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Over Shabbat

Bamidbar

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Yom Yerushalayim: On Not Yet, Always Already, and the [Im]possibility of Crossing Over

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[After the Jewish sage's lengthy disquisition on the distinctiveness of the Land of Israel,] the Khazar [king] said: In that case, you are falling short of what is required by your Law, because you do not go to this place and make it your life's abode—and [the abode] of your death as well—when you [keep on] saying: *Have*

mercy upon Zion because it is our life's abode, and believe that the Divine Presence is going to return to it... But surely your bowing down and bending your knee towards it are either acts of hypocrisy or rote worship, practiced without any thought (cf. Isa. 29:13)...

The sage said: You have certainly reproached me [legitimately], O King of the Khazars... If we were prepared to meet the Lord of our fathers with pure intent, He would help us just as He helped our fathers in Egypt. Therefore, our saying, *Bow down towards His holy mountain ... and bow*

down to His footstool!... He who restores His Divine Presence to Zion, and similar such things are only like the [mindless] warbling of starlings and parrots. We do not realize what we are saying in this regard or in regard to other things as well, just as you said, O Commander of the Khazars. (Judah Ha-Levi, *Kuzari* 2:23-24, trans. Barry Kogan, Yale University Press, forthcoming.)¹

Having been raised as a religiously observant Jew in the United States, in a family with a rabbi and *rebbitzin* for patriarch and matriarch whose lodestar was Jewish literacy, liturgy and learning, who went on all fours with two year-old me to teach me the “*alef-bais*” – I was blessed to inhabit a feeling of continuity with the civilization of my forefathers unselfconsciously for all my childhood.

²

The sense of longing for the Land of Israel was inculcated within me at a crucial, precritical time, the first ten to thirteen years of life, when I sensed God to be everywhere, all the time. This enchanted time perhaps had best access to Biblical theology as Benjamin Sommer tries to reconstruct it – the sense of God immanent everywhere, the “prophecy [which is] now relegated to the insane and children” (Bava Batra 12b) – before my developing mind could be

exposed to the twin colonizers of the Jewish mind: (1) classical antiquity, the Hellenizing intellectualization of God to a transcendent prime mover atop, but at great remove from, the Ptolemaic universe He animates; and (2) two millennia on, the secularizing winds of enlightenment and modernity, in which Cartesian dualism banished God from science and metaphysics altogether and confined Him to the prison of the private and personal. All (or nearly all) but the most enclave-bound Jews are, these days, marched into these mental ‘exiles,’ – and require a Ricœurian second and third naïveté.

This longing – perhaps indigenous? – had nothing to do with the political movement called Zionism. It shouted from every page of the liturgy, itself mostly composed in classical antiquity, from the prayers in that first Siddur we received in first grade and recited daily until they rolled off our tongues – the blessings in the thrice-daily Amidah pleading for a return to Zion with His great shofar blast and restoration of its judiciary, capital, monarchy, and Temple service, the Grace after meals that is preceded by Psalm 126, the epitome of longing for restoration, and whose three blessings narrow their focus from all the world to the Land to Jerusalem and its Temple. The Jewish holidays – in an insular orthodox community, a time of joy and wonder, with exotic flora and dishes, special melodies, blessings from the

¹ I am indebted to Prof. Daniel J. Lasker for sharing this translation with me before publication.

² Thanks to Professor Shulamit Elizur for her gracious input regarding some source citations, Professor Daniel Lasker for sharing source materials, and my daughter Rivka for her comments and corrections on an earlier draft.

kohanim – was punctured at its climax, the late morning *mussaf*-repetition, by the discordant dirge of *Eikha*: ‘rebuild Your House as in the beginning, and establish Your Sanctuary on its site. Show us its rebuilding and gladden us with its restoration.’

The effect was a deep sense, at my very core, that the promised land was where we *needed* to be, where I and my community inexorably *will* be, in our lifetimes, *be-hayeikhon u-be-yomeikhon* – and were bound for, any minute now, if I just prayed with enough *kavvanah* this Tish’a Be-Av, or Yom Kippur, or even this afternoon – “today even, if you will only hearken to His voice!” (Psalms 95:7). I remember this vividly because it remains preserved in my religious consciousness, and I suspect perhaps all who share this sort of childhood – except perhaps the most ‘socially Orthodox’. It erupts in discrete moments in adulthood, either of vulnerability or exultation – no matter how far I find myself mired in the abstractions and distractions of post-modern maturity.

And yet this had *everything* to do with Zionism, and immigration to Israel – in ways that are patently obvious, at least to me. Yet for others, this proposition is curiously nonintuitive, and even controversial – and it is worth examining why.

In his recent *The Necessity of Exile*,³ Shaul Magid recounts precisely the inverse experience: raised without much feeling for Judaism or Israel, finding both, and then rethinking the latter, as an adult. Magid argues that Zionism must be extricated from Judaism. From Rav Shagar, the Satmar Rav, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and R. Aaron Samuel Tamares, Magid evinces a theology that the messianic realization, the expiration of exilic existence, is, authentically conceived, ‘not yet’; there is (always) work to be done, exilic ‘air’ to be purified; the real arena of Jewish existence is the diaspora, and redemption is always a dream to be deferred, something perhaps tomorrow but not today. As theory, can this argument be sustained?

To be sure, that strand, ‘not yet’, certainly *does* exist in contemporary Orthodox Jewish thought. After the disenchantment that came with Enlightenment, the loss of fervent belief and God-consciousness – Haym Soloveitchik’s “touch of His presence,”⁴ or *yir’at shamayim* – messianic expectation soon degenerates into Yeshayahu Leibowitz’s cynical bon mot “the Messiah that comes cannot be the Messiah,” which inevitably renders waiting for him as absurd as waiting for Samuel Beckett’s Godot. It derives in part from more elaborate justifications of the exile that

³ Shaul Magid, [The Necessity of Exile: Essays from a Distance](#) (Ayin Press, 2023).

⁴ Haym Soloveitchik, "[Rupture and Reconstruction: The transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy.](#)" *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 28:4 (1994), 64-130.

developed in the sixteenth century, which the late Professor Shalom Rosenberg⁵ argued emerged from the realities of the Spanish expulsion. The traditional ‘*galut*-as-punishment’ idea was no longer tenable, especially when the Church preached the same view to underscore the truth of its teachings. The other old notion of *hevlei mashiach*, that the travails of diaspora were the birth pangs of the messiah – and that Jews would soon be rewarded in recompense for their prolonged misery – faded quickly as the decades passed from 1492 and 1507. The Lurianic emphasis on raising up the holy sparks of divinity scattered in the husks of the exilic wasteland emerged from Safed to kindle religious fervor in Jewish Eastern Europe, and it found complementarity in non-mystical theory of a “light unto the nations,” to instruct humanity in the ways of righteousness, which came to animate both the fathers of German reform and R. Samson Raphael Hirsch in the Jewish West. In a classic essay some time ago, Shalom Carmy showed how these and prior approaches gave rise to rationalizations, if not necessarily idealizations, of Jewish non-territoriality in the more comfortable diasporic experiences of late modernity.⁶

But to the pre-Modern Jewish mind, the one

reinforced daily in prayer and the rock of Jewish piety and fervor, the promised Messianic age is never “not yet.”

Rather, it is “always already”: in philosophy, a technical term for a condition always present, with no identifiable beginning – but an apt formula for the primal Jewish emotional relationship with messianic anticipation. The morning prayer is commonly closed with the thirteen Maimonidean principles, including faith in the messiah: “I believe with complete faith in the coming of the Messiah, and though he may delay I wait daily for his coming.”

Students of classical and medieval Jewish history know that Jews have been seizing upon world events, positive or negative, as signs of the already-beginning restoration from as long ago as the reign of Emperor Hadrian, and then every century after the translocations of Jewish centers to Europe and the Christian millennium, starting with an infamous tenth-century responsum from the Halakhists of the geonic academy in Jerusalem to Ashkenazic interlocutors, the first we possess – criticizing them for inquiring about the date of the messianic end. This continues through the great hopes for 1096-“*ranu cycle*”⁷ that were so cruelly

⁵ Shalom Rosenberg, “Exile and Redemption in Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century: Contemporary Conceptions,” in [Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century](#), ed. Bernard Dov Cooperman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies, 1983), 399-430.

⁶ Shalom Carmy, “A View from the Fleshpots: Exploratory Remarks on Gilded Galut Existence,” in [Israel as a Religious Reality](#), ed. Chaim Isaac Waxman (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1994), p. 1-42.

⁷ Speculations abounded regarding the 256th 19-year metonic cycle from creation, which coincided with the turn

dashed by the Crusader massacres along the Rhineland, but renewed in each new Hebrew century from Judah Ha-Levi's own pilgrimage to the Crusader Kingdoms around 1140, to the "Aliyah of three hundred rabbis," Tosafists and disciples who came to Late Ayyubid Levant in the 1240s, who joined Maimonideans following Rambam's own calculation-date for prophetic renaissance around 1216; to the 1440s movement from Spain, North Africa and Italy, which set the stage for the great renaissance in Safed in 1540 and both the unifying, Sanhedrin-priming Shulhan Arukh and messianic Lurianic kabbalah which emerged – laying the ground for the Sabbatean messianic eruption after 1640, the attempted arrival of the Gaon of Vilna and the Ba'al Shem Tov after 1740, and their students around 1840.⁸ Not only the Khazars, but also the early Muslims (and for Abraham Abulafia and others, even the Mongol hordes who nearly liberated the land from the Mamluks) were regarded as messianic warriors, perhaps the ten lost tribes of Israel⁹ who would provide ready-made military reinforcements to instantly restore Jewish sovereignty and Judaism from a 'despised faith' to its rightful place among world powers.

And the sense of messianic imminence and eschatological immanence has not been snuffed

of that century, since Jeremiah 31:6 – a prophecy predicting the Jewish redemption – opens with the word *ranu* (the *gematric* equivalent of 256).

⁸ Arie Morgenstern, "[Dispersion and the Longing for Zion, 1240-1840](#)," *Azure* (2002), 71-132.

out. The most modern of Hasidim and their peculiar messianic view, which Magid describes as a 'not yet' approach – was transformed, as early as the 1970's, into 'Moshiach Now', a movement whose fringes teeter on the theological brink, but whose mainstream is of a piece with all that came before it. Of this, David Singer wrote cogently,

"...genuine longing for the coming of the messiah is bound to trigger periodic eruptions along the lines of Lubavitcher messianism. Simply put, this is the price of religious authenticity. Far worse than the disruptive presence of the Lubavitcher messianists on the current Orthodox scene would be their total absence. An Orthodox Judaism in which hope for the messiah remained permanently fixed at the level of pious affirmation would be nothing more than a religious mummy."¹⁰

And it is not limited to Chabad. Nearly every major event in world or Israel's history sees the circulation among religious Jews of texts that are interpreted – often with great liberties – to have predicted it, typically linking it to an imminent

⁹ Steven Bowman, "Messianic Expectations in the Peloponnesos," *Hebrew Union College Annual* (1981), 195-202.

¹⁰ David Singer, "[The Rebbe, the Messiah and the Heresy Hunter](#)," *First Things* (May 2003).

messianic arrival, much to the chagrin of Orthodox intellectuals, not least for its capacity to “dull the urge to ethical action”.¹¹ But the persistence of the phenomenon seems to speak to something deep, even primal, about our Jewishness.

If the Mongols are the ten tribes, then *of course* a Jewish army which re-establishes Jewish life in the Holy Land – with courts that draw upon *mishpat ivri*, with its capital in a Jerusalem *ha-benuyah*, full of towers and cranes of rebuilding – is of an eschatological moment. Our Chabad *shliach* in Alabama did not recite Hallel on 5 Iyyar, to be sure, but every year would tell the story of the veteran elderly Hasid in Kfar Habad, who would spontaneously dance in the streets on Yom ha-Atzma’ut, telling onlookers, “I can’t help it, my feet need to dance.”

It would seem to me that Magid is quite correct that Judaism does not agree with the secular Zionist ‘negation of exile.’ But this is not because ‘not yet’ diasporic existence is more important than an actual ‘redemption’ – it is because the spiritual riches of exile were always contingent upon the drama of a redemption constantly bursting into reality. Diasporas were *always* anticipating, and beginning to consummate, the reconstitution of a civilization upon its land.

