three. Torah law requires a landowner to leave over fallen stalks for the poor (Leviticus 23:22), but the Torah does not specify at what point the fallen stalks become so numerous that the land owner can collect them and need not leave them. The Mishnah (*Peah* 6:5) rules that the Torah ordinance only applies to two fallen stalks; three fallen stalks go to the field owner.[6] Most of the other poor gatherers were not learned, though, and so they would often gather beyond what they were legally entitled to (*Alshikh* 2:5). Ruth understood the law, however, and Boaz noticed the breadth of her knowledge.

Behind this Talmudic explanation is a belief that the role models and heroes of Judaism should possess significant, noteworthy Torah scholarship. Many other *midrashim* also serve a similar purpose, establishing the Torah scholarship of our biblical figures in general. The Talmud in tractate *Sanhedrin* alone gives three examples: Joshua is noted as having learned Torah in depth even while at war (44b), David is introduced as always being successful in halakhic arguments (93b), and Hezekiah is said to have ensured that every Jew in Israel mastered even the most arcane laws of Judaism (94b, see also 26a). The heroes of our Tanakh should also reflect the centrality of Torah in the life of a Jew and not just excel in war, politics, business, or modest conduct.

Other texts also extoll Ruth for her knowledge of matters of Judaism. In describing the procedure leading to her conversion, the Talmud (*Yevamot* 47b) and Midrash (*Ruth Rabbah* to 1:16-17 [2:22-25]) list a wide variety of areas of law that Ruth was acquainted with as part of her embrace of Judaism: affixing a *mezuzah*, rejecting gentile culture, the maximum distance one can walk on Shabbat, the different graveyards for the different capital punishments—indeed, all 613 commandments of Judaism. Ruth studied and learned well, and it was this aspect of her persona that stood out to Boaz.

This interpretation of the story highlights the importance of Torah knowledge, scholarship, and mastery for all Jews, including Jewish women. This reading of the Talmud credits Ruth with tremendous learning, and it hopefully inspires Jewish women to this day to study the entirety of Jewish law and tradition, even such arcane or

[6] The reason for this law is unclear. Rashi on *Sanhedrin* (88a) seems to understand *leket*, generally, as being grounded in the reality that the average owner does not go back for small forgotten stalks; individuals would go back for three stalks, not two. Rabad to *Torat Kohanim* (*Kedoshim* 3:2) explains that three stalks have the status of "harvest" and therefore cannot receive the status of "forgotten from the harvest." See also Rashash to *Sanhedrin* 88a and the penultimate note to this essay.

esoteric laws as the laws of harvest gleanings.

Legal Inventiveness and a Good Business Sense

A famous interpretation of this Talmudic passage disagrees with Rashi and gives a significantly different reading of the rule of two and three stalks. In this view, Ruth is singled out for a good instinct for business and for legal inventiveness, values which receive less prominence in traditional Jewish texts but which do find some discussion.[7] It is unclear whether this interpretation emerges from an alternative close reading of the Talmudic text, a reluctance to focus Jewish heroism on legal scholarship generally (as a Hasid might be uncomfortable with a story of a hero of Brisker Judaism), or a reluctance to center the value of Torah learning on memory and recall of a law instead of on insight and inventiveness.[8]

What was Ruth's novel Torah conclusion? The Torah repeatedly places a variety of poor individuals (poor, foreigner, landless Levite, orphan, and widow) in the same category, and the simple sense one gets from the Torah, the Talmud, and the later decisors is that the laws of gleanings apply equally to all poor people.[9] Yet, the first Gerrer Rebbe, writing in the nineteenth century, argues that Ruth had a different understanding of these verses. She showed brave legal inventiveness to develop a new exception or category within the laws of gathering, enabling her to transcend the earlier legal limitations. In his work *Hiddushei Ha-Rim*, the Gerrer Rebbe argues that indeed, most poor people are only permitted to gather two fallen stalks, but Ruth was different. Since she was poor, a widow,[10] and also a convert,[11] she—and only she—was permitted to take even three fallen stalks. Thus, the Gerrer Rebbe explains the Talmud as follows: when

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[7] One example of Jewish sages taking pride in their legal inventiveness is *Shabbat* 116b, where Rabban Gamliel and his sister Imma Shalom give two sophisticated arguments on either side of a specific question to reveal the hypocrisy of a Christian philosopher/judge. There are fewer stories of this sort in the Talmud and Midrash, although there are some.

[8] See *Berakhot* 64, where it is debated whether a "*Sinai*" or an "*oker harim*" is preferred.

[9] Thus, though Leviticus 23:22 refers to the poor person and the foreigner or "*ger*," and Deuteronomy 24:19-21 refers to the orphan, widow, and foreigner/*ger*, the laws apply to all poor people equally, whatever their designation.

[10] Were Ruth an orphan, the argument would be stronger. In that case, she would be a member of a fourth group-set entitled to these agricultural gifts (see Deuteronomy 24:19-21).
Was Ruth also an orphan? As mentioned in the first note, some say her father was Eglon, King of Moab, and in that case she was probably an orphan, since Eglon was killed by the judge Ehud. One view in *Ruth Rabbah* 1:1 says the Ruth story took place during the eighty-year time period of Ehud, supporting the view that the story of Ruth took place shortly after (or slightly before) her father died. This is also the view taken by *Seder Olam* (chapter 12). In contrast, Tosafot (to *Nazir* 23b and *Yevamot* 48b) say she must have lived many generations after her distant ancestor Eglon, given that Eglon was killed by the second of the judges, Ehud, while Ruth lived at the time of the later judges, centuries later.
The debate about the relationship between Eglon and Ruth is the direct result of the problem of the limited number of individuals who live between Nahshon and Jesse, his great-grandson. Nahson did not enter the land of Israel (Ruth 4:20; his death is described in *Seder Olam* Ibid [and see Vilna Gaon loc. cit.]), but Jesse, his great-grandson, lived more than 400 years later (see Kings I 6:1, Ramban on Genesis 46:15). The midrashic solution is to argue that one or all of the generations of Boaz, Oved, and Jesse had unusually long lifespans; see *Bereishit Rabbah* 96:4 (note the different versions cited by Radal and Rashi 47:29, however).

[11] The *ger* is a foreigner who is not a member of the Jewish people through heredity and who has not inherited land and

Ruth first passed through the field, she worked quickly to take pairs of stalks which any poor person could take, leaving the groups of three; two stalks were competitive, and she focused her attention on those first. Afterward, Ruth made a second pass through the field and took the groups of three for which she had no competition, as only she was entitled to them, thereby remarkably increasing her daily take.

The interpretation is remarkable, as Ruth's *hiddush*—despite being lauded in the Talmud according to this view—finds no expression in any of the halakhic sources,[12] and it is explicitly raised and rejected by sixteenth-century Shmuel Eidels (Maharsha to *Shabbat*). Conceptually, it is also hard to understand why being part of multiple disadvantaged *categories* would have a greater impact on what an individual was able to take than the sheer *level of need*.[13] The Gerrer Rebbe's suggestion is also built on the argument given in the Talmud Yerushalmi that the very basis of the rule of two and three stalks comes from the words "to the *ger*, orphan, and widow." But many other commentators deny the Yerushalmi's source for the difference between two and three stalks more generally; it is hard to understand why those three words would impact the number of stalks one can collect.[14]

Whatever the issues with derivation, this view understands Ruth's heroism in her legal ingenuity and her ability to use the law to create a favorable economic outcome, more than in her knowledge of conventional Jewish law or in her modesty.

Ethics

A fourth view says that Ruth's decision to take two and not three stalks was not a business decision but an ethical one. Tevu'ot Shor (Rabbi Alexander Shor, also author of the *Simlah Hadashah*, 1673-1737) in his Talmudic commentary to *Shabbat* (known as the *Bekhor Shor*) explains that Ruth surmised that Boaz allowed the poor to collect three fallen stalks—though this was not legally required—based on logic similar to the Talmudic recommendation in *Bava Kama* 69a. The Talmud recommends that field owners should renounce their rights to stalks that are rightfully theirs that the

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so finds himself or herself destitute. The word "*ger*" can mean "convert" or "foreigner" more generally (Rashi Exodus 22:20), but in Ruth's case it is a moot question, as Ruth was a member of both categories.

[12] It does not appear in the Talmud and is never mentioned in Rambam (see *Hilkhot Matanot Aniyim* 4:1, 4:15, 5:14-16, and 5:22) or Rashi (Leviticus 19:9) or *Shulhan Arukh*.

[13] Rashi (*Sanhedrin* 88a) explains that the basis of this rule is from the perspective of the field owner and not from the perspective of the poor people at all. The owner typically releases ownership from two fallen stalks, one imagines the effort to retrieve these stalks is not worth the small benefit, and consequently the Torah formalizes this typical sentiment through the laws of these gifts to the poor. Since the typical owner releases ownership of two and not three, the Torah follows suit in that vein. To this view, the nature of the poor person would be irrelevant to the rule.
Rashash disagrees and says the typical owner never releases even two fallen stalks, arguing that it is instead an explicit removal of ownership rights that the Torah applied onto two stalks and not three. To this view as well, the Torah releases certain stalks from the possession of their original owner; it does not give a license localized in the specific poor person to take specific grain.

[14] Rashbam *Bava Batra* 72b; see also sources in previous note.

poor might overcollect, to prevent the poor from violating theft. Yet, Ruth was concerned that perhaps he gave the permission to do so only later in the day—or perhaps never gave so at all—and therefore, she forwent that option and instead only took two stalks in a group.

This fourth view is the exact opposite of the third one. For *Hiddushei Ha-Rim*, greater halakhic knowledge creates new business opportunities and new ways to outflank one's competitors financially. For Tevu'ot Shor, greater halakhic knowledge creates a new recognition that the field owner was acting beyond the call of duty, creating a new drive to take less and allow the field owner to do what was required but not more. In one view, more knowledge begets more assets (to borrow the language of *Avot* 2:7). But in the other, more Torah begets more worry and causes the poor person to renounce some grain that really might have been theirs.

What makes a Jewish Hero?

