



Behaalotekha

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Lehrhaus Over Shabbat for the month of June is sponsored by Lauren and David Lunzer to commemorate the 29th yahrzeit of David's mother, Beila Raizel bas HaRav Binyamin.

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The Divinity Is in the Details

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What brings our students round to the beginning of a mature understanding of history and an appreciation of what the past has imagined is—simply—*detail*.

Ian McEwan, [*What We Can Know*](#)

Introduction

Christine Hayes, who recently retired from her position as the Sterling Professor of Religious Studies at Yale University, is a celebrated thinker

and teacher who was a perennial recipient of best faculty awards from her students. In recognition of her reputation for excellence in pedagogy, she was the first Yale professor whose course was recorded as part of the Open Yale Courses initiative and made available to the public. The 24 lectures that make up “Introduction to the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible)” are YouTube videos that have garnered over 2 million views and countless likes. They are master classes—tightly organized, smart, and incisive. It is well worth the time to sit in her virtual classroom.

As one listens to her lectures, it is clear that, for Hayes, the Old Testament (or Tanakh) is self-evidently a composite work, produced by many

people—acting individually or in scribal groups—who contributed material over a long stretch of time and in a wide range of locales in the ancient Middle East. The authorized texts contain different, and at times conflicting, views on theology, morality, politics, and human nature. For Hayes, it is precisely the inclusion of multiple voices and ideas within the Tanakh that constitutes its novelty and continued vitality. In contrast, the notion that the Tanakh reflects the disparate worldviews and ideologies—held by the people of Israel and changing over time—can be disconcerting to some readers. The claim that the biblical writers compiled the text—and had underlying motivations to modify it as they saw fit—is at odds with the traditional Jewish position, codified by Maimonides, that the Torah is divine, whole, unchanging, and timeless.

The divergent theological ideas, conflicting and redundant content, and range of literary styles fuel opposing approaches to the “authorship” of the Tanakh: the traditionalist’s view of a unified divine revelation versus the view among academics in biblical criticism that the text is a human composition that evolved over time. In this essay, I highlight one feature of the biblical text, namely the addition of details to a preexisting narrative. I offer an explanation for why this literary device was utilized without weighing in on the authorship per se of the expanded text. Rather than focus on who wrote the details, I aim to answer why the details were written. Like Robert

Alter, who highlights the literary artistry of the Tanakh as evidence of its unique power,¹ I suggest that the additional details contribute to the singular status of the Bible as a meaningful historical document for the Jewish people.

Textual Composition: Horizontal and Vertical Edits

The Tanakh contains a number of narrative episodes and statements of law that appear inconsistent, even in conflict with one another. They have perplexed readers of all stripes across the millennia. These internal contradictions are compositional edits that one could characterize as horizontal in nature, meaning that a story is repeated downstream in the literary corpus but with different narrative features. There is a restatement of a law, but with specific content that is at odds in its particulars with the first presentation. Examples of this include the famous repetition of the creation story ([Genesis 1–2](#)), the two versions of David’s selection and emergence as a national hero ([1 Samuel 16–17](#)), and the three descriptions of the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE ([2 Kings 18–19](#), [Isaiah 36–37](#), and [2 Chronicles 32](#)). As legal texts, [Exodus and Deuteronomy](#) prescribe different durations for Passover. In contrast to the second of the Ten Commandments in Exodus, [Ezekiel \(18:20\)](#) abolishes vicarious punishment. These discrepancies seem to undermine the conception of an immaculate text and provide a rationale for the [Documentary Hypothesis](#), the view that the

¹ Robert Alter, [The Art of Biblical Narrative](#) (Basic Books, 2011).

Torah derives from multiple sources. Traditional thinkers have also recognized the problem and addressed it in various ways, such as Rabbi Mordechai Breuer’s approach of “*shtei behinot*” (two perspectives).

The text can also be considered composite through what can be categorized as vertical editing, meaning that a detail (or details) is layered onto an already existing narrative in a second version. The additions are not essential to the story arc or the characterization of the key protagonists and are usually quite mundane in nature. However, they flesh out the first take on the story and, by providing more information, make the narrative more substantive. It is on this editorial method that I want to focus: I propose an explanation for why this vertically oriented literary tool was deployed and how it served the authors’ agenda as the Tanakh was molded into its final form.