¹¹ David Shatz, [*From the Depths I Have Called to You: Jewish Reflections on September 11th and Contemporary Terrorism*](#) (Yeshiva University, 2002).

To be fair, however, this is not the full picture. Magid is correct about a historical Jewish ambivalence toward Aliyah; it is also real, and – for reasons quite different from modern valorizations of exile – also precedes modernity.

As it turns out, the focus of Jewish hopes and dreams became a center for another “always already” – but of a vastly different variety. The ideology of the Christian monastic movement, as articulated by Jerome (342-420) – of Stridon, and crucially, for the last thirty-four years of his life, Bethlehem, on the cusp of the Judean desert – is the possibility of “realized eschatology” in this world; but a decidedly other-worldly eschatology. “Dying to the world” by giving up one’s earthly possessions, and withdrawing from incorrigibly sinful human society to the desert, enables the monk to “carry with them Jesus’ mortification bodily and live not according to the flesh but spirit.”¹² The movement began with solitary monks (anchorites), and quickly came to encompass highly organized communities of ascetics in monasteries (cenobites).

After Constantine, an indisputably Jewish Holy Land was transformed into a vast network of monasteries and late antique Christian cities, which existed in reciprocal relationship, providing education and receiving material support. Constantine himself had remade Jerusalem, its

¹² Marcin Wysocki, "[The Eschatological Aspects of the Monastic Life in St. Jerome’s Letters.](#)" *Vox Patrum* 76 (2020), 143-155.

new Temple – the Church of the Holy Sepulchre – juxtaposed against the Temple’s ruins, as a Christian focus of pilgrimage. The earliest Pilgrimage account, the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* from 333-334, already draws the intended contrast between the desolate, destroyed Temple mount, now a refuse dump,¹³ and the New Jerusalem then taking shape. Christianization reached its peak by the reign of Justinian, and the conscious dispossession of Jews from their own homeland is lamented in the works of sixth-century *payyetan* Yannai.¹⁴

Recent scholarship¹⁵ argues that this new configuration of the land persisted even beyond the Muslim conquest, until a key event: the cataclysmic Galilee earthquake of 749. The ruin that was wrought upon the center of Jewish life in the Galilee was catastrophic; tens of thousands were killed, and a fast day with its own liturgy was created to commemorate the event, on the twenty-third of Shevat. Communities responded

in diverse ways to the destruction, often preserving synagogue ruins as a visual commemoration.¹⁶ But Jewish life went on.

For the Christians of the Holy Land, the event was transformative. The city wealth that sustained the monasteries, and much of the human capital, was gone. A ‘rapid involution’ occurred. Many churches in the north were not rebuilt, and many which were demonstrate only partial restoration, ‘narrowing of the sacral space’ to adjust to limited resources and fewer attendees, while most of a church was left in ruins.¹⁷ By 950, the Christian cultic network was reduced to core nuclei around Jerusalem and the Judean desert.

For Western Christians, this new reality – perfect for the ascetic life, re-invigorated in the monastery by the incipient Cistercian revolution – helped spur the Crusades, which blurred monastic ideology, pilgrimage and holy war.¹⁸ The Holy Land was the perfect place for the devout. The only

¹³ Jewish, Karaite and Muslim sources report that Byzantine women would send menstrual cloths to Jerusalem to be discarded on the Temple mount. See Moshe Gil, [A History of Palestine, 634-1099](#) (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 67.

¹⁴ Shulamit Elizur. “Exile on Native Soil” (Heb). *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 27 (2014), 21–36.

¹⁵ Daniel Kenneth Reynolds, [Monasticism and Christian Pilgrimage in early Islamic Palestine c. 614-c. 950](#) (Diss. University of Birmingham, 2014).

¹⁶ Rick Bonnie, "[A Sustained Presence: Synagogue Buildings in Galilee during the Early Islamic Period and Later.](#)" *Journal*

of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies 9:3 (2021), 278-298.

¹⁷ Piotr Makowski, "Liturgy after an earthquake. The reduction of sacral space of churches in the cities of Jund al-Urdunn." [Ex Oriente Lux: Studies in Honour of Jolanta Młynarczyk](#) (Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2020), 363-372.

¹⁸ Katherine Allen Smith, [War and the making of medieval monastic culture](#) (Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2013).

barrier could be sinful attachment to this-worldly pleasures.

For Jews, the situation was a bit more complex. For Rabbanite Judaism, monastic asceticism is problematic. For one thing, the Babylonian Talmud takes a jaundiced view of mortification of the flesh,¹⁹ which dovetails with the sensibilities of its decidedly more “body-positive”²⁰ Zoroastrian milieu. But more importantly, the Rabbis (Mishnah Avot 2:4, Ta’anit 11a) adjure against the *apotaktikoi*, the renunciant from society, which it terms *poresh min ha-tzibbur* – an unforgivable act of hubris. Where Christians sought out the intercessory prayers of the monks, the Talmud (Berakhot 8a) inverts the equation: God is more favorably inclined to the prayer of the congregation than the individual.

When the Crusaders arrived and eliminated almost all remnants of the indigenous Jewish population – and when the Abbasids and Mamluks

subsequently destroyed most of the Crusader fortifications, including the walls of Jerusalem – relocating to the Holy Land ceased to be *aliyah* and instead became Moses’ *e’ebrah na*, ‘crossing over,’²¹ akin to a hermit’s monastic vow; it required abandoning one’s community, family and spouse – effectively, celibacy – to live a lonely life among desolate, unsafe ruins. For Spanish and French Jewry, this was no deterrent. Judah Ha-Levi abandoned Andalusia, acclaim, and Aristotelianism to act upon the ideals of his *Sefer Kuzari*; Nahmanides favored asceticism and saw in it, and *aliyah*, a way to cleave unto the Source of prophecy.²² The motive of the ‘three hundred Rabbis,’ French Tosafists, to establish a pious (cenobitic monastic?) elite to stimulate messianic warfare, was a product of cultural coproduction with Crusader ideology.²³ Even prior to the renaissance in Safed, that city became a focus for burial of diaspora Jews, as well as elderly Jews who left their families to come die in the Holy Land²⁴ -- perhaps not quite so different from their

¹⁹ See, e.g., Lennart Lehmhaus, "[Talmudic Torment: Late Antique Jewish Texts on Pain and Suffering Between Medicine, Martyrdom, and Askesis](#)." *Journal of Early Christian History* 12:1 (2022), 52-79.

²⁰ Solomon A. Nigosian, "[Zoroastrian perception of ascetic culture](#)." *Journal of Asian and African studies* 34:1 (1999), 4-18.

²¹ See Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, "'Let Me See That Good Land:' the Story of a Human Life," in Lewis Aron and Libby Henik, eds., [Answering a Question with a Question: Contemporary Psychoanalysis and Jewish Thought](#) (Academic Studies Press, 2010), 236-264.

²² Oded Yisraeli, "'Taking Precedence over the Torah': Vows and Oaths, Abstinence and Celibacy in Nahmanides's Oeuvre," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 28:2 (2020), 121-150; idem., "Jerusalem in Nahmanides's Religious Thought: The Evolution of the 'Prayer over the Ruins of Jerusalem'," *AJS Review* 41:2 (2017), 409-453.

²³ Uri Zvi Shachar, [A pious belligerence: dialogical warfare and the rhetoric of righteousness in the crusading Near East](#) (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021.), 97-129.

²⁴ Eyal Davidson, "The Advantage of Burial in Safed: Analysis of Medieval Sources," Conference Lecture, August 8, 2023, archived at <https://youtu.be/yQuVKr>

Christian neighbors who took monastic vows on their deathbeds.

But with the twinning of *aliyah* and monasticism came age-old Rabbinic reservations, ones which surfaced specifically among the leading lights of the German Jewish community in the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries: the pietist R. Eliezer ha-Darshan of Würzburg, the early Tosafist R. Hayyim ha-Kohen of Mainz,²⁵ and the late Tosafist, R. Meir of Rothenberg (although the latter himself apparently began to make the trek).²⁶ These figures hailed from a community that particularly developed the idea of *kehillah kedosha*, the sacred congregation, a belief in the intrinsic holiness of the community by dint of their Jewish identity – at odds with the Christian view, both of Jews, of course, but also of ordinary Christian societies, which monks sought to renounce.²⁷ Despite their own ascetic inclinations, Ashkenazic leaders protested the abandonment of family, sustenance, and study toward the aim of *aliyah*. They would not abide individualistic pious gestures that seemed to protest, and threatened to subvert, the

solidarity and fabric of the holy collective.

Echoes of this voice – to be sure, a minority one – outlasted the return of sizable Jewish populations to the Land. In a classic article,²⁸ Aviezer Ravitzky catalogues the sorts of anxieties about the Holy Land that emerge in the medieval period, out of the very forces that long attracted Jews to the land: who am I to leave my community for a land suffused with holiness? How can I be sure that I won't fail to observe its special laws? Perhaps, God forbid, I am rushing the End and will sin there, and bring calamity upon myself and the Jewish people. Worst of all, perhaps I will sacrifice all, and come – and I (or my spouse, or my teenagers) will fail to achieve ascetic bliss, the dreams I projected upon the land will crumble under its austere conditions – or nowadays, just the banal quotidian – and I will be left with nothing at all.

Contemporary Jewry found diverse ways to cope with the problem. American Jews mostly stayed put, and clung to the dream, projecting their utopian yearnings and dreams for America – often

ZfD0?si=ZXLsTkYhC8L60knJ and accessed on November 27, 2024.

²⁵ Avraham Rami Reiner, "Ashkenaz and France in the Middle Ages—were they one cultural entity? R. Hayim Ha-Kohen as a test case." *Journal of Jewish Studies* 69:2 (2018), 303-318.

²⁶ Israel M. Ta Shma, *Studies in Medieval Rabbinic Literature: 1. Germany* (Bialik Institute, 2004), 254-260; Elhanan Reiner, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage to Eretz Israel, 1099–1517* (Hebrew

(Ph.D. thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1988), 99-114.

²⁷ Jeffrey R. Woolf, *The Fabric of Religious Life in Medieval Ashkenaz (1000-1300): Creating Sacred Communities* (Brill, 2015), 22-79.

²⁸ Aviezer Ravitzky, "The land of Israel: Desire and dread in Jewish literature," in *Hearing visions and seeing voices: Psychological aspects of biblical concepts and personalities* (Springer Netherlands, 2006), 153-168.

the opposite of what they themselves lived – upon their views of Zion.²⁹

Secular Zionism sought to surgically detach Jewish nationalism from its cultural imaginary and leave relics like ontology, nomos and eschatology entirely aside; Jews could come and possess the land, and that would be all. In the face of obvious divine intervention, one just closes one's eyes and sings "*nes lo kara lanu, pakh shemen lo matzanu*" more loudly. Since everyone must dream, Zionism would craft a different, secular dream, one which, as it turns out, changes each generation as new fashions replace the old.

Some Haredim also deny reality, locked into a nineteenth-century decision on the Zionist heresy that obliges them to take an implausibly dark view of a Jewish army, the miracles of '48 and '67, a sabbath/kosher observant public sector, even a kippah-clad Prime Minister. It is all status quo ante, more of the same *golus*, something which theologically must not be, is forbidden to be, the mere start of redemption. It is the devil's work; the better it seems, the worse it really is. Magid mercifully spares us some of the darker, more painful, regrettable citations from the Satmarer

Rav's output. The dream of redemption remains, but becomes ever more fantastic, supernatural, removed from reality. Ironically, in modernity, out of piety rather than secularism, some of this ostensibly ultra-orthodox branch actually finally abandoned 'always already' for the decidedly unorthodox, thoroughly modern 'not yet.'

Religious Zionism would come to fully embrace a theology of 'always already,' but shove their anxieties into a smaller space: before '67, the Old City of Jerusalem; after '67, the Temple Mount,³⁰ thus displacing the beating heart – hopes, prayers, yearning, the longing which was the engine of Jewish tenacity for millennia – into a walled enclosure, a chest, the 'egg' housing the lifeforce of [Koshchei the deathless](#) of Slavic folklore: and woe betide us if it is ruptured. The holiday of Religious Zionism, Yom Yerushalayim, celebrates Jerusalem by marching through the Old City, through the Arab Souk – which covers Wilson's arch, the most direct ancient road to the *axis mundi* – and stopping short, ending at the Wall; as with any collision, kinetic energy is converted to heat and sound, and it is sadly in evidence with increasing frustration and unbecoming behavior on the march's youthful fringes.