This topic may seem like a Rorschach test for the reader more than an analysis of the actual text of the book of Ruth. The text doesn't even give the faintest clue as to what Boaz noticed about Ruth, or why the two of them were drawn to each other and eventually married. As we read Ruth, however, the text begs us to consider what about Ruth makes her one of our religion's greatest heroes and thereby to ask ourselves what makes the greatest Jewish woman or Jewish man. Modesty, ethical behavior, business acumen, and Torah scholarship have all been proposed as possibilities. It now behooves us to read the *megillah* with an answer in mind about what she was and what we ought to be.

When Kaddish Becomes Currency: Mapping Out the Mechanics of Merit

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Scenario: A friend of yours is in their year of mourning for their mother.[1] They realize that they are going to be in transit and miss *minyan*. As a contingency plan, they ask if you would be willing to recite *Kaddish* on their mother's behalf. Can your *Kaddish* count for someone else's parent? Moreover, if you are already reciting *Kaddish* for your own parent, would it be inappropriate or perhaps even ineffective to recite *Kaddish* for more than one person?

These questions are compounded by a practice that has become commonplace in many synagogues which maintain a running list of those who are deceased and sadly do not leave behind a relative to recite *Kaddish* on their behalf. The expectation is that either the rabbi or a member of the congregation will step up to recite *Kaddish* for this

[1] Translations are adapted generally from Sefaria, Soncino, and my own. I would like to thank Yosef Lindell for his expertise in editing this piece. Furthermore, I like to acknowledge the members of Congregation Agudath Sholom who offered feedback during my various oral presentations on this topic.

list of individuals. Similarly, there are now organizations that will accept funds in order to arrange for a third party to recite *Kaddish* and study Torah on behalf of one's dearly departed.

The laws of mourning, and *Kaddish* in particular, serve as an intriguing case study for how halakhic scholarship is sometimes forced to consciously or unwittingly espouse certain theological assumptions when addressing concrete matters of ritual practice.[2]

In this essay we will explore the ability of children versus non-children to confer merit and the complication of reciting *Kaddish* for multiple beneficiaries. However, before we can adequately address these scenarios, it behooves us to briefly review some background sources about the origins and power of *Kaddish*. The Talmud (*Shabbat* 119b) relates:

> R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: He who responds, "Amen, May His great Name be blessed," with all his might, **his decreed sentence is torn up**, as it is said, "when punishments are annulled in Israel, when the people offer themselves, bless the Lord."
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> Why 'when punishments are annulled'? Because they blessed the Lord. R. Hiyya bar Abba said in R. Yohanan's name: Even if he has a taint of idolatry, **he is forgiven**: it is written here, "when retribution was annulled [*bifroa' pera'oth*]"; whilst elsewhere it is written, "and Moses saw that the people were broken loose [*parua'*]; for Aaron had let them loose." Resh Lakish said: He who responds "Amen" with all his might, **has the gates of Paradise opened for him**, as it is written, "open the gates, that the righteous nation which keeps truth [*shomer emunim*] may enter in": read not "s*homer emunim*" but "*she'omrim amen*" [that say, amen]. What does "amen" mean? — Said R. Hanina: God, faithful King.

Evidently, the Sages believed that *Kaddish* possesses profound spiritual benefits for one who capitalizes on the opportunity. One of the earliest sources identified that connects *Kaddish* to the context of bereavement can be traced back to approximately the eighth century *Tractate Sofrim* (19:9), which explains that mourners go to the synagogue to be comforted as follows:

> After the reader finishes the *mussaf*, everyone goes behind the doors of the Synagogue, which are in front of the Synagogue, and there meets the

[2] For instance, the standard of granting priority for leading services to a man in mourning for his parent over other mourners may very well be assuming a unique metaphysical status of a child vis-a-vis their parent. See Rema (*Yoreh Deah* 376:4).

mourners and all their relatives. The benediction is said followed by ***Kaddish***.

A more explicit account of the connection between *Kaddish* and mourning originates in the legend of Rabbi Akiva and the son of a flagrant sinner, a story that first appears in medieval times in works such as *Kallah Rabbati* (2:9) and *Or Zaruah* (*Hikhot Shabbat*, no. 50):

> Rabbi Akiva once saw (what he thought was) a man struggling with a heavy burden on his shoulders and bemoaning his lot in (what Rabbi Akiva thought was) life. Concerned that this might be an overworked slave deserving to be freed, Rabbi Akiva asked the man what his story was. The oppressed laborer replied that he was the soul of a person who committed every conceivable sin and that if he stopped to talk, he'd get in even more trouble. The punishment of this particular sinner was to gather wood, which was used to burn him every day. Rabbi Akiva asked if there was any way to free this soul and the deceased replied that the only way was if he had a son who would stand in front of the congregation and say "*Barkhu et Hashem ha-Mevorah*" or "*Yitgadal ve-Yitkadash*…," after which the congregation would reply, "*Barukh Hashem hamevorah le-olam va-ed*" or "*Yehei shmei rabbah*…," respectively. (These are the prayers of *Barkhu* and *Kaddish*, in which the leader of the service calls upon the congregation to praise God, which they then do.) Finally, Rabbi Akiva asked the man who had survived him; the spirit replied that his wife had been pregnant when he died. Rabbi Akiva recorded the name of the deceased, the man's wife, and his hometown so that he might investigate the matter. Hurrying to the man's city, Rabbi Akiva discovered that the deceased was particularly reviled by the townspeople. He had been a corrupt tax collector who took bribes from the rich and oppressed the poor. Among his more notorious deeds, the man had violated a betrothed girl on Yom Kippur! Rabbi Akiva located the widow, who had given birth to a son. So despised was her husband that no one had even circumcised the child. Rabbi Akiva took care of this grievous omission and, when the child was old enough, he taught him Torah and how to daven in shul, including the prayers the man had specified. As soon as the boy recited the appropriate prayers, his father's soul was relieved of its harsh punishments.

> The man's spirit re-appeared to Rabbi Akiva in a dream to thank the scholar for saving him from the tortures of *Gehinnom*.[3]

Both the *Beit Yosef* (*Yoreh Deah* 376, s.v. *Nishal*) and Rema[4] (*Yoreh Deah* 376:4) cite this story from earlier sources and codify it as halakhic precedent for a child[5] to recite *Kaddish* upon the loss of their father or mother. The question this raises, however, is whether the child's role in reciting *Kaddish* is merely preferable or indispensable. For instance, if, God forbid, a parent recited *Kaddish* for their child, would it have the same spiritual standing as when a child recites *Kaddish* for their parent? The answer to this question is not obvious and is subject to what appear to be two diametrically opposed passages in the Talmud. In *Sanhedrin* (104a) the Gemara sorts which Jewish kings qualified to enter the World to Come:

> And why was Amon [a wicked king] not included [in the list of those excluded from the World to Come]? Because of [his son] Josiah's honor. Then Manasseh [Hezekiah's son] too should not be included, because of Hezekiah's honor? — **A son confers privileges on his father, but a father confers no privilege on a son** (*Bara mezakeh aba; aba lo mezakeh bara*).

The Gemara is clear: Only the son has power to confer merit (*zekhut*) to his father, while the reverse is ineffective: *Bara mezakeh aba; aba lo mezakeh bara*. It goes without saying that any other individual would certainly be incapable of providing merit. Returning to our scenario, based on this passage alone, it would be doubtful that one could ask a third party to recite *Kaddish* in order to confer merit upon a parent.

However, this conclusion is seemingly contradicted by the a talmudic passage in *Sotah* (10b) in which King David ostensibly prays for his son Avshalom to be lifted out of Hell and given a lot in the World to Come:

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[3] There are several versions of this legend in which details such as the identity of the rabbi and the particular sin committed by the suffering man vary, but the essence remains the same. The passage above is translated by Rabbi Jack Abramowitz for the Orthodox Union based on *Kallah Rabbati* (2:9) and *Or Zaruah* (*Hilkhot Shabbat*, no. 50). See *Mahzor Vitry* (no. 144) and cf. *Tana De-Vei Eliyahu Zuta* (no. 17) who presents Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai as the protagonist, instead of Rabbi Akiva.

[4] The Rema, in his responsa (no. 118) writes that even a maternal grandchild would be worthy of reciting *Kaddish* since he is obligated to honor his grandparents. Cf. Rema in *Yoreh Deah* (240:24) where he codifies an obligation to honor one's grandfather but also cites the position of Maharik (no. 44) who believes that no such responsibility exists.

[5] Subsequent halakhic codes extrapolate that a son possesses the power to recite *Kaddish* for his mother even though the legend of Rabbi Akiva only contains a father figure. If gender is not exclusive vis-a-vis the parents it would stand to reason that the gender of the child in this story should not serve as a basis to preclude a daughter from performing the same role. See *Havot Yair* (no. 222) cited in *Pithei Teshuvah* (*Yoreh Deah* 376:3) and R. Hershel Schachter in *Be-Ikvei Ha-Tzon* (Essay no. 5, fn. 5). However, see also sources cited within *Sedei Hemed* (*Aveilut*, no. 160).

> And the king was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said: O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died for you, O Absalom, my son, my son. And the king covered his face, and the king cried with a loud voice, O my son Absalom, O Absalom my son, my son. Why is "my son" repeated eight times? **Seven to raise him from the seven divisions of *Gehinnom***; and…**to bring him into the World to Come**.

Thus, in contrast to the prior passage, we have a Talmudic teaching which conveys that a father has the power to provide metaphysical aid to his son.

In order to resolve this apparent contradiction, commentaries and later authorities are forced to reinterpret the meaning of one of the two passages. Broadly speaking, there are what we might term the maximalist and minimalist camps: The former seeks to maximize the ability of non-children to produce merit for others, thus enshrining the David-Avshalom passage as the paradigm. The minimalist group, on the other hand, endeavors to minimize the ability of a non-child to confer merit by reciting *Kaddish*, thus emphasizing the line in *Sanhedrin*, that only a child confers merit upon his father but a father does not confer merit upon his son.[6]

(A) **Maximalist Approach #1**: R. Yaakov Reischer (*Responsa Shevut Yaakov* 2:93), based on *Tosafot* (*Sotah* 10b), suggests that the Gemara in *Sanhedrin* is dealing with exceptionally evil individuals - wicked kings who led the Jewish people astray from the ways of God. Therefore, the only recourse available to them was exclusively through the merit of their own offspring. However, the typical person can certainly benefit from the good deeds performed by additional family members and beyond. *Shevut Yaakov* infers this from the Gemara in *Shavuot* (39a), which states that in certain instances recompense for a sin can be exacted from one's family. It therefore follows that certainly the opposite is true and one can serve as a source of merit for their entire family.