Added Details in the *Humash*

To start, it is important to note that there are brief vertical edits dispersed throughout the Torah, the first five books of the Tanakh. Based on the content, they appear to be later additions, fine details embroidered onto a received text. Phrases such as “the Canaanites were then living in the land” ([Genesis 12:6](#)), “the name of the city was Luz at first” ([Genesis 28:19](#)), “the battles against Sihon

and Og are recorded in the Book of the Wars of the Lord” ([Numbers 21:14–15](#))—as well as the last eight sentences of Deuteronomy after Moses’s death ([Deuteronomy 34:5–12](#))—provide historical granularity and a historical frame of reference for the story. They have caused discomfort for classical commentators such as [Ibn Ezra](#), as reflected in his remarks about [Deuteronomy 34:1](#).² Ultimately, rather than try to reconcile them as the writings of a contemporaneous author, these details are generally accepted to be later edits to an established text.

Added Details in Chronicles

Chronicles, the last book in the biblical canon, is a rich source of horizontal editing because it is an explicit retelling of events recorded in earlier books. It is widely accepted that 1 and 2 Chronicles, compiled in the last half of the sixth century BCE, are a concerted effort by Judean scribes to reframe previous narratives recorded in the Tanakh. They aimed to boost the prestige and authority of the Davidic monarchy³ and to reinforce the covenantal relationship between God and the nation, as well as the people’s attachment to the rebuilt Second Temple in Jerusalem.⁴ In large part, these objectives are achieved by horizontal changes to the narrative, featuring alternative but favorable material and deleting problematic episodes involving favored figures, primarily King David.

² Zev Farber, “[The Significance of Ibn Ezra’s Position That Verses Were Added to the Torah](#),” *TheTorah.com*, accessed May 1, 2026.

³ Sara Japhet, [1 and 2 Chronicles: A Commentary](#) (SCM Press, 1993).

⁴ Yair Rahat, “[Is the Book of Chronicles Meant to Glorify?](#)” *Yeshivat Har Etzion*, accessed May 1, 2026.

1 and 2 Chronicles also provide ample evidence of vertical editing. The compositional device of adding seemingly superfluous information to an existing text is much in evidence in these two books. The first ten chapters of 1 Chronicles are densely packed with genealogical data. They provide exhaustive lists of names of previously unnamed people who played a part in the history of the nation up to the inauguration of King David. They serve as a comprehensive addendum to parallel texts in earlier books in the Tanakh. The following examples are instances in which the excruciating detail—of marginal theological significance—represents a supplemental literary stratum added vertically onto a previous version of the story.

The first example describes King David's second attempt to escort the Ark publicly and with great fanfare from its temporary storage—on the grounds of Oved Edom the Gittite—to Jerusalem after the tragic death of Uzzah during the failed first attempt. The original version appears in [2 Samuel 6:12–15](#):

It was reported to King David: "GOD has blessed Obed-edom's house and all that belongs to him because of the Ark of God." Thereupon David went and brought up the Ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the City of David, amid rejoicing. When the bearers of the Ark of GOD had moved forward six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. David whirled with all his

might before GOD; David was girt with a linen ephod. Thus David and all the House of Israel brought up the Ark of GOD with shouts and with blasts of the horn.

Contrast this fairly concise description with the expanded, more detailed version that appears in [1 Chronicles 15:3–14](#). The bolded lines highlight the novel designation of the Levites as the officials entrusted with the task of transporting the Ark and the addition of the names of the individual people and the number of support staff involved in the ceremonial procession and relocation of the Ark:

David assembled all Israel in Jerusalem to bring up the Ark of the LORD to its place, which he had prepared for it. **Then David gathered together the Aaronides and the Levites: the sons of Kohath: Uriel the officer and his kinsmen—120; the sons of Merari: Asaiah the officer and his kinsmen—220; the sons of Gershon: Joel the officer and his kinsmen—130; the sons of Elizaphan: Shemaiah the officer and his kinsmen—200; the sons of Hebron: Eliel the officer and his kinsmen—80; the sons of Uzziel: Amminadab the officer and his kinsmen—112. David sent for Zadok and Abiathar the priests, and for the Levites: Uriel, Asaiah,**

Joel, Shemaiah, Eliel, and Amminadab. He said to them, “You are the heads of the clans of the Levites; sanctify yourselves, you and your kinsmen, and bring up the Ark of the LORD God of Israel to [the place] I have prepared for it. Because you were not there the first time, the LORD our God burst out against us, for we did not show due regard for Him.” The priests and Levites sanctified themselves in order to bring up the Ark of the LORD God of Israel. **The Levites carried the Ark of God by means of poles on their shoulders, as Moses had commanded in accordance with the word of the LORD.**

A second example records part of the extended description of the battle for succession that broke out between Rehoboam and Jeroboam after the death of King Solomon. In [1 Kings 12:22–24](#), the prophet simply warns Rehoboam to desist from attacking Jeroboam, and he obeys the prophetic command:

But the word of God came to Shemaiah, the agent of God: “Say to King Rehoboam son of Solomon of Judah, and to all the House of Judah and Benjamin and the rest of the people: Thus said GOD: You shall not set out to make war on your kindred the Israelites. Return

to your homes, for this thing has been brought about by Me.” They heeded the word of GOD and turned back, in accordance with the word of GOD.

When this event is recorded in [2 Chronicles 11:4–11](#) the narrative adds great detail, again indicated by bolded text, about the extensive fortifications that Rehoboam commissioned as king to protect the territory of Judah and Benjamin against hostile attack, internal or external. Despite the lack of a reason for the construction of these defensive garrisons, the author of Chronicles perceived a value in detailing this intensive construction project:

But the word of the LORD came to Shemaiah, the man of God: “Say to Rehoboam son of Solomon king of Judah, and to all Israel in Judah and Benjamin: Thus said the LORD: You shall not set out to make war on your kinsmen. Let every man return to his home, for this thing has been brought about by Me.” They heeded the words of the LORD and refrained from marching against Jeroboam. **Rehoboam dwelt in Jerusalem and built fortified towns in Judah. He built up Bethlehem, and Etam, and Tekoa, and Beth-zur, and Soco, and Adullam, and Gath, and Mareshah, and Ziph, and Adoraim, and Lachish, and Azekah, and**

Zorah, and Aijalon, and Hebron, which are in Judah and in Benjamin, as fortified towns. He strengthened the fortified towns and put commanders in them, along with stores of food, oil, and wine, and shields and spears in every town. He strengthened them exceedingly; thus Judah and Benjamin were his.

This specific approach of adding details about construction programs is repeated in the text that centers on the reign of Uzziah, he of the famous song. In [2 Kings 15:35](#), there is a single sentence that provides a capsule summary of his reign and public works projects:

However, the shrines were not removed; the people continued to sacrifice and make offerings at the shrines. It was he who built the Upper Gate of the House of GOD.

Compare the brevity of 2 Kings with the longer, more concrete list in [2 Chronicles 27:3–4](#) that enumerates the individual building projects, in bold, that Uzziah commissioned and completed during his long reign:

It was he who built the Upper Gate of the House of the LORD; **he also built extensively on the wall of Ophel. He built towns in the hill country of Judah, and in the**

woods he built fortresses and towers.

In a second military example, [2 Kings 11:4](#) speaks to the courageous efforts of Jehoiada the priest to restore the Davidic monarchy after the bloody rule of Queen Athaliah. It is a generic description of how he enlisted men to join in this battle against the Northern kingdom, indistinguishable from Jehoiada's other martial campaigns:

In the seventh year, Jehoiada sent for the chiefs of the hundreds of the Carites and of the guards, and had them come to him in the House of GOD. He made a pact with them, exacting an oath from them in the House of GOD, and he showed them the king's son.