²⁹ Jonathan Sarna, "A Projection of America as it Ought to Be: Zion in the Mind's Eye of American Jews," in [Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews](#), Allon Gal, ed. (Wayne State University Press, 1996), 41-59.

³⁰ Yaacov Yadgar, and Noam Hadad. "Nation-Statist Soteriology and Traditions of Defeat: Religious-Zionism, the Ninth of Av, and Jerusalem Day," *Politics and Religion* 15:3 (2022), 506-525.

The marchers stop. Not because they fear they will collapse Zionism, as Tomer Persico suggested.³¹ What holds the Religious Zionists back are the anxieties that held Jews back for a millennium. The sum of all hopes cannot be constricted any further than the Temple Mount. But perhaps we are unworthy. What if to live the dream is to kill it?

And so *all* Jews, diasporic and Israeli alike, remain, like Naomi Shemer's Jerusalem of Gold, *shevuyah ba-haloma*, imprisoned in their dreams.

The touchstone of my memories of childhood longing for the land was one specific place: the balcony of the executive suite of the King Solomon Hotel. From 1992, my grandparents, Rabbi Emanuel and Norma Holzer – American Jewish organizational leaders, who would travel several times a year to Israel – would stay at the hotel. They would bring me on a yearly basis and whenever I came with them – and later, when I was there for summer camp, or those gap years in Israel – I would visit with them there. The view from the balcony of the Old City of Jerusalem brought to life, in my mind, Naomi Shemer's anthem of longing:

Mountain air as clear as wine and
the scent of pine,
Borne on the evening wind with
the sound of bells.

³¹ Tomer Persico, "The end point of Zionism: Ethnocentrism and the Temple Mount," *Israel Studies Review* 32:1 (2017), 104-122.

Jerusalem from that distance was the opposite of all that I lived in America. The *longue durée*, mysterious, tranquil, that axis so far removed from the ephemeral, career, consumerism, turmoil and stress. I longed, with every fiber of my being, to 'cross over'. But, a good American Jew, it didn't occur to me to actually do so – who am I to live on the *axis mundi*? When I ultimately made '*aliyah*, at the suggestion of my visionary wife, I came "clear-eyed," with a career in Tel Aviv and plenty of possessions, living in the anglo preserve of Beit Shemesh, in the space between 'always already' and 'not yet'.

The King Solomon was sold some time ago and sat empty for a while. The hotel reopened in 2023 under new management, rebranded as the Cassia. My parents came to visit and decided, for old time's sake, to give it a try for Shabbat. Our family joined them.

We knew something was unusual when we walked into the hotel synagogue for *kabbalat Shabbat* – the prayerbooks were nearly all *eidot ha-mizrah*, of Mizrahi Jews from Arab lands. Soon, the room filled with men greeting each other heartily in Hebrew – all of whom seemed to know each other well – and the crowd sang the psalms, in a lilting North African *maqām*, in unison and then with each member participating as though rehearsed. This was something quite unusual for a Jerusalem hotel, in which guests are in the main

Ashkenazic, American, strangers to one another, and prayer leadership is distributed ad hoc. This, clearly, was a community.

When we arrived at the dining room, passing children who appeared very much at home in every nook and cranny, it became clear very quickly that we were the lone ‘outside’ guests in a hotel of *mefunim*, evacuees, from Kiryat Shemona – the development town way up north that absorbs missiles in every Lebanon conflict. After communal singing and Kiddush, one after another, families came to talk to us, inviting us to join them in *zemivot*, bringing their babies to play with us, one older man sharing swashbuckling stories of his policeman father in Morocco, pouring cups of Arak.

I was reminded of the lyrics of an 1982 Safam song:

Sitting in a hall in Kiryat Sh’mona,
With Jews from Syria, from Yemen and
Iran,
The only Ashkenazi in Kiryat Sh’mona,
I can hear their laughter but I cannot
understand.

Just another foreigner in another foreign
land,
But these strangers are my brothers as
they take me by the hand.
“Aleikhem salaam, Salaam aleikhem, (heim
sharu)
Bruchim haba’im, shalom aleichem.”

But of course, this generation spoke Hebrew, so we very much *did* understand. And they indeed took us by the hand.

When the Arak-pourer had finished his story, we asked the obvious question. It had been nine months, and there was no end in sight. They were living something of an ascetic, cenobitic life – in a hotel room, out of suitcases, while their homes and businesses, their lives’ work, were being pulverized. Their life plans, education, all upended indefinitely. How are they possibly coping?

The man stopped, looked down. “Yes, it is not easy, you are right.” Then looked up, and with a gleam in his eye, gestured to the window toward the old city, and intoned “but... to be in Yerushalayim!”

They had crossed over.

A Mathematical Reevaluation of the Prohibition on Counting Jews

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I.

A long time ago in a galaxy far far away. ...

Growing up, that’s how the *gabba’im* of my youth *minyan* would determine if a *minyan* was present.

Aware that there was not only a prohibition against counting the number of Jews in a room but also a well-known workaround – to use the ten-word verse from Psalms beginning *hoshi'a et ammekha* ([Ps. 28:9](#)) in lieu of the numbers “one, two, three, etc.” – the *gabba'im* perfectly blended piety with sacrilege in using an alternative ten-word sentence more in keeping with their community: the [opening to every Star Wars movie](#).

But for all the obvious problems with using pop-culture to count a *minyán*, there is a greater issue still. Because while R. Shlomo Ganzfried codifies the use of Ps. 28:9 in his *Kitzur Shulhan Arukh* ([15:3](#)), the *Star Wars* method seems to suffer from a fatal misunderstanding of the mathematics behind the prohibition on counting that renders it (on the surface) an unhelpful solution.

It is only by unpacking the prohibition on counting Jews alongside an understanding of its mathematical underpinnings that the merits and pitfalls of various halakhic solutions can be appreciated—including R. Ganzfried's, which, when reevaluated, can be seen as far more mathematically workable than how it is often understood.

II.

It is undeniable that Judaism prohibits counting Jews. But it is tricky to pin down the exact reason and rationale. Not only do a variety of Talmudic explanations clash, but many different scriptural sources are suggested as the reason for definitively prohibiting counting—a challenge further exacerbated by the fact that the

prohibition is never counted among the 613 Biblical commandments in the various sources that list them.

And if that weren't enough, neither the *Shulhan Arukh* nor Rema codify the prohibition. Nonetheless, not only does Rambam explicitly do so ([Hilkhot Temidim u-Musafim 4:4](#)) but a who's who of *Aharonim*, in addition to R. Ganzfried, emphatically declare counting Jews to be prohibited: R. Avraham Gombiner ([Magen Avraham 156:2](#)), R. Hezekiah da Silva (*Peri Hadash* 55:1), R. Hayyim Palaggi (*Kaf Ha-Hayyim* 13:10), and R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi ([Shulhan Arukh Ha-Rav 156:15](#)).

But the mere existence of the prohibition's codification does not weaken the major challenge of discovering its scriptural source. Take what might seem the most obvious Biblical source prohibiting counting Jews, in which God explicitly instructs Moses to conduct a census via an indirect method: each person must give exactly one half-shekel, and those half-shekels are counted to calculate the population “so that no plague may come upon them as they are counted” ([Exodus 30:11–16](#)).

At first glance, these verses not only perfectly characterize the prohibition against counting Jews but also offer a workaround: count something else. And this is, indeed, the scriptural source cited by *Hazal* when discussing King David's calamitous census ([II Sam. 24:1–15](#)). David's failure to heed the command to count Jews via a half-shekel (or any other medium) led to a plague descending upon Israel—the very consequence explicitly

stated by God to Moses. To boot, *Hazal* stress that “even schoolchildren” know it is forbidden to count Jews from the verses in Exodus 30 ([Berakhot 62b](#)).

Yet, for all the obvious appeal of Exodus 30 and the fact that even children know it as the prohibition’s source, it is conspicuously absent from a different Talmudic discussion of the prohibition—one more grounded in practical *halakhah* than the *aggadic* discussion concerning David’s failed census.

The Mishnah describes the way in which the *kohanim* would compete for the honor of removing the ashes from the altar each morning: they would race up the altar’s ramp and whoever won the race would remove the ashes ([Yoma 2:1](#)). But, as the Mishnah proceeds to explain, in the event of a tie, all the *kohanim* would be entered into a lottery, instead, to determine the winner. Standing in formation, the priestly officer in charge would pick a random number and instruct the *Kohanim* to extend a finger. He would then count the fingers until he arrived at the winning number.

Commenting upon this *mishnah*, the *gemara* asks why the *kohanim* are told to extend their fingers. Why not simply count the *kohanim* themselves? The *gemara* answers by quoting R. Yitzhak’s ruling that “it is forbidden to count Jews even for the purpose of a *mitzvah*” ([Yoma 22b](#)).

And while a reader might expect the *gemara* here to then cite as prooftext Exodus 30—the source even schoolchildren know prohibits counting Jews—a different verse is offered, which describes

David’s predecessor Saul conducting a military census:

Saul mustered them in Bezek, and the Israelites numbered 300,000; the men of Judah 30,000 ([I Sam. 11:8](#)).

And though this verse offers no obvious indication that Saul avoided the prohibition against counting Jews (indeed, it could indicate the opposite), R. Yitzhak suggests a radical reinterpretation of the verse. Saul didn’t count his troops *at* the location called “Bezek.” Rather, he counted his troops *via* “*bezek*,” “shards of pottery.” Each soldier brought (or took) a pottery shard and Saul counted each and every one to determine his army’s size.

And while R. Ashi immediately objects to this scriptural source, he does not offer Exodus 30 as an alternative, because his gripe is not with R. Yitzhak’s decision to creatively interpret Saul’s actions here, but something far simpler. “Bezek,” he argues, is too obviously the name of a location, given it appears in [Judges 1:5](#). Instead, R. Ashi suggests a near-identical verse describing another military census of Saul:

Saul mustered the troops and enrolled them at Telaim: 200,000 men on foot and 10,000 men of Judah ([I Sam. 15:4](#)).

Here, R. Ashi suggests the same logic. It’s not that Saul counted his troops *at* the location called “Telaim.” Instead, he counted his troops *via* “*tela’im*,” “sheep.” Each soldier brought (or took)

a sheep, and Saul counted the sheep to determine his army's size.

But regardless of which source from I Samuel is the source of the prohibition here, that neither verse explicitly addresses counting—with *Hazal* relying on, instead, an incredibly creative rereading of the verses—is a confusing choice, made all the more so by the *gemara's* quoting of R. Elazar, who invokes a different verse altogether to prove that it is prohibited to count Jews. R. Elazar's suggestion could not be further removed from a description of the correct approach to conduct a census. Instead, he relies on Hosea's declaration that the Jewish people are considered like the sand of the sea, "which cannot be measured" ([Hos. 2:1](#)).

All of which seems to point more to *Hazal's* aversion to invoking Exodus 30 than to their belief that there are other verses from which the prohibition emerges, leading to many attempts to explain *Hazal's* motivation. R. Shmuel Eidels, for example, suggests that the wider context of Exodus 30 makes clear that it's not really about the prohibition against counting Jews. Instead, God insisted that the people each bring a half-shekel as penance for the sin of the Golden Calf ([Maharsha to Yoma 22b](#), s.v. "asur limnot et Yisra'el").

Alternatively, as R. Eliezer Waldenberg argues, there are simpler and more technical reasons as to why *Hazal* did not root the prohibition in Exodus 30. Given R. Yitzhak's insistence that one cannot

count "even for a *mitzvah*," Exodus 30 is an insufficient example because there is no *mitzvah*; God never commands Moses to conduct a census at this point (*Tzitz Eliezer* 7:3).

The only thing that clearly emerges from the above is the lack of clarity regarding the source of the prohibition against counting Jews. Yet one single Talmudic story draws attention to what might be a uniting theme for the debate. When King Agrippa wished to conduct a census of the people, he instructed the High Priest to count his people using the paschal offerings ([Pesahim 64b](#)).

In addition to the shekels, shards, and sheep of the scriptural sources, this *gemara* states that the High Priest counted the kidneys of each sacrifice. Combined with the Priestly officer's counting of fingers in the Mishnah, one single thread connects all these otherwise disparate and disagreeing sources: they all recognize that an intermediary must be used to count Jews.