(B) **Maximalist Approach #2**: R. Yehiel Mikhel Tukatzinsky (*Gesher Ha-Hayyim* 2:23) also espouses the belief that one can dedicate merit for someone other than their parents. R. Tukatzinsky

[6] We should also note the approach of Rashba (*Responsum* 5:49) which does not neatly fall into either camp. Rashba suggests that indeed there is a foundational concept of *zekhut avot*, the merit of our forefathers. However, he qualifies that such a merit will only aid one in this world, whereas only a child can confer merit that will be enjoyed in the world to come. If anyone could confer merit, it would diminish the significance of the Talmud's exhortation in *Avodah Zarah* (3a): "One who takes pains on Shabbat eve will eat on Shabbat, but one who did not take pains on Shabbat eve, from where will he eat on Shabbat?" In general, one needs to take responsibility for their own actions and cannot rely on others to help them earn their place in the World to Come.

In a similar sense, R. Moshe Shternbuch (*Ta'am Ve-Da'at*, Vol. 2, p. 122) critiques Bilaam for saying, "Let me die the death of the righteous" (Num. 23:10), which he interprets to mean that Bilaam did not desire to live an ethical life but was content with others doing righteous acts on his behalf after death.

bases his approach on the final suggestion of *Tosafot* in *Sotah*:

> That which it states [in *Sanhedrin*] that "a father cannot confer merit upon his son" only means to say the consideration of the father's **honor** is not sufficient to withhold him [i.e. the son] from being counted among the wicked without the use of **prayer**. But prayer is efficacious just like David prayed for Avshalom.

R. Tukatzinsky understands *Tosafot* (ibid.) to be distinguishing between what we may term **passive** versus **active** generation of merit. Any person may consciously dedicate a *mitzvah* for the benefit of another, with prayer merely serving as but one example. Whereas, the unique quality of a child is that by simply leading a Torah observant life, they serve as a testament to not only the parents' *mitzvah* of bringing them into the world, but also the effort they put into raising them right. Every *mitzvah* the child performs is thus viewed as an automatic byproduct of the parents' dedication to their child.

(C) **Minimalist Approach #1:** *Responsa Binyamin Zev* (no. 202) reads the aforementioned passage in *Tosafot* differently than R. Tukatzinsky. Instead of portraying prayer as simply one possibility for actively conferring merit, he argues that prayer is essentially the sole method for aiding a non-parent. In other words, only a son can confer merit upon his father via means other than prayer. However, prayer is unique in the sense that any person may utilize it to metaphysically aid another, just like King David successfully prayed for the welfare of his son Avshalom in the netherworld.

We should add that R. Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uziel (*Mishpatei Uziel Orah Hayyim* 1:2), based on *Beit Lehem Yehudah* (*Yoreh Deah* 376), argues that *Kaddish* is actually **not** a form of prayer, but rather a means of conferring merit. If we accept this characterization, it would follow that *Kaddish* could only be efficacious when recited by the child, no different than any other *mitzvah*.

(D) **Minimalist Approach #2:** *Responsa Binyamin Zev* (ad loc.) offers an additional reconciliation of the two Talmudic passages in which, again, he attempts to mitigate the significance of the David-Avshalom narrative. Again, he posits that the principle of *aba lo mezakeh bara* in *Sanhedrin* is the default point of departure. Unlike *Tosafot's* reading of the Gemara, he portrays David's deed as not that of prayer, but of **forgiveness**. King David did not metaphysically intercede on his son's behalf, but rather, once he forgave his transgression, the spiritual consequences in the next world naturally dissipated. Thus, King David cannot serve as a model for a father conferring metaphysical benefits upon his child—as this was an instance of granting forgiveness of transgression instead of conferring merit.

Responsa Binyamin Zev supports his contention from the aforementioned legend of Rabbi Akiva. If anyone can confer merit upon anyone they wish, then why did Rabbi Akiva go to such lengths to

track down the son of the suffering man and train him to recite *Kaddish* and *Barekhu* when he could have found another relative—or just recited *Kaddish* himself like many rabbis do today! From this account, one can infer that there is at least some unique, if not exclusive, power that the child possesses. Indeed, that is why it is specifically the child who is instructed to proclaim "*hareini kaparat mishkavo,"* (may I be an atonement for his resting soul),[7] when invoking his father's name, as the power to atone may be exclusive to the child.[8]

Shlihut: Appointing an Agent to Recite *Kaddish* in One's Stead

According to proponents of the minimalist perspective, is there any way that another party can confer merit through *Kaddish* in lieu of the child? *Magen Avraham* (132:2) rules that if a child cannot recite *Kaddish* they should not simply designate another party, but should pay them for their service as well. While *Mahatzit Ha-Shekel* (ad loc.) comments that the purpose of the payment is to guarantee that the appointee will take his role seriously,[9] there is perhaps something more profound taking place here.

R. Moshe Shternbuch (*Teshuvot Ve-Hanhagot* 3:57) understands that the goal of paying the appointee to recite *Kaddish* is to effectuate a super form of *sheluho shel adam ke-moto,* or power of attorney. Generally, the Talmud[10] rules *mitzvah bo yoter me-beshluho*, that it is better to perform a *mitzvah* directly rather than appoint an agent. However, *Shakh* (*Hoshen Mishpat* 105) qualifies that when one pays their agent, Halakhah would view *sheluho shel adam ke-moto* as *ke-gufo mamash* – as if the appointer is physically the one performing the deed.[11] Thus, R. Shternbuch suggests

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[7] The passage in *Kiddushin* (31b) reads as follows: "How [does he honor him] in his death? [If] he says a matter he heard from his [father's] mouth, he should not say: So said Father. Rather, [he should say:] So said father, my teacher, may I be an atonement for his resting [soul]. And this applies within twelve months [of his death]. From this [time] onward he says: May his memory be for a blessing, for the life of the World-to-Come." Some suggest that this requirement only applies when citing a Torah teaching from one's father, as the purpose of this declaration is to create merit for his benefit. (See *Arukh ha-Shulkhan Yoreh Deah* 240:15). As mentioned earlier, the same principles are extrapolated to mothers as well (see Rema *Yoreh Deah* 240:9 and *Ben Ish Hai*, *Halakhot*, Second Year, *Shoftim*, Ch.14).

[8] *Responsa Zera Emet* (*Yoreh Deah* 148 on *Hilkhot Aveilut*, *Siman* 376) suggests that a child is superior due to his metaphysical bond to his parent, and furthermore he is charged with the *mitzvah* of honoring his parents. *Badei Ha-Shulhan* (*Yoreh Deah* 376:66) also mentions that it bodes well for the parents when their child performs a *mitzvah* since they brought him into the world (similar to what *Gesher Ha-Hayyim* and others suggested). R. Moshe Shternbuch (*Teshuvot Ve-Hanhagot* 3:57) also suggests that reciting *Kaddish* operates as a form of *tziduk ha-din*. Meaning that there is a sanctification of God's name that despite the loss that the child is experiencing, he proclaims the Name of God nonetheless. If that is the case, it is at least understandable why there would be no benefit for a stranger to recite *Kaddish* on the child's behalf.

[9] See also *Kaf Ha-Hayyim* (55:30) and *Badei Ha-Shulhan* (376:4).

[10] See *Shabbat* (119a) and *Kiddushin* (41a).

[11] This discussion is relevant for many areas of Halakhah e.g. a potential impetus for paying someone to light Menorah when you are lodging at their residence (see *Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim* 677:1 and the elaboration of *Harerei Kedem* 1:195). However, see also *Agur Be-Ohalekha* (8:10, fn. 22) who marshals *Dovev Meisharim* (1:47) and other sources against this premise in the context of hiring another party to install one's *mezuzot*.

that even if there are unique powers exclusive to the child, if he hires another party it would be considered as if he is actually the one reciting the words of *Kaddish*.

While this is a creative framework, it would seem that it either did not occur or was deemed not worthy of serious consideration by proponents of the minimalist camp. R. Ben Tzion Uziel (*Responsa Mishpatei Uziel Orah Hayyim* 1:2) severely circumscribes the benefit of appointing another party to recite *Kaddish* in one's stead. R. Uziel posits that there are two benefits to reciting *Kaddish*: (1) Providing **merit** for one's parent, and (2) fulfilling the *mitzvah* of **honoring** one's parent. According to R. Uziel, when the child appoints another party, he is only accomplishing the mitzvah of honoring his parent, while the ability to provide actual metaphysical benefit could only come from reciting *Kaddish* himself.

Moreover, R. Maurice Lamm (*The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, pp. 163-164)[12] offers strong words of rebuke for a child who would consider outsourcing their responsibility:

> Relatives or friends cannot relieve the son of his obligation—whether or not an uncle happens to attend services regularly, or perhaps a brother was closer to the deceased than the son. It is the son who must recite the *Kaddish*, even though it will be irregularly, or even unconscientiously, performed. There is no doubt that the daily recitation of the *Kaddish* may become burdensome, but it is a burden that must be borne and, like other vital burdens in life, cannot be delegated.
>
> No person may be hired to say *Kaddish* in the place of a living son, whether the designated person is very pious or moral or scholarly, or a rabbi or a cantor or sexton, whether or not he is a better person than the son. The *Kaddish* is not a magical incantation, some exalted abracadabra that opens the gates of Heaven and that needs saying, no matter by whom.
>
> The son's paying for the *Kaddish*, rather than praying it, defeats every conceivable purpose of the sacred prayer. No value can be achieved by transferring this personal religious responsibility to a paid emissary. There is no possibility for a "merit of the children;" no respect given to the deceased; no psychological healing; and no sanctification of the name of God. **There is, in sum, nothing religious about the whole matter. It**

[12] My thanks to R. Aviad Bodner for bringing this passage to my attention.

> **is another unfortunate consequence of the prevalent utilitarian idea that everything in this world can be bought.** "Merit of the children" must be deserved; it cannot be bought. A bought *Kaddish* will only reflect adversely on the parent whose child has no time or patience for the reverence he should give.

Thus, there are several important factors a child should consider before out-sourcing their *Kaddish* if it remains at all possible to recite it themselves.

