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SHAVUOT

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VE-ATAH BANIM SHIRU LA-MELEKH – PEOPLE OVER ANGELS ON SHAVUOT

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Famous as the source text for a [modern hasidic tune](#), the *piyut* of *Ve-atah banim shiru la-Melekh* [fills a prominent slot in the Shavuot mahzor](#). It can be found immediately after the key words “*Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh*” in the [blessings before Shema](#). Composed by the great rabbi and liturgical composer Shimon Bar Yitzkhak of Mainz, Germany (950-1020), it was commonly said in many, if not most, of the *Nusah Ashkenaz* synagogues in Europe before the war and is still printed in almost all *Ashkenazi mahzorim* for Shavuot. In some modern *mahzorim* (such as Beit Tefillah and [ArtScroll](#)), it remains in its original lofty spot within the prayers while in others (such as Rinat Yisrael and the new [Koren Sacks mahzor](#)), it lost its prominence and was moved to the back, a fate shared with most of the other *piyutim*.

By now, it is likely that many readers are singing or humming the joyous modern tune of *Ve-atah banim* to themselves, and probably know the two lines of the song by heart. But the full *piyut* of *Ve-atah banim shiru la-Melekh* (“And now, children, sing unto the King”) actually has five stanzas, each comprising four lines. The lines commonly sung in the modern tune are the first line of the first stanza and the first line of the third stanza. While the rest of the *piyut* may not have a catchy tune, the entirety of this relatively short *piyut*, as well as its unconventional placement within the prayers, deserves our attention.

Ve-atah banim takes the form of an “*ofan*,” which is a *piyut* that is said in the midst of the daily section of prayers that recount the angels’ sanctification of G-D (right after the words “*Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh*” and before “*ve-ha’ofanim*”), and is usually an expansion of that topic. On Shavuot, however, the *ofan* of *Ve-atah banim*—one of the only *piyutim* instituted for both days of Shavuot—specifically deviates from the theme of the prayers. Rather than expanding on the song of angels, it describes a song of “children.”

While *Ve-atah banim* was one of the highlights of the Shavuot prayers for many generations—and was even singled out as one of

the key *piyutim* recited by the Vilna Gaon with great fervor¹—unfortunately, today, it is only recited in a handful of communities². Its message, however, remains as relevant as ever.

In this article, I would like to address the following two questions:

- 1- What is the connection between *Ve-atah banim* and the holiday of Shavuot?
- 2- Why would this *piyut*, which describes a song of “children,” find itself in the midst of a section recounting the song of angels?

This article will hopefully shed light on the key role that *Ve-atah banim* plays within the theme of Shavuot and perhaps even inspire some to find it in their own Shavuot *mahzor* and include it in their prayers or in their Yom Tov *zemiro*t this year.

But first, let us take a step back to better understand the background of Shavuot and its connection to *Mattan Torah* (the Giving of the Torah) so that we can appreciate the role of *Ve-atah banim* within the general context of the holiday.

Shavuot – A Time of Partnership

There is no explicit connection between Shavuot and *Mattan Torah* within the verses in the Torah that describe the holiday. The verses in

¹ The Vilna Gaon (Gra) specifically added *Ve-atah banim* to the list of *piyutim* that he recited on Shavuot after *Hallel* (since he thought it would be an interruption to say it within the blessings of *Shema*). Generally, the Gra recited many of the *piyutim* of the repetition of the *amidah* (after the leader’s repetition, or after *Hallel* on Yom Tov) but not many of the *piyutim* that were composed for the blessings of *Shema*. *Ve-atah banim* was an exception. In the first of only two *simanim* (numbered sections) on *Hilkhos Shavuot* in *Maaseh Rav* (*Siman* 195), it mentions that (based on the custom of the Gra) “*Ve-atah banim shiru la-Melekh* is recited with *kol zimrah* (chant) verse by verse (ie: responsively).”

² Although it is recited almost exclusively today at synagogues that follow German customs such as [KAJ \(Breuer’s\)](#) in Washington Heights, New York, *Ve-atah banim* is part of the liturgy of both *Minhag Polin* (Eastern European custom) and *Minhag Ashkenaz* (Western European custom). As such, it is just as much a part of the heritage of *Ashkenazi* Jews of Polish or other Eastern European countries as it is of German Jews.

Parashat Emor (Leviticus 23:15-21) mention that the 50th day of the *omer* is a holy day on which work is forbidden and on which an offering of new grain is brought to the temple, the two loaves of bread. In *Parashat Re'eh* (Deuteronomy 16:9-10) the holiday is specifically named Shavuot but, again, no reference is made to *Mattan Torah*.

It is the Rabbinic tradition that makes the connection between *Mattan Torah* and Shavuot³. The link to *Mattan Torah* is based on verses in *Parashat Yitro* (Exodus 19:1-19), which indicate that the revelation on *Har Sinai* (Mount Sinai) happened in the early days of the third month, Sivan—around the same time Shavuot occurs. While the exact dates are not explicit in the Torah, Rashi, based on the *Mekhilta*, understands that B'nei Yisrael arrived at *Har Sinai* on Rosh Hodesh Sivan.⁴ Once at *Har Sinai*, Moshe went up and down the mountain a couple of times to relay messages between Hashem and the people, after which there were three days of preparation prior to *Mattan Torah*. The *Mekhilta* (Exodus 19:10) aligns the various actions performed by Moshe (ascending and descending from the mountain as well as building an altar) with the different days of Sivan to support the accepted tradition that *Mattan Torah* occurred on Shavuot.

Basic math, however, coupled with the Talmud's conclusion of the timing of two historical events, relegates *Mattan Torah* to the 51st day of the *omer*—one day after Shavuot, and *Yom Tov Sheini* of Shavuot in the diaspora. The Talmud (*Shabbat* 86a and 87b) concludes that:

1. The Exodus from Egypt occurred on a Thursday. By extension the first night of the *omer* began on Thursday night.
2. *Mattan Torah* happened on Shabbat.⁵

Now for the math. The first night and the 50th night of the *omer* must fall out on the same night of the week. So if the first night of the *omer* is a Thursday night (as per #1), the 50th night must also be a Thursday night, and the 50th day would have to be a Friday. Since *Mattan Torah* happened on Shabbat (as per #2), it could, therefore, not have occurred on Shavuot but *could* have occurred on the following day, the 51st day of the *omer*.⁶ In fact, based on the traditional understanding of the verses in *Parashat Yitro* (Exodus 19:1-19) that *Mattan Torah* happened around the time of Shavuot (not a week before or a week later), we *must* say that it happened just one day off from the biblical holiday of Shavuot, which by definition is celebrated on the 50th day of the *omer*. It seems too close to be a true coincidence, and our tradition tells us that this is no coincidence. Shavuot and *Mattan Torah* are strongly related. We call the holiday *Z'man Mattan Torateinu* (the time of the giving of our Torah) in all of our prayers, as per the accepted Rabbinic tradition. But if *Mattan Torah* is related to Shavuot, why would it take place exactly one day later?

³ The connection of *Mattan Torah* to Shavuot is explicitly mentioned in the *Mekhilta* (Exodus 19:10) as well as in the Talmud (*Shabbat* 86b), among other places.

⁴ This is learned specifically from the words "*ba-yom ha-zeh*," on this day, which are written in the same sentence as "*ba-hodesh ha-shelishi*," in the third month, indicating that it likely was the first day of the month.

⁵ These days are also clearly listed in *Seder Olam Rabbah* 5:2.

⁶ Since the Torah wasn't given on the actual day of Shavuot, it is thus clear why the Torah doesn't mention *Mattan Torah* when it describes the holiday of Shavuot.

Let us take a short detour to discuss the calendar date of Shavuot before answering this question. The Torah does not assign a calendar date for Shavuot, but the verses in *Parashat Yitro* (Exodus 19:1-19), as understood by Rashi, suggest that Hashem was at the very least *planning* to give the Torah on the 6th of Sivan. There is a discussion in the Talmud, however, regarding whether the Torah was *actually* given on the 6th or 7th day of Sivan. According to the Rabbis, the Torah was given on the 6th of Sivan. According to Rav Yossi, the Torah was given on the 7th of Sivan. While Hashem intended to give it on the 6th, Moshe Rabeinu "*hosif yom ehad mi-da'ato*"—added an additional day to the preparatory days before *Mattan Torah* of his own volition, believing the people needed an extra day to get ready for the occasion (*Shabbat* 87a-b).⁷

Since there was not yet a set calendar when the Jews left Egypt and the months of Nissan and Iyar could have either had 29 or 30 days, the 51st day of the *omer* on which the Torah was given could have aligned with either the 6th or 7th day of Sivan. According to the Rabbis who say that the Torah was *actually* given on the 6th of Sivan, the 51st day of the *omer* must have coincided with the 6th of Sivan that year and then Shavuot itself (50th day of the *omer*) must have occurred on the 5th of Sivan.

According to Rav Yossi, the logic is more straightforward. The Torah was *meant* to be given on the 6th of Sivan, which was the 50th day of the *omer* (Shavuot) but Moshe asked to push it off one more day to the 7th of Sivan, which was the 51st day of the *omer* (*Shabbat*).⁸ This

⁷ This analysis purposely combines the two points described above, the one related to the day of the *omer* and the one related to the day of the month. The reason is as follows: While Rav Yossi's logic alone explains how the day was pushed off, his opinion, though generally accepted, is challenged by the Rabbis in the Talmud. In addition, many halakhic authorities, including *Magen Avraham* and *Mahatzit Hashekel* (*Shulhan Arukh*, *Orah Hayyim* 494), struggle with how to reconcile Rav Yossi's view that the Torah was given the day after Shavuot with the fact that we call Shavuot *Z'man Mattan Torateinu*.

The issue related to the days of the week (the Exodus on a Thursday and *Mattan Torah* on Shabbat, leading to the Torah being given on the 51st day of the *omer*), however, is a more accepted conclusion. It then also strengthens Rav Yossi's view, which provides an explanation for why *Mattan Torah* would end up being exactly one day after the biblical holiday. But the question of how we can say *Z'man Mattan Torateinu* remains. Our analysis further down in this article, based on *Nitei Gavriel* and *Rema mi-Pano*, addresses this issue: We can still say *Z'man Mattan Torateinu* even if the Torah was actually given a day later because, as will be explained below, that is when the Torah became *ours*. Therefore, Rav Yossi's view not only better aligns with the conclusion that the Torah was given on the 51st day of the *omer*, but is also no longer challenged by the issue of how we can say *Z'man Mattan Torateinu* a day too early.

⁸ As explained by Rashi in Verse 15, Rav Yossi builds upon a distinction in the words that describe the third day of preparation prior to *Mattan Torah*. Hashem uses the word "*Yom ha-Selishi*" (the third day) when speaking to Moshe, while Moshe uses "*Sheloshet Yamim*" (three days) when speaking with the people, the latter of which suggests three complete days of preparation prior to *Mattan Torah* (which would take place a day later). Despite being an opinion of a single rabbi against a majority, Rashi finds that Rav Yossi's opinion is convincing given the flow of the verses in *Parashat Yitro*. Further, as discussed by *Magen Avraham* in his commentary to

offers a clear explanation as to how *Mattan Torah* got pushed from the 50th day of the *omer* to the 51st.⁹

Today, since we have a set calendar, the 50th day of the *omer* (Shavuot) always coincides with the 6th of Sivan. So if we follow the view of Rav Yossi, the *second* day of Shavuot, the 51st day of the *omer*, will now always coincide with the day of *Mattan Torah*, the 7th of Sivan. But if that is the case, why are we calling the first (and in Israel only) day of the holiday *Z'man Mattan Torateinu*, what aspect of *Mattan Torah* are we celebrating on that day?

In the introduction to his Shavuot volume of *Nitei Gavriel*, Rabbi Gavriel Zinner (in following Rav Yossi's opinion) explains that on the 50th day of the *omer* (the first day of Shavuot), we celebrate our *partnership* in Torah. On this day, Moshe asked to add an extra day for the Jewish people and Hashem agreed. In listening to Moshe's request and altering the date of *Mattan Torah*, Hashem made it clear that we too have a role in shaping the scope of the observance of Torah. That is why the holiday is called *Mattan Torateinu*, the day of giving of *our* Torah. It is the day on which the Torah became *ours*.

Rema mi-Pano points out that the Torah was given specifically in the diaspora and on the 51st day of the *omer* (ie: on *Yom Tov Sheini*) and specifically on the day that Moshe added, to show that Hashem Himself was "celebrating" on *Yom Tov Sheini*.¹⁰ In fact, *Yom Tov Sheini*—which in the diaspora must be treated with the same reverence (and same laws) as a full-fledged Torah holiday—is a classic example of the rabbis doing exactly what Moshe did when he "added a day." Like Moshe, the rabbis used their own halakhic ingenuity to modify Torah practice for the realities of the diaspora, thereby partnering with God. The fact that the Torah was given on such a day is proof that Hashem views Torah as a partnership and accepts the rabbis' halakhic decisions just as He accepted Moshe's decision that B'nei Yisrael needed more time to prepare for *Mattan Torah*.

Given Rav Yossi's generally accepted view that Hashem agreed to push *Mattan Torah* off by one day, we can understand why we celebrate *Mattan Torah* on the day before the Torah was given. The most important day for us to celebrate is not the day on which we actually received the Torah but the day on which the partnership *began*—the day on which Hashem *agreed* with Moshe's (and our) partnership in Torah. That day is the 50th day of the *omer*. In other words, for generations later, what we celebrate is not the day on

Shulhan Arukh (Orah Hayyim 494), there is a Halakhah related to *Hilkhot Niddah (Yoreh De'ah 196)* that is learned from the extra day of separation that Moshe added according to Rav Yossi, and many authorities learn from there that Rav Yossi's view is generally considered authoritative.

⁹ The Rabbis (who argue with Rav Yossi) can still accept that the Torah was given on the 51st day of the *omer*, but they have a hard time explaining why it was pushed off, unless they argue that it was never meant to be given on Shavuot. According to them, we can still say *Z'man Mattan Torateinu* since today the 6th of Sivan always falls on the 50th day of the *omer* (Shavuot), even though it fell on the 51st day at the time of *Mattan Torah*. As such, Shavuot is now celebrated on the same *calendar date* as *Mattan Torah*, even if historically they did not actually occur on the same date. But it is still unclear (according to the Rabbis) why the Torah was given on the 51st and not on the 50th if it is connected to Shavuot.

¹⁰ The text of the *Rema mi-Pano* (Italy, 1548 – 1620) [can be found here](#), beginning at "od ta'amo" five lines from the bottom.

which the Torah was given but the day on which God proclaimed how the Torah would be treated—as a partnership with man.

The Talmud (*Shabbat* 88b, 89a) describes how the angels weren't happy that the Torah was taken "down" to the people. Moshe explained to the angels that the Torah *cannot* possibly be relevant to them. First, it is focused on elevating the physical aspects of the world and humanity, which angels have nothing to do with, and second, it places great emphasis on social interactions (such as honoring one's parents) that are of no relevance to angels. While Moshe's attempts at placation were admirable, these explanations were surely obvious to the angels. Clearly there was something deeper bothering them about God's choice to give the Torah to people.

Rabbi Gavriel Zinner explains that the angels must have been particularly disturbed by this new *partnership* between Hashem and the Jewish people that was created on the 50th day of the *omer*. Angels just follow God's orders blindly; they didn't understand the idea that people could influence Torah, as Moshe did on the 6th of Sivan when he added an extra day "*mi-da'ato*." It was this partnership that was created at the time of *Mattan Torah* which the angels could not countenance.

Ve-Atah Banim Shiru La-Melekh - The Song of Man

This background can now help us understand the role of *Ve-atah banim shiru la-Melekh* within the Shavuot liturgy.