And indeed, *Targum Yonatan* reinforces this connective thread by interpreting Saul's census at Telaim through the prism of King Agrippa: "And Saul gathered the people and counted them by their paschal lambs" ([Targum Yonatan, I Sam. 15:4](#)).

III.

For many *Rishonim* and *Aharonim* who discuss the prohibition to count Jews, this permissibility of using an intermediary (perhaps only under certain circumstances) becomes the sole source of

agreement even as all the other details are debated.

The medieval Italian Tosafist R. Isaiah di Trani, for example, stresses that when one is counting Jews for a *mitzvah* it must be done via a *davar aher*, “something else” ([Tosafot Rid to Yoma 22b](#)) – a point also noted by Rabbis David Kimhi ([Radak to I Sam. 15:4, s.v. “ba-tela’im”](#)) and Hayyim ibn Attar ([Or Ha-Hayyim to Ex. 30:12 s.v. “od”](#)). Nachmanides, too – among his many analyses of the prohibition – suggests the centrality of an additional medium in avoiding the prohibition ([Ramban to Ex. 30:12](#)).

Similarly, R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (“Netziv”)—in discussing the census conducted at the beginning of the Book of Numbers—cites approvingly an idea originating with R. Isaac Luria, that Moses did not count the people directly but rather via slips of paper ([Ha’amek Davar to Num. 1:42](#)).¹ And in addressing the controversy of counting Jews when conducting a formal census, Rabbis Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg ([Seridei Esh II §48](#)), Ben-Tzion Uzziel ([Mishpetei Uzziel, Hoshen Mishpat Kellalim 2](#)), and Menahem Mendel Kasher ([Torah Sheleimah XXI p. 168](#)) all argue that the names written on a form constitute a legitimate alternative object to count.

But perhaps the most forceful recognition that the permissibility of counting Jews hinges on the use of an intermediary is found in the writings of R.

Avraham Bornsztain, who insists that the reason the Priestly officer was permitted to count the *kohanim’s* fingers was that “the finger is not an intrinsic part of the person” (*Avnei Neizer to Yoreh Dei’ah* 450:10), an admittedly confusing comment clarified by another responsum: “one who counts fingers is not considered to be counting the Jew themselves” (ibid. 452:5). In other words, the finger is considered alternative enough of a medium to be counted. In a similar vein, R. Yisrael of Shklov argues that a person’s finger is sufficiently divorced from their head and thus may be counted (quoted in *Hatam Sofer, Kovetz She’eilot u-Teshuvot* §8).

Admittedly, the above does not imply total rabbinic consensus. *Hatam Sofer’s* reason for quoting R. Yisrael of Shklov is to disagree with him, and though R. Moshe Feinstein does not explicitly name *Avnei Neizer*, he disagrees with his thesis (*Iggerot Moshe, Yoreh Dei’ah* III §117:2). But even in this latter case, as R. Asher Weiss argues, R. Feinstein’s issue might be narrowly restricted to opposing the argument that some body parts are sufficiently divorced from a person; he might permit counting an article of clothing a person is wearing (*Minhat Asher, Bamidbar* §1:6).

What thus emerges from all of this is the existence of a formidable school of thought—spanning *Hazal* through to the modern era—arguing for the fundamental distinction between counting Jews directly and counting them via an additional

¹ The actual process described by Netziv is a tad convoluted, but the concept is identical: the people were counted via an additional medium.

object. And while it may appear to be nothing more than a workaround, a fundamental mathematical principle validates the distinction.

IV.

In her delightful book, *How to Bake π* , Eugenia Chang uses a familiar scene to illustrate the profound mathematics at the heart of counting.²

Picture the proud parents of a toddler declaring their child's ability to count to ten, which the child then proceeds to do upon command. But, as Chang notes, what is more likely is that all the toddler has learned are the words to a simple ten-word poem, "one, two, three...". If you place seven apples in front of the child and ask them to count them, they'll probably just recite the full ten-word poem while pointing at the apples.

This example uncovers the difference between the *appearance* of counting and the *mathematics* of counting—a profound mathematical operation that we learn so early that we never have to think through just how complex it is.

The technical term for counting is "abstraction," the ability to ignore the specific and distracting and notice, instead, commonalities. As Edward Dolnick writes, quoting Alfred North Whitehead:

It was a notable advance in the history of thought when someone hit on the insight that two rocks and two days and two sticks all shared the same abstract property of "twoness." For countless generations no one had seen it.³

And so, whether we're counting ten men or ten apples, the process is the same. It begins by ignoring the fact that they are men or apples in favor of representing them abstractly as a number that can then be counted.

But what must be stressed here is that there is no inherent magic to the word "two," for example, other than what it conveys, which we would term "twoness"—but, again, these words need not be used. The concept of two and twoness would be just as easily comprehended if we used the word *deux* or *shtayim* or "blurgh" or "et." What matters is not the word used but the concept it characterizes.

The difference between the child who can count and the child who cannot is never their use of a ten-word "poem," because every English speaker uses the same poem. The difference lies in the child's ability to abstract objects to the words of

² Eugenia Chang, [*How to Bake \$\pi\$: An Edible Exploration of the Mathematics of Mathematics*](#) (Basic Books: New York, NY) 2015, 15–43.

³ Edward Dolnick, [*The Clockwork Universe: Isaac Newton, the Royal Society & the Birth of the Modern World*](#) (HarperCollins Publishers, NY; 2011) 195

the poem. In a sense, then, the words we use for numbers are simply constructs that convey deeper meanings.

This provides more precise mathematical language to help reframe the permissible approach to counting Jews via an intermediary. What is prohibited is the direct *abstraction* of Jews. When directly counting people, their personhood is removed—they are abstracted—simply represented by a number.

Indeed, the one scriptural source suggested above that bears no relevance to conducting a census—Hosea’s declaration that the Jewish people “cannot be counted”—might highlight the significance of this understanding. If Hosea’s declaration is seen as a metaphorical statement about how dear the Jewish people are to God rather than a factual statement about the Jewish people’s numerosity, it is a prophetic statement about the problem of reducing Jews into abstractions.⁴

An indirect count, however, contains a subtle but key mathematical difference. Because here, while abstraction still takes place, no Jews are abstracted. When they represent themselves as

shekels, shards, sheep, or whatnot, they are never directly abstracted.

V.

It should be noted that this theory defies one of the most emphatic explanations for the prohibition that finds its origins in a comment of Nachmanides (different to the one mentioned earlier) that the prohibition is only to count the entire Jewish people rather than a subset thereof ([Ramban to Num. 1:3, s.v. “tifkedu otam”](#)).

The reason for Nachmanides’ distinction, according to R. Moshe Sofer,⁵ is that an incomplete count is always imprecise (*Hatam Sofer, Kovetz She’eilot u-Teshuvot* §8). As Hatam Sofer explains, there is no certainty here. Counting a smaller group is permitted because the counter merely requires a rough assessment of how many people are assembled.

This perspective has merit; all the sources discussed by *Hazal* describe counts where it was easy for error to creep in. It is not hard to imagine some of Saul’s less-enthusiastic soldiers failing to pick up a pottery shard or sheep—or a few of his more gung-ho soldiers picking up extra out of sheer excitement.⁶

⁴ This also fits with what is otherwise a curious and hard to explain position of Rashi, who offers his own scriptural sources for the prohibition against counting Jews – Gen. 13:11 and 32:13. But both verses recognize the preciousness of the Jewish people ([Rashi to I Chron. 27:24, s.v. “va-yhi be-zot ketzef al Yisrael”](#); [Rashi to I Sam. 15:4, s.v. “va-yifkedeim be-tela’im”](#)).

⁵ While I must express my general appreciation to Chesky Kopel for being such a wonderful editor, specific credit must go to his realization that Rabbi *Sofer* is the perfect name for a rabbi who addresses the issue of counting.

⁶ I should stress that Hatam Sofer develops his own theory regarding the purpose of the sheep in Saul’s census.

Similarly, the Talmudic story of King Agrippa recognizes the likelihood of error in the High Priest's calculation. Not every Jew was able to bring the paschal sacrifice, some being either impure or too far away; the census was definitionally inaccurate.

And the same is true regarding the lottery conducted by the Priestly officer. Because not only does the *mishnah* explicitly state that a priest could extend either one or two fingers, but Rambam assumes that some *Kohanim* would sneakily extend more than two ([Commentary to Mishnah, Yoma 2:1](#); [Hilkhot Temidim u-Musafim 4:3](#)). And many of the other sources mentioned can be reinterpreted in this light.

Yet for all the merits of Hatam Sofer's theory of imprecision, it makes it practically impossible to follow. Because one of the most central needs to count Jews without violating the prohibition is to determine if a *minyan* is in the room,⁷ and here there can be no room for error. One cannot roughly count the number of Jewish men in the room and be unsure whether there are nine or ten. The count must be precise.

Hence the need for a method of precisely counting Jews under certain circumstances using indirect abstraction. But here the fatal flaw in using Ps. 28:9 emerges. Because when the *gabbaim* of my

youth *minyan* used "A long time ago in a galaxy far far away" to determine if a *minyan* was present, their actions were mathematically equivalent to using "one, two, three, etc." They still abstracted each and every male in the room to a series of ten words—only this time they used the opening of *Star Wars*.

And the same is obviously true of using the ten words of Ps. 28:9. Because the specific words we use do not matter: the problem is the abstraction. "One, two, three," "*ahat, shtayim, shalosh*," "*un, deux, trois*," and "*hoshi'a et amekha*" are all functionally equivalent. The mathematics never changes, only the words. People are still directly abstracted as the count is still conducted—thus violating the prohibition of abstracting Jews.

VI.

But the use of Ps. 28:9 to count Jews without avoiding the prohibition may be the product of a misunderstanding. Because nowhere does R. Ganzfried spell out how to use Ps. 28:9 to avoid the prohibition. All he states, after codifying the prohibition, is that "it is customary to count them via reciting the verse '*hoshi'a et amekha*,' which contains ten words."

And while the obvious understanding is to use these ten words in lieu of the numbers one to ten, there is another possible interpretation.⁸

⁷ A point explicitly noted by both *Peri Hadash* and *Kaf Ha-Hayyim*.

⁸ One perspective that I've not considered in this article is the belief that the use of Ps. 28:9 serves as a protective ward against any of the ill-effects of counting Jews. While this is an opinion worthy of further study, I am not reckoning with it in the body of

Two different early medieval codes, *Sefer ha-Orah* (§56)—attributed to Rashi—and R. Yehuda ben Barzillai’s *Sefer ha-Itim* (§174) both describe in detail a workaround to the prohibition of counting Jews that also relies on a ten-word verse from Psalms, *va’ani be-rov hasdekha*, “But I, through Your abundant love, enter Your house; I bow down in awe at Your holy temple” (Ps. 5:8).

And while it should be noted that, thematically, this verse fits far better with the need to determine a *minyan*—given it references the entering of God’s house—the way it was used was not as a substitute for numbers. Rather, to determine if a *minyan* was present, the men assembled would go around the room with each one saying a word of the verse until the entire verse could be completed.

And while this doesn’t appear too dissimilar to the use of Ps. 28:9, there is a fundamental difference. By calling out one word in a verse nothing much has happened mathematically—yet now, instead of one person directly abstracting the Jews in the room to a ten-word verse, it is the words themselves that are abstracted. Much in the same way that the *kohanim* would extend fingers to be counted, here the people in the room “extend” a

word of the verse. And it is thus not unreasonable to assume that R. Ganzfried’s suggestion is the same. The use of Ps. 28:9 is not in lieu of numbers but as an alternative process.

*

Few prohibitions are as effortless to violate as the one against counting Jews. Yet its mathematical underpinnings reveal a better way to understand not only it but how some of the workarounds are fundamentally different.

Manna, Mitzvot, and Meaning

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“**W**e remember the fish [we ate in Egypt freely].’ But were fish granted to them freely in Egypt? Even straw was not granted to them freely in Egypt. Rather, they were free of commandments.”
[*Sifrei Bemidbar 87*](#)

“‘Inscribed on the tablets.’ Do not read ‘inscribed (*harut*),’ but ‘freedom (*herut*).’ For there is none who is as free as one who engages in Torah study.”

the article because it not only assumes that the major concern is plague – an Exodus 30-centric perspective – but seems to also concede that the prohibition *is* violated in some sense but there nonetheless exists a mystical, rather than a mathematical, method of

abrogating the issue. Indeed, Ps. 28:9, which asks God to save His people, becomes a particularly poignant request if the counter knows they are violating a prohibition with disastrous consequences.