Reciting *Kaddish* for Multiple People?

To compound an already complicated issue, how might the equation change if one is reciting *Kaddish* not just for someone else's parent, but someone else's parent **in addition** to their own parent? While this is, of course, a non-starter for the minimalist camp, we will see that it also might present a challenge for the merit-maximalists who generally believe in the efficacy of a third party. The Rema (*Yoreh Deah* 376:4) writes:

> This [above-mentioned] *Kaddish* applies only [when it is recited] for a father and mother alone, but not [in the case of] other near-of-kin. If there is no one present in the synagogue who is in mourning for one's father or mother, that *Kaddish* may be recited by one who has no father and mother **on behalf of all the dead of Israel**.

Later authorities, such as R. Feivel Cohen *(Badei Ha-Shulhan, Yoreh Deah* 376:4, *Biurim*, p. 97), infer from this Rema that there is nothing to lose from reciting *Kaddish* for the merit of multiple people.[13] However, this possibility leads almost to a *reductio ad absurdum*: If there is a limitless quantity of merit to go around, then why is the default for people to be selfish and hoard the merit of *Kaddish* exclusively for their own parents? If there is nothing to lose, then every person should dedicate every *Kaddish* "on behalf of all the dead of Israel!"

Indeed, R. Moshe Feinstein (*Responsa Igrot Moshe, Yoreh Deah* 1:254) takes issue with this very position. In addressing an official of a synagogue who earned income for reciting *Kaddish* for multiple families, R. Feinstein presents a significant circumscription: Each *Kaddish* may only be dedicated for one individual at a time. Accordingly, one may only recite *Kaddish* for as many individuals as the amount of *Kaddishim* that are available to him that day.[14]

However, R. Feinstein does not precisely articulate why one may not dedicate a single *Kaddish* for multiple people. *Responsa Doveiv Meisharim* (2:15)

[13] See *Responsa of the Ranakh* (no. 77).

[14] R. Feinstein notes that from a monetary standpoint, the one reciting *Kaddish* should ensure that the family understands that he is only committing to recite one *Kaddish* per day for their deceased. Otherwise, the family could claim they hired him to dedicate all his *Kaddishim*, and that the arrangement was thereby agreed upon false pretenses.

assumes that one only has a finite amount of *kavanah*, or mindfulness. When reciting *Kaddish* one should actively concentrate on the intended beneficiary—attempting to focus on two individuals simultaneously will detract from one's focus on each one.[15] However, I would like to suggest that the issue that troubled R. Feinstein can actually be extrapolated from a later responsum in *Igrot Moshe*.

While it is traditionally accepted that one cannot *post-facto* sell their Divine reward,[16] Rema (*Yoreh Deah* 246:1) codifies how one could enter into a business arrangement called *heskem yissakhar u-zevulun,* in which one party financially supports the other in order to derive a share of the merit generated from the beneficiary's Torah study.[17] There are two possible ways to conceptualize this arrangement: (A) The one learning Torah retains the full measure of Divine reward for his or her *mitzvah* of Torah study, while the financial benefactor earns independent metaphysical reward for the *mitzvah* of **supporting** Torah study. (B) Alternatively, R. Feinstein (*Igrot Moshe Yoreh Deah* 4:16) espouses the belief that the financial benefactor is actually **siphoning off** fifty percent of the merit generated by the Torah study. He dismisses the analogy that some have made to one flame kindling another in which the initial flame does not diminish in the process. R. Feinstein believes that there is only a finite (yet unquantifiable[18]) amount of merit generated by a given *mitzvah*, which is being divided between two parties.

Perhaps this is precisely R. Feinstein's concern vis-a-vis one agent accepting a virtually limitless portfolio of clients for whom to recite *Kaddish*. If *Kaddish*, like any *mitzvah*,[19] generates a finite amount of merit, to begin reciting *Kaddish* for additional parties would diminish the reward that the initial deceased beneficiaries would have received.

If we accept this premise, it becomes ethically dubious for a person currently mourning a parent to have in mind an additional deceased during *Kaddish*, as it would diminish the merit that his parent would have reaped.[20] In fact, if we were to posit that *Kaddish* could generate an undepletable

[15] This is, perhaps, conceptually analogous to the principle of *trei kali lo mishtamai* which posits that it is not feasible to focus on two voices simultaneously (see *Megillah* 21b).

[16] See *Responsa of Maharam Alashkar* (no. 101).

[17] R. Shlomo Kluger (*Responsa Tuv Ta'am Ve-Da'at* 1:217) explains that Divine reward is not some form of currency that can be bequeathed on a whim. God decides who He wishes to bestow benefits upon, not man. Whereas, when one enters into a *heskem yissakhar u-zevulun*, God views it as if the financial benefactor is actively involved in the performance of the *mitzvah* that he is facilitating.

[18] See *Avot* (2:1).

[19] The ramifications of this topic extends to many other scenarios such as sponsoring a Torah lecture or learning Mishnah for a person's *sheloshim*. One can raise a similar question whether or not we conceptualize these arrangements as one of giving away one's merit.

[20] Still, we may ask how R. Feinstein reckons with the explicit guidance of the Rema (*Yoreh Deah* 376:4) which promotes reciting *Kaddish* for all of the deceased of Israel. In truth, this is not merely a question for R. Feinstein, but for the Rema himself who also believes in a finite amount of reward per mitzvah (*Yoreh Deah* 246:1): "…And a person is able to make a

quantity of merit then we would be forced to return to our initial question and inquire how it is ethical for a mourner to selfishly reserve his *Kaddish* strictly for his own parents when he could easily benefit others for no extra cost. After all, we are *rakhmanim bnei rakhmanim*[21] and Halakhah in certain instances even goes so far as to coerce people who are unnecessarily stingy.[22] Therefore, it should at least give one pause to consider the potential ramifications of reciting *Kaddish* on behalf of multiple beneficiaries.

Charity as an Alternative Avenue

R. Shternbuch (*Teshuvot Ve-Hanhagot* 3:57) suggests an alternative that circumvents all of these complications. He explains that when one hires a member of a local yeshiva, *kollel*, or other Torah institution to say *Kaddish*, the merit comes from the charity given to the institution, not from the subsequent recitation of *Kaddish*. The goal is not to buy a share in another party's *Kaddish* or Torah study, but for the charity used to support the Torah study and lifestyle to serve as an independent source of merit (similar to how some actually conceptualize the *heskem yissakhar u-zevulun*).

The unique power of charity is accepted even by many proponents of the minimalist camp. Charity as a method of granting merit can be traced back to commentary on Deuteronomy's (21:8) discussion of the *eglah arufah* ceremony performed for an unsolved murder:

> "Absolve, Hashem, Your people Israel whom You redeemed, and do not let guilt for the blood of the innocent remain among Your people Israel." And they will be absolved of bloodguilt.

Rabbeinu Bahya, citing earlier sources[23], comments:

> According to *Pesikta*[24] on our verse, the word "atone" refers to the living who can attain atonement by means of their money. The words "whom You redeemed," refer to the already dead who will achieve their atonement by charity given by the living. The verse teaches that the donations made to the Temple treasury by the living on behalf of their dead are of benefit. This is so in an increased measure if the son donates in his father's name; it is considered a merit for the departed

condition with his friend, that he will study Torah and he will support him, and he will split the reward with him." There may very well be no contradiction in the Rema as he is comfortable with the notion of all the deceased of Israel dividing the merit generated by the *Kaddish* recited.

[21] See *Sefer Ha-Hinukh* (no. 42).

[22] See *Bava Batra* (12b) and related commentaries regarding the principle of *kofin al midat sedom*.

[23] See *Midresh Tanhuma* (*Tazria*, no. 1), *Sifrei* (*Shoftim* no. 210).

[24] *Pesika* no. 20.

father…

While the child has a qualitative advantage, it would appear that anyone can contribute charity in order to help any deceased individual earn atonement. This has served as the basis for pledging charity on Yom Kippur (see *Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim* 621:6), which was later expanded to pledging charity during *Yizkor* recited on the Holidays in Ashkenazic communities.[25] So potent is this practice that some have warned that failing to actualize one's momentary pledge can, God forbid, be detrimental to the soul of one's dearly departed![26]

In any event, we see that both prayer and charity are well-documented methods for availing the souls of the deceased, irrespective of familial relationships. While the efficacy of reciting *Kaddish* for a non-parent is debatable, the best course of action might be to support Torah study and hire someone else to recite *Kaddish* on their behalf.

Caveats & Conclusion

R. Dr. Natan Slifkin, wrote an excellent essay[27] in which he sought to convince the reader of the minimalist approach to the efficacy of *Kaddish*. In his conclusion he wonders why mainstream Jewish discourse appears to uncritically adopt the maximalist position:

> There would appear to be two answers to this: One is that it is enormously emotionally comforting for people to believe that they can do something for someone that they care about … Second is that there is a lot of money to be made from it. Many *yeshivot* and *kollelim* find it very hard to obtain financial support. A solution is to convince bereaved people that they can help the deceased by giving money to people who will learn Torah on their behalf … "For bribery blinds the eyes of the wise, and distorts the words of the righteous" (Exodus 23:8). Even the wise and the righteous are not immune to being swayed by financial benefits.

The less-than charitable portrayal notwithstanding, R. Dr. Slifkin ultimately raises an important caveat. While religious non-profit institutions ultimately rely on donations to function, it is of paramount

[25] See *Mishnah Berurah* (621:18-19) and *Kaf Ha-Hayyim* (621:35) who elaborate on the origins and parameters of this practice. The latter makes reference to the Talmudic story (*Hagigah* 15b) of R. Meir successfully praying to alleviate the suffering of his wayward teacher, Elisha ben Avuya, as a precedent for the power of prayer as well.

[26] *Sha'arei Hayyim* on *Sha'arei Ephraim* (10:38) citing *Sefer Kav Ha-Yashar* (Ch. 86). See Dirshu's *Mishnah Berurah* commentary (621:19, fn. 21).

[27] Expanded as a chapter in his *Rationalism vs. Mysticism* (pp. 485-486). R. Dr. Slifkin supports his arguments with some of the sources reviewed above and notably from the *Responsa of the Rashba* (7:539) who distinguishes between the power to atone on one's behalf versus conferring additional merit, as well as Maharam Halavah (responsum no. 17), who limits the option of atonement for the deceased to communal rituals, as opposed to individuals.

importance that the relationships cultivated with constituents do not become contingent on the potential for monetary extraction. (This is acutely important for proponents of the maximalist approach to merit-granting.)