In the parallel text in [2 Chronicles 23:1](#), the timing is the same and the preparation for battle is still the central topic. However, names of five men with their pedigree, in bold font, are inserted as leaders of the military force that accepted Jehoiada's call to arms. This provides specificity to the preparation for this battle because it is unlikely that the same five individuals were recruited to lead other clashes:

In the seventh year, Jehoiada took courage and brought the chiefs of the hundreds, **Azariah son of Jeroham, Ishmael son of Jehohanan, Azariah son of Obed,**

Maaseiah son of Adaiah, and Elishaphat son of Zichri, into a compact with him.

Finally, the added detail sheds light on the character and intensity of the battles that were waged by the Israelite kings. [2 Kings 14:7](#), a single laconic sentence, summarizes the exploits of Amaziah in his military maneuvers against the people of Edom:

He defeated ten thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt, and he captured Sela in battle and renamed it Joktheel, as is still the case.

[2 Chronicles 25:11–12](#) has a much more graphic and violent description of the events. The confrontation with the people of Edom or Seir is recorded in a similar manner as in Kings. But in Chronicles, there is more elaboration and the addition of another phase of the battle—namely, the capture of 10,000 men of Judah and their brutal massacre in the wilderness. The motivation for adding this bloody detail, highlighted in bold, is uncertain, but it certainly makes the episode more memorable:

Amaziah took courage and, leading his army, he marched to the Valley of Salt. **He slew 10,000 men of Seir; another 10,000 the men of Judah captured alive and brought to the top of Sela. They threw them**

down from the top of Sela and every one of them was burst open.

Details in the Mishnah

To this point, the focus has been on the documentation of added detail in the Tanakh, with Chronicles serving as the prime example. The Mishnah is another canonical work in which granular details that are not clearly necessary or relevant to the text at hand—in this case, the specific law under discussion—are frequently added to the work. The assertion that the biblical text is composite in nature, with vertical layers of detail, raises concerns about its divine authorship. This claim is less problematic when discussing the Mishnah, which is traditionally viewed as the work of an identifiable person, Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi, writing in the second century CE. It is the scholarly consensus that he compiled together many compilations of the law that had been in circulation and created a more unified version that gained broad authorization and wide acceptance among his peers.

The following are three examples among many. In these cases, it is not possible to provide side-by-side versions that describe a common event or object—one of which, for no apparent reason, is distinguished by the addition of seemingly extraneous details, indicated in bold.

To start, everything we know and read about the operation of the Temple indicates that it must have been an administrative tour de force. While the famous *mishnah* in [Pirkei Avot \(5:5\)](#) lists the

ten miracles that distinguished the Second Temple as a cultic site, there had to be many people who worked hard day-to-day to make sure that everything got done as per divine guidelines and with available human resources. The Mishnah in [Shekalim 5:1](#) calls attention to a list of specific individuals, all in bold, who supervised key aspects of the holy worship:

These are the officials who served in the Temple: **Yoḥanan ben Pineḥas was responsible for the seals; Aḥiyya for the libations; Matya ben Shmuel for the lotteries; Petaḥya for the pairs of birds;... Ben Aḥiyya for [priests who suffered from] intestinal disease; Neḥunya was the well digger; Gevini was the Temple crier; Ben Gever for locking the gates; Bevai appointed over the shreds [of garments for wicks]; Ben Arza for the cymbal; Hugras ben Levi for the song; The house of Garmu for the preparation of the shewbread; the house of Avtinus for the preparation of the incense; and Elazar for the curtains; and Pineḥas was the valet.**

Similarly, there were several unique utensils that were part of the Temple service. The Midrash provides a miraculous description of how the menorah was constructed. But the Mishnah in [m. Yoma 3:10](#) names the human source, the actual individuals—highlighted in bold—for some of the

other elements that were used in specific ceremonies but whose provenance may have been uncertain:

ben Katin made twelve spigots for the basin as [previously it] had only two. He also made a machine for the basin so that its water would not be disqualified by remaining overnight. King Munbaz would make the handles of all the Yom Kippur vessels of gold. Queen Helene, his mother, fashioned a gold chandelier above the entrance of