“The Torah was only given over for interpretation to those who ate from the manna.” [Mekhilta Beshalah 16](#)¹

I. Slavery and Selfhood

Instinctually, we recoil at the idea of relating to ourselves and others as slaves. Slavery violates our deepest intuitions about the depth and weight of personhood. The will of the master subjugates that of the individual; the subject becomes an object.

This discomfort influences our study of *Humash*. When the Torah commands that the Israelite bondsman must be freed, “*ki avadai hem*,” I have observed that people are quick to render the phrase as “for they are My servants,” as opposed to “slaves” ([Vayikra 25:42](#)). The same word which refers to the Israelites’ status in Egypt—*avadim hayyinu*—is sanitized in its new covenantal context. We do not want to relate to ourselves as God’s slaves, either.

Is this instinct justified, or does Judaism demand

radical servitude? Is there something that distinguishes our relationship with God from that of the human master and slave? To put it plainly: In leaving Egypt, did we simply exchange one master for another? R. Kook, in his collected comments on the *Haggadah*, suggests that the experience of slavery in Egypt was designed to instill this exact notion:

Although the enslavement surely caused many evils and led to the development of destructive traits — and we need not mention the evils and pain inflicted on those who suffered at the time — it also inculcated the trait of submissiveness and the value of submitting oneself to whom it is proper to submit: To be an *eved* of God in truth, to nullify one’s independent will and inclination for the sake of accepting the yoke of Heaven.²

If so, then our service to God is superior to our enslavement to Pharaoh inasmuch as God deserves our submission, while Pharaoh does not. It appears that we are slaves, after all.³

¹ Translations my own.

² [www.sefaria.org/Olat Reiyah, Maggid,](http://www.sefaria.org/Olat_Reiyah%2C_Haggadah.5?lang=he&with=all&lang2=he)
Translation my own.

³ Cf. R. Kook’s comments in *Da’at Elohim*, printed in *Eder Hayakar* (Mossad Harav Kook, 145-149) and translated by Ben Zion Bokser in [The Essential Writings of Abraham Isaac Kook](#) (Ben Yehuda Press, 1988, 49-50), in which he argues

against a slave-like conception of Divine service: “The concept of serving God, when it is defined in lowly terms, corresponds to a person’s limited understanding of what he means by God. It is the service of a slave. It rises in stature to the same extent as his understanding of God will rise. If a person should reach a state where his moral and intellectual powers have been duly developed, in accordance with his potentialities and the cultural climate of his time, yet his understanding of God remains on a low plain, then there will necessarily emerge into him a fierce opposition to the whole

Must our relationship with God be limited to this conception, or is there something more going on beneath the surface? In an essay previously [published](#) in Lehrhaus, I argued how we might see the trial of the *Yam Suf* as educating the Israelites in matters of faith. Following their experience at the Sea, the Israelites had trust in God's ability to help them in their conquest of the Land. Here, in advance of Shavuot, I would like to pursue a similar line of inquiry with regard to some of the subsequent events that occur on the way to Sinai. This will hopefully speak to our primary question regarding the nature of Divine service.

II. *Mitzvot at Marah*

The Israelites depart from the Sea and set off into the wilderness. For three days, they wander without finding water. Eventually, the people arrive at *Marah*, where they complain against Moshe. God, in turn, directs him to cast a piece of wood into the bitter waters to sweeten them:

So he cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water and the water became sweet. There He made for them a fixed rule and law (*hok u-mishpat*), and there He put them to the test. (15:25)⁴

idea of serving God. The only remedy to overcome this is to elevate his concept of God through deep feeling and comprehensive understanding of ever-increasing scope, at least paralleling his other perceptions of the great and the

The immediate crisis is resolved. But the *Humash* does not suffice with a simple description of its resolution. Instead, it emphasizes that this action established a fixed rule and law, a *hok u-mishpat*, and constituted a test. Moreover, on a seemingly unrelated note, the next verse presents a set of conditions that follow from the Israelites' observance of the Divine will:

He said, "If you will heed the Lord your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight, giving ear to His commandments and keeping all His laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I the Lord am your healer." (15:26)

What is this "fixed rule and law," how may the incident at *Marah* be considered a test, and what is its connection to the following verse about the people's observance of the law?

Rashi reads the entire narrative as a revelation of Divine law. The people are given their first *mitzvot*, including those of Shabbat, the Red Heifer, and civil matters. In his elucidation of Rashi's view, Ramban argues that our verse does not describe a full-blown act of Divine legislation, which would require the *Humash* to explicitly detail the *mitzvot*

sublime. The affirmation of God, however, is preliminary to everything else."

⁴ All verse translations are adapted from the JPS Tanakh (1985).

that were given. In the absence of any such mention, the incident at *Marah* should rather be understood as a preliminary stage on the way to the actual event of law-giving at Sinai:

Now Rashi's expression, "He gave them... sections of the Torah so that they might engage in the study thereof," indicates that Moshe did inform them of these statutes and that he taught these statutes to them, [saying], "In the future, the Holy One, blessed be He, will command you so," in the same way as Abraham our father learned the Torah. The purpose of it was to make them familiar with the commandments and to know if they would accept them with joyfulness and with gladness of heart. This was "the test" of which Scripture says, "and there He tested them," and he [Moshe] informed them that God would further command them the precepts of the Torah. This is the intent of the verse, "If you will heed the Lord your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight, giving ear to His commandments, which He will command you [in the future]." ([15:25](#), s.v. *sham sam lo*, Chavel translation)

According to Ramban, we are not dealing with the

acceptance of specific laws at this time. Rather, Moshe tests the people to see if they will be able to eventually summon the proper level of joy that befits *mitzvah* observance. Ramban further approvingly cites Ibn Ezra's observation that the sweetening of the water is an inversion of the first plague, which turned the waters of Egypt into blood. If the people accept the *mitzvot* with joy, then they will be saved from the plagues that God brought on Egypt.

Ramban's interpretation is of interest as it casts a spotlight on the ideal attitude people should take toward the *mitzvot*. But why should that attitude be one of joy, given the feeling of compulsion that accompanies our obedience to the Divine law? The law is imposed from without; it limits the individual's freedom. As R. Soloveitchik describes in his seminal work *U-vikkashtem Mi-sham*, the revelational experience entails "the consciousness of necessity and subjugation; it is an absolute awareness of the revealed duty that preempts man's will" ([And From There You Shall Seek](#), Ktav 2008, 43). It is the consciousness of the slave who blindly submits to the will of his master: "Man appears as absolutely subordinate... The acceptance of the command does not contain any feeling of freedom" (Ibid., 35). Where, then, is there room for joy?

III. Manna and Memory

Following a short stint at *Eilim*, the people travel to *Midbar Sin*, where they are left without food:

In the wilderness, the whole

Israelite community grumbled against Moshe and Aharon. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death.” (16:2-3)

This is a rather rose-colored recollection of their time in Egypt. Faced with the challenge of hunger, the people revise their history. Their memories of persecution and slavery fall away — Egypt was nothing short of Eden, where food was readily available.

God responds to the people’s complaints and gives them manna — bread from heaven. The people claimed that Moshe and Aharon took the people out of Egypt of their own accord. The manna teaches them that it was God who orchestrated the exodus:

Moshe and Aharon said to all the Israelites, “By evening you shall know it was the Lord who brought you out from the land of Egypt.” (16:6)

But the “history lesson” does not end here. God also carefully designs the experience of the manna to address the people’s ‘nostalgia.’ In Egypt, the people were ordered (*vayetzav Par’oh*, 5:6) to go out to collect straw to meet a daily quota of bricks

(*devar yom be-yomo*, 5:13, 5:19). Likewise, the Israelites are commanded (*zeh ha-davar asher tzivvah Hashem*, 16:16) to collect their daily portion of manna (*devar yom be-yomo*, 16:4). Rebellion in both instances results in *bi’ush*, spoiling: “You have spoiled (*hivashtem*) our spirits in the eyes of Pharaoh” (5:21); “Some of them left of it until morning, and it became infested with maggots and spoiled (*vayivash*)” (16:20). Even the color of the manna, *lavan* (white, 16:31), echoes the bricks (*leveinim*, 5:14, 5:19) that the people were forced to produce. In other words, God makes the people relive their experience of slavery.

At first glance, this seems to confirm R. Kook’s thesis. Divine service is quite similar to the enslavement in Egypt: *avadai hem*. But there is a key difference between the two stories. Unlike the collection of straw, which was designed to defeat the spirits of the Israelites, the collection of the manna was for their benefit. God utilizes their experience in Egypt to teach them this important lesson. Pharaoh’s decrees were issued to subjugate the people. In contrast, God’s laws contribute to their well-being. This is also evident in the role Shabbat plays in the manna narrative. While Pharaoh complains that Moshe had caused the people to cease working (*hishbatetem otam misivlotam*, 5:5), God grants the people a day of rest (*shabbaton shabbat kodesh laHashem*, 16:23). This kind of social morality is later expressed as one of the reasons for Shabbat: “Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor, in order that your

ox and your donkey may rest, and that your bondman and the stranger may be refreshed” ([23:12](#)).

IV. Teleology and Talmud Torah

If we take the events of *Parashat Beshalah* as preparing the people for their full acceptance of the *mitzvot* at Sinai, then we should emulate their journey. “The Torah was only given over for interpretation to those who ate from the manna,” who were taught to view God’s Law as different from that of Pharaoh. We, too, must learn to view Divine law in this light. One potential avenue for such insight is offered by the study of *ta’amei hamitzvot*, the reasons for the commandments, which assume the rational nature of God and His law. Divine service, when viewed in this way, aims to instruct humanity in its quest toward intellectual and moral perfection.

⁵ For an expression of this view, see R. Aharon Lichtenstein’s [Henry More - The Rational Theology of a Cambridge Platonist](#) (Harvard University Press, 1962, 173-185), where he argues for the necessity of a “numinous” experience of Divine revelation that stands outside of the rational sphere: “Belief in revelation does not consist merely in the acceptance of certain revealed truths, but also—and chiefly—in the concomitant realization that these truths are of a supernatural order of knowledge surpassing the range of human reason—undiscovered and undiscoverable. And this not simply because they happen to be hidden by a screen, upon the removal of which they are seen on our level, but because they are essentially beyond our ken, as deriving from an absolutely different plane of truth. It is in the recognition that the content of revelation is qualitatively unique that the essence of revealed religion consists. Furthermore, the sense of revelation as an experience and a power, as an active factor transfusing and transmuting human personality, can be fully appreciated only where the unique character of revelation is recognized” (174-176).

However, the search for halakhic teleology has its detractors. Their criticism extends beyond the fear that *ta’amei hamitzvot* may lead to shaky observance, inasmuch as halakhic practice sometimes deviates from what we take to be the reason behind a given commandment. For these thinkers, the experience of commandedness as a dialogical encounter with God demands a sense of His otherness and the discontinuity of reason and revelation.⁵ *Hukkim*, which are commonly taken as having no rationale (although both Rambam and Ramban held otherwise), may engender this sort of perspective. But while there is certainly room for ‘blind’ obedience in religious life — after all, per Rashi’s account, one of the first *mitzvot* given is that of the Red Heifer, the quintessential *hok* — there is a tendency today to view the total negation of teleology as an expression of piety. The application of this attitude to all of Torah falls

Yet, elsewhere, R. Lichtenstein advances that “from a traditional Jewish perspective, there is no doubt that there surely exists a system of standards and values that may serve — and, to a large extent, serves as — a source and foundation for the will of God in general and its expression in Torah and *mitzvot* specifically” (*Halakha veHalakhim Ke’oshayot Mussar*, <https://asif.co.il/wpfb-file/%D7%94%D7%9C%D7%9B%D7%94-%D7%95%D7%94%D7%9C%D7%9B%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%9B%D7%90%D7%95%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%A1%D7%A8-%D7%94%D7%A8%D7%94%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%9E%D7%97%D7%A9%D7%91/>, 15). Also see R. Lichtenstein’s “Formalism vs. Teleology: Circumvention and Adaptation in Halakha” in [Values in Halakha](#) (Reuven Ziegler, ed.; Maggid Books, 2023) and R. Tzvi Goldstein’s recent Lehrhaus [article](#), which discusses R. Lichtenstein’s position.

prey to Rambam's criticism of those who claim that God's will is arbitrary:

There are people who find it difficult to give a reason for any of the commandments, and consider it right to assume that the commandments and prohibitions have no rational basis whatever. They are led to adopt this theory by a certain disease in their soul, the existence of which they perceive, but which they are unable to discuss or to describe. (*Guide for the Perplexed* III:31, Friedlander translation)

How might modern anti-teleologists respond to this charge? For one, it might very well be that we are living in a post-Maimonidean world, in which reason is not granted as much weight as it was in the past. Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, forcefully accepted by R. Soloveitchik and others,⁶ limits our ability to posit definitive reasons for the commandments. Indeed, post-Kantian theories of cognition accentuate the "otherness" of Divine law — reason cannot fully capture the contents of the transcendental realm.