Along similar lines, it is worth returning to the piercing words of R. Maurice Lamm (*The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, p. 165):

> It should be noted that this custom [of out-sourcing *Kaddish*], while it is practiced sincerely and conscientiously, has unfortunately brought a host of unintended consequences in its wake. It has caused people to think of respect for the dead in material terms. It has engendered the feeling that somehow the *Kaddish* is a sort of credit system that can be manipulated financially. It has encouraged people to "pay" for all religious services, like "hiring" a *yahrzeit* commemorator or *Yizkor* reciter, or an *Kel Mal'e Rakhamim* prayer at the grave, a practice that is reprehensible to the religious spirit. **Some people have come to believe that paying is more important than praying and to think of the synagogue as a celestial supermarket. They substitute the bank for the Bible and believe that they can erase all personal vices by contributions to charity.** The harm this practice has caused far outweighs the good it has innocently sought to instill. As such, it should be minimized, if not totally abandoned.

* * *

A separate, but also noteworthy caveat, is made by R. Yechiel Michel Tukatzinsky (*Gesher Ha-Hayyim* Ch. 30, 8:8)[28] and R. Yosef Tzvi Rimon (*Hilkhot Aveilut*, p. 191), in which they direct their words to the mourners themselves. While one is understandably passionate, and even desperate, to honor their loved one, it should not come at the expense of proper interpersonal conduct. R. Tukatzinsky writes that if someone forces himself upon the congregation to lead the prayers when someone else was entitled to it, his *Kaddish* will not be accepted by God. R. Rimon suggests that if one is willing to compromise and allow another man to lead, it will serve as a greater merit for his dearly departed.

* * *

Kaddish is halakhically a public act, but it is also a highly personal experience that is exceedingly sensitive for many. While the above analysis in this piece is intentionally meant to strike a somewhat dispassionate tone, I hope that it in no way minimizes the dedication and sacrifices that many

[28] See also, *Gesher Ha-hayyim* (Ch. 30, 10:13).

make in order to recite *Kaddish* for their dearly departed. In fact, the impetus for this piece was borne out of the many questions I receive from congregants who are well-meaning and endeavor to do what our religion determines to be objectively optimal for their loved ones. There are few pursuits that can be more significant and urgent than seeking the welfare of our loved ones' eternal souls.

The Talmud (*Ta'anit* 5b) teaches that "our patriarch Jacob lived on through the actions of his children." So too, when we faithfully perform the commandments of God's Torah, our parents and loved ones live on through us. This is not just comforting on a sentimental level, but as we have outlined above, there are concrete methods that Judaism makes available to us to make it a reality.

While we can only try our best to understand God's ways, I pray that the information presented in this piece serves to motivate the curious and caring mourner to delve further and continue pursuing ways to both help and honor their dearly departed.

May death be swallowed up forever, and may the Lord God wipe away tears from every face and remove the mocking of God's people from throughout the world, for the Lord has spoken (Isaiah 25:8).

Of Prayer in Solitude

Dov Frank is a college student in New York

I left to pray in a minyan of trees,
to sing the morning through,
And, broken-souled, I sat and sought
To be apart from Jews.

I wondered if I would need
A new phrase or one of yore
To allow me to sing free
As if, at Sinai, I was once more

For solitude needs a new language
Which has not yet been made
By Jews throughout history
Who have, with humans, prayed

But with me, the trees meet
And pray with wisdom sage
Though they did not receive the Law
That God for sinners gave

Thus, when I see their swaying
Despite their rigid face
I learn the new language
And, with the trees, I pray

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In Six Barleys were Wrapped an Enduring Legacy

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Introduction

The character of Boaz serves as a beacon through the ages, showing us how great leaders go beyond the call of duty to transcend social stigma and protect the vulnerable, thereby leaving an enduring and inspiring legacy.

Central to Boaz's greatness is his self-discipline in the face of sexual temptation. In particular, the Book of Ruth presents his responses to this challenge in a manner that integrates the achievements of the first-generation leaders of Israel, the leader of the children of Leah (Judah) and of Rachel (Joseph). On the one hand, Boaz is Joseph-like in succeeding where Judah failed: When offered an inappropriate liaison that could seemingly elude human witnesses, Boaz is not diverted from the virtuous path. But like Judah and unlike Joseph, Boaz manages a tricky, potentially scandalous situation, by preserving the honor of all parties. The conclusion to Boaz's story is not only similar to Judah's but directly linked to it: the birth of a progenitor of King David. Indeed, the book of Ruth concludes by explicitly tracing the ancestry of Ruth and Boaz's newborn son Oved back to Tamar and Judah's son Peretz, and tracing it forward to David.

Yet our image of Boaz's greatness was apparently not the image that Naomi had of Boaz even after the events of Chapter 2, when Boaz welcomed and praised Ruth and provided protection for her as she gleaned barley and wheat from his fields. To be sure, Naomi was appreciative. But she was apparently growing increasingly impatient. Just as her forebear Tamar did (and just as was the case for Ruth's forebears the daughters of Lot), Naomi had apparently come to doubt that Boaz would come on his own to recognize that he had an important role to play in taking care of a young woman with no prospects of suitors with whom to build a household ("a resting place that will benefit [Ruth]"; Ruth 3:1). As in these prior cases from Genesis, Naomi devised to solve the problem by seducing Boaz with the offer of a young woman's body.[1]

Naomi's skepticism towards Boaz was apparently so great she thought desperate measures were warranted. But if so, how did she soon become so confident that Boaz would rise to the occasion? After welcoming Ruth back from the threshing room floor and receiving Ruth's report, Naomi tells Ruth that "the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today" (Ruth 3:18). That there was even a

[1] For discussion of this "*yibbum* (levirate marriage) triangle" and how Boaz and Naomi succeed at meeting the moral challenge of a parent figure swallowing their pride to provide a future to a bereft young woman, see Ezra W. Zuckerman Sivan, "Rebuilding a Future When Our World Comes Crashing Down," *The Lehrhaus* (May 28, 2020).

matter to settle (i.e., whether Boaz or the "closer kinsman") would "redeem" Ruth (3:12) was great news. But where did Naomi's confidence come from?

After all, if we did not know that Boaz eventually acted in Chapter 4 as Naomi now expected, we might have thought that the mission had been a failure. Ruth returns from Boaz alone and apparently empty-handed. More to the point, there is seemingly nothing to prevent Boaz from continuing to treat Ruth (however kindly) as a mendicant. Unlike Tamar and Lot's Daughters, Ruth could not have become pregnant from her chaste encounter with Boaz. Nor did Ruth come away with what Tamar had: distinctive possessions of Boaz's that could be used to induce Boaz to do what he promised on the threshing room floor, to ensure that he either he or the "closer kinsmen" would "redeem" her and "take [her] under [his] wings" (3:9-12). On its face, Naomi's turnabout seems completely unwarranted. If she was skeptical before, why was she confident now?

The Puzzle Pieces

To be sure, Ruth did not return with nothing from Boaz. She returns with six barleys, perhaps wrapped around herself. As she reports to Naomi, "He gave me these six barleys, saying to me 'Don't go to your mother empty-handed'" (3:17).

But this just adds to our puzzle. Why does Boaz ask Ruth to hold her *mitpahat* (shawl or "wrap"),[2] measure out 6 "barleys" of unspecified volume, and then "place it on her" (Ruth 3:15)? Why does this convince Naomi when instead she might have concluded that Boaz was trying to buy Ruth and Naomi off so as to escape any responsibility for helping them?

In developing an answer to this question, it is reasonable first to suppose that the six barleys serve as some kind of signal. After all, it has the *effect* of a signal, in that it changes the hearer's understanding of the situation. More specifically, Boaz seems to have successfully caused Naomi to think that they have the same goal, and that he actually has a better (more legally and morally legitimate) path to that goal than she had imagined. But how did this six-barley wrap convey this message so effectively?

Another clue is provided by Dr. Yael Ziegler's suggestion that Boaz wrapped Ruth's womb with the barleys, apparently as full stalks, thereby making her look like a pregnant woman in the dimly lit early morning.[3] Ziegler identifies strong textual support for this idea: the only other example of *va-yashet*, "and he placed (the barleys on her)" (3:15) in Ruth is in the next chapter: "And she took the child and she placed it in her bosom" (4:16). The idea that Ruth appeared pregnant would also help explain why Naomi greets Ruth with the enigmatic question, "Who are you, my daughter?" (3:16); Naomi would have been teasing Ruth by indicating that she was

[2] Yael Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy* (Maggid Press, 2015), 348.

[3] *Ibid.*, 347-50.

masquerading as a pregnant woman. Overall, the effect of this barley wrap would then be two-fold: to give Ruth an effective disguise that would help ensure that "it would not be known that the woman (i.e., the non-pregnant Ruth) came to the threshing floor" (3:14) that evening; and to signal that Boaz intended to provide Ruth with a child.

Yet while we are beginning to see why Naomi might have been impressed with Boaz's signal—he was using a great deal of creativity to protect Ruth and indicate his intentions to help Ruth build a household—it is still unclear why the formerly skeptical Naomi might have been so convinced by this. Again, there was still nothing to bind Boaz to these seemingly good intentions. And given Naomi's initial plan, it is not clear she would be happy that Boaz has seemingly been successful at keeping the threshing floor meeting a secret. It remains unclear why the text goes out of its way to tell us that Boaz "measured out six barleys." Could the six barleys have helped to convince Naomi?

Invoking a Meaningful Precedent

I would like to suggest that the answer is yes. To appreciate how and why, let us entertain the possibility that Boaz is alluding to another momentous biblical event from national and tribal history, one that carries important lessons applicable to their present situation.

Consider three images that are fused in our story:

a) A woman is returning from the fields during wheat harvest with renewed expectations of marital love;

b) A woman is returning from the wheat harvest fields with flowers in her hands, having obtained such flowers in return for forgoing relations (which had been assumed to be the ticket to fertility and fulfillment);

c) A return from the fields causes a leader to be surprised that their plan for relations had been reworked by a third party who paradoxically seeks to use the forgoing of relations to forge a three-way bond.