On Shavuot, after we describe the praises of Hashem that are sung by the angels and recite "*Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh*," we cannot continue without adding our own two cents. The words "*Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh*," taken from Isaiah 6:3, were sung by a choir of angels in the famed mystical vision of the prophet Yeshayahu. In his vision, Yeshayahu saw Hashem enthroned among the heavenly hosts, the angels, who praised Him in unison. On Shavuot, we are focused on the fact that we are *greater* than the angels because we are part of a true *partnership* with Hashem. The *piyut* of *Ve-atah banim shiru la-Melekh*, "and now, children, sing unto the King," focuses not on the angels but on the *banim*, Hashem's children, referring to the Jewish people. It interjects our daily description of the angels' song to make a point that we are greater. In other words, the *piyut* essentially proclaims, "put that on hold, angels, now is the time for the children to sing!"

As mentioned above, the [piyut](#) consists of five stanzas, each comprising four lines. Let us explore just the first and last lines of the *piyut*:

1- *Ve-atah banim shiru la-Melekh be-tiferet mefoar* (first line of *piyut*)

And now, children, sing unto the King Who is glorified with splendor¹¹

The first word "*Ve-atah*" signifies that it is a continuation of the previous section of the prayers. As discussed above, the previous words were "*Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh*," the praise of Hashem uttered by the angels. The *piyut* begins with the words "and now" to build upon the previous lines: "And now" that we started describing the role of the angels in sanctifying Hashem, it is time to describe *our* role. On Shavuot, when we celebrate our Torah partnership with Hashem, we will not take a back seat to the angels. Our "song,"

¹¹ All translations are taken from the [ArtScroll mahzor](#)

symbolizing our constant and persistent connection with our Creator, overtakes that of the angels because it matters most. As the second word of the *piyut* states, it is the song of the “*banim*” (literally, the sons, but often translated more generally as children). Unlike a ruler who may not care about the opinions of his subjects, a father cares deeply about those of his children. While the father has the final word, the suggestions of his children definitely have an impact on his decision making and may often sway his decision. The children are ultimately partners, not subjects. Hashem is our Father, and from the day of *Mattan Torah*, He made it clear that our voice will always be heard and considered. As long as we keep singing the song of the “*banim*,” we will be treated as Hashem’s children and will remember our unique role as part of a partnership of Torah.

2- *Ahar shetei teivot mazkirim Shem Kodsho, lehodia lakol ki hem zera Kedosh* (final line of *piyut*)

After two words they mention His Holy Name, to inform all that they are His holy offspring

Although this final line of *Ve-atah banim* did not make it into the popular song, it is arguably the *piyut*’s punchline. The line hints to a discussion in the Talmud (*Hulin* 91b) regarding how the angels need three *teivot* (words) to sanctify Hashem’s name while we only need two. In their key prayer, they say “*Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh*,” and only then “Hashem.” The Jewish people, on the other hand, need only two *teivot*. In our key prayer, we say “*Shema Yisrael*,” and then “Hashem.” This can be understood as a “proof,” so to speak, that we are a step above the angels! If so, we have a right to be interrupting the angels’ song to sing our own.

The idea that we are superior to the angels is also expressed in another more commonly recited *piyut* of Shavuot, *Akdamut Milin*¹², which is recited prior to the Torah reading of the first day. After describing the greatness of the angels in depth, *Akdamut* includes the following line:

*Adav yekar ahasantei havivin d-vikvata,
Avida lei hativah bi-dnah u-shkata*

But the portion of His precious inheritance is better, for with regularity

They make Him their sole desire, at sunrise and sunset

The above line from *Akdamut* is based on an idea described in the same section of Talmud cited above, which mentions that the Jewish people pray more regularly than the angels and say *Shema* twice daily, in the “morning and the evening.” In fact, according to the Talmud (*Hulin* 91b), the angels recite their praises of Hashem either once a day, once a week, once a month or once in 50 years, and otherwise remain uninvolved.

The regularity with which we pray and speak exemplifies the idea that we are regular and consistent partners who are constantly in touch, unlike the angels who do not offer their praises as often. The *piyut* of *Ve-atah banim* plays a similar role as *Akdamut* in describing our remarkable status above the angels, but at a much earlier—and arguably more critical—point in the prayers as far as angels are concerned. It specifically disrupts the daily description of the *kedushah* recited by the angels to make the point that it is now time for our *shirah*.

¹² Composed by Rabbi Meir bar Yitzchak who was a cantor in Worms, Germany in the 11th century.

Particularly on Shavuot, a holiday focused on pointing out the Torah’s place among humans in the physical world, the great *paytan* Shimon Bar Yitzchak of Mainz felt compelled to remind us of our “song” that we must offer Hashem. The song signifies our active role in shaping our partnership in Torah that only humans, not angels, can achieve. By interrupting the regular description of the song of angels with a description of our own song to God, *Ve-atah banim shiru la-Melekh* reminds us—in a very unique way—of our special role. Whether we recite this song within our prayers or sing it at the Yom Tov table, we can hopefully gain new strength from this beautiful, nearly 1000-year old, *piyut* during the upcoming Yom Tov.

SHAVUOT: THE WAKEUP CALL

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A Contemporary Reading of Rabbi Yaakov Leiner on Matan Torah¹³

“In the morning the Torah was given, and in the evening—the *mishpatim* (ordinances).”¹⁴

Using this brief line of the midrash (*Shemot Rabbah* 30:1), R. Yaakov Leiner (1818-1878), Hasidic Master and heir to the Izbica-Radzyn dynasty, shows us how he envisions what occurred at the Revelation at Sinai. Based on this midrash, R. Yaakov suggests that when the Children of Israel received the Torah, the people themselves were in a state of utter clarity—their minds were enlightened, clear as the bright morning sun. R. Yaakov depicts just what that morning clarity entailed:

What this means is that at the moment Israel heard the utterance “I am the Lord Your God” (Exodus 20:2), they knew that all creations are merely “livushin” for God’s will, only that there are gradations: higher (more refined) “livushin” and lower (coarser) “livushin.” (Beit Yaakov, Mishpatim 4)

The term “*livushin*” can literally be translated as garments or clothing. In the hands of the Hasidic masters, however, it is a symbol, a code word, for a foundational principle encapsulating a subtle yet comprehensive and penetrating worldview.

According to this viewpoint, we perceive the world in various layers. Reality, everything in the world, is covered—cloaked—with a “garment” concealing its true essence. That true essence can be

¹³ The ideas in this article are based on two teachings of Rabbi Yaakov Leiner, which he lays out in his work, *Beit Yaakov* (I refer to *Mishpatim* 4 and *Yitro* 86 in particular throughout this essay). All translations are my own. My in-depth article on the teaching in *Mishpatim* 4 will appear in the forthcoming anthology on teaching the Hasidic Homily, a project that is currently being directed and carried out by Prof. Elie Holzer in Jerusalem.

¹⁴ R. Yaakov’s teaching also builds upon the simpler understanding in this midrash that these two terms refer to different kinds of laws: “Torah” refers to the ten commandments, while “*mishpatim*” refers to the laws in *Parashat Mishpatim*.

described as holiness, Godliness, or *Retzon Hashem* (the Will of God). Some things are covered in “coarser *livushim*,” that is, with heavy layers, greatly obscuring what lies underneath. It is hard, perhaps, to see the holiness in a rock or a grain of sand, or even a harsh personality. Other things are cloaked in a thinner fabric, “a refined *livush*,” making it easy to see the shape it is draping. We more readily appreciate a glorious sunset or see a spark of the divine when we behold the innocent face of a newborn child. But the spirit of God pulsates as the animating force hidden behind every cover and every aspect of reality.

The *drashah* continues: “However, at the moment of *Matan Torah* (the giving of the Torah), all of Israel saw clearly that (in truth) all the details of daily life are with The Holy One, Blessed be He, and that the entirety of creation is a mere garment of His Will” (*Beit Yaakov, Mishpatim 4*).

At the time of *Matan Torah*, R. Yaakov asserts, all veils were lifted. *B’nei Yisrael* (the children of Israel) encountered the world as it really is—stripped, as it were, of its coverings. They encountered the divinity of existence as clearly as the morning sun, and they perceived that everything—even the most mundane of elements—is a *livush* for God’s will. For a brief moment, they were gifted with the unique awareness that I call “Sinai consciousness.”

R. Yaakov goes on to describe what occurred at the moment God uttered His *dibrot* (the Ten Commandments): “At the moment The Holy One, Blessed be He, gave the Torah to Israel, each *dibur* (utterance) impacted upon the root of each individual’s heart beyond their intellectual cognition” (*Beit Yaakov, Yitro 86*). The *diburim* purified and refined the foundation of their being, both body and soul, so that they were now naturally attuned to “refrain from evil and do good” ([Psalms 34:15](#)).

This was so because they grasped each of the commandments with complete clarity, like the morning in which they were given; they were “full of life and light,” to use R. Yaakov’s phrase. This divine life force entered the heart of each member of Israel so that they truly became “like the *dibur* itself,” fully aligned and at one with it.

R. Yaakov pictures a unitive reality: when a human being encounters God’s utterance, the *dibur* impacts upon—and then merges with and becomes—the natural desires of the human heart. Divine essence becomes human nature.

Elaborating on how God’s word influenced their state of mind, R. Yaakov says that as God uttered the words “Thou shall Not Murder” ([Exodus 20:13](#)), the effects were instantaneous: “Immediately, the life force of the *dibur* ‘Thou shall not murder’ entered their hearts, and they became completely good-hearted, meaning they felt absolutely no restraints, no *tzimtzum* (constriction) whatsoever. They simply would not withhold abundance and kindness from any place” (*Beit Yaakov, Yitro 86*).

How does R. Yaakov get from a simple, straight forward commandment, “Thou shall not murder,” to the lofty ideal of complete good-heartedness and an overflow of benevolent feelings and good will?

R. Yaakov digs down to the roots, until he is convinced that he has reached the core of the *dibur*. The foundation of “Thou Shall not murder” is premised on the value of life. Simply put, it means, “Do not deprive life.” One can achieve this by withholding, by stopping oneself from taking another life. This is the first stage of the meaning

of “Thou shall not murder.” I found the idea of non-violence in Hindu thought (called *ahimsa*) to be a particularly helpful formulation. *Ahimsa* is defined by Indologist Wendy Doniger¹⁵ as “the absence of the desire to injure or kill, a disinclination to do harm, rather than an active desire to be gentle.”

But, R. Yaakov is not done digging. There is a deeper level. According to him, the mindset of “Thou shall not murder” is not only the removal of the desire to deprive life, but also the positive desire to give life as well. When the desire to deprive is removed, the void it leaves is filled with the positive urge to give life—and by extension, to disseminate love and kindness to one and all without bounds. However, this is not really a linear process; rather, it is experienced concurrently.

At its root, “Thou shall not murder” means that when one cannot entertain the possibility of depriving life, one is simultaneously imbued with desire to not only give life, but also to give generously and continuously with no limits. For R. Yaakov, this experience is the embodiment of the *middah* (character trait) of *hesed*, the impulse to give life, which expresses itself in loving-kindness.

Thus, when internalized in its totality, the negative commandment “Thou shall not murder” actually inverts and becomes a positive injunction: “Give life!” Martin Luther King Jr. was referring precisely to this broader, more encompassing understanding when he said, “At the center of non-violence stands the principle of love.”¹⁶

R. Yaakov says that this unbridled force of love, of life-giving energy, seems to directly conflict with the next *dibur*: “Do not commit adultery.” How does the consciousness of unbridled love for life accommodate itself to the opposing demand to limit one’s love when it is prohibited?

R. Yaakov teaches that just as the *dibur* “Thou shall not murder” was stripped down to its root meaning at Mount Sinai, so too, the *dibur* “Do not commit adultery” was pared down to its deepest essence as well. At its core, the prohibition against adultery meant that the Children of Israel absorbed the truth that the Holy One, Blessed be He, holds us accountable to the strictest standards (in this case of sexual mores). “Thou shalt not commit adultery” ultimately means that one must be ever vigilant to utterly withhold love and generosity when it is inappropriate—to restrict and restrain when necessary.

At the moment of Revelation, they were—with no contradiction—able to hold an unrestrained desire to give life and indiscriminate love to all and to simultaneously completely suppress prohibited kinds of love. At the height of this “Sinai consciousness,” this paradox existed naturally, intuitively, and reflexively in the minds of the people, without a struggle. At Sinai, a person was able to embody diametrically opposing qualities and hold these *middot*¹⁷ in perfect balance.

¹⁵ Wendy Doniger, [The Hindus: An Alternative History](#) (London: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9.

¹⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., “An Experiment in Love” in [A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), ed. James Melvin Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 19.

¹⁷ In Hebrew, the word for character traits, *middot*, also means measurements. The notion that a character trait is also a specific measured portion, as opposed to an unquantifiable emotion, highlights the difficulty to achieve a balance.

R. Yaakov teaches, “These *dibrot* were not in conflict with one another because they were *dibrot* of life, and life is One.” How could it be that these conflicting *middot* did not cause discord amongst the people? The answer is this: at Sinai, the people grasped absolute love and absolute awe, total giving and at the same time total restraint, as they emanated forth from God’s unitive source. God alone is One; God is the source of All. Within God, the *middot* all exist, but they exist in an undifferentiated form—therefore, there are no conflicts.

What would our interactions look like if opposing impulses and character traits were perfectly aligned? R. Yaakov continues, “Each *dibur* (naturally) yielded to the other, and despite the fact that each one found full expression, nevertheless, each one naturally equalized with the others.” Self-limiting and making room for one another was done intuitively with no need for any person to impose his or her will and no need for a command.

R. Yaakov supports this understanding with an innovative interpretation of the well-known discrepancy between the two versions of the Ten Commandments recorded in the Torah. When God first gives the *dibrot* in Exodus, they are written as separate statements—“Thou shall not murder/Thou shall not commit adultery/That shall not steal” ([Exodus 20:13](#))—without the word “and” (denoted by the Hebrew letter “vav”) between one commandment and the next. Here, each *dibur* stands independently; the commandments are not separated by anything, nor do they require a boundary. However, when Moses retells the experience in the Deuteronomy and wishes to impart the content of the Revelation to the Jewish people, the second recounting required the letter “vav” between each *dibur*. There the verses read, “Thou shall not murder, **and** thou shall not commit adultery, **and** thou shall not steal” ([Deuteronomy 5:17](#)).

What this means, according to R. Yaakov, is this: at Sinai, it was entirely unnecessary to impose any boundary. The letter “vav” is a boundary, and it means, “Here you can love, but here you must stop.” Yet in this “Sinai consciousness,” each opposing commandment was able to exist fully with no limits and still paradoxically not be in conflict with the other. Since the Children of Israel grasped the true essence of the divine intent, the boundaries and commandments were entirely unnecessary, even superfluous. As R. Yaakov says, at Sinai, the people themselves “embodied the *dibur*, and their hearts were saturated with kindness, such that it would be as absurd to command them not to murder as it would be absurd to command a father not to kill his son” (*Beit Yaakov, Yitro 86*).

R. Yaakov sheds light on this ideal mindset when one lives in a state fully absorbed in this clarity—when human nature is entirely in attunement with the divine will.¹⁸

But alas, that moment of clarity was not to last. Just as evening follows morning, darkness follows light; certainty recedes, and the wakeful state gives way to slumber.

¹⁸ This is, of course, the ideal relationship that we human beings seek with each other as well; one where each member intuits the will of the other, where the union flows spontaneously, un-self-consciously, in total harmony. R. Yaakov teaches later in this same *drashah*: “In this world, there is no human being whose nature is rooted in divine traits, one who is not affected by his inborn/intuitive negative traits” (*Yitro 86*).