⁶ See *And From There You Shall Seek* (Ktav Publishing House, 14) and Aviezer Ravitzky's "Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik on Human Knowledge: Between Maimonidean and Neo-Kantian Philosophy," *Modern Judaism*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1986, 157–88.

⁷ This approach is generally associated with Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Cf. Kolbrener, William. "Towards a Genuine

But this does not mean that we are doomed to the disinterested service generally associated with Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz, who declared that *mitzvah* observance cannot be subordinated to any other system of value. Rather, we may have to shift the project of *ta'amei hamitzvot* to the more subjective realm of meaning.⁷ Instead of seeking a definite cause for each commandment, we should constantly engage in a process of never-ending interpretation to explore the meaning of our practice.

V. *Avodah She-ba-lev* and Inwardness

This brings us back to Ramban, who understood Moshe as testing the people at *Marah* to see if they would eventually accept the *mitzvot* with joy. But it takes time to train the people to relate to God's law as qualitatively different from that of Pharaoh. The experience of collecting the manna — similar to yet so very different from the collection of straw — teaches them about the benevolent nature of God and His service. It is this understanding that should lead the people to accept God's rule with joy and gladness. As R. Soloveitchik writes:

Nahmanides as well as

Jewish Philosophy: Halakhic Mind's New Philosophy of Religion." *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, vol. 30, no. 3, Spring 1996, 21–43. Tradition Online, <https://traditiononline.org/towards-a-genuine-jewish-philosophy-halakhic-minds-new-philosophy-of-religion/>.

Maimonides emphasized time and again that the element of *avodah she-ba-lev*—worship of the heart—must be present in every religious act. The ritual as well as moral actions must be endowed with emotional warmth, love and joy, and the mechanical act converted into a living experience. Of course, all this is unattainable if there is no message to deliver, no idea to suggest, no enriching meaning. In order to offer God my heart and soul, in order to serve Him inwardly, one thing is indispensable—understanding, the involvement of the logos. ([Out of the Whirlwind](#), Ktav, 2003, 43-44).

The servant of God is not a slave, inasmuch as *avodat Hashem* demands the cultivation of inwardness — an understanding of the depth and meaning of one’s service. The feeling of total compulsion falls away once we recognize that the Divine law has something to say to us. This is a lesson of the manna, and it would do us well to learn it as we approach *Zeman Matan Torateinu*.⁸

⁸ Thank you to Josh Brafman, Yaakov Grunsfeld, and Michael Kay for their helpful comments on an early draft of this essay, and to Drs. Erica Brown and Shira Weiss, as well as the entire

Blintzes, Sinai, Revelation: The Concrete Implications of a Custom

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It started with *blintzes*. I’m not saying this to be clever; it’s simply what happened. A cursory review of the laws and customs of eating *milchigs* (dairy foods) on Shavuot in its sources in the halakhic literature led me, in a happy series of events over time, to the 12th-century Rhineland (so to speak), collective and personal revelation at Sinai, the classic eastern European *heder*, a scathing critique—by a protégé—of Gershom Scholom’s “anarchistic,” “antinomian,” “nihilistic” reading of a teaching of the Rimanofer Rebbe, to an early 19th-century *heder* setting, and again, Sinai.

And, significantly, back to the *heder*. And *blintzes*.

My interest here is in the forms of an idea, of the imagery and actuality of the relevance of *blintzes* and the *heder* as experience or metaphor in relation to the revelation at Sinai. The historical and theological background of these will have bearing on contemporary polemical issues of “ongoing revelation”—or non-revelation—at Sinai. Their significance is in how *minhagei Yisrael*’s significations and meanings—or, more

Sacks-Herenstein Research Scholars Cohort, for their continued guidance and insight.

importantly, their experience—continue to have deeply layered, concretized meaning for us.

Milchigs and Hakhnasah Le-Heder

Here's what happened. My focus was on *blintzes* and the custom of eating *milchigs* on Shavuot. Reading the halakhic sources about this, I had what I thought was a startling discovery (it turns out it had already been suggested¹) about its true origin. While there are, to be sure, some 150 fascinating explanations for the *minhag*,² the more explanations that are given only serve to create the impression that they are all true and beautiful—but not originary.

The practice of eating *milchigs* on Shavuot is actually a historical vestige of the ancient *Hakhnasah Le-Heder* custom practiced in the medieval Rhineland or Carolingian Jewish world, of bringing a child to begin his study of Torah on Shavuot itself—just as the Jewish people did at Sinai, as articulated in the custom's sources (see below). The *Hakhnasah Le-Heder* ritual focused on a child being given a milk-and-honey cake with *pesukim* and the *Aleph-Beit* on it to experience the Torah's sweetness as he would begin the study of Torah. No medieval halakhic authority before the

11th-12th centuries is cited in the literature; all are Ashkenazic,³ and the custom's repeatedly cited proof text is [Song of Songs 4:11](#): “Honey and milk are under your tongue.”

The detailed custom appears in R. Elazar b. Yehudah's 12th-century *Sefer Rokeah (Hilkhot Shavuot* 296) as “the [ancient] custom of our forefathers,” in which the child would be brought to synagogue to begin study of Torah on Shavuot as equivalent to *mattan Torah* itself—“since the Torah was given on that day”—and would be given a milk-and-honey cake with *pesukim* on it:

The [ancient] custom of our forefathers is that we have the little children begin to study Torah on Shavuot, since on that day the Torah was given. . . . we bring the little children [to the synagogue] at daybreak on Shavuot, since it says, “In the morning there was thunder and lightning” ([Exodus 19:16](#)) . . . and we cover the child with a garment, as it says, “And they stood beneath the mountain” ([Exodus 19:17](#)). We bring him a tablet on

¹ R. Gedalia Oberlander, *Kovetz Or Yisrael*, 32:104-120, and updated in his *Minhag Avoteinu Be-Yadeinu*; Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1994), 139.

² R. Eliezer Brodt, “The Mysteries of *Milchigs*,” *Ami Magazine* (June 10, 2013), cites, among others: R. Pinchas Schwartz, *Minhah Hadashah*, 38-44; R. Shariah Deblitski, *Kuntres Ha-Moadim*, 37-40; *Kovetz Etz Hayyim* (Bobov) 6 (2008), 239-242; *Pardes Eliezer*, 227-316; R. Tuviah Freund,

Moadim Le-Simhah 6, 490-505; R. Yitzchak Tessler, *Peninei Minhag*, 292-319; Yehudah Avidah, *Yiddishe Maholim*, 43-44; M. Kosover, *Yiddishe Maholim*, 75, 77, 98; etc.

³ Similarly, Aton Holzer writes in “[Blessed Are the Cheesemakers: In Search of Ancient Roots of Dairy on Shavuot](#),” *Hakirah* 30 (Summer 2021): “There is not a single mention of the practice in the Rabbinic corpus that precedes medieval Ashkenaz—not in Mishnah, Midrash, Talmud Bavli, Yerushalmi, *piyyut* or Genizah fragments.”

which is written [the first and last four *Aleph-Beit* letters forwards and backwards] and “*Torah tzivah lanu Moshe*” ([Deuteronomy 33:4](#)) and “*Torah tehei emanuti*” (Siddur) and “*vayikra el Moshe*” ([Leviticus 1:1](#)). The Rav reads every letter of the *Aleph-Beit* and the child repeats it—and similarly, the verses. And he puts a little bit of honey on the tablet, and the child licks the honey on every letter, and then they bring him a cake kneaded in honey on which is written: “My Sovereign God gave me a skilled tongue to know” . . . ([Isaiah 50:4](#)), and the Rav reads every letter of those verses, and the child [reads] after him.

Before that, Rashi’s disciple, R. Simhah of Vitry (11th century), explains the custom citing Song of Songs 4:1:

And why do we knead the cakes in milk and honey . . . ? Since it says, “Honey and milk are under your tongue.” And when a person brings his son into the Talmud Torah, we write the [*Aleph-Beit*] letters on a tablet . . . and then we cover them with honey, and we feed him cakes made with honey. Know that the

matter is as if he brought him before Har Sinai. ([Mahzor Vitri, Laws of Circumcision 508](#))

In the 13th-century *Sefer Minhagim* of R. Meir b. Barukh of Rottenburg (*Minhagei Shavuot*):⁴

We have the custom to make cakes for the young children who begin to study Torah, and we write on them verses to open their hearts, and they eat them in the synagogue.

The custom and its proof text, “Honey and milk are under your tongue,” are cited in R. Eliezer b. Yoel Ha-Levi’s 13th-century *Avi Ezri*. It is also cited by R. Aharon b. Yaakov (13th-14th centuries) in his *Orhot Hayyim (Hilkhos Tefilat Ha-Moadim)*:

We have the custom of eating honey and milk on the first day of Shavuot, since the Torah is compared to honey and milk, as it says: “Honey and milk are under your tongue.”

It also appears in the 14th-century [Kol Bo](#) (53 and 74):

We also have the custom to eat honey and milk on the holiday of Shavuot, since the Torah is

⁴ His student R. Mordekhai b. Hillel reports (*Shabbat* no. 369) that R. Meir was asked why it is permissible for the child

to eat the *Aleph Beit* letters, thus erasing them on *Yom Tov* (that is: Shavuot [Hida, *Mahzik Berakhah*, I:340]).

compared to honey and milk, as it says: “Honey and milk are under your tongue.”

Beyond the biblical simile of Torah as “sweeter than honey”—“More desirable than gold . . . and sweeter than honey and drippings of honeycomb” ([Psalms 19:11](#)); “How pleasing is Your word to my palate, sweeter than honey” ([Psalms 119:103](#))—tasting the milk-and-honey cake’s *pesukim* was as if experiencing the Torah’s sweetness itself in the custom’s proof text ([Kol Bo 52](#): “Since it says, ‘Honey and milk are under your tongue’). Some *midrashim*⁵ read this verse as an allegory for the experience of Torah; [Tanhuma \(Buber\) Ki Tisa 9](#) even reads it as the original experience of *mattan Torah* itself:

When Israel stood before Mount Sinai and said, “All that G-d spoke, we will do and we will listen” (Exodus [24:7](#)), the Holy One

Blessed Be He said to them, “Honey and milk are under your tongue.”

Over time, the Shavuot *Hakhnasah Le-Heder* practice disappeared (R. Shabbetai Kohen, 17th century; [Sifte Kohen, Yoreh Deah 245:8](#)), and the abandoning of the *Hakhnasah Le-Heder* customs in general was lamented (R. Yaakov Emden, *Migdal Oz*). Several elements—e.g., wrapping the child in a *tallit*, putting honey on the *Aleph-Beit* letters, etc.—have been reinstated, largely adopted in the general Jewish public and particularly within the Hasidic practice known as the “*Areinfirinish*” (Yiddish for ‘bringing in’—‘*Hakhnasah*’—[to the *Heder*]).

My sense was that the *Hakhnasah Le-Heder*, together with its honied *Aleph-Beit* letters cited extensively in *Sefer Rokeah*, *Avi Ezri*, *Orhot Hayyim*, *Kol Bo*, etc.,^{6 7} migrated eventually to the

⁵ [Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah 4](#): “Anyone who speaks words of Torah in public and they are not pleasant to their listeners like this honey and milk that are intermingled, it would have been preferable for him had he not said them... Even one who reads a verse in its pleasantness and in its melody, the verse says in his regard: ‘Honey and milk are under your tongue.’” See also [Devarim Rabbah 7:3](#): “That the Torah is compared... to honey and milk... what is the source? ‘Honey and milk are under your tongue.’”