These three images at the heart of the "six barley moment" are also fused in another moment of great significance in Israel's history: When Jacob returned from the fields to discover that Rachel had traded her marital bed with Leah in exchange for *duda'im* from Leah's first-born son (Genesis 30:14).

It may be surprising that the book of Ruth would be referencing this story, but it should not be. The book of Ruth contains many literary allusions to earlier Biblical books. But it contains only two *explicit* references: to the story of Tamar (and Judah), and to the story of Rachel and Leah. In particular, upon completing the process of redeeming Ruth, the townsfolk of Bethlehem bless Boaz as follows:

> May God make it so that the woman who is coming into your house is like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the House of Israel! Prosper in Ephratah and perpetuate a great name in Bethlehem! And may your house be like the House of Peretz,

> whom Tamar bore for Judah, from the seed that God will give you from this young woman! (Ruth 4:11-12)

In a previous *Lehrhaus* essay,[4] I discussed how the Book of Ruth embeds within it a deep reading of the story of Rachel and Leah, one that indicates how Rachel and Leah were able to overcome their bitter jealousies to become a "team of rivals," thus setting the foundations for national unity. The trade of the *duda'im* was a key turning point in this regard as Rachel and Leah began to work together and gain power over the men in their lives. Whereas the two sisters had been treated as sexual objects that were traded in an unseemly deal between two men (their father Laban and husband Jacob), they were now the agents of a deal that treated a man (Jacob) as a sexual object to be traded.

Three additional aspects of the *duda'im* story are notable for helping us unlock the mystery of the six barleys.

First, a *midrash* suggests that the *duda'im* were in fact barley.[5] The rationale for this suggestion is that once the season had shifted from the barley harvest to the wheat harvest, barley effectively became weeds or flowers. Given this *midrash*, it is likely that Boaz had wrapped Ruth in precisely the kind of plant—flowering, overgrown barley stalks—that Reuben had given to Leah, who in turn traded the *duda'im* with Rachel for sexual access to Jacob.

Second, the *duda'im* trade is not just about erstwhile bitter rivals calling a truce and sharing Jacob, it is also about sharing a symbol of filial love. "Give me from your son's *duda'im*," Rachel implores of Jacob (Genesis 30:14). This parallels a theme in Ruth, whereby Naomi (Ruth 2:2, 2:22, 3:1, 3:16, 3:18) and Boaz (2:8, 3:10, 3:11) take turns calling Ruth "my daughter." They are effectively sharing her filial love much as Rachel and Leah contrived to do.

Finally, the *duda'im* trade seems to have been a critical turning point in how the two matriarchs thought about their fertility—its true source and purpose—and this deeper understanding had the effect of granting them greater fertility.

Whereas the text tells us that Leah had "stopped giving birth" after giving birth to Judah, the trade causes her to be blessed with sons five and six. Her declaration at the naming of son number five (Issachar) explicitly credits the trade with Rachel (*sakhar* means trade or exchange) and her declaration at the naming of son number six (Zebulun) seems especially noteworthy given how happy she seems to be ("this time God has given me a choice gift" (Genesis 30:20)), and perhaps then ushering the birth of her daughter and final child, Dinah (30:21).

Boaz's choice of six barleys may thus symbolise the momentous event that led to the births of Leah's fifth and sixth sons. Let us now see why six sons

[4] Ezra W. Zuckerman Sivan, "Team of Rivals: Building Israel Like Rachel and Leah." *The Lehrhaus* (November 15, 2018).

[5] *Bereishit Rabbah* 72:2.

might have been a meaningful number for descendants of Judah like Boaz and Naomi, as a symbol of Judah's leadership.

First, if one reviews Leah's statements upon naming each of her six sons, one notices that the declarations for sons three (Levi) and six (Zebulun) stand out. Only for the births of her third and sixth sons does she mention their number in the birth order. And with the exception of the first-born son (Reuben), only for sons three and six does she express heightened confidence of her standing as Jacob's wife. "Now this time my husband will become attached to me because I have given him three sons" she mentions in naming Levi (29:34). "This time my husband will exalt me for I have given him six sons," she adds to her thanks to God in naming Zebulun (30:20).

It is unclear why the third and especially the sixth sons are so important to Leah, but it is not hard to guess. Throughout Genesis, twelve children symbolized the achievement of a great household and the foundation for a dynasty.[6] If twelve was the target, three children meant that at least one fourth of Jacob's household would see Leah as their matriarch; with six children, she would be the matriarch of half of Israel (and two-thirds if one includes the two sons of her maidservant Zilpah).

In addition, the division of twelve into four groups of three would later become the basis for the organization of the encampment in the wilderness (Numbers 2), with one group of three tribes in the vanguard to the east; another group of three tribes to the south; another group of three to the west; and another group of three to the north. Notably, only one of these groups consists only of Leah's sons, and this is also the only group that preserves the birth order. It is the vanguard group. It is led by Judah (the fourth tribe), followed by Issachar (the fifth), and Zebulun (the sixth). As such, there is good reason for the number six to be a potent symbol of leadership for Judahites specifically (and certainly for Zebulunites and perhaps Issacharites as well): if it were not for the *duda'im* trade and the birth of sons five and six, Judah's claim to leadership—of the Leahite tribes and of Israel generally—would be weak.[7]

There is thus good reason to believe that the number six would have been a meaningful symbol of Judahite leadership that both Boaz and Naomi would have known well.

While the six barleys would be significant to any Judahite, the *duda'im* trade and the national unity it engendered may have had special resonance for Judahites who were from Bethlehem. It is notable

[6] See Genesis 17:20, 25:16; 22:20-24.

[7] This may also have been especially true at the time of the book of Ruth, "at the time when the judges ruled" (Ruth 1:1). If one reviews the book of Judges, one finds that Judahites never take up the mantle of leadership, and that the stories that discuss Judah (and "Bethlehem, Judah" in particular; see Judges 17, 19) display it as weak and marginal.

that both "Bethlehem" and "Ephratah" are referenced by the townsfolk in their blessing to Boaz. These terms reference the place of the tragic and untimely death of Rachel soon after she gave birth to her second son, Benjamin (Genesis 35:16-19; 48:7). Together with placing Rachel's name before Leah's,[8] this reference suggests that Rachel's legacy had a special place for them, presumably because they were the curators of her grave and received many Rachelite pilgrims to their town. Their very place name then would have implied the potential for national unity (during a highly fractious time), and the townsfolk's blessing suggests that they embraced this identity.

As such, the importance of the *duda'im* episode for Rachel and her children may also have resonated for Boaz and Naomi. Rachel's act of sacrificing her access to Jacob's bed was quite significant for someone who had been so "jealous of her sister" that she begged Jacob to "give (her) sons, because without them, I am as good as dead" (30:1). But now, having given her erstwhile rival the opportunity to further her advantage over her by having another child with Jacob, Rachel now seems to relax. It would appear this is because she and her sister have begun to reconcile. It also seems she realizes that the path to fulfillment and love ultimately may not come from marital relations and biological children and that marital relations alone cannot guarantee children (as Jacob had suggested). Once she gains that realization (with no further complaints even as her sister has three more children), she too is blessed with her first son.

Let us pull these various threads together by first clarifying that we cannot be certain of the meaning behind Boaz's six-barley wrap and why it would have sent a powerful message to Naomi. However, a wide array of contextual evidence appears to support the idea that it was an allusion to a key turning point in Israel's history, one that would have been especially resonant for Judahites from Bethlehem: the *duda'im* trade, leading to the births of Leah's fifth and sixth sons, as well as her daughter and to Rachel's sons. By evoking this significant moment of national unity, Boaz would have been elegantly embedding within that six-barley wrap several powerful points that should have hit home powerfully with Naomi and reinforced the credibility of his message, which can be decoded as follows

1. This business has the potential to be quite a sordid affair. Let us instead frame it in the context of a momentous, foundational moment in our people's history.

2. I understand my duty now and you need no longer worry. With God's help, I will provide a child to you and Ruth just as Rachel and Leah got children via the *duda'im* trade.

3. Perhaps you were being a bit hasty in judging me? As Rachel taught us, sometimes

[8] See Rashi on Genesis 31:4.

4. it is prudent to hold off on physical relations in order to get to the love that matters more, and then the desired fertility and legacy will come.

5. I understand that you have felt rejected, and this son would be a vehicle for taking your rightful place and ensuring your legacy. Let us have a son who recalls Leah's momentous son number six, the one who represents a scorned woman being recognized and achieving an enduring legacy of leadership.

6. There is the potential here for something truly extraordinary, the birth of a son who can lead not just Judah but unified Israel to greatness.

To be sure, Boaz could not count on Naomi picking up on all of the symbolism. But given how much symbolic meaning seems encoded in the *duda'im* story and how much of it was infused in the way Boaz sent Ruth home to Naomi—and given that Ruth (as a Moabite) would have understood none of the allusions—it should have been very effective for sending a special message to Naomi, one that she should have found very meaningful and credible.

Conclusion

For readers today, the signal of the six barleys helps us appreciate Naomi and Boaz's greatness in a new way. On the one hand, we see that their greatness was not given in their individual characters but a *joint achievement,* one that was founded on a larger *historical* and *cultural* achievement.

To appreciate the joint achievement, we must consider how easily the events of chapter 3 could have turned out very poorly. Each character has good instincts on display in the first two chapters of Ruth. Naomi is remarkably loyal to her God and people, returning home on a treacherous journey even as a humiliated, poor woman. Boaz is remarkably kind, solicitous, and praising of a poor outcast foreigner. But it turns out that each is set on a line of action that was highly problematic. Initially, Boaz is apparently content to have Ruth glean from his fields without worrying about Naomi and Ruth's precarious standing in society. As a result, Naomi apparently concludes that she needs to trick him into taking care of them. Disaster looms if Boaz remains passive, but it also looms if he succumbs to Naomi's plot. This is where their *joint* greatness comes in. On the one hand, Naomi shakes Boaz out of his passivity. On the other hand, Boaz redirects Naomi's initiative away from a problematic and scandalous ending to an honorable and exalted one. That the story concludes in chapter 4 in such inspiring fashion is a result of the work Naomi and Boaz do in chapter 3 to prod each other out of potentially disastrous lines of action. And they pull it off with remarkable creativity and skill. Most of all, they find a way to communicate very clearly with one another about quite complex matters without ever speaking to each other once!