And so, R. Yaakov explains, after this powerful moment of illumination, when the Children of Israel could no longer handle the intensity of God’s presence, they ask Moses to intervene. R. Yaakov describes this in the following way::

The life force of the *dibrot* became concealed, and they remained like one who is asleep. . . . The full life [inner meaning] of the *dibrot* became like a sketch, one whose inner vitality disappeared from their conscious mind, and only the *livush*, their outer garment, was revealed to them.

At that instant, the inner meaning of the command “Do not murder” disappeared, and its vitality vanished with it. The *dibrot* lost their life and energy and became “just” commands. “Do not murder” was now constricted to a negative statement and was grasped solely in its exterior meaning, as if the commandment was merely to refrain from killing. The same became true for all the commandments, as their deeper meaning was no longer naturally intuited. R. Yaakov suggests that from that moment on, the people experienced the *dibrot* as one does when instructed, “Do this, and do not do that.” From then on, they would perform the duties just because “someone else” asked them to do so, but the passion was gone; their heartfelt conviction was lost.

According to R. Yaakov’s interpretation of the midrash “When Moses descended Mount Sinai and saw the golden calf, the letters flew away from the tablets” ([Midrash Tanhuma, Ki Tisa 26](#)), it was just then that the “inner life force flew out of the *dibrot*” (*Beit Yaakov, Yitro 86*), leaving only the stone upon which they were inscribed. At that moment, Moses’s hands became heavy until the Tablets fell from them and were smashed. Without that energy, the “light and life” behind the commandments, the precarious harmony that existed between them fell away as well.

Unlimited love and absolute restraint were suddenly in conflict with one another. The Torah, instead of bringing life and clarity, seemed entirely embattled. Now, if one were to attempt to live the Sinai consciousness of “Thou shall not murder” with unbridled compassion, one would end up distorting this *dibur* and exercising compassion where it did not belong. If one were to withhold compassion and generosity, as per the essence of the commandment against adultery, it might cause misplaced callousness. Such behavior would result in the famous dictum: “One who has compassion for those who are cruel will result in being cruel to those in need of compassion” ([Midrash Tanhuma, Metzora 1](#)).

And so, Moses’s hands became heavy, the tension between the *dibrot* could not be contained, and the Tablets shattered.

But in their place, we received the second *luhot* (tablets). R. Yaakov contends that the first *luhot* are reflected in Exodus (in *Parashat Yitro*), while the second *luhot* are reflected in Deuteronomy (in *Parashat Va-ethanan*).¹⁹ These second commandments have a “vav” in between each utterance—the “vav” that delineates an external limit. The “vav” represents the boundaries of law that we need, as they tell us that enthusiasm, love, *hesed*, expansiveness, as well as restraint, restrictions, and self-control, should go to this extent and

¹⁹ This contention already appears earlier in *Tiferet Yisrael*, a work written by R. Judah Loew ben Bezalel (Maharal), at the end of chapter 44: “And according to the view of our Rabbis, the second tablets contain the *dibrot* in *Parashat Va-ethanan* and not the first (tablets), which have the words from *Parashat Yitro*.”

not to that extent. They are the blessings of law which make life—the hidden life within the *luhot*—possible.

But this blessing is not easily apparent. The acceptance of law is the acceptance of the limitations of our humanity: “And it was very hard for them to receive the law” (*Beit Yaakov, Mishpatim 4*), which was given in the evening, in the hiddenness of God’s face. It was painfully difficult, says R. Yaakov, for them to go from the ultimate state of clarity and coherence to the dos and don’ts of legislation—or, in other words, to go from revelation to regulations.

For us as well, the laws are difficult to carry out at times. It is often very hard to see the “life and light” embedded in every mitzvah, every prayer service, and every obligation. It is a constant challenge not to fall into performing them numbly, “as if we are asleep” (*Beit Yaakov, Yitro 86*).

But here, R. Yaakov is at his most empathetic as he acknowledges this challenge and shows us the path to lead us out of this spiritual lethargy:

The Torah is not a book of dry commands, “do this, don’t do that” (like a dead letter). Their vital life force has not been entirely removed. Rather, the command appears lifeless, like a sleeping person. But just like a sleeping person can easily be stirred and woken up, so too may the divine life of the Torah be awoken.

The energy, “the light and life” of the commandments, has not been extinguished. It is right there, waiting to be rekindled like a light sleeper who can easily be stirred out of his sleep: “By learning Torah, we arouse the inner meaning of the Torah. The words impact upon the person so that he is roused anew, just like at *Matan Torah*” (*Beit Yaakov, Yitro 86*).

Every time we learn Torah, every time we approach God’s word earnestly, we have a chance to revisit *Matan Torah*, to regain that Sinai consciousness, if only for a brief moment.

On Shavuot night, we stay awake learning Torah all night. We stay awake with the hopes that we will awaken within ourselves the vital life force and clarity which pulsates behind every word and every commandment. Perhaps, as the morning dawns, we may for a moment have the clarity to become like the *dibur* itself.

TORAT HASHEM HEFTZO: FINDING WONDER IN TORAH STUDY DETERMINISM AND HUMAN PURPOSE

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We are all familiar with situations in which observant Jews who study Torah have not been fortunate to see their children follow in their footsteps. It would seem to be obvious that the children of people who study Torah are inspired to live a Torah-based life themselves. After all, their parents know how to explain it and make it accessible to them and can inculcate within them the love and knowledge of Torah. It might even be said that spiritual genetics should contribute to religious continuity.

Why do young adults raised in homes steeped in Torah still sometimes leave formal observance? This question, which is raised so frequently nowadays, was already discussed in the Talmud, in *Nedarim* 81a. Naturally, the very fact that the rabbis discussed this issue indicates their profound and significant soul-searching in regard to the way they educated their children and that at times they did not always succeed, a situation with which we can identify today. According to our rabbis’ conversation in *Nedarim*, the lack of religious continuity among their children is meant to teach *talmidei hakhamim* not to be haughty regarding their engagement with the community, and not to think “that the Torah was given to them as an inheritance.” But Ravina suggests a different, surprising reason: “Because the Torah scholars did not recite the blessing before studying Torah.” This is a continuation of the words of Rav, who even attributes the destruction of the First Temple to this cause. We must therefore ask ourselves what is the significance of the blessings over the Torah, such that their neglect led to the lack of religious observance amongst the children of the Torah scholars and the destruction of our Temple.

Maimonides, in the *Laws of Berakhot*, recounts the different types of blessings: blessings of enjoyment (*birkot ha-nehenin*), blessings over *mitzvot*, and blessings of thanksgiving and praise. He elaborates on all types of blessings, beginning with *birkat ha-mazon* up until the blessing over *arba’at ha-minim* on Sukkot. The only blessings absent from this list are the blessings over the Torah. These, Maimonides mentions only in the *Laws of Tefillah*, chapter 7:10:

One who rises early to read from the Torah before he recites the reading of the *Shema* - whether from the written Torah or from the oral Torah - washes his hands first and says three blessings and afterwards reads. And these are they: Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us about the words of Torah. May the Lord our God please make sweet the words of Your Torah in our mouths and in the mouths of Your nation the entire House of Israel. And may we and our offspring and the offspring of Your nation be those who know Your name and those involved in Torah. Blessed are You, Lord, who teaches Torah to His nation Israel. Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who chose us from all the nations and gave us His Torah. Blessed are you Lord, giver of the Torah.

It is evident from here that the recitation of these blessings enables Torah study. If someone wants to eat an apple, one must recite "*borei pri ha-etz*"; and if one has now chosen to study Torah, he or she must first recite its blessings before doing so. But in the next Halakhah, Maimonides states that this blessing is to be recited every day, and that afterwards one must read a selection from the Biblical text or the words of the sages:

One is obligated to recite these three blessings every day. Afterwards, one should read a few words of Torah. The people adopted the custom of reading the Priestly Blessing. In certain places, they recite [the passage, (Numbers 28: 1-9)]: "Command the children of Israel...", and there are places where they read both of them. Also, [it is proper] to read chapters or laws from the Mishnah and the *Baraitot* (*ibid.*:11).

However, the meaning of this duality is unclear: does the *berakhah* make Torah study possible? Or is the reading of Torah texts a response to the obligation of reciting a daily blessing on Torah study? In any case, why was this included in the *Laws of Tefillah* rather than in the *Laws of Berakhot* or the *Laws of Torah Study*?

If we return to the Talmudic text (*Berakhot* 11b), we see that an even more basic question is the subject of controversy: Which type of Torah study requires a blessing? While Rav Huna states that we recite the blessing only over studying the Biblical text, Rabbi Eliezer adds Midrash and Rabbi Yohanan includes the Mishnah. Rava goes so far as to say that one should recite the blessing on Talmud study as well. What principles underlie this difference of opinion? It can be suggested that the argument is predicated upon what is considered Torah that requires a "*matir*" of a *berakhah*. Rav Huna sees the requirement for blessings over Torah to make it permissible to study God's word as applying **only** to the Biblical text. Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yohanan extend God's word to include limited rabbinic text; they differ regarding the distance from the Torah that rabbinic texts lose their status as "God speak". Does it continue with the Midrash, which directly interprets the Biblical text? Does it also include the halakhic rulings of the Mishnah? Rava, whose position is accepted as Halakhah, extends this holiness to the Talmud – the human conversation that interprets the text – and so this, too, requires the recitation of the Torah blessings.

The discussion of which forms of Torah study require a blessing as well as the positioning of *birkot ha-Torah* in Maimonides' Laws of Prayer are reflected in the specific terminology used in the three *berakhot* recited. The first blessing "...Blessed are You...who commanded us concerning words of Torah," relates to the historical connection which was initiated at Mount Sinai, and from that moment on, each and every Jew has an insoluble link to the Torah. The passive and static language that Maimonides chooses for the formulation of the first *berakhah* "*al divrei Torah*" –upon words of Torah, rather than the more dynamic formulation of "*la'asok be-divrei Torah*" – to *engage* in the words of Torah, highlights that this *berakhah* is reserved for the historical dimension of the Torah experience.

The second blessing, which opens with the words "*ha'arev na*," may the words of Torah be pleasant, and ends with "*ha-melamed Torah le-ammo Yisrael*," who teaches Torah to His people, Israel, adds an emphasis of engagement to the one who studies Torah. We have to carry on the powerful experience at Sinai through our profound engagement with Torah, channeling the "sounds and lightning" by way of the Beit Midrash, the house of study. The power of this

engagement is why our sages state that there is no justification for the existence of the Beit Midrash without *hiddush* – without new and novel interpretation.

Now we can understand Rava's approach. It is truly through the discussions of the sages that we experience the most potent expression of holiness. Through the analysis and exploration we find what is most alive and eternal in Torah: the ability for us to kindle God's light.

The third *berakhah* connects these two points, describing the passive historical dimension, "*asher bahar banu mi-kol ha-amim*," who has chosen us from amongst the nations, but at the same time "*natan lanu et Torah-to*," who gave **us** His Torah. This is the active and dynamic aspect of *limud* which expresses our responsibility for continuity in the Torah.

If so, the blessings over the Torah were not only intended to make study permissible, or to express thanks for the privilege of such engagement, but to provide context. The Torah comes with a compass that always points towards the learner, derived from the gravitational pull of our fidelity towards tradition, responsibility to the *mesorah* and at the same time the mandated desire to develop new insights. This compass shows us the way, from whence we came and to where we are going.

Maimonides, in contrast with others who enumerated the Torah's commandments, does not count the *mitzvah* to recite *birkot ha-Torah* as part of the 613 commandments in his *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* (see Nahmanides notes to Maimonides' *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Commandment 15 and the *Megillat Esther op cit.*). From his perspective, the recitation of these blessings is not a *mitzvah* that is separate from the commandment to study Torah. The context is not meaningful without the text itself, and the Biblical text cannot be actualized without its context. In this manner, it is possible that the two *halakhot* linked to *birkot ha-Torah* express the above duality. It would be correct to say that the *berakhah* makes Torah study permissible, but also that the blessing creates the context for study.

It is for this similar reason that *birkot ha-Torah* appears in the *Mishneh Torah's Hilkhot Tefillah*. Prayer and Torah study are two sides of the same coin, channels of communication between the Holy One Blessed Be He and His People. While prayer springs from below and reaches up towards heaven, Torah's source comes from above and faces the earth. The blessings over the Torah, similar to prayer, originate in human action, which the Kabbalists call "*Itaruta de-letata*," an awakening from below. They frame the discourse, indicate direction and purpose, and draw Torah study towards the student.

In this context, let us examine another point. The third blessing, "*asher bahar banu*," Who has chosen us, is recited again, after having been said during the morning blessings, by one who receives an *aliyah* in the synagogue. The communal Torah reading is the "tribal campfire" – the focal point of the religious community. Shabbat after Shabbat, year after year, the congregation gathers and creates a shared bond with the Torah, additional to the personal bond held by each individual. In many senses, the Torah reading provides context to the synagogue experience; it empowers the gathering of individuals into a community. These two aspects of Torah study are the "*tzvei dinim of limud ha-Torah*" – the two essential and different components of our engagement with Torah study, each requiring their own separate benediction.

As was previously explained, the blessings have a dual role. On the one hand, they make it possible to approach the holy, enabling the immersion of the student into the world of Torah, and on the other, they are the catalyst for Torah study. Those who recite the *berakhah* with the proper mindset recognize the miraculous nature of what they are about to do, and are filled with desire and the will to delve deeply and find new insights. Suddenly they feel that their lungs are empty and must fill them with air, to breathe in spirituality and holiness. How can someone recite *birkat Ha-Torah* and not immediately sit down and read a chapter from the *Humash* or a page of the *Gemara*?

Perhaps this is the tragedy for some of our children. Sometimes the learning lacks context; a person does not understand why and with whom he or she is sitting and reading texts that are centuries and millennia old. What is the point of contact between the learner and the text, and where is it supposed to lead? Sometimes a young person may feel the need to walk away, for their engagement in Torah study has caused him or her to drown in the sea of material. The learner hears his or her entire life about the importance of Torah study and the grandeur of the tradition. This learner is provided with skills and interpretations, with knowledge and information, until he or she feels put upon, with no room to move and no ink in their quill in order to scribe the next chapter. The learner is blinded to the opportunity of owning the text, shaping the text, and using it to inspire and create a romantic rendezvous with God.

Rabbi Haim of Volozhin, in his introduction to the Vilna Gaon's commentary on *Sifra De-Tzniuta*, explains the need for autonomy in Torah study:

He [the Gaon of Vilna] did not gain satisfaction other than from the work he did in wisdom and intellect and ability and after much strain, when Heaven had mercy upon him and wellsprings of wisdom were revealed to him, secrets of secrets and hidden things inside hidden things, this was for him a gift of God. Other than this [aspects of mysticism], he [the Vilna Gaon] did not want them, even though the heavens wished to give him, without any work or exhaustion, celestial secrets via angelic messengers, masters of secrets and officers of Torah. He did not raise his eyes to this. It was close to him, and he distanced it. I heard from his sacred mouth that angelic messengers often rose early to his door, desiring to convey to him secrets of Torah without any work, and he did not turn his ear to them at all. One of the angelic messengers pressed him greatly, but he did not look upon the angel's great appearance. He answered and told him, "I do not want my grasp of God's Torah to come via any intermediary at all; my eyes are raised only to Him. That which He wishes to reveal to me and give me as my portion in His Torah for the work I have done with all of my energy, He will give me wisdom, from His mouth comes intellect and comprehension, when He gives me a comprehending heart..."