⁶ See also President George H. W. Bush’s acceptance speech in 1998 for the Republican Party’s nomination for president: “I believe in another tradition that is, by now, embedded in the national soul. It’s that learning is good in and of itself. You know, the mothers of the Jewish ghettos of the East

would pour honey on a book so the children would know that learning is sweet. And the parents who settled hungry Kansas would take their children in from the fields when a teacher came. That is our history.”

⁷ See also Shlomo Bar of Ha-Breirah Ha-Tivit’s bitter protest, “*Etzlenu Be-Kefar Todra*,” against Moroccan Jewish culture’s erasure: In our community of Kefar Todra, when the celebrant reaches the age of five, we bring him to the synagogue and write all of the letters from *aleph* to *tav* with honey on a wooden tablet—and the Torah that is in the mouth is as sweet as the taste of honey.

child's third birthday⁸ or September and the beginning of the school year.⁹

And the *blintzes*, the milk-and-honey cake (“honey and milk are under your tongue”), stayed in place on Shavuot.¹⁰

The Jewish People's *Hakhnasah Le-Heder*

The medieval sources (*Rokeah*, *Mahzor Vitry*, *Kol Bo*, etc.) repeatedly stress that the *Hakhnasah Le-Heder* custom was held on Shavuot because on that day Israel received the Torah. Shavuot effectively celebrates the Jewish people's own archetypal *Hakhnasah Le-Heder* at *mattan Torah*.

The imagery of Sinai as a classroom does appear already in [Tanhuma \(Buber\) Yitro 16's](#) variant on [Mekhilta, Yitro DeBahodesh 5](#), that God announced at Sinai, “I [“*Anokhi*”] am the Lord your

God”, “Since He appeared to them at the Sea as a strong warrior [“God is a man of War” (Exodus 15:3)] and at Sinai as a *Humash* teacher who teaches Torah . . . He taught them Torah and stood before them as a scribe.” The combined imagery in this variant on the *Mekhilta's* version, “He appeared at Sinai as a old man full of mercy” conveys that of a kindly *Humash* teacher at Sinai.

***Hakhnasah Le-Heder* Transformed**

The conceptual reversal of the personal Shavuot *Hakhnasah Le-Heder* custom to that of Israel's collective *Hakhnasah Le-Heder* at Sinai was already formulated by the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe (R. Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson, 1880-1950):¹¹

⁸ See Rema and [Turei Zahav](#), *Yoreh Deah* 245:8.

⁹ Sometimes this occurs not at the age of three but instead at the age of five or later, or it occurs at the first *upsherin* haircut at age three.

¹⁰ In the context of material culture, Israeli field teacher Netanel Elinson (“[Siyur Im Netanel Elinson Le-Sadot Beit Lehem Megaleh Mah Karah Be-Emet Be-Megillat Rut](#),” *Makor Rishon*, May 25, 2023) notes that while in Israel in late spring at the time of Shavuot, goats and cattle didn't produce a high volume of milk (Aton Holzer notes it was certainly more scarce after *Hazal* forbade raising goats there). The custom emerged in the medieval Rhineland where milk was plentiful at that time. (See Jeffrey L. Singman's [Daily Life in Medieval Europe](#) [Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1999], where he explains that spring and summer were times of calving in medieval Europe—when calves were weaned and fodder was plentiful—so there was an abundance of dairy products then; see also John Cooper's

[Eat and Be Satisfied: A Social History of Jewish Food](#) [Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993] on the abundance of milk at this time of year). Elinson suggests that wheat would be more appropriate for Shavuot in Israel (as reflected in *Megillat Ruth*). However, I note how the dairy custom's universality in and outside of Israel by Ashkenazim and Sephardim simply reflects how all Shavuot customs developed over centuries outside of Israel ([Rashi, Pesachim 68b](#): “to show that this day is pleasant and accepted to Israel because the Torah was given on it”) over two days, compressed today in Israel into one: *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, *Akdamut*, *Megillat Ruth*, *Yetziv Pitgam*, R. Yisrael Najara's *Ketubah*, *Yizkor*, *Azharot*, and *blintzes*. Rema (also [Magen Avraham](#)) 1:494 does suggest that Shavuot's *milchigs* commemorates the *shetei ha-lehem's* two Shavuot wheat loaves (*Pri Hadash* [ad loc.] dismisses this as forced).

¹¹ *Sefer HaSihot* 5703 (1943), 147.

At *mattan Torah*, G-d Blessed Be He took 600,000 men¹², besides old people, women, and children, and brought them in a “*Cheider*” to say ‘*Qamatz Aleph A*’, as it says, (Song of Songs 1:4) “The king has brought me to his ‘*chambers*’ [‘*Hadarav*’: ‘his “*Heders*’”], we will be glad and rejoice *in You*” [in Hebrew: ‘*Bach*’: *Beit Chaf*, the numerical equivalent of the *Aleph-Beit*’s 22 letters], as the first letter that G-d Blessed be He said was ‘*Qamatz Aleph A*’ of the word “*Anokhi*”.

Moreover, he startlingly reverses it back again from there to a Jewish child’s personal *Hakhnasah Le-Heder* in the context of eastern European *heder* practices. In a letter (*Igerot Kodesh* VII, p. 146), he invokes the poetic imagery as a concrete archetype to argue for preserving the traditional *heder*’s method of learning the *Aleph-Beit* in the face of modernity. In this way, the collective *heder* experience at Sinai is replicated back into a child’s personal *Hakhnasah Le-Heder*.

There is a tradition we have from our holy fathers, our teachers [the Habad Rebbes before him], received from father to son, from generation to generation from ancient generations, about the

¹² The reference to “600,000” may allude to the idea of “‘Israel (*y-s-r-’-l*)’ is a contraction for ‘there are six hundred thousand letters in the Torah (*yesh shishim ribo* ‘*otiyot*

reason for beginning the study of Torah with the *Tinoqot Shel Bet Raban* [*heder* children] with the letter *Aleph* with its *Nikud* of a *Qamatz* as: ‘*Qamatz Aleph A*’, as commemoration of the receiving the Torah at Sinai, where the Holy One Blessed Be He opened the First Statement [of the First Commandment] with the letter *Aleph* in the *Nikud* of *Qamatz*. That is to say, the *Hakhnasah Le-Heder*, bringing a child into *heder* is [his own] *mattan Torah*, and as elaborated in one of the books of the *Rishonim* [presumably the *Rokeah*]. How much holiness in pure faith is established in the child’s heart in knowing that *his Hakhnasah Le-Heder* is his personal *mattan Torah* . . . as just as there, we begin learning with him the first letter *Aleph* with the *Nikud* of a *Qamatz* as ‘*Qamatz Aleph A*’.

The Rimanovert’s Teaching

All this however brings us to a fiery polemic debate about Gershon Scholem’s “anarchistic,” “antinomian,” “nihilistic” (the diatribes get worse) reading of a teaching of the Rimanovert Rebbe (R. Menaḥem Mendel of Rimanov, 1745–1815) about the revelation (for Scholem, the foundational non-

latorah)” (*Zohar Hadash, Shir HaShirim* 74d; *Megaleh Amukot, Ofen* 186), to imply here that the Torah’s text received at Sinai mirrored the communal peoplehood of Israel who received it.

revelation) at Sinai. In Scholem's understanding of that teaching, the revelation at Sinai consisted only of the first letter *Aleph* of the word "*Anokhi*" of the First Commandment, thus essentially inaudible or inchoate: "without specific meaning" (*On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, 30).

In the ensuing critique by Scholem's protégé Moshe Idel the experience of the 19th-century *Heder* is invoked as significantly salient.

The teaching Scholem adduces was gleaned second-hand from Aharon Marcus' *Der Chassidismus* (1901), that cites the teaching and reads it in the context of Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*, of the rational as independent of prophecy. What the Rimanover may have actually said is reported by his disciple, R. Naftali Tzvi of Ropshitz (1760-1827):

"I heard from my Master, the Rebbe of Rimanov on the verse: "God spoke once [or "*One*" = *Aleph*] (Psalms 60:12), that it is possible that we did not hear from the Mouth of the Holy One Blessed be He but only the letter *Aleph* of '*Anokhi*'. (*Zera` Kodesh, Shavuot*)

Idel thus notes¹³ that the Hasidic masters "were hardly harbingers" of "minimalist," "anarchic

speculations", or Nietzschean "theories of negativity," but that:

"The phrase *Qamatz Aleph*" . . . in the formulation of the three Hasidic masters . . . is constituted by two words by which every Eastern European¹⁴ Jewish male child started to learn Hebrew at the age of three. The sonorous ambience that accompanies the child's collective recitation of those two words . . . is quintessential for understanding the underlying background of the Hasidic discussions about the revelation at Sinai . . . It was the *Heder* setting, in which the teacher pronounced "*Qamatz Aleph A*" and the small children repeated it loudly, that the Hasidic masters had in mind and transposed to Sinai . . . Instead of the solemn silence of inchoate revelation . . . as Scholem assumes, we have here the sonorous community of the teacher, the *melammed*, who is projected on high as God, and the Israelites in the role of children."

¹³ *Old Worlds, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought*: University of Pennsylvania Press 2012.

¹⁴ Idel is Eastern European; Scholem was not.

Scholem's reading of inaudible revelation is also critiqued by Yehudah Jerome Gellman¹⁵, philosophy professor at Ben-Gurion University as invoked by Benjamin Sommer¹⁶, a *JTS* Bible professor who uses the Rimanovert's teaching as a basis for justifying Bible criticism from Sinai. Idel and Gellman both point out that the other versions and interpretations of the Rimanovert's teaching in the Ropshitzer's works, as well as by his son-in-law, the next Ropshitzer Rebbe, refer not to a silent revelation, but several times explicitly, to: "Qamatz Aleph."

In One Word, Or Letter

What emerges in the critique is that for the Rimanovert, the *Aleph* at Sinai was not inaudible, "non-verbal" (Sommer), without content. More specifically, Gellman and Warren Zeev Harvey¹⁷ argue, the teaching's connection to the sonorous "Qamatz Aleph A" must be understood in the context of classic Jewish thought about the Ten Commandments at Sinai containing and subsuming the entire Torah.

The idea is clearly developed in Talmudic and mystical sources. The *Mekhilta* (*Yitro, DeVaHodesh 4*)¹⁸ describes God as saying all Ten Commandments first "in one utterance," and then individually, and (*DeVaHodesh 7*) that even the subsequent individuated commandments "Remember the Sabbath" (Exod. 20:8) and "Guard the Sabbath" (Deut. 5:12)¹⁹ were said in "in one utterance." *Talmud Bavli, Makot 24b* and *Horayot 8a*, brings a further position that we heard directly from God only its first two Commandments ("I am the Lord your God . . ."; You shall have no other gods . . ."), since when the experience was too powerful for Israel, "My soul went out in His speaking with me" (Song of Songs 6:6), Moshe taught the rest as they appear in the third person (*Bavli Shabbat 88b*) based on Deut. 5:20-26. Halakhic authorities thus note²⁰ how both of the *Mekhilta's* two versions of "in one utterance" at *mattan Torah* are replicated and reenacted in the *Aseret HaDibrot* Torah Reading on Shavuot with its *Ta'am HaElyon* cantillating the first two Commandments ("I am the Lord your God . . ."/"You shall have no other gods") as one verse

¹⁵ "Wellhausen and the Hasidim," *Modern Judaism* 26 (2006).

¹⁶ Benjamin D. Sommer, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015);

¹⁷ "What Did the Rymanover Really Say About the Aleph of Anokhi?," *Kabbalah* 34 (2016) (Hebrew).

¹⁸ And *Sifrei Bamidbar* 102; *Tanhuma Yitro* 11; *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 11.

¹⁹ In the Decalogue's two versions.

²⁰ *Hizkuni, Shemot* 20:13; *Shulhan Aruch HaRav* I: 494, 8-11: "On Shavuos it is customary to read [the Ten Commandments] communally... to read each commandment as a single verse, [even when the commandment contains several verses or only part of a verse. The rationale is that since] the Ten Commandments were given on that day, we read them in the same manner they were given, each commandment constituting a distinct verse" (translation from Chabad.org)

and the four verse Shabbat Commandment as one.