That they succeed in getting on the same page is in turn a result of the joint language they share as Bethlehemites from Judah. Without knowledge of Israel's history, would Boaz have understood that Ruth's appearance in his bed was recalling earlier

episodes when patriarchs had faced similar challenges, with associated lessons for him to draw on?[9] And without this history being common knowledge between Naomi and Boaz, would Boaz's message of the six barleys have been as meaningful and credible to Ruth? Could the message have been as meaningful if Leah and Rachel's great moment of unification was not cherished by the people of Bethlehem, Judah? In short, Israel's inspiring history served as the foundation by which Naomi and Boaz saved each other from their worst instincts and brought out their best ones, thereby creating an even stronger foundation for Israel's future. May their example similarly inspire us.

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Yatziv Pitgam: Poetry as Talmud Commentary

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*P**iyyutim* (liturgical poems) have a well-deserved reputation for being hard to understand. Modern editions of *piyyutim* are accompanied by commentaries that proceed phrase by phrase in the style of Rashi on the *gemara* to aid the reader in the act of deciphering. They explain the meaning of obscure words, and they identify the biblical and rabbinic texts to which the *paytan* (liturgical poet) appears to be alluding. But when commentary proceeds phrase by phrase, it often loses a sense of the whole, in two interrelated senses. First, many *piyyutim*, like the poems familiar to us from the English canon, are marked by thematic and aesthetic coherences that close reading can bring to light. Second, the allusions in a *piyyut* can sometimes reveal a programmatic intent. The *paytan*, in such cases, does not grab randomly at this biblical passage or that rabbinic remark: his choices are governed by an underlying logic that contributes to the meaning of the *piyyut*.

Below I offer a holistic reading of *yatziv pitgam*, an Aramaic *piyyut* written by the fiery 12th century northern French Tosafist, Jacob son of Meir, better known as Rabbenu Tam.[1] At this time and place, there were two occasions in the liturgical calendar, the seventh day of Passover and the second day of Shavuot, when the reading of the *haftarah* in the synagogue was accompanied by the recitation of the corresponding section from *targum Yonatan*, the

[9] It is also possible to interpret Naomi's motive in sending Ruth to Boaz not as an attempt to seduce him but as a test to see if he would respond in the manner of Joseph, the manner of Judah, or (as he did) in some combination of the two. That is, just as Boaz's response was to send Naomi a signal that was something of a challenge ("Can you just be a bit more patient and a little less Tamar-like? I'm working on a great solution!"), Noami had herself been sending Boaz a signal that was something of a challenge ("Would you hurry up and do the right thing? Or are you going to be obtuse and afraid of scandal like Judah?").

[1] On the poetic oeuvre of Rabbenu Tam see Ephraim Kanarfogel, *The Intellectual History and Rabbinic Culture of Medieval Ashkenaz* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 393-95. For the poems themselves see Isaac Meiseles, ed., *Shirat Rabbenu Tam: The Poems of Rabbi Jacob ben Rabbi Meir* (Jerusalem: Leshon Limudim, 2012).

Aramaic rendering of the Prophets attributed to a certain Jonathan son of Uzziel. *Paytanim* of the period composed introductory poems (*reshuyot*, or "permissions") as prefaces to the reading from *targum Yonatan*.[2] Rabbenu Tam appears to have written *yatziv pitgam* for the second day of Shavuot. (Today, we no longer publicly recite *targum Yonatan* at all, but the liturgy retains Rabbenu Tam's introductory *reshut*.) What I will argue below is that we cannot appreciate the meaning of this *piyyut* until we realize that it is a literary reflection on a *sugya* in Bavli *Megillah* 28b-29a.

I begin by describing the formal constraints of the *piyyut*; readers less interested in such technical details can skip to the next paragraph. The first letters of each line, until the final four lines, form an acrostic of the author's name, *ya'aqov be-rabi me'ir*. Every line ends in the same rhyming syllable, *-rin*.

Every line is also subject to the same metrical constraint: the line divides into two halves, where each half has four "feet," or sequences of syllables determined by vowel length: short-long, long-long, short-long, long-long.[3] (This meter may be familiar to readers from the *zemer* for Shabbat composed by Dunash ben Labrat, *deror yiqra'*.) In the first half of each line, the second and fourth feet rhyme. Because all of the lines are formally identical to each other, the poem is not, from a formal perspective, strophic, i.e., the lines do not group into distinct stanzas. In fact, however, the *piyyut* "thinks" in two-line couplets.[4]

As a prelude to my analysis of the *piyyut*, I offer the following translation. It seeks to convey the poem's sense and rhythm; I make no attempt to preserve the rhyme.[5] The original Aramaic text is appended to this article.

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[2] In the world of the Geonim, the recitation of *targum Yonatan* on the *haftarah* was more prevalent, and *reshuyot* composed for it did not specify a particular liturgical occasion, but were evidently meant to be used on any occasion when *targum Yonatan* was recited. See Michael Klein, "Introductory Poems (*R'shuyot*) to the Targum of the *Hafṭarah* in Praise of Jonathan ben Uzziel," in Avigdor Shinan et al., *Michael Klein on the Targums: Collected Essays 1972-2000* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 167-76; Peter Sh. Lehnardt, "The Role of Targum Samuel in European Jewish Liturgy," in Alberdina Houtman et al., *A Jewish Targum in a Christian World* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 44-51.

[3] To state the rule in a somewhat oversimplified form: a "short" vowel is a *shewa* or a reduced vowel, while a "long" vowel is any other vowel. There are exceptions to this metrical pattern throughout *yatziv pitgam*, including in the very first syllable, which has a long vowel rather than the expected short vowel. Another poem by Rabbenu Tam composed in the same meter, and with similar rhyming constraints, is the *selihah*, שמך אירא (poem 18 in Meiseles' edition). The system of metrical constraints for Hebrew poetry arose in medieval Spain, and achieved a certain limited popularity in Ashkenaz in the 11th century forward.

[4] The formal constraints of *yatziv pitgam* resemble in part those of another Aramaic *piyyut*, an alphabetical acrostic published in Rimon Kasher, *Targumic Toseftot to the Prophets* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1996) (and intended as a preface for the *haftarah* for the first day of Passover?), אגברא חסינא. I have not had the opportunity to study this *piyyut* closely, but accessed it only through the online Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon. The rhyme scheme is the same as that in *yatziv pitgam*, and the two *piyyutim* even share the same terminal rhyming syllable, *-rin*. There are also verbal overlaps, especially in the *gimel* and *yod* lines. Note in particular the *yod* line: יציבא ממריה דברומה מדוריה בגו נור ביעורין "Firm is the word of Him who dwells on high in the midst of fire of torches," recalling lines 1 and 4 of *yatziv pitgam*.

[5] Unless otherwise indicated, I depend on the Aramaic text provided in Yonah Fraenkel's *Mahzor Shavuot* (Jerusalem: Koren, 2000), 570-72.

1. Firm is the word / of the Sign and Mark // among myriad myriads of Watchers.[6]
2. Where does He dwell? / Amid the numbers // that hew four mountains.

3. In front of Him, / into its basins, // a river of fires extends and streams.
4. On a mountain of snow / is a flaming light // and flashes of fire and torches.

5. He made and saw / what is in the dark, // for with Him lights reside.
6. He spies things distant / without forgetting,[7] // and to Him are revealed hidden things.

7. I seek from Him / His leave, // and after Him, of these men,
8. Who know law / and Mishnah, // and Tosefta, Sifra, and Sifre.

9. May the King who lives / forever and ever // bestow fruit on the people that seek him.[8]
10. It is said of them, / they will be as sand, // and innumerable be like the dusts.

11. White as sheep / may their dales become; // may their presses drip with wines!
12. Grant their desire, / and brighten their faces; // Let them shine like the light of mornings!

13. And to me give strength, / and raise Your eyes: // See the enemies that deny You!
14. May they be as straw / inside a brick; // may they be silent as stone, ashamed.[9]

15. When I arise / and I translate // with the words of the choicest of scribes,
16. Jonathan, / that most humble man, // we thus render him graces.

The basic structure of the poem is clear enough. Lines 1-6 praise God. Lines 7-8, at the center of the poem, represent its effective essence: the speaker seeks leave from God and from the sages to speak. Having transitioned from God to the sages of Israel, the poem, in lines 9-12, offers a prayer for the redemption of Israel. The last four lines, which exceed the name acrostic, represent something of a postscript: the first-person perspective of the speaker figures prominently as he first calls on God to take note of those who reject God, and then describes his own task, namely, conveying the words of *targum Yonatan*.

A more profound appreciation for how the *piyyut* works demands attentiveness to its sources, for every line, indeed almost every word, alludes to other texts. The first words present us immediately with a mystery: what is the "firm word" with which

[6] "Sign" and "Mark" are references to God, drawn from Deuteronomy 33:2 and Song of Songs 5:10, as interpreted in *Hagigah* 16a.

[7] Or: unhurriedly. For the root *shataf* in the sense of forgetting see *Genesis Rabbah* 81.

[8] I translate here a variant reading: ליה ... ימגד, rather than להון ... ימגר.

[9] For "silent as a stone" see *targum Onkelos* to Exodus 15:16.

the poem begins, and where does this term come from? I have found only one other occurrence of the term, in *targum Yonatan* to Jeremiah 46:18.[10] The verse is part of an oracle foretelling the fall of Egypt: "As surely as Tabor is among the mountains and Carmel is by the sea, so shall this come to pass (יבוא)." *Targum Yonatan* reads: "Just as the word is firm (יציב פתגמא) that Tabor is among the mountains, etc." Line 1 evidently alludes to this passage.

But what drew Rabbenu Tam to the *targum* to Jeremiah 46:18? The explanation lies in the interpretation given to Jeremiah 46:18 in *Megillah* 29a. The Bavli takes the verb יבוא in the verse as describing the action of Carmel and Tabor: these mountains came to Sinai from elsewhere in the world to witness the giving of the Torah, and as reward, God fixed them in the land of Israel. By the same logic, says the Talmud, the synagogues and academies of Babylonia, great sources of Torah learning, will be transplanted to Israel in the future. With the first two words of the *piyyut*, then, Rabbenu Tam implicitly celebrates the sages of his own community, and the redemptive power of their Torah study.

This celebration emerges explicitly, and takes on an especially bold cast, in the continuation of the first couplet. Line 1 speaks of God as surrounded by the "Watchers," a class of angels: there are thousands upon thousands of them, yet God is the "Sign and Mark," distinguishable from them. The second line begins by asking: "Where does He dwell?" In answer, we are told that God dwells in the numbers of those who: פסלין ארבעה טורין. Yonah Fraenkel, a great scholar of midrash and *piyyut*, translates these words as: "render four mountains invalid." He sees in these words an allusion to the *targum* to Psalm 68:16-18, which tells of various mountains (טורין) that sought to be the ones on whom the Torah was given, but were disqualified (איתפסילו) by God because of their height. On this approach, line 2 of the *piyyut* more or less repeats line 1: line 1 describes God's angelic retinue, and line 2 says that God dwells among the angels who invalidated four mountains.

It is possible that Rabbenu Tam did mean to allude to this targumic tradition. A version of the same tradition appears in *Megillah* 29a, immediately after the aforementioned comment on Jeremiah 46:18. But I think that Fraenkel's reading represents, at best, only a secondary sense and not the chief intention of the line, because it suffers from two problems. First, it is God in the *targum*—or a voice from heaven (*bat kol*) in the Bavli's version—that invalidates the mountains; neither version refers to angels. Second, neither the *targum* nor the parallel tradition in *Megillah* 29a specifies the number of invalidated mountains.

The second line in fact alludes most immediately to a story that appears earlier in the same *sugya*, in *Megillah* 28b. According to this story, the *amora* Resh Lakish, when traveling along the way, finds his path blocked by a pool of water. A man puts Resh Lakish on his shoulders to traverse the pool. While

[10] But see n. 4 above.

crossing, Resh Lakish inquires of the man's Jewish literacy, and discovers that he is well-versed in the Bible and has studied four orders from the Mishnah. At this, Resh Lakish exclaims: "You have hewn four mountains (פסלת ארבעה טורי), and you bear the son of Lakish on your shoulder? Cast the son of Lakish into the water!" (The man declines to do so.) In alluding to this story, the second line of the *piyyut* means to say that God resides among the sages, who study Torah. Line 2, then, does not parallel line 1, but daringly qualifies it: yes, God is accompanied by His angels, but God's true dwelling place is among Israel, and in particular, in the synagogues and academies where Torah is studied.[11]

The *sugya* in *Megillah* 28a-29a celebrates the synagogue as a place not only of prayer but also and even especially of Torah study.[12] It insists that the synagogue and the academy are the very dwelling places of God: little temples sanctified by the Torah study that occurs in them. I have noted two allusions in the first two lines of *yatziv pitgam* to this *sugya*, and there is probably yet a third allusion to it, more delicate but distinctly audible, in the same couplet (for which see the footnote).[13] The poem returns again to the same *sugya*, for a fourth time, in lines 7-8, when it characterizes the sages whose license the speaker seeks as those "who know law and Mishnah, and Tosefta, Sifra, and Sifre." This characterization comes from *Megillah* 28b, which tells the story of the death of and eulogy for "one who had studied law and Sifra and Sifre and Tosefta."

Through its sustained engagement with the *sugya*, the poem elevates students of Torah—and the people Israel as a whole, insofar as they are led by the sages—above the angels, and makes them second only to God. Their proximity to God emerges explicitly in line 7: the speaker requests the permission, first of God, then of the sages. This relationship is reinforced implicitly through the similarities between the description of God's throne room in lines 3-4, and Israel's reward in lines 11-12.

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[11] Note should be taken in this context of a *reshut* for Shavuot written by Rabbenu Tam's student, R. Yom Tov b. Isaac of Joigny. In this *piyyut* (published in Fraenkel's *Mahzor Shavuot*, 573-75), the student borrows from his teacher the phrase פסלין ארבעה טורין, but rearranges it to so that טורין can appear at the beginning of the line (line 10), and the initial letter *tet* can serve in the name acrostic. In R. Yom Tov's poem, the phrase clearly refers to sages, not angels. R. Yom Tov seems to borrow two other elements of his name acrostic from *yatziv pitgam*: the very first word, יציב (but filtered through an allusion to Daniel 7:16), and בעי "I seek" in line 16, taken from בעית "I sought" in line 7 of *yatziv pitgam*.

[12] The foundation of this *sugya* is a *baraita* quoted on 28a-b (and paralleled in Tosefta *Megillah* 2:18), which prohibits certain behaviors in the synagogue, like entering it for the sake of shelter from rain, but ends with a license: "But one studies Torah and Mishnah in them." Reflecting on this *baraita*, the Bavli and even more so the Yerushalmi (*Megillah* 3:3 [77a]) transform this license into an exhortation: the synagogue is in fact the proper place for study, and thus for the sages. In the Yerushalmi, R. Joshua b. Levi goes so far as to say: "Synagogues and academies are for the sages and their students." The reception of the *baraita* in the Talmuds presumably reflects the expansion of the rabbinic movement in the amoraic period and its greater influence in places of public assembly.

[13] In line 2, the word ענה "He dwells" probably derives, as Fraenkel notes in his commentary, from the word מעון "dwelling." Why did Rabbenu Tam choose this word? In *Megillah* 29a, just before the exegesis of Jeremiah 46:18, the *gemara* cites Rava's and Abbaye's interpretations of the instances of the word מעון in Psalm 90:1 and Psalm 26:8 as references to the synagogues and academies in which God dwell. I venture that ענה in line 2 depends on this passage.

Lines 3 and 4 depend heavily on the eschatological vision in Daniel 7:10 ("A river of fire streamed forth before Him") and 7:9 ("His garment was white like snow … His throne was tongues of flame"), respectively.[14] In lines 11-12, the *piyyut* envisions a future of plenty for Israel. Line 11 is nearly a direct quotation of the *targum* to Genesis 49:12, from God's blessing to Judah ("His mountains will grow red with his vineyards; his presses will drip with wine; his valley will become white with grain and his flocks of sheep"), while line 12 introduces a simile that *targum Yonatan* uses (at 2 Samuel 23:4; Amos 4:12) for the reward of the righteous, "like the light of morning" (כנהור צפרא). What logic underlies Rabbenu Tam's choices here? I think it likely that we are meant to see lines 11-12 as echoes of lines 3-4. Israel's land will be white, like God's snowy mountain, and both will shine with light. Unstated elements from the verses to which the poem alludes generate additional bridges: the mountains of the *targum* to Genesis 49:12 ("His mountains will grow red with his vineyards") recall God's mountain in line 4 ("a mountain of snow"), and the sheep of line 11 ("White as sheep / may their dales become") are anticipated by Daniel 7:9, which depicts God's hair as white like clean wool.

The notion of composing a poem about a *sugya* might seem distinctively modern, a novel way of making meaning from the Bavli. And yet Rabbenu Tam did something very much like this in *yatziv pitgam*. *Megillah* 28b-29a is woven through *yatziv pitgam*, and through this *sugya*, the poem gives expression to the redemptive power of Torah study, and especially Torah study in the synagogue. The very recitation of *yatziv pitgam* and the *targum* in the synagogue represents a performative realization of the power of Torah study. Through such study, the assemblies of Israel become God's home, and in the future, through study again, the land of Israel will be transformed into something like the divine throne room. The *piyyut* is thus a fitting paean indeed for Shavuot, the day on which we celebrate the giving of the Torah.

יַצִּיב פִּתְגָם לְאָת וּדְגָם בְּרִבּוֹ רִבְוָון עִירִין

עֲנֵה אָנָא בְּמִנְיָנָא דְּפָסְלִין אַרְבְּעָה טוּרִין

קֶדָמוֹהִי לְגוּמּוֹהִי נָגִיד וּנְפִיק נְהַר דְּנוּרִין

בְּטוּר תַּלְגָּא נְהוֹר שְׂרַגָּא וְזִיקִין דְּנוּר וּבָעוֹרִין

בְּרָא וּסְכָא, מַה בַּחֲשׁוֹכָא וְעִימֵּיהּ שָׂרְיִין נְהוֹרִין

רְחִיקִין צָפָא בְּלָא שִׁטְפָּא וּגְלַיִין לֵיהּ דְּמִיטַּמְּרִין

[14] Daniel 7:9 is also the immediate source of the "myriad myriads" in line 1. In adverting to Daniel 7, Rabbenu Tam draws on an ancient tradition of liturgical engagement with the mysteries of the divine throne. One notable deviation from Daniel is that, while Daniel 7:9 describes God's garment as white as snow, the *piyyut* speaks of a "mountain of snow," probably to echo the mountains hewn by the sages in line 2. The phrase "mountain of snow" is drawn from rabbinic literature, wherein it refers to Mt. Hermon. See, e.g., *Sifre Numbers* 131.

בְּעֵית מִינֵּיהּ יָת הוּרְמָנֵיהּ וּבָתְרוֹהִי עֲדֵי גּוּבְרִין

יָדְעֵי הֵילְכָתָא וּמַתְנִיתָא וְתוֹסָפְתָּא סִפְרָא וְסִפְרִין

מָלַךְ חַיָּיא לְעָלְמַיָּיא יְמַגַּד עַם לֵיהּ מְשַׁחַרִין

אָמִיר עֲלֵיהוֹן כְּחֹלָא יְהוֹן וְלָא יִתְמְנוֹן הֵיךְ עַפְרִין

יְחַוְּורוּן כְּעַן לְהוֹן בִּקְעָן יְטוּפוּן נַעֲוֵוי חַמְרִין

רְעוּתְהוֹן הַב וְאַפֵּיהוֹן צַהֲב יְנַהֲרוּן כִּנְהוֹר צַפְרִין

וְלִי הַב תְּקוֹף וְעֵינָךְ זְקוּף חֲזִי עָרָךְ דְּבָךְ כַּפְרִין

יְהוֹן כְּתִבְנָא בְּגוֹ לִיבְנָא כְּאַבְנָא יִשְׁתְּקוּן חָפְרִין

כְּקָאֵימְנָא וְתַרְגֵּימְנָא בְּמִלּוֹי דִּבְחִיר סַפְרִין

יְהוֹנָתָן גְּבַר עִינְוָותָן בְּכֵן לֵיהּ נַמְטִין אַפְרִין