Heavenly messengers and angels appeared to the Vilna Gaon and wished to bestow Torah learning upon him from above, without any exertion or work on his part. Yet he understood that accepting their assistance would mean giving up independence, losing his freedom and personal responsibility in the world of Torah. Without being oriented and grounded, a person can become lost; when it becomes overwhelming - he or she goes nowhere. Wonder vanishes, and the capacity for novel interpretation disappears. There is no air to breathe. Even when the sages recited the blessings over the Torah, perhaps the concept of making Torah one's own had not been effectively communicated to their children. The *berakhot* had not been fully contextualized and thus not properly recited.

Unfortunately, many of our sons and daughters feel stifled and disconnected in our communities. There may be many reasons for this. Free choice exists and *mazal* - good fortune - is necessary. "Everything depends on *mazal*, even the Torah Scroll in the Temple" (*Zohar* 3, 134a). However, we the community must take ownership of this challenge. The role of the community is to provide a person with context for a life of faith and Halakhah. Sometimes instead of providing that, it chains the learner to a single interpretation or to a particular tradition which allows no room for personal space to create a meaningful connection to Torah.

Over the past several, long months our synagogues were locked, communities were separated and the *Sefer Torah* remained like an orphan, alone in the Holy Ark. Many tried to maintain at home the regular rhythms of prayer and read the Torah from a *Humash*. We all discovered new contexts, yearning for the community of the future. As we return to our synagogues, *midrashot* and *yeshivot*, we will have to act wisely to preserve wonder and novelty, to allow all worshippers, both men and women, air to breathe and the opportunity to write the next storied chapter within the Sea of Torah.

(Some of the ideas reflected in this article were heard from Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. They are not formally attributed as I know not where his ideas end and my musings begin).

MOSHE THE MARVELOUS

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When Moshe reached the top of Mount Sinai, he found God sitting at the peak, holding a deck of cards. The cards were normal size, but they looked tiny in His mighty hands.

"Pick a card," said God, fanning them out, faces to Moshe. "Any card."

Moshe picked a card. The king of hearts.

"Now," said God, "put it back in the deck." And God held the deck out to Moshe, who stuck it in the middle while God turned His face away.

"Would you like to shuffle them?" asked God, and Moshe took the cards in his two hands. He shuffled them, but clumsily, for he was not one for games.

"Now hand them back to Me," said God, and Moshe did.

God held the cards and began shifting them from hand to hand, spinning the deck this way and that, shuffling and reshuffling. "I am the Lord your God," said God, and the cards flew over His head, from one hand to the other. "The One who brought you out of Egypt." The cards exploded outwards in every direction, fluttered in the air like birds, surrounding Moshe in a cloud of white and red and black. God turned up his palm and the cards flew back towards it.

"No other gods than Me," said God, and with His pinky He jabbed at the deck, cutting it in half. The cards began to bleed where they had been cut. "And do not use My name in vain." He clapped His hands and the deck reformed, like it had never been broken. "Remember the Sabbath. Honor your parents."

"Is this all part of the trick?" asked Moshe, and God nodded and said, "Yes, but don't interrupt. Thou shalt not kill." With a flick of His wrist, God threw a card at a neighboring mountaintop, the tip of which was sheared clean off. "Thou shalt not commit adultery," and He brought the king of diamonds and the queen of spades together; they immediately burst into flames. "Thou shalt not steal," He said, and God leaned over to Moshe and reached His hand behind his ear, brushing his hair. Moshe shivered. In God's hand was another card, but no sooner had Moshe seen it than it also burst into flames. "Tsk tsk," said God, mockingly, and gave a wide smile. "Remember: thou shalt not bear false witness. And thou shalt not be jealous."

God's hands were balled into fists; He opened one and laid something on the ground. The deck of cards, face down. With thumb and index finger, God peeled off the top card and placed it in Moshe's hands.

"Is *this* your card?" God whispered.

It was a heart—a human heart, still beating, its rhythms matching the ones in Moshe's chest. "I—sort of?" stammered Moshe, embarrassed on God's behalf, holding the heart away from his body awkwardly in stiff hands. "My card was—"

"Oh! How silly of me, I forgot the final step," grinned God, and the heart split open. There, in the inner chamber, was a card: the king of hearts.

Moshe exhaled. "Lord," he said quietly, "is this in the Torah that you have given me?"

"No, dear Moshe," said God, taking back the card and the heart. "but it is called Talmud, and it is my true passion. Would you like to learn it?"

"With every fiber of my being," said Moshe, and his own heart leapt a little.

"Good, good," said God. "Let me show you again." And God ran through the whole trick, with all the audience banter, but this time more slowly—and then, upon Moshe's request, slower still. When Moshe could perform the trick flawlessly, God moved onto the next trick, and then the next one. Moshe stayed on Sinai for forty days, neither eating nor drinking, moving objects from one hand to another, revealing and concealing, manipulating, faster and faster, until the hand movements had become as natural as breathing and the scripts were seared into his mind.

At the end of the forty days, Moshe began to descend the mountain. Far below, he saw the people worshipping a golden calf. Something had gone wrong.

The people glanced up; impossibly, Moshe was approaching, two heavy tablets in his hands. "So this is what you choose to do?" shouted Moshe. He glanced backwards and winked. "Well then, watch carefully!" And Moshe rolled up his sleeves and threw down the tablets, which shattered into millions of pieces on the rocks below. There was a collective gasp.

"Now that I have your attention," said Moshe. He raised his right hand and snapped his fingers—and then held up his left hand, which again held two tablets. The people clapped; Moshe bowed. The letters on the tablets glowed. They were written in Moshe's own hand.

"How—but how...?" the people shouted. Pandemonium. Complete mayhem.

"It is a tradition from Sinai," said Moshe. "Would you like to learn it?"

"With every fiber of our being," said the people.

"Good, good," said Moshe. "Let me show you again."

NO ASSEMBLY REQUIRED: THE INDIVIDUALIZED ASPECTS OF THE SHALOSH REGALIM

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As ever, time waits for no one—as we are forced to pause, the calendar rolls on. We arrive now, still in isolation, at the second of the *shalosh regalim* (the three pilgrimage holidays; *regel* in the singular). Around the world, many synagogues are already facing the possibility that they may be closed through the *Yamim Noraim* (High Holidays) and Sukkot—the possibility that this year, we will miss communal gatherings for the full cycle of the *regalim*. (While this cycle would cross from 5780 over into 5781, agriculturally the *regalim* are structured to run from Pesah to Sukkot, from springtime to the last harvest.)

This eventuality might feel like a deeper disruption than what we are now experiencing. After all, even in the absence of the *Beit ha-Mikdash* (the Temple), the *regalim* are characterized by the gathering of Jews to celebrate together, whether in our local synagogues or with family elsewhere. The essence of coming together in our synagogues or for large meals on any of the *regalim* is an echo of the national assembling and feasting in Jerusalem when the *Beit ha-Mikdash* stood. Each synagogue is a *mikdash me'at* (“mini-Temple”); each shared meal is an evocation of the *shalmei hagigah* (holiday peace offering). Even in the absence of a *Beit ha-Mikdash*, we still find ways to come together. We gather for *sedarim* even without the *korban Pesah* (paschal offering); we gather for all-night Torah study on Shavuot; we gather for the celebration we call “*simhat beit ha-sho'eivah*,” itself merely an echo of the original celebration from which it takes its name (originally a big party in observance of the water-libation offering; nowadays, just a big party); and we gather for circuits with the *arba minim* (four plant species) on Hoshana Rabbah and with Torah scrolls on Simhat Torah. The component of a *regel* that involves gathering in Jerusalem in order to “be seen” by God lies dormant, but its corollary effect has remained prominent: both seeing and being seen by numerous other Jews who are also celebrating.

Yet our tradition provides us with ways to see each of the *regalim* as operating not just on a communal level, but also on an individualized one. It is true that the three holidays share one particular way of relating to one’s interface with the Divine: going with all other Divine-seekers to where the *Shekhinah* (Divine Presence) “is.” That commonality defines the three holidays as a set. But in each case, we can identify a narrower conduit to the Divine that is built into the holiday, independent of its role as an occasion for communal gathering.

Rabbinic tradition ([Mishnah Sukkah 3:12](#)) teaches that originally, the **only** location where the *arba minim* were taken on each day of the holiday of Sukkot was the *Beit ha-Mikdash*. Everywhere else (termed “the *medinah*”), people would take *arba minim* only on the first day. In my view, this splitting of the mitzvah into two location-dependent sub-mitzvot with different time frames seems to be a resolution of a tension in [Leviticus 23:40](#): first we are instructed to “take [*arba minim*] on the **first day**” and then to “rejoice before Hashem your God for **seven days**.” The clause commanding *arba minim* is attached to the first day, but Hazal (for example, in [Sifra Emor 16:9](#)) read the rest of the verse as also pertaining to *arba minim*. They thus define an aspect in which the mitzvah does in fact apply to all seven days,

deriving the criterion of being in the place that is “before Hashem”—this being the *Mikdash*. (I admit I am not aware of a rabbinic passage that explicitly formulates this *derashah* as an attempt to avoid the conflict between “the first day” and “seven days” in the same verse; the aforementioned *Sifra* simply quotes, “Rejoice before Hashem your God for seven days” and then adds, “But elsewhere, not all seven days.”) According to [Rambam on Mishnah Sukkah 3:12](#) (alluding to a comment he makes on [Mishnah Maaser Sheni 3:4](#)), “the *medinah*” refers to anywhere except **Jerusalem**—so anyone who made *aliyyah le-regel* (the pilgrimage to Jerusalem) and was in the city would perform the mitzvah on all seven days.

Nowadays, those who buy *arba minim* are not just making one-day investments to fulfill their mitzvah on the first day of Sukkot. In the absence of the *Beit ha-Mikdash*, we have adopted the ritual behavior of taking *arba minim* throughout the holiday (except on Shabbat). But while this behavior is expressly described (for instance, in the continuation of that *Sifra*) as a remembrance of the *Mikdash*, it does not only reflect a commemoration of the defunct *Mikdash* practice; rather, it also reflects something original to the mitzvah in and of itself. The commandment of *arba minim* in the rabbinic reading of Leviticus 23:40 stipulates a status quo in which some people are gathered in Jerusalem to visit the *Mikdash* while others are in “the *medinah*,” having not made *aliyyah* for this *regel* (for whatever reason). Our contemporary fulfillment of *arba minim* throughout the holiday of Sukkot is thus not merely an echo of an absent *Mikdash* practice. In a sense (though not formally), it is an **expansion** of the model of the first-day obligation outside Jerusalem, a mitzvah which is special to the *shalosh regalim* but by design applicable only for those who have not made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem as commanded. The rabbinic idea of *arba minim* points to the verse instructing us to take *arba minim* on the first day and highlights that **it is not even primarily about the people who have made *aliyyah le-regel*!** The verse is telling us what to do if we have to stay home! In developing the parameters of the mitzvah of *arba minim*, Hazal detach it from the context of *aliyyah le-regel* per se, and they assign textual legitimacy to its fulfillment at home.

The mitzvah of *arba minim* on Sukkot is an avenue to the Divine that is available to individuals who are apart from those who have gathered together—not just as an imitation or commemoration of the “real” version for gathered-together folks in *Mikdash* times, but as a feature incorporated into the mitzvah itself on a textual level. Through the performance of this special holiday mitzvah, individuals have the opportunity to approach God on Sukkot without the company of the congregation. That opportunity is not an echo of anything; rather, it is built into the holiday and the mitzvah.

The *korban Pesah* is a little harder to approach with this attitude—as practiced, its performance is inextricably tied to the *Mikdash*. In the time of the *Beit ha-Mikdash*, the offering was so tied to one’s ability to physically make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem in a state of purity that the mechanism of *Pesah Sheni* (“Second Pesah”) existed to give more people the chance to engage in the mitzvah. Yet even there, the essence of the mitzvah can be seen as the connection of the Divine not precisely to the assembled crowd, but to each particular household. The *korban Pesah* is an offering that combines aspects of *korban yahid* (an individual’s offering) and *korban tzibbur* (a communal offering). Like a *korban yahid*, a series of individual animals are slaughtered, rather than just one animal slaughtered for the benefit of all the people. Like a *korban tzibbur*, all the Jews participating fulfilled it at the same time—everyone involved had to bring their *korban Pesah* on the afternoon of the 14th of the month.

For most *korbanot tzibbur*, the entirety of *Am Yisrael* is represented at the time and site of sacrifice by a rotating roster of *anshei ma'amad* (appointed proxies from each of the 24 districts of the Land; see [Mishnah Taanit 4:2](#)). In the case of the *korban Pesah*, each animal must be accompanied by a representative member of the particular *haburah* (group) that will be consuming it. Unlike most *korbanot yahid*, such as *shelamim* (peace offerings)—of which one is permitted to invite others to partake of the meat without prior designation—in the case of *korban Pesah*, each animal is limited to the members of its *haburah* (the members being those who had been designated prior to sending their animal to be slaughtered with their representative).

It seems that while the performance of the *korban Pesah* in practice depended on the gathering of Jews in Jerusalem, its essential nature existed apart from that prerequisite. What the *korban Pesah* really did was establish a connection with the Divine—not broadly connecting the entire community, but rather narrowly connecting the Divine with each mini-*tzibbur*, each *haburah* of *korban Pesah*-eating Jews. Ideally, a *haburah* consisted of enough people to consume the whole *korban* in one night, but the concept applied to a *haburah* smaller than that—even as little as just a few people. Ostensibly, a “*haburah*” of even just one person was valid. Although it would be hard to avoid violating the prohibition of leaving over uneaten meat, a solitary individual still had the opportunity to fulfill the *korban Pesah* obligation.

When we sat this year to hold our *sedarim*, many of us found ourselves with a smaller *haburah* than usual. Though most years we are used to a *seder* table set for extended family and other guests, this year we instead put out only a few place settings, or perhaps even just one. But even as our usual *sedarim* fragmented into sheltered-in-place, smaller *sedarim*, each one of those households' evocations of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*-era *seder* was (conceptually, at least) just as robust as ever. It is not the gathering-together characterization of the *regel* that defines the *korban Pesah*; its parameters are individualized—they are at the household level. Each *haburah* in Jerusalem in the time of the *Mikdash* interfaced with the Divine via the medium of the *korban Pesah*, doing so in a manner for which the existence of the *Mikdash* was only tangentially necessary, in a manner to which the presence of all the other Jews in the same city was almost irrelevant. Each *haburah* individually engaged with the mitzvah, all simultaneously, but not as a single massive communal entity. In this sense, *Pesah* has long modeled for us what it means to be celebrating as a *tzibbur* while each of us, or each family among us, is *be-yehidut*.

When it comes to Shavuot, the day's special observances consist entirely of harvest offerings. One is the *shtei ha-lehem* (“two loaves” of the new wheat harvest), a true communal offering, which caps off the *Pesach*-to-Shavuot counting of the *omer*. However, we do not call Shavuot “*hag shtei ha-lehem*.” Even in a verse that describes the *shtei ha-lehem* ([Numbers 28:26](#)'s “new grain offering”), the Torah designates this holiday as “*Yom ha-Bikkurim*,” using the name of the other harvest observance that it initiates: *bikkurim*, the first-fruits offering, which can be brought anytime during the Shavuot-to-Sukkot span of the *regel* cycle. As described in rabbinic literature ([Mishnah Bikkurim 3:2-6](#)), *bikkurim* seem to be a centralized and communal institution. A procession forms, each village sending its contingent with their first fruits to the local *ma'amad* city (district capital) to assemble and march. Celebratory bands join up in the environs of Jerusalem; the whole display is enhanced by auxiliary adornments and musical accompaniment (one could almost imagine parade floats). Eventually, this vast procession of Jews streams right into the

Temple court, and the *bikkurim* ceremony begins: each Jew delivers their first fruits and performs the ritual in succession with the guidance of the *kohanim*.

But if we set aside the Mishnaic description of *bikkurim* and focus on the Biblical text, we get a different view of the practice: “Take some of every first fruit of the soil, which **you** harvest from the land that Hashem your God gives **you**” ([Deuteronomy 26:2](#)). The use of the singular form here indicates that *bikkurim* are an individual offering, a direct reflection of the relationship between the Divine and each person who tills a plot of cropland. The obligation of *bikkurim* is not a communal one, and it does not take effect upon the entire Land at once. It is a particular obligation on each person or household, taking effect individually based on when each specific farmer sees the first-ripening produce in their own plot. With or without a communal procession, *bikkurim* are a reflection of each Jew's relationship with God **at home**. We bring *bikkurim* to the *Beit ha-Mikdash*, but unlike the *shtei ha-lehem*, it is not a communal offering that is **of** the *Mikdash*. *Bikkurim* are of each Jew's home, of each grower's home soil.

Bikkurim is a mitzvah that directly links one's own home to God. Each Jew who goes to the *Beit ha-Mikdash* on this *regel* presents the first seasonal product of their own home, and the offering itself is a function of that private home. The *Beit ha-Mikdash* is just a repository. “*Yom ha-Bikkurim*” is by nature a name that evokes individual dedication.

Ordinarily on Shavuot, we gather to learn all night long (or at least until late into the night). We show our **communal** dedication to Torah. We focus on the concluding suffix of “*zman matan Torateinu*”—the “ours”-ness of the Torah. This year, we must focus on the “*bikkurim*” of “*Yom ha-Bikkurim*,” the Torah which we nurture in our own homes, in our own separate plots of spiritual soil. Our *kabbalat ha-Torah* (acceptance of Torah) and *limmud Torah* (study of Torah) is renewed year after year, sprouting new appreciations and new insights. And, like the farmer in [Mishnah Bikkurim 3:1](#) who takes note of this and ties on a string while saying, “These are *bikkurim*,” our task each time is to be mindful and recognize similarly: “This is the product of the home soil God has given me.” Time ticks on, and while this cycle of *regalim* may pass without assembly, the calendar will come back around. Next year's holiday of *bikkurim* will be on its way just as soon as this one is on its way out. For now, in the absence of communal celebration, what we each have to offer is the product of our own individual homes, and as they say in I.T., “That's not a bug; that's a feature.”

It is *Yom ha-Bikkurim*, and the *Shekhinah* makes house calls.

THE NIGHTLY CRY, THE SONG OF TORAH

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Lamentations

Arise! Call out (*roni*) at night! ... Pour out your heart like water before God! Raise your hands to Him for the soul of your youth, who are enwrapped in hunger on every corner. ([Lamentations 2:19](#))

The anguished call of the prophet Jeremiah (author of Lamentations, as per *Bava Batra* 15a) echoes off the cobblestones of Jerusalem. "God has left us, His Temple is destroyed! Zion lays in ruins, her youth starving in the streets! How can you sleep? How can you stay still? Pour out your heart like water, raise your hands in prayer!"

Yet, Jeremiah's choice of verb for the verse in Lamentations is surprising. Rather than telling the people to call out (*za'aki* or *tza'aki*), cry (*bekhi*), or even awaken (*oori*), Jeremiah says *roni*. This word comes from the noun *rinah*, song, as in the verse, "Then our mouths shall be filled with laughter, and our tongues, with song (*rinah*)" ([Psalms 126:2](#)). Why? *Rinah* connotes positivity and joy, surely not appropriate for the dead of night amongst the ruins of Jerusalem!

The classical commentators were cognizant of this problem and suggest that the translation of *rinah* as song is incorrect, or at least incomplete. [Ibn Ezra](#) claims that the root *rinah* simply means to raise one's voice, be it in song or in elegy. The Midrash ([Sifrei Devarim 26](#)) lists *rinah* as one of the formulations used for prayer, which may reflect thanksgiving or supplication. Both explanations fit our expectation of the verse.

Jeremiah calls upon a people struck by catastrophe to reject acceptance and complacency. There are widows crying in the streets, there are orphaned children wailing in the darkness. Empathize with them, feel their pain. God is no longer close by to comfort them. Arise! Raise your voices in prayer to God!

Nighttime Torah Study

R' Yohanan said: the song (*rinah*) of Torah is only at night, as it says, "Arise! Call out (*rinah*) at night!" ([Leviticus Rabbah 19](#))

The Sages speak in superlatives of one who spends the night time hours engaged in Torah study. Such people are as the priests who served in the Temple ([Menahot 110a](#)), they are blessed with favor and grace ([Avodah Zarah 3b](#)), only they can acquire the crown of Torah ([Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Talmud Torah 3:13](#)). Why then, does R' Yohanan see fit to use a verse in Lamentations to highlight the uniqueness of a nighttime Torah vigil? Or, reformulating the question from the opposite perspective, how does the study of Torah at night fit the call of Jeremiah?

Previously, we had interpreted the verb *rinah* as raising one's voice in mourning and elegy, and as calling out in prayer and supplication. Jeremiah certainly wants the people to mourn for the destruction of the Temple and to pray for the starving youth fainting in the streets of Jerusalem. For Torah study to fit with Jeremiah's exhortation it

must fulfill these functions. Can the learning of Torah manifest mourning and prayer?

Torah Study as Mourning

The suggestion that Torah study can manifest or fulfill mourning is, on its face, not only incorrect but incongruous. One is prohibited from learning Torah while in mourning because it is a source of joy ([Mo'ed Katan 21a and Rashi s.v. "v-assur"](#)). Yet, R' Soloveitchik asserts that the learning of Torah on Tish'ah be-Av in order to appreciate and consequences of the events on that day, is a fulfillment of mourning:

While the study of Torah is prohibited on Tish'ah be-Av, the study of the events that happened on Tish'ah be-Av is not only permitted but is, in itself, a fulfillment of *avelut* (mourning). Understanding what Tish'ah be-Av means - a retrospective reexperiencing and reliving of the events it commemorates, appreciating its meaning in Jewish history and particularly the consequences and results of the catastrophe that struck us so many years ago that it commemorates - is identical to *kiyyum avelut* (a fulfillment of mourning). On Tish'ah be-Av *avelut* means to understand what happened, and that understanding or intellectual analysis is to be achieved... in the light of both *Torah she-bi-khtav* and *Torah she-be-al peh*, the Written and Oral Law. These are our only frames of reference... (R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik, [The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways](#))

R' Soloveitchik's approach is most appropriate for Tish'ah be-Av, the actual day of the Temple's destruction. On that day, we must relive the events of the destruction of the Temple and its historical consequences of exile, antisemitism, and Holocaust. However, the ramifications of the Temple's destruction from a Torah perspective are much more broad and perhaps just as tragic. With the destruction of the Temple, huge swaths of Torah lost their purpose. Hundreds of commandments were rendered irrelevant. Most of the mishnaic orders of *Zeraim* (Seeds), *Kodshim* (Holy Things), and *Taharot* (Purities) suddenly became obsolete. How do we mourn this loss? How can we reexperience and relive a de-actualization of Torah? Where is our fulfillment of mourning for God's word that now has no ready audience?

R' Yohanan sees in the lament of Jeremiah not only a call to mourn, but instructions on how to mourn. Just like on Tish'ah be-Av we mourn via the study of Torah, so too every evening. On Tish'ah be-Av, our mourning is concentrated on the specific events of the day and its consequences as recorded by our Sages. The rest of the year, our mourning encompasses Torah life as a whole and its incompleteness in a post-Temple world. On Tish'ah be-Av, specific portions of Torah allow us to relive the destruction of the Temple and its meaning in Jewish history. The rest of the year, by exploring all of Torah, the blueprint of Creation, we can begin to fathom the beauty of God's actual plan for the universe, not the shadow-world we currently inhabit. With this comprehension we can truly mourn over the destruction of the Temple. Only through Torah can we realize our loss and mourn what we once had.

However, R' Yohanan goes a step further. It is not only that the learning of Torah constitutes mourning. Jeremiah's instruction of Torah study as the way to mourn is also an elixir.

“A song of ascents. Behold, bless God, all servants of God who stand nightly in the house of God,” ([Psalms 134:1](#)). What does the verse mean “at night?”²⁰ R’ Yohanan says, “These are the Torah scholars who engage in Torah at night. The verse considers them as having performed the Temple service.” ([Menahot 110a](#))

The Temple may have been destroyed, its service may have disappeared. But one who studies Torah can accrue the same merit and foster the same relationship with God as those who performed this service.

Torah Study as Prayer

Solomon stood before the altar of God in front of the entire community of Israel and spread his palms towards Heaven. And he said... You should turn, my God, to the prayer and supplication of Your servant, to hear the calls (*rinah*) and prayer which Your servant prays before You today. (Kings I [8:22-23, 28](#))

King Solomon’s address to the people of Israel at the dedication of the Temple ends with a lengthy prayer to God. This prayer entreats God that the Temple should fulfill its divine purpose: to be the place where all humanity turns to pray to God, and where all are assured that God has heard their prayers. As described by King Solomon, the Temple is God’s house where those who seek go to find answers, and those who are pained go to find comfort. Can such a connection still exist in a post-Temple era?

Rabbi Elazar said: From the day the Temple was destroyed an iron wall separates Israel from their Father in Heaven, as it says ([Ezekiel 4:3](#)) “And take for yourself an iron griddle, and set it as an iron wall between yourself and the city...it will be a sign for the house of Israel.” ([Berakhot 32b](#))

The destruction of the Temple severed the prayer channel between God and man. Obstructing open communications with God is a wall, blocking Israel’s prayers from reaching His Heavenly abode. Can our prayer even penetrate this wall?

The answer is no, the wall is impenetrable. Even God, as it were, can only, “Watch out the windows, and peer through the cracks” ([Song of Songs 2:9](#)). Yet, at times, God will, as it were, tunnel through the wall. He will frequent the synagogue and attend the communal prayer service:

Ravin bar Rav Adda said in the name of R’ Yitzhak: From where is it derived that the Holy One, Blessed be He, is located in a synagogue? It says: “God stands in the congregation of God...” ([Psalms 82:1](#)). And from where is it derived that ten people who pray, the Divine Presence is with them? “God stands in the congregation of God...” ([Berakhot 6a](#))

²⁰ This verse is inherently problematic as it implies that there is service to be done in the Temple at night. While it is true that at certain times there is, in fact, some service that is either left over for night or begins at night (R’ Amos Hakham in [Da’at Mikra to Psalms](#) suggests that the verse referred to those who would come early to the Temple on holidays), the main part of the Temple service was certainly by day.

When God attends communal prayer, our prayers can reach Him, and His presence can still be felt by His people.

At least during the day. But what about at night?²¹ How can we feel the Divine Presence when the synagogues are closed and the streets are empty? The Talmud addresses this as well. At night prayer is replaced by Torah:

And from where is it derived that when even one sits and engages in Torah study, the Divine Presence is with him? As it is says ([Exodus 20:21](#)) : “In every place where I cause My Name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you.” ([Berakhot 6a](#))

Torah study, even when isolated and alone, becomes a prayer service.²² Just as God is present at the communal prayer service, so too he is with those who study Torah. Thus, God’s plan to live amongst His people can still be attained, and those looking to speak will even now find an open channel.

The identification of Torah study with prayer is attested to by another Talmudic statement extolling the virtues of learning at night:

Reish Lakish said: One who occupies himself with Torah at night, the Holy One, Blessed be He, spreads upon him a thread of grace during the day, as it says ([Psalms 42:9](#)), “By day, God will command His grace, and at night His song (*shirah*) shall be with me [as a prayer to God the guardian of my life].” What is the reason that by day, God will extend His grace? For at night His song (*shirah*, referring to Torah study) is with me. ([Avodah Zarah 3b](#))

Reish Lakish, the great student and study partner of R’ Yohanan, asserts that one who studies Torah at night is rewarded with grace and favor. His proof text, however, does not mention Torah study explicitly, but rather uses the word *shirah*, which in the context of the verse in Psalms refers to prayer. By identifying Torah learning with *shirah*, Reish Lakish is informing us that Torah study at night becomes prayer.

How does the learning of Torah constitute prayer? R’ Joseph B. Soloveitchik (*Shiurim I-zekher Abba Mori* volume 2), based on the formulation of Maimonides in his [Sefer Ha-Mitzvot \(Aseh 5\)](#), categorizes both Torah study at night and prayer as “service of the heart.” This concept consists of three elements which both prayer and Torah study share. Engaging in either prayer or Torah study: (1) demonstrates acceptance of the yoke of Heaven, (2) are modes of

²¹ See [Maharsha, Tamid 32b](#).

²² The intertwining of Torah study and prayer is found throughout the works of our Sages. The *mishnah* in [Berakhot \(4:2\)](#) records that “Rabbi Nehunyah ben HaKanaah would offer a brief prayer when he entered the study hall and when he left.” The Talmud in [Mo’ed Katan \(29a\)](#) states, “Rabbi Levi said: One who leaves from the synagogue and goes to the study hall, and from the study hall to the synagogue, merits to receive the Divine Presence.” Learning Torah even becomes part of our liturgy, as with the reading of Shema, the recitation of the sacrifices, the *Tosefta* of R’ Yishmael’s 13 principles of derivation, and the *mishnayot* of the second chapter of *Shabbat* on Friday night. For further examples, see R’ Joseph B. Soloveitchik in *Shiurim I-zekher Abba Mori* volume 2.

making requests of God,²³ (3) is a form of praise to God.²⁴ I would submit that the ultimate purpose of both prayer and Torah study is to connect with God and thus bring Him into our world. This is done in prayer by praising Him for all He has created, by sharing with Him our hopes and dreams, and by thanking Him for all He has done and continues to do for us. When learning Torah, we connect with God by studying the blueprint of the universe, and thus engage in an exploration of how our world should be. Studying the blueprint declares that we are not satisfied with the world as it is, but we desire that it fulfill God's original design. In this way, we implicitly ask for God to intervene and coordinate that transformation.

In the call of Jeremiah, the word *rinah*, understood as prayer, is parallel to the other parts of the verse, "pour out your heart... raise your hands..." in prayer. The prayer sought by Jeremiah is one of pleading with God for a rebuilt Temple and a reborn Israel - in other words, a return to how the world ought to be. Hence, the appropriateness of Torah study in answer to Jeremiah's exhortation.

Torah Study as Repentance²⁵

Jeremiah calls on the people to mourn, to pray, to not peacefully accept the post-Temple world as the "new normal." However, to turn back the clock to a time when Jews could directly commune with God, to bring His presence back into our lives, requires one more element, *teshuvah* (repentance). Can we read repentance into Jeremiah's exhortation to awaken at night? In fact, the [Targum Yerushalmi](#) does just that in interpreting a later part of our verse, "Pour, like water, the crookedness of your heart and return in *teshuvah*." However, a hint of this can even be found in the first part of the verse, for the word *rinah* also may refer to *teshuvah*:

R' Eliezer said: [the Jewish] redemption from Egypt was enabled by five catalysts: troubles, repentance, ancestral merit, mercy, and the arrival of the time to end the exile... So too, at the end of days [Jewish] redemption will be predicated on these five catalysts... "When He hears their call (*rinah*)" ([Psalms 106:44](#)), this refers to repentance (*teshuvah*). ([Yalkut Shimoni on Torah 827](#))

If *rinah* refers to *teshuvah*, as [Yalkut Shimoni](#) suggests, then we can read Jeremiah's call at its outset as *teshuvah*-oriented: Arise! Call out, raise your voice in repentance at night!

²³ R' Soloveitchik explains that God understands each individual's needs without the person stating them explicitly. Learning Torah constitutes a request in which one simply throws his burden on God. R' Jonathan Ziring ("[The Midnight Song: Nocturnal Torah Study in Solitude](#)," *Tradition* 52:1 (Winter 2020): 28) suggests that this is because engagement with Torah is a process of understanding God's will as expressed in our world. This is an acknowledgement that God knows what is best for everyone without being asked. The explanation I suggest in the text is similar, but with the emphasis on looking for the world repaired rather than a person's desires.

²⁴ R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik (*Shiurim I-zekher Abba Mori* volume 2) demonstrates that the true fulfillment of mourning is also done in the heart. In mourning as well we find acceptance of the yoke of Heaven via *tzidduk ha-din*, Justification of God's judgment, and praise to God via the recitation of *kaddish*.

²⁵ See also R' Daniel Z. Feldman, "[The Teshuvah Beyond Teshuvah](#)," *Rosh HaShana To-Go* (Tishrei 5769): 9.

Is repentance possible in a post-Temple world? King Solomon's address at the dedication of the Temple characterizes the Temple as the place for one to repent and receive forgiveness for their sins: "Should the heavens be shut and there be no rain, because they have sinned against You. Then they pray toward this place and acknowledge Your name and repent of their sins when You answer them. Hear in heaven and pardon the sin of Your servants, Your people Israel..." ([Kings I 8:35-36](#)). Without the Temple the road of the repentant is a long and arduous one:

Amongst the ways of repentance are, for the penitent to continuously cry out with tears and supplications before God, to give charity according to his means, and to greatly distance himself from that with which he has sinned, to change his name, as if saying: "I am now another person, and not that person who performed those deeds," to completely change his conduct for the good and straight path, and to exile himself from his place of residence, for exile provides atonement for sins, because it leads him to submissiveness and to be humble and of low spirit. ([Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Teshuvah 2:4](#))

With the destruction of the Temple, it is no longer possible to present oneself before the Almighty where He is found and simply repent. The call of Jeremiah recognizes this. To attain forgiveness one must spend sleepless nights calling out to God, pouring out one's heart like water and raising one's hands to Him in prayer.

Is there another way?

The Talmud ([Yoma 86b](#)) identifies two unequal pathways towards *teshuvah*: *teshuvah* out of fear, and *teshuvah* out of love. The first method transforms willful transgressions into unintentional sins, while the second transforms willful transgressions into merits. How can one attain *teshuvah* out of love?

Rabbi Hama the son of Rabbi Hanina, also said: Why are tents juxtaposed to streams, as it is written, "As streams stretched forth, as gardens by the riverside; as aloes [*ahalim*] planted by God, as cedars by the water" ([Numbers 24:6](#))? To tell you, just as streams elevate a person from ritual impurity to purity after he immerses himself in their water, so too tents [*ohalim*] of Torah elevate a person from the judgment of guilt to that of merit. ([Berakhot 15b-16a](#))

Rabbi Hama the son of Rabbi Hanina identifies what action can be taken to transform judgments of guilt into that of merit: the study of Torah! This implies that one attains *teshuvah* out of love via the learning of Torah. Indeed, this claim rings true, since it is via Torah study that one can come to the love of God:

The third *mitzvah* is that we are commanded to love God, exalted be He. This is to understand and closely examine His commandments, His statements, and His works, until we understand Him; and through this understanding to achieve a feeling of ecstasy. This is the goal of the commandment to love God. The language of *Sifrei* ([Deuteronomy 33](#)): For it says, "You shall love God your Lord" ([Deuteronomy 6:5](#)), how can I come to love God? It says, "and these words which I command you today shall be upon your heart," ([Deuteronomy 6:6](#)) that through this you will recognize the One Who spoke, and the world was. ([Maimonides Sefer Ha-Mitzvot, Aseh 3](#)).

By learning Torah one comes to love God, and through the love of God one can achieve repentance - not just any repentance, but one that turns transgressions into merits.

This analysis leads us in a full circle back to R' Yohanan's interpretation of *rinah* as Torah study. From the time Jeremiah was a young man, his call to the people of Israel centered on one concept: *teshuvah*. This was so before the destruction of the Temple and certainly must be true afterwards. Yet, R' Yohanan is troubled. Is true repentance possible without a Temple? Can one possibly appear before God to beg for penitence when He is hidden? To this, R' Yohanan answers in the positive. True repentance is possible via the study of Torah.

The Torah of Exile

At midnight I arise to praise You for Your just rules. ([Psalms 119:62](#))

Rabbi Levi said: "The harp was suspended over the bed of David and when it was midnight, the northern wind would blow and the harp would play by itself... When David heard its sound he would arise and study Torah. When Israel heard the music, they would say, "If King David is engaged in Torah study, then we should be all the more so!" Immediately they studied the Torah. ([Lamentations Rabbah 2:22](#))

Must the nighttime engagement in Torah be one of praying and repentance? Must *rinah* always be twisted to refer to mourning and not rejoicing?

The above *midrash*, commenting on the very verse of Jeremiah's call, informs us that Jeremiah was not the first to wake people in the midst of the night to engage in the study of Torah. King David did likewise, but in a different historical, sociological, and religious context. Jeremiah called out bitterly, to shock people from their complacency after the Temple's destruction. King David gently brought people out of their restful slumber. Jeremiah's anguished cries were for Torah study as mourning, prayer, and repentance. King David's melodious harp encouraged the Torah study of paeans and praise of God. Jeremiah cried over Jews in exile, King David rejoiced over the Jewish golden era.

Alternatively, Reish Lakish said: One who occupies himself with Torah in this world, which is comparable to night, the Holy One, Blessed be He, extends a thread of kindness over him in the World-to-Come, which is comparable to day, as it says, "By day, the Lord will command His kindness, and in the night His song shall be with me." ([Avodah Zarah 3b](#))

In exile, the nighttime Torah vigil is one of mourning. In the era of redemption, the era of the World-to-Come, this Torah will become one of song and rejoicing.

Rejoicing in Exile

Can one find joy in the study of Torah even at times of darkness, even in the bitterness of exile?

Perhaps R' Yohanan's identification of *rinah* with the learning of Torah is meant precisely to accomplish this transformation. There is no doubt that Jeremiah's call into the darkness of night was to arouse the people to mourning, prayer, and repentance. What else could it be at a time when God has appeared to abandon His people and

allowed his abode to be destroyed? Yet, Jeremiah invokes a word that usually means sing and rejoice. Why? To this R' Yohanan replies, because there is a way to transform the suffering and pain into song and rejoicing, by learning Torah.

Jeremiah calls on the people to mourn the loss of the Temple, Torah, and the ruin of God's plan as to how the world should be. Torah is the blueprint of that plan and learning Torah provides us a substitute to the ideal of Temple service.²⁶

Jeremiah calls on the people to pray. Yet, after the destruction of the Temple, there is a wall of iron between God and the Jewish Nation. Studying Torah brings God's presence down to the Jewish people, thus circumventing the wall.

Jeremiah calls on the people to repent for their sins. Yet, after the destruction of the Temple, there is no place to go to seek God's forgiveness. Torah study is a method of turning transgressions into merit.

The nighttime study of Torah can be one of rejoicing even at a time of exile. The divine glory dwells before us even in darkness. Jeremiah provided us the key to this understanding by using the word *rinah*, song. For though we have lost the Temple and have been banished from our land, we still sing the joyful song of Torah before God.

²⁶ Avraham said before God: Master of the Universe... when the Temple is not standing, what will become of [the Jewish Nation]? God said to him: I have already enacted for them the order of offerings. When they read them before Me, I will ascribe them credit as though they had sacrificed them before Me and I will pardon them for all their transgressions. ([Ta'anit 27b](#))

REBUILDING A FUTURE WHEN OUR WORLD COMES CRASHING DOWN

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Introduction

How do we respond to the apparent destruction of our world? What do we do when the narrative we have developed for ourselves, around which we have organized our lives and in which we believed so completely, is so radically disrupted we see no way forward? How do we face the younger generation in whom we have inculcated our narrative and who has built their own emerging narratives on our foundation? Can we help them build a new narrative even if it means acknowledging our failure and shame?

These difficult questions resonate with too many people today in light of the coronavirus pandemic. But they are age-old. Indeed, they are central to the book of Ruth (which we read on the upcoming holiday of Shavuot), and more generally to the three dynastic stories of which Ruth is the climax. When read in this light and taken together, this narrative triangle—including the story of Lot and his daughters (climaxing in [Genesis 19](#)) and the story of Judah and Tamar ([Genesis 38](#)), as well as that of Ruth and Boaz—holds powerful redemptive possibility. In particular, I suggest here that the shocking account of father-daughter incest in the first story is crucial to unlocking the triangle's lessons.

My approach reconciles two approaches in traditional commentary on the daughters' motives for seducing their father—the majority approach (they thought there were no other men on earth) and the minority approach (they thought no one acceptable would marry them). A close reading reveals that each approach has a basis in the text and that the majority approach should apply not to the daughters but in a figurative sense, to Lot (*his world had seemingly come to an end*) while the minority approach applies to his daughters (their options to secure a future for themselves were greatly narrowed because of their father). This reconciliation then sheds light on the other two points in the triangle and on Ruth in particular—with Ruth as a *tikkun* (moral correction) for the daughters (she chooses to risk what they were not) and Naomi as a correction for Lot (she chooses to swallow her pride as he would not).

The Yibbum Triangle

The first two stories of the triangle have an obvious link to the third: each describes the union and birth of a son (Moab, son of Lot's older daughter and Lot; Peretz, son of Judah and Tamar) that contributed to the genealogical line leading to the union of Ruth (the Moabite) and Boaz (descendant of Peretz), and thereby to the dynastic king of Israel.

But the third story does more than simply flow genealogically from the first two. As has been noted by various contemporary scholars, and as is reflected in how numerous midrashic commentaries compare and contrast the three stories, deep textual and thematic bonds tie the three stories together.

Observe first that all three stories are effectively extraneous to the larger narratives in which they are embedded. If the story of what happened after Lot and his daughters fled from Sodom had not been included in Genesis, it would not have been missed; would we otherwise have wondered about the births of the founders of Ammon and Moab? The same certainly applies to the story of Ruth;

there is no need for us to know about one of David's four great-grandmothers. After all, we never even learn the name (let alone the backstory) of David's mother!²⁷ And while we might have wondered what transformed Judah from someone who was apparently consumed by sibling rivalry and filial resentment (such that he was willing to sell his rival half-brother Joseph into slavery and conspire in leading their father Jacob to believe his favorite son was dead; [Genesis 37:26-35](#)) into a paragon of brotherly devotion and filial devotion (such that he offered himself into slavery in place of Joseph's brother in recognition of Jacob's preference for him; [Genesis 44:18-34](#)), there are many other stages in character development the bible leaves out (why didn't the other brothers have a similar transformation?).

Moreover, not only are the stories unnecessary, they are the kinds of stories that families—especially dynastic ones whom one might think have some control over what is written about them—tend to hide. That is, the stories seem intent on airing out dirty laundry. This can be seen when one reviews the parallel organization of the three stories. Rachel Adelman,²⁸ building on Harold Fisch,²⁹ identifies nine stages: Descent, Disaster, Abandonment, Redemption, Bedtrick, Celebration, Levirate Union (*yibbum*), Issue, and Knowing/Recognition.³⁰ When read superficially, almost every stage casts a harsh, negative light on David's ancestors. This is especially true for the first of the three stories, which seems to have no redeeming value.

The die seems cast in each story because of the way they all begin: a period of tribal or familial stress in the land of Israel leads a man to *descend* from the tribe or family and join another community. In the second and third stories, this is captured in the very first verses. "Judah descended (*y-r-d*) from his brothers at about that time" ([Genesis 38:1](#))—i.e., around the time Joseph was being sold to Egypt and Jacob was mourning his apparent death ([Genesis 37:35-36](#))—"and Judah camped until he reached an Adullamite *ish* (important man or personage) named Hirah." Soon he has three sons by the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua. Similarly, we are told in the first verse of Ruth that "there was a famine in the land and an *ish* (whom we soon learn is Elimelech) left Bethlehem, Judea³¹ and went to sojourn in the fields of Moab, he and his wife and two sons" ([Ruth 1:1](#)). Here the patriarch (Elimelech, along with Naomi, Mahlon, and Kilyon) who leaves his tribe in its distress also does so by way of an act of *descent*: from Judea to the Jordan Valley.

Lot's descent,³² from the "house of God" (*Beit El*) in the hills of Samaria to a wicked city at the lowest point on the earth's surface,

²⁷ [Bava Batra 91a](#) identifies David's mother as Natzvat bat Adael, but this detail is not found in the Biblical text.

²⁸ Rachel Adelman, "Weaving the Messianic Light: Law and Narrative in the Making of the Davidic Dynasty," Chapter 4 in [The Female Ruse: Women's Deception and Divine Sanction in the Hebrew Bible](#) (Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005).

²⁹ Harold Fisch, "[Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History](#)" *Vetus Testamentum* 32:4 (January 1982): 425-437.

³⁰ Yael Ziegler uses a similar organization. See Yael Ziegler, [Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy](#) (Maggid Press, 2015). See especially pp. 59-73 ("The Roots of the Book of Ruth: Lot and Abraham") and pp. 285-361 ("A Long-Term Solution: Ruth Chapter 3").

³¹ Recall that Judea in Hebrew is "Yehudah"—i.e., Judah. So Judah frames the story of Ruth as well.

³² Note that while the word for descent (*y-r-d*) is used in the case of Judah, it is implicit both geographically and spiritually for Lot and

seems rooted not in a struggle over life-giving resources (Elimelekh) or family leadership (Judah), but in managing great wealth and status ([Genesis 13:1-6](#)). In response to a dispute over grazing rights, Abraham appeals to family unity and shared status (“are we not both brothers and *anashim*, i.e., distinguished personages?”) and offers to divide the grazing area with his nephew ([Genesis 13:8-9](#)). But Lot decides to head down to Sodom; it reminds him of the source of their wealth (Egypt) and he is apparently undeterred by its reported wickedness ([Genesis 13:7-13](#)).

Given the problematic family betrayal captured in each patriarch’s descent, it is hardly surprising that *disaster* and *abandonment* follow. In Ruth, Elimelekh dies soon after arrival in Moab; and after they marry Moabite women, his two sons (whose names ominously mean “Plague” and “Destruction”) die before having sired children. The sons’ two widows—Ruth and Orpah—now have unclear prospects, especially since they are far from Judea and any relative of their husbands who might redeem them through the rite of *yibbum*, levirate marriage.³³

Judah’s calamity also centers on the death of his oldest two sons, and in this case the moral condemnation is explicit: they were “*ra* (wicked) in God’s eyes” ([Genesis 38:7,11](#)). His daughter-in-law Tamar, twice widowed, does have a potential levirate redeemer in the third son Shelah, but who would risk marrying off their remaining son to a woman after his older brothers had each died soon after marrying her?

And in Lot’s case, it is his (anonymous) two daughters who are left “without the prospect of acquiring men”³⁴ after seemingly everyone they and their father knew were killed for their association with *ra*.

The next stages in each story provide a way out of the predicament in which these women find themselves, but this way out risks scandal: an unconventional *redeemer* is identified, and he is induced through indecent female initiative to effect a questionable *levirate union* and thus sire a dynastic *issue* via a *bedtrick* involving *celebration* and a lack of *knowledge/recognition*.

In the first story, the redeemer is Lot himself; he is incestuously seduced by each daughter on successive nights in which they get him so drunk he copulates with (and impregnates) them “not knowing when she lay down and when she got up” ([Genesis 19: 33,35](#)). In the second story, Tamar intercepts Judah on his way to sheep-shearing festivities and induces him to play the role of levir by presenting herself as a roadside prostitute and getting him to copulate with (and impregnate) her. He eventually recognizes the child and his errors

Elimelekh, each of whom left the land of Israel and traveled down to the Jordan valley. Since Judah’s descent is subtler, the text calls it out.

³³ Levirate marriage was a rite ([found also in other ancient/patriarchal cultures](#)) by which a brother of a man who died without sons married the childless widow. Importantly, while Deuteronomy (25:5-10) frames this rite as a tool for perpetuating the dead husband’s “name,” the formulation of the law places a premium on female initiative (see Ziegler, *op cit.*, p. 297), and the *yibbum* narratives in the Bible implicitly depict it as a tool for perpetuating the bereft woman’s legacy. See Ezra Zuckerman Sivan, “The King’s Great Cover-Up and Great Confession,” *The Lehrhaus* (September 17, 2018) and Ezra Zuckerman Sivan, “How to Curtail Pernicious Social Competition: The Legacy of Zelophehad and his Daughters,” *The Lehrhaus* (July 29, 2019).

³⁴ Adelman, *op cit.*, p. 75.

when she explains her illicit pregnancy by submitting the identifying property he has left as a deposit in lieu of payment. And in the third story, Ruth crawls into bed with a distant relative of Mahlon’s and asks that the man redeem her; he agrees in the shadow of looming scandal if she is discovered. These salacious bedtrick scenes are the focal point of each narrative even though they are the kinds of scenes that would seemingly be suppressed by authors seeking to make the Davidic dynasty a source of inspiration. Indeed, even if one recognizes that the Hebrew Bible presents its heroes’ flaws so the reader may more readily identify with them and learn from their failures as well as their successes, it is not immediately clear what the message is behind such scandalous behavior.

The Weak Point in the Triangle

In fact, however, it is not difficult to justify the canonization of the second and third stories on this last criterion. As noted, the story of Judah seems fundamental to his character development. Many commentators identify the pivot point in this development as the moment when Tamar induces Judah to “recognize” that he had wrongly blocked Shelah from marrying her, using the same language (*haker na*) as Judah and his brothers had used in pulling the wool over Jacob’s eyes ([Genesis 37:32, 38:25](#)).³⁵

And Boaz seems to pick up where his ancestor Judah leaves off. Whereas *Ploni Almoni’s* (“Mr. Anonymous,” a better candidate for levir) refusal to redeem Ruth evokes Onan’s refusal to consummate his levirate marriage to Tamar,³⁶ Boaz steps up. His forebear Judah had effectively condemned Tamar to stigmatized, perpetual widow status due to her association with calamity and had recognized her rights (*vayaker Yehudah*) only after she risked her dignity and life to bring him the promise of children. By contrast, Boaz immediately recognizes Ruth (*lehakireni; yehi makirekh barukh*; Ruth [2:10, 19](#)) despite similar associations with calamity and low status as an outcast Moabite. And of course, while Boaz apparently needs to be induced to recognize that he has the responsibility to find Ruth a levir, it is not necessary to get him drunk and/or to seduce him. To the contrary, when given the opportunity to treat her as nothing but a sexual object, he asks for her name and does everything he can to protect her dignity and status.³⁷

The Judahite side of the triangle thus harbors powerful moral lessons behind its scandalous facade. But what about the Moabite side? It certainly seems ominous that the moral traits associated with Sodom—the use of sex as a tool for power and the undignified treatment of foreigners—are exhibited several generations later during Israel’s journey from Egypt to Israel. This is why the Moabites, and especially Moabite women, become stigmatized.³⁸ Elimelekh’s decision to take his family to Moab was thus tantamount to taking them to Sodom. Given that, it seems clear that Ruth’s actions represent corrective redemption (or *tikkun*, in kabbalistic terms) for her foremothers.

³⁵ [Genesis Rabbah 84:19](#).

³⁶ *Ploni Almoni’s* reasoning ([Ruth 4:6](#)) is he cannot be levir *pen ashhit et nahalati* (“lest I destroy my legacy”), which evokes Onan’s infamous refusal to consummate his levirate marriage to Tamar ([Genesis 38:9](#)) via *shihet artzah levilti neton zera le-ehav* (“destroying [his seed] on the ground so as not to give seed to his brother”).

³⁷ Ziegler *op cit.*, pp. 309-323.

³⁸ See [Numbers 25:1-9](#) and [Deuteronomy 23:5](#). See also Menachem Leibtag, “[The Akeyda and Miscellaneous Topics](#),” <http://tanach.org/vayera.htm>.

Yet while there may be redemptive lessons in the Judah-Tamar story and in how Ruth and Boaz correct the mistakes of each of their forebears, the absence of any such lesson from the story of Lot and his daughters stands out. In particular, whereas Tamar and Ruth are each moral exemplars who took great risks in inducing a patriarch to do right by them, it is hard to justify or learn from the apparently disturbing actions taken by Lot's daughters. The fact that their actions apparently encoded the immorality of Sodom in Moabite culture reinforces this difficulty.

Did They Really Think Everyone had been Killed?

In reckoning with this problematic point in our triangle, it is intriguing that the rabbinic sages were surprisingly positive in their assessment of the daughters' actions.³⁹ And as any graduate of a yeshiva or Orthodox Jewish day school can tell you, a key contextual fact helps to explain the scandalous step they took: they believed that they were the last people left on earth. Yet while this is the majority view among traditional Jewish commentators,⁴⁰ there is no direct support for it in the text and many reasons to doubt it. Moreover, while this approach provides pretext for the daughters' action, it is still a struggle to draw lessons from it.

To be sure, there is some textual basis for this majority approach. In particular, strong intertextual allusions link this story with that of Noah and his sons in the aftermath of the flood. Both are stories about God raining (*vayamter*) destruction (*hashhatah*) upon a wicked (*ra*) civilization. Both are stories about a relatively good, if imperfect, man and his family receiving divine warning about impending calamity and a helping hand to salvation. And the climax of each story involves a drunken patriarch who is sexually betrayed by one of his children, with a curse befalling the descendants of that child ([Genesis 9:20-28](#), [Deuteronomy 23:4](#)).

Yet both Seforno and R.Yosef Kara (as cited by R. David Kimhi)⁴¹ contend that the daughters were motivated by the fact that they had no (good) marriage prospects, a motive that is essentially the same as the motives of Tamar and Ruth. This is indeed the straightforward interpretation of what the older daughter says to the younger, "An *ish*—none exist in the land to come onto us according to the ways of the land" ([Genesis 19:30](#)). She could have said "there are no other men left in the land" or perhaps "no man exists in the land." It is unclear why she would add the expression "according to the ways of the land" if not to denote something like "according to accepted custom"—i.e., marriage.⁴² And her emphasis on *ish* (ungrammatically placed at the beginning of her words) is consistent with its

³⁹ See Ziegler, *op cit*, p. 301 for review.

⁴⁰ For a useful review of the range of traditional approaches, see Eliezer Schlossberg, "Ish Ein Ba-Aretz Lavo Aleinu K-Derekh Kol Ha-Aretz," *Sinai* 11:147-161 [Hebrew]. The majority view has had significant currency outside rabbinic circles, as it is cited by both Josephus and Philo (Jonathan Grossman, 'Associative Meanings' in the Character Evaluation of Lot's Daughters," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 76: 40-57).

⁴¹ [Genesis 19:32](#), *ad loc.*

⁴² "Accepted custom" is essentially the meaning of "way of the land" (*derekh erez*), the term in later Hebrew. It is more obscure in biblical Hebrew, occurring in Joshua's valedictory address ([Joshua 23:14](#)) and in David's dying words to Solomon ([1 Kings 2:2](#)). On the one hand, these seem like allusions to biological processes (i.e., aging) rather than social customs. On the other hand, the context (leadership transition) is about maintaining social institutions despite the threat of disruption.

importance throughout the *yibbum* triangle: the daughters seem to be seeking a *good* marriage. Finally, if indeed they think they are the last people on earth, why do they have to trick their father? Why don't they expect him to be as likely as they are to understand that conventional morals must be set aside?

There is even stronger evidence that Lot's daughters did not think they were the last people on earth. Consider that: (a) the divine messengers' initial warning to Lot specifically says that they should leave "this place" because "we are destroying this place" ([19:12-13](#)); (b) Lot pleads with the messengers to let them go to Zoar because his "soul could live there" ([19:20](#)); (c) the messengers accede to his request and say that they "won't overturn this city (i.e., Zoar) about which you spoke"; (d) Lot and his daughters leave Zoar because he became "afraid to dwell there" ([19:30](#)), not because the messengers reneged on their promise and in fact destroyed it; and (e) the Hebrew Bible provides voluminous evidence that Zoar was in fact never destroyed.

The last point is the most important one.⁴³ If one reviews the references throughout the Hebrew Bible to the cities of the plain,⁴⁴ one finds that whereas prior to Genesis 19, Zoar or its apparent predecessor settlement is listed among the five cities of the plain ([Genesis 13:10](#); [14:1-8](#); [15:10-19](#)), thereafter the other four cities—Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zevoim—are described as having been destroyed, with Zoar conspicuously absent from this gallery of shame (see especially [Deuteronomy 29:21-22](#)). To the contrary, Zoar is described as if it is in continuous existence. Indeed, the very climax of the Torah portrays Moses looking out from the steppes of Moab onto the cities of the plain, where his panoramic view ranges from "Jericho, the city of dates, until Zoar" ([Deuteronomy 34:1-4](#)). Remarkably, Isaiah ([15:1-5](#)) describes Zoar as a city of refuge for Moabites fleeing from cities destroyed for their moral infractions. And perhaps even more remarkably, Zoar is described in various places in the Talmud as a Jewish city with long-standing and distinctive traditions (and which supplants Jericho as a "city of dates"),⁴⁵ and there is evidence of a robust Jewish community there as late as the 6th century CE.⁴⁶ Far from having been destroyed, it would appear that this was a city with tenacious staying power!

Additional Clues

Thus while the story of Lot and his daughters certainly recalls that of Noah and his sons after the flood, it seems impossible to accept that the daughters were motivated by a belief that there were no men left with whom they could restart the human race. The text clearly suggests that they would have known that there were still people in Zoar. But then why were they afraid to live there even though Lot had initially thought it would be a good refuge? And what would have so convinced them they could never find a good husband that they were willing to cast their own father as redeemer?

Clues that help resolve these questions emerge from reviewing earlier events in the story, especially the sequence of events starting with God's messengers ("angels") leading the two daughters and their parents out of Sodom.

⁴³ See Kimhi (quoting Kara), *op cit*. See also R. Yaakov Medan, *Ki Karov Elekha: Lashon Mikra u-Lashon Hakhamim, Bereshit*, (Yediat), 137 [Hebrew].

⁴⁴ See www.sefaria.org/sheets/110390.

⁴⁵ See e.g., *Mishnah Yevamot 16:7*; *Pesahim 52a*.

⁴⁶ See <https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/מְצוֹרָת> [Hebrew].

First, it is essential to interpret the story in terms of the earlier horrific story of sexual immorality involving Lot and his daughters. In particular, at the beginning of chapter 19, Lot seems to offer two daughters for gang rape so that a Sodomite mob will spare the angels. This foreshadows the end of Lot's story in a cruelly ironic way: whereas here he offers his daughters as virgins "whom no man has *known* (carnally)" ([Genesis 19:8](#)), he eventually ends up sleeping with his daughters, apparently without *knowing* it. It is a classic case of being hoisted on his own petard, or *midah ke-neged midah*.

The word *ish*, or distinguished personage—noted above as important throughout the *yibbum* triangle—is also conspicuous in this part of the story. When the people of Sodom demand that Lot hand over his messengers "so that they may know them" ([19:5](#)), they "remonstrate with the *ish*, with Lot, very much" ([19:9](#)). The word *ish* here is extraneous. The implication is that they are challenging the status Lot had apparently achieved, alleging that he has no right judging them, in part because he is really a usurping visitor (a "carpetbagger," so to speak) rather than a proper citizen: "has *that one* come to sojourn with us and would presume to judge us? (emphasis added)" (*ibid.*).⁴⁷

Let us turn now to the departure from Sodom.

As he is being escorted out by the messengers, Lot is told that he should not look behind, but instead should hurry "up the mountain"—i.e., from the Jordan Valley up to the hills of Judea ([19:17](#)). Lot pleads with them for a different course of action ([19:18](#)), saying that "his soul" will not "live" if he goes up the mountain "lest *ra'ah*, wickedness, stick to me and I die" ([19:19](#)). At first blush, it seems that Lot was driven by the fear of getting caught in the conflagration. But the messengers have just told him that the mountain is safe, and we soon learn that indeed Abraham is safe when he stands on the Judean mountains overlooking this scene. So Lot's concern is puzzling. Moreover, throughout the Hebrew Bible, the terms *ra* and *devek* (to stick) consistently refer not to physical but to moral processes pertaining to human agency. Indeed, the latter word is a key word in the book of Ruth, used to describe how Ruth cleaves to Naomi as does the idyllic husband to his wife ([Ruth 1:14](#); cf. [Genesis 2:24](#)) and in Boaz's invitation to Ruth to glean near, and thus be accepted by, Boaz's field hands.⁴⁸ Lot seems to be worried about a moral threat of some kind, of *stigma* they will not be able to shake.

Next, Lot begs the angels to let his family go to Zoar. He enigmatically explains that Zoar is close by and is *mitz'ar*—little or lowly. He repeats this point and uses it to explain that if he goes there "my soul will live" ([19:20](#)). Lot's denigration of Zoar is consistent with the fact that Zoar seems relatively less established or politically stable (it is variously named Lasha and Bela in [Genesis 10:9](#) and [14:8](#)).⁴⁹ But it is strange that the status-conscious Lot would seek refuge in a lowly city, especially since years earlier, when he first looked out upon the plain, Lot had apparently rejected Zoar for the more established and prominent city of Sodom ([Genesis 13:10](#)).⁵⁰ It seems that whereas Lot

had once sought status, he is now seeking the opposite as his ticket to life; and he somehow expects the messengers to understand this puzzling logic and to empathize with it.

Next, after the reader is informed that Lot has arrived in Zoar safely and that the other cities of the plain are being destroyed, the reader's focus is made to shift abruptly to a scene on the Judean mountains overlooking the plain ([19:27-29](#)). We learn that Abraham rose early that day and returned to the place where he had tried and failed to head off God's plan of destruction. We also learn that Abraham looked out on the destruction and that he saw smoke rising "like the smoke of a kiln." The reader is then provided with a summary statement that God had sent Lot out from the destruction of the "cities in which Lot had dwelled" and that God had done this because he had "remembered Abraham." Yet it is unclear whether Abraham knew that Lot had been saved or whether he in fact cared. As far as we know, the two men never again spoke. This repeats and deepens the pattern that began several years earlier when Abraham came to Lot's rescue when he was taken captive as a prisoner of war. After Abraham defeats Lot's captors, it appears that the uncle and nephew are so estranged that they do not exchange words ([Genesis 14:14-24](#)). Lot soon returns to his place at the city gate of Sodom, apparently an important personage there, perhaps because he is the nephew of the man who defeated the city's enemies ([Genesis 19:1-19](#)). And when Abraham pleads with God on Sodom's behalf, he never mentions Lot by name ([Genesis 18: 16-33](#)). So now, when Abraham returns to this scene for what will turn out to be his last potential interaction with Lot, the text seems to go out of its way to emphasize their estrangement: God spares Lot from Sodom's destruction on Abraham's behalf, but Abraham may not know or care. This is a troubling image of salvation rooted both in a seemingly unbreakable family bond and a seemingly unbreachable family rupture.

Finally, in the final verse before the older daughter proposes her conspiracy to the younger daughter, we learn that "Lot went up out of Zoar and dwelled in the mountain and his daughters were with him, because he was fearful of dwelling in Zoar; and he dwelled in a cave, he and his two daughters" ([19:30](#)). The most important question this verse raises is: *What happened in Zoar, and why were they fearful of staying?* It is also odd that this verse repeatedly describes Lot as acting on his own but with his daughters dragged in tow as if an afterthought. It is also strange that fear of living in Zoar is presented as if it is the reason for living on the mountain with his two daughters, rather than being merely the reason for leaving Zoar.

The Destruction of Your Narrative is not the End of Your World or of Your Children's

The set of clues we have laid out can now be assembled to propose a theory that integrates the textual and social/psychological insights underlying both the minority and majority positions with regard to the daughters' motives, and that helps us appreciate the deeper lessons imparted by this story and by the *yibbum* triangle more generally.

In short, *whereas it felt to Lot like his entire world had been destroyed because of the humiliation and loss he experienced, it was just his life's narrative that was ruined. The world was still here, and he had a duty to help his daughters find a future in it.*

⁴⁷ This recalls the moment in a 2008 US presidential election debate when John McCain referred to Barack Obama as "that one," which was taken by some to be a way of dismissing his political opponent. See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-politics-thatone/from-the-one-to-that-one-mccain-remark-irks-idUSTRE49781120081008>.

⁴⁸ Ruth 2:8,21,23.

⁴⁹ See [Shabbat 10b](#).

⁵⁰ See [Leibtag](#), *op cit*.

When we first encounter Lot, we learn that he bristles under Abraham's family leadership.⁵¹ He is also ambitious; he thus seeks riches and prestige in Sodom even though its culture is corrupt. Having pridefully struck out on his own, he seems to resent any help from Abraham, even when desperately needed. Whereas the King of Sodom once thanked Abraham for freeing him, Lot apparently did not ([Genesis 14:17-24](#)). And now that Sodom is destroyed but he is spared, Abraham has apparently saved his life again. At this point, Lot cannot bring himself to go up to Abraham with his tail between his legs. He also recognizes quite reasonably that, as the sole survivor of a terrifying conflagration, and with daughters whose marital status and sexual mores may be in doubt (*Had word gotten out about his indecent proposal? Are these his married daughters or his unmarried ones? Did he have two pairs of daughters or one pair?*⁵²), he is likely to be shunned by polite society. Lot needed Abraham's help—the social acceptance he could provide through his great prestige and perhaps his wealth to provide dowries—but Lot would have to swallow his pride and go to Abraham and ask.⁵³

But the prospect of humiliation was apparently too great. And so Lot's alternate plan is to go to the city he once shunned as beneath him. Given how lowly Zoar is and how Lot had been a distinguished member of a more prestigious city, he reasons that they will be happy to accept him and that he will be able to live there. Yet, as is hardly surprising, the people of Zoar are not interested in accepting Lot on this basis. The conflagration has probably made them less deferential to Sodomites, who used to look down upon them. Moreover, especially if word has gotten out about Lot's proposal to the mob, his daughters would likely have been shunned or abused in Zoar. And so Lot's family is forced to leave. They do go up the mountain, but not to Abraham. Rather, Lot drags his daughters into a cave—the ultimate symbol of someone who has given up and retreated from society. Indeed, we soon encounter a cave as a burial site ([Genesis 23](#)).

The problem of course is that Lot cannot just give up: he has an obligation to his daughters. It is his responsibility to swallow his pride and find a way to reintegrate them into society, to help give them a future. After all, they did nothing wrong; this is all Lot's fault! So, *with no help from their father in performing his primary responsibility of providing them a recognized status in society* (a lack of status

⁵¹ The text of [Genesis 12:10-13:1](#) suggests two reasons for Lot's discontent: a) He may resent Abraham for letting Lot's sister Sarai be taken to the Egyptian harem, with both Abraham enriched as a result; and b) Whereas Lot was once a central member of Abraham's party ("And Abram took his wife Sarai and Lot, the son of his brother, and all the souls they made in Haran"; [12:5](#)), he now seems an afterthought ("And Abram went up, he and his wife and all that he possessed, and Lot was with him"; [13:1](#)). The latter formulation, "and Lot was with him" seems to foreshadow how Lot dragged his daughters with him to the cave.

⁵² The text is famously ambiguous on these questions, but perhaps this is the point. If anyone had heard rumors, these questions would have had no clear answer, and Lot would have no documents or witnesses to attest to his version of events.

⁵³ Given that Abraham was apparently still fertile (the angels might even have told Lot about the prophecy that Sarah would give birth within the year; [Genesis 18:10](#)), he could have married Lot's daughters and performed the role of levir, as he apparently had done in marrying Sarah. Alternatively, chapter 24 suggests that Laban was available back in the family compound in Haran; Abraham could have helped provide the dowries.

symbolized by the fact that they don't have their own names, their only status is through their father), Lot's daughters believe they have no choice but to take matters into their own hands. It seems a small step from the logic of levirate marriage, after all.⁵⁴ And what choice did they have, given the position their father had put them in?

The Triangle Revisited

Let us now return to our triangle and consider how the proposed interpretation of Lot and his daughters—an approach that reconciles the textual and social/psychological insights underlying the majority and minority approaches—helps sharpen our appreciation of the *yibbum* triangle and its messages.

First, consider how Judah's actions are illuminated.

Judah too must have felt like his world was destroyed when he lost his beloved two sons, in part because he surely saw it as punishment for his role in causing his own father to lose his beloved son. But he would nonetheless need to come up with a plan for Shelah. What was it? The text implies that Judah had been waiting for Shelah to grow up, with the ostensive plan of having him be the levir for Tamar but the surreptitious plan of marrying him off to someone else "lest he die like his brothers" if he were to marry Tamar ([38:11](#)).

But was that actually his plan? The text is silent. If levirate marriage was as normative as it seems to have been, the implication is that Shelah would be perceived as obligated to marry Tamar, and any other woman would have wanted that matter clarified. Moreover, Shelah might have been stigmatized by his brothers' mysterious deaths just as Tamar was; *maybe the problem was with Judah's sons?* And so Judah seems like a man who is stuck, just like Lot was. He is desperate to keep Shelah alive but he has no clear plan for Shelah's (and therefore for his own) future.

Yet his cloud seems to lift once his wife dies and the mourning period is over. Unlike his father, who could not reconcile himself to his apparent loss of Joseph (*va-yema'en le-hitnahem*; [37:35](#)), Judah is somehow able to reconcile himself to the loss of his wife (*va-yenahem Yehudah*; [38:12](#)) and he feels sufficiently positive that he goes to a sheep shearing. It is unclear what accounts for this shift. Perhaps he was inspired by the memory of his father, who lost his beloved Rachel but somehow was able to move past that and lead the family. Perhaps he can now go ahead with a plan for resolving the problem with Shelah and Tamar to which his wife may not have agreed. And perhaps Tamar now senses that Judah's perspective has shifted (for either of those reasons or some other reason) and that he is now oriented towards the future rather than his calamitous past, that he is focused on life rather than death. At the same time, she has heard nothing concrete and is reasonably worried that she is not part of the plans. And so she takes initiative to ensure that his plans for the future include her.

The implications for how we understand Ruth and Naomi run even deeper.

First, the manner by which Ruth provides a *tikkun* for her foremothers is now even clearer. Her story is very much like theirs. When she returns to Moab, she appears to Bethlehemites just as Lot's daughters might have appeared had they too gone up to Judea

⁵⁴ Medan, op cit., notes that the first daughter's formulation for a union, "*lavo al*," is used nowhere in the Hebrew Bible except for the law of levirate marriage ([Deuteronomy 25:5](#)).

and tried to enter civilization there—i.e., with unclear or damaged lineage, and tainted by association with some kind of terrifying and potentially contagious calamity. Moreover, she was a member of the lowest possible caste—a Moabite, who had married into a family that had betrayed its own at its time of distress. *Who would marry her?*

But a key difference between her and Lot's daughters underlines Ruth's moral greatness: *Ruth freely chose this lowly status when she did not have to!*

Ruth could have gone back to Moab like Orpah did. Indeed, Naomi actively discourages her from tagging along for this very reason. And, as Boaz notes, she did not have to marry such an old man like him. Remarkably, she *chose* to sacrifice herself in a way that tends to be experienced as intolerable by others—such as Tamar and the daughters of Lot. Ruth actively chose to accept the likely possibility that she would never be integrated into acceptable society—at best she would be a poor beggar at Naomi's side, someone who could never give her a child.⁵⁵

And if Ruth provides *tikkun* for Lot's daughters, Naomi provides *tikkun* for Lot.⁵⁶ Consider in particular that Naomi could easily have given up. Her husband and two sons were dead. She was in a foreign land and was apparently penniless. As a woman, widow to a man who had emigrated, she could not expect a warm reception or the restoration of family property upon her return. And even if she herself would return home, she apparently expected her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab so they could find husbands and build futures for themselves there ([Ruth 1:11-13](#)). Finally, given her dour disposition upon her return to Bethlehem (calling herself “bitter” instead of “pleasant”; [1:20-21](#)), she certainly does not seem to have been motivated by great optimism about her future. What was her plan then?

It is hard to know. But it seems key that despite the destruction of her life narrative and her bitterness about it, she did not give up and somehow undertook the perilous journey home. The text gives us one clue as to why: Naomi had heard that “God had *pakad* (noticed/redeemed) his people and given them food” ([Ruth 1:6](#)). This statement is intriguing because given that she was in Moab, she probably heard just that “the famine in Judea is over.” But what she *chose* to hear was language that evokes God's *pakad* of Sarah by facilitating her birth of Isaac ([Genesis 21:1](#)) and perhaps God's hearing and remembering the people of Israel at the depth of Egyptian slavery ([Exodus 2:24](#)). The implication is that Naomi's frame of mind was such that she interpreted the news via a *national* narrative frame, the covenantal relationship between God and Israel (*cf.*, [Esther 4:14](#)).

Choosing to see herself as part of a larger, national narrative may have helped Naomi transcend her personal troubled narrative and become more hopeful for the future. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, we soon learn that her daughter-in-law Ruth has come to identify with

that national narrative as well, centering on its covenant with God—“your people are my people, your God is my God” ([Ruth 1:16](#)). This is remarkable, given that Ruth's direct experience with those who lived by this narrative (Naomi's family) had been so calamitous and that she had every reason to expect rejection by that people and perhaps by its God. But Naomi's connection with her people and God had apparently survived her personal tragedy, and it had clearly made a great impression on Ruth.

It is also possible that Naomi was motivated by concern for her daughters-in-law. Given how she encourages them to return to their families and find husbands, she clearly was worried about their futures and wanted to see them thrive. Perhaps she was also worried that they felt obligated to care for her, and she wanted to free them from that obligation. If she were to return to Judea and they were to stay behind, they would no longer be “anchored” to her and could move ahead with their lives (*cf.*, [Ruth 1:13](#)). And perhaps this plan backfired on Naomi, but in the best possible way. While Naomi could not see how she and Ruth could build a future together, perhaps Ruth took inspiration from the fact that Naomi was apparently still moving forward and willing to try her luck in Judea on her own. *Anyone who can push ahead despite such setbacks must have a compelling narrative one can believe in. And with Naomi's resilience and strength of character, perhaps she actually can help me find a husband and a future.*

Conclusion

One can only speculate what was going through the minds of the characters in any biblical story, including those who comprise the *yibbum* triangle. What is clear is that each story asks us to consider how we might respond to the apparent destruction of our life's narrative, where that destruction reveals our previous choices to have been based on problematic premises. More specifically, the *yibbum* triangle asks those of us with young adult children (or children-in-law or protégés more generally) what we might do if the junior party needs us to help them rebuild a future that has been compromised by being tied to the apparent destruction of our world. The younger generation faces the flip-side of this dilemma: what can it do to secure its future given the calamity that has befallen my parent/patron, and what sacrifices and compromises does this require of me? As noted, these questions resonate clearly and painfully today given how the coronavirus pandemic has overturned our world and associated life narratives.

Framed in these terms, the *yibbum* triangle reveals that the genealogical backstory of the Davidic dynasty is in the biblical canon for a clear reason: it is morally inspiring. The stories trace twin arcs of moral development, as one moves from the earliest point on the triangle (Lot and his daughters) through the middle (Judah-Tamar) to the final point (Ruth and Boaz/Naomi).⁵⁷ From the standpoint of the older generation, the arc begins with a father who fails utterly at the challenge of swallowing his pride and helping his daughters rebuild their lives; it continues with a father-in-law who apparently needs to be scandalously tricked to see the error of his ways but ultimately owns up to it and does the right thing; and finally to a mother-in-law and a distant patriarchal relative who, in halting but ultimately successful fashion, rise to the challenge in exemplary fashion. Indeed, while their brush with scandal is a near miss and there are missteps

⁵⁵ See my essay “[Team of Rivals: Building Israel Like Rachel and Leah](#),” *The Lehrhaus* (November 15, 2018), on the importance of female initiative in Ruth and in how Ruth reveals this theme as a powerful subtext in the story of Rachel and Leah.

⁵⁶ It is possible of course to provide *tikkun* for multiple earlier characters. For instance, Ziegler (*op cit.*) proposes that Ruth provides *tikkun* for Lot, and Naomi may *provide* *tikkun* for Lot's daughters in that she, like they, was dragged to her predicament by an agentic male (compare [Ruth 1:1](#) with [Genesis 19:30](#)).

⁵⁷ As I discuss in “[The King's Great Cover-Up and Great Confession](#)” (*op cit.*), David's sin (and confession) with Bathsheba represents a dramatic reversal and semi-recovery along these same moral dimensions.

as they grope their way forward, who can blame them given that the challenge is so difficult and either of them could easily have walked away from it?

From the standpoint of the younger generation, we can trace a similar arc: from daughters whose decision is commendable only in that they seemingly had no other choice in securing their future⁵⁸ but to violate a universal norm, to a daughter-in-law who might have been able to find a less scandalous way to induce her father-in-law to recognize his duty, to a daughter-in-law who, like her older partners in effecting the unconventional *yibbum*, could have walked away from the dilemma entirely. Remarkably, Ruth *chose* to attach herself to her mother-in-law because she saw a future with and through her even when her mother-in-law did not. Her willingness to invest in and thereby *save* the family and national narrative surely makes her a worthy matriarch for the dynastic king of Israel and one whose moral example— together with her *yibbum* partners— shines as a beacon through the ages.

Of course, few of us can achieve the moral heights attained by Ruth, Boaz, and Naomi. Nonetheless, as we struggle today with rebuilding our narratives in light of the coronavirus pandemic (and other calamities that unfortunately befall us), the *yibbum* triangle provides moral inspiration in three crucial ways: a) by alerting us to the universality of the challenge of helping the younger generation build a future when ours seems hopeless, and thus telling us we are not alone; b) by suggesting we not blame ourselves for failing to find an optimal solution to this challenge given how difficult it is to solve; and c) by reminding us (to teach our children) that our personal life narrative gains greater meaning and resilience when it is built into a narrative that is much greater than ourselves. This last implication resonates powerfully with this year's celebration of Shavuot, when even Jews who must tragically be alone in their homes are invited to imagine themselves entering into an eternal covenant with God at Sinai.

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⁵⁸ Grossman, *op cit.*, argues persuasively that the younger daughter exhibited more reluctance than the older daughter, which is consistent with a moral arc that begins with the elder daughter.