The further developed idea that all 613 Mitzvot were contained in the Ten Commandments appears in one form or another in Philo²¹, R. Moshe HaDarshan (11th century)²², the medieval *Midrash Agadah*²³, and R. Saadiah Gaon's Commentary to *Sefer Yetzirah* and his liturgical Shavuot poem, "*Anokhi Eish Okhelah*, an "*Azharah*"²⁴ which in an exegetical context Rashi (*Exod. 24:12*) cites that the *Aseret HaDibrot* contained all 613 *Mitzvot*.

From there in mystical and Hassidic teachings, which the Rimanover certainly knew, comes the idea that all positive and negative commandments were contained in the first two Commandments ("I am the Lord your God . . ."; You shall have no other gods . . .") (R. Yeshayahu Hurvitz, *Shnei Luhot HaBrit, Torah Or, Yitro*; R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Likutei Amarim* 20, "since *only these we heard*, since they *contain the entire Torah*."²⁵) The idea is extended through the *Zohar*, II:85b (and 90b), to

²¹ *De Deca Logo; De Specialibus Legibus*.

²² *Bereishit Rabati, Bereishit*, 3.

²³ *Vaethanan*, 184.

²⁴ "*Azharot*" are ancient poetic lists of the 613 *Mitzvot* which Sephardim say appropriately on Shavuot.

²⁵ R. Shneur Zalman was an adherent of the *Shelah* before becoming a disciple of the Mezeritcher *Magid*.

²⁶ R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoya, *Ben Porat Yosef, Noach*

the *Ba'al Shem Tov*²⁶, and Mezeritcher *Magid*²⁷, that all the Torah's commandments were contained in the *Aseret HaDibrot's* first word, "*Anokhi*". The *Magid's* student, Rabbi Pinhas HaLevi Horowitz (*Panim Yafot, Yitro*) extends this to the entire Torah being contained in the *Aleph* of '*Anokhi*'.²⁸

"(Non)Verbal Revelation" and "Ongoing Revelation"

Extensive discussion and debate (citing the Rimanover among others) has proliferated about what's been described as a progressive "Ongoing Revelation" as a resultant corollary of a "Non-Verbal Revelation" at Sinai, such that effectively the Torah is not from Heaven but developed by humans. It's been largely brought to the fore in the Conservative Movement²⁹ where the primary issue appears to be Bible criticism (and in Halakhic Egalitarian circles, a programmatic subtext of adjusting the Torah to contemporary mores). Since B. Sommer and others deny that the text of the Torah is from Heaven, they argue for an "ongoing revelation." Since the revelation at Sinai was

²⁷ *Likutei Amarim* 158; *Or Torah, Pinhas*.

²⁸ Connection to J.L. Borges' story of a physical Aleph point containing all the universe (*The Aleph and Other Stories*, 1949) is only in how his poem about the *Maharal's Golem* cites *Scholem*, as he admitted it rhymes with '*Golem*'.

²⁹ Benjamin D. Sommer, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015); Neil Gillman, *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1992)

ineffable and inaudible, they argue, (citing the Rimanover, Rosenzweig³⁰, and A.J. Heschel's comment that "the Bible is a midrash on the experience of revelation"³¹), that it follows that all subsequent Written Torah (and Oral Torah) is the result of an "Ongoing Revelation"—by people.

As Rabbi Steven Gotlib describes it (*Jewish Action*, Spring 2023) in his review of *The Revelation at Sinai: What Does "Torah from Heaven" Mean?* (eds. Yoram Hazony, Gil Student, and Alex Sztuden, Ktav, 2021):

. . . A concern is raised throughout the book: a small, yet increasingly influential, group of scholars and theologians suggests that the Written Torah is the result of human development over time, rather than a literal, or at least objectively witnessed, Divine revelation. Such views—generally referred to under the heading of "ongoing revelation"—require no Moshe, no Mount Sinai, no revelation, no unique Jewish experience, and not even Hashem.

Yet its proponents claim this to be an authentically Jewish view.

Gotlib notes there how Rabbi Gil Student (and Hazony) emphasize that full acceptance of Biblical criticism, including the idea of "ongoing revelation" as applied to the text of the Torah, undermines the entire Jewish project. Or in Gotlib's review ("Theologically Speaking: God, Language, and the Maggid of Mezritsh"), *Lehrhaus*, April 25, 2022) of Ariel Mayse's *Speaking Infinities: God and Language in the Teachings of Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezritsh*³², he writes:

The primary question nowadays, though, is if such a revelation actually requires a literal voice of God to be revealed or not once contemporary biblical scholarship is taken into account.

Ultimately, Neil Gilman puts it starkly this way, "The only genuine dividing line among contemporary Jews is verbal revelation, and on this issue one can only be for or against"³³

³⁰ "The primary content of revelation is revelation itself. 'He came down' [on Sinai] this already concludes the revelation; 'He spoke' is the beginning of interpretation", *The Star of Redemption*.

³¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York, 1955), 185. Heschel's own position on non-verbal revelation and "ongoing revelation" has been characterized as deliberately elusive and

ambiguous. See, Arnold Eisen, "Re-reading Heschel on the Commandments", *Modern Judaism*, 9:1 (1989); Elliot Dorff, *Conservative Judaism: Our Ancestors to Our Descendants*, (2007), Neil Gillman, "Toward a Theology for Conservative Jews", *Conservative Judaism* 37:1 (1983).

³² Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020

³³ "Toward a Theology for Conservative Jews", 8

The discussion and argument—for and against—by contemporary thinkers as Yehudah Gellman³⁴, Tamar Ross³⁵, and Marc Shapiro³⁶ continues in a proliferation too extensive to catalog. And in the context of “ongoing revelation,” A. Mayse even proposes³⁷ that R. Dov Ber, the Magid of Mezeritz, passed the understanding of “revelation as an unfolding process in which the ineffable divine is continuously translated into human language” onto several early Hasidic masters including “Menaḥem Naḥum of Chernobil, Ze’ev Wolf of Zhitomir, and Levi Yitshak of Barditshev”³⁸ as it appears in their works. However, the idea of “Ongoing Revelation” does not necessitate a theory of (or belief in) “Inaudible Revelation” at Sinai, and certainly not by Hasidic Masters. In some examples of this, the attribution of the connection to “early Hasidic masters” is demonstrably false.

³⁴ “Realism and Constructivism: A Correspondence between Professors Yehuda Gellman and Tamar Ross”, *Association for the Philosophy of Judaism*.

³⁵ “Behind Every Revelation Lurks an Interpretation: Revisiting “The Revelation at Sinai”, *Lehrhaus*, May 2023.

³⁶ “Confronting Biblical Criticism: A Review Essay” *Lehrhaus*, January, 2023.

³⁷ Ariel Mayse, “The Voices of Moses: Theologies of Revelation in an Early Hasidic Circle,” *Harvard Theological Review* 112, no. 1 (January 2019): 101–125.

³⁸ The only connection of the Berditchiver to any of this would be his famously suggested reason for the custom of *milchigs* on Shavuot (cited in *Toldos Yitzchak*, 1868), noted in the *Mishneh Berurah* as heard “in the name of a great scholar.”

R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi³⁹, for instance, forcefully articulates the idea that innovation and discovery as “Ongoing Revelation” in Torah is both a mystical⁴⁰ and halakhic religious obligation⁴¹. Yet he also asserts clearly that the revelation at Sinai was unambiguously audible and that all Positive and Negative commandments were contained in the first two Commandments, “since only these we heard, since they contain the entire Torah.”⁴² Moreover, this of itself obligates every Jew to

delve and reveal the Torah embedded in it, and at every level implanted there. (This is besides the obvious that the *Siddur* he compiled has in it *Lecha Dodi’s* “‘Observe’ and ‘Remember’ in one utterance/the One and Only God allowed us to hear.”)

All this might reflect *Hazal’s* formulation,⁴³ “Even what a proficient student in the future will

³⁹ Mayse, “The Voices of Moses,” does aver: “Shneur Zalman’s highly-intellectualized reading of Sinai as paving the way for cerebral communion with the divine both complements and challenges other voices in the Maggid’s circle.”

⁴⁰ *Tanya*, *Igeret HaKodesh* 26.

⁴¹ *Hilchot Talmud Torah* 1:4; 2:2.

⁴² *Likutei Amarim* 20.

⁴³ “*Ve-afilu ma she-talmid vatic atid lehadash kulan ne’emru le-Moshe be-Sinai*” is the text as it appears in Margoliot *Vayikra Rabah* 25 from a manuscript. See also *Bavli Megilah*

innovate was said to Moses at Sinai”, the space and necessity of innovation (as “ongoing revelation”) which is yet grounded in the revelation at Sinai. It refers to what was imparted in the 40-day period after the verbal revelation on Shavuot.⁴⁴ And all subsequent Torah was embedded in that taught in the 40 days on *Sinai: Shemot Rabah* 41:6, “Did Moshe learn the entire Torah . . . in 40 days? Rather The Holy One Blessed Be He taught Moshe general principles.” But according to R. Shneur Zalman, as he articulates, all the Torah taught in those subsequent 40 days was embedded already in the Ten Commandments themselves, or perhaps even in the first two Commandments.

Fascinatingly, in that relationship, in a hybridized reading, James A. Diamond (“The Cherubim: From Guardians of Eden to Auschwitz”⁴⁵), in fact notes how in the rabbis even imagining God appearing at Sinai in the mode of “a teacher teaching Torah” [*Tanhuma (Buber) Yitro* 16], they thus situate themselves “as God’s successors in the continuous unfolding of that foundational revelation.” And he

notes: “The rabbinic interpretive enterprise assumes that very posture, offering continuing access to God’s revelation, itself metaphorized as a ‘tree of life’ (e.g. *bBerakhot* 32b on *Prov* 3:18) whose original is no longer audible except through the medium of rabbinic teaching.”

Conclusion

This note on revelation started with *blintzes*. We have seen the significance and relevance of its possibly unsuspected bearing on the issue of the revelation at Sinai. In the case of this *Minhag Yisrael*, we might say that literally, “*Minhag Yisrael Torah Hu*” (“The custom of Israel—is Torah”) or “*Minhag Avoteinu Torah Hu*”⁴⁶, in the way it comes to embody or reflect the experience of the revelation of the Torah at Sinai itself.

As such, in that experience we find ourselves back in the *heder* at Sinai, hearing a very sonorous and quite audible “*Qamatz Aleph A*”, with all of the Torah embedded in it to be revealed. In that trajectory we return perforce to the originary “*Qamatz Aleph A*” heard there. Thus on Shavuot we re-experience the concrete metaphor of

19b; *Yerushalmi Peah* 2:4, *Shemot Rabah* 47, *Kohelet Rabah* 1:9; 5:8.

⁴⁴ See Aryeh Leibowitz, “Matan Torah: What was Revealed to Moses at Sinai?”, *Hakirah* 32:2022.

⁴⁵ *Marginalia*, January 20, 2023)

⁴⁶ *Sefer Rokeach* describes this custom as “*minhag avoteinu*,” “a practice of our forefathers.” The expressions, “*Minhag Yisrael Torah Hu*” or “*Minhag Avoteinu Torah Hu*”, emerge at this same time: Shmuel Ashkenazi, *Alfa Beita Tinyeta di-Shemuel Zeira* (Jerusalem, 2011), 2:576,

attributes its earliest source to Rabbenu Tam. See also, Israel M. Ta-Shma, *Minhag Ashkenaz ha-Kadmon* (Jerusalem, 1992), 27ff, 104-5. In *Mahzor Vitry* of Rashi’s disciple, R. Simhah, (378, 506) and *Tosafot to Menahot* 20b (attributed to the school of Rabbenu Tam)): “*u-minhag Avoteinu Torah Hi*”. According to Haym Soloveitchik, “*Minhag Ashkenaz ha-Kadmon*”, *Collected Essays II*, 49, “*Minhag Avoteinu Torah*” or “*Minhag Torah Hi*” was likely coined by Rabbenu Yitshak b. Yehudah, a student of Rabbenu Gershom and the teacher of Rashi.

Israel's communal *Haknasah Le-Heder's* milk-and-honey cake's sweet *Aleph* and its other letters at Sinai. And we appropriately enjoy the sweetness of receiving the Torah again anew, from *Aleph*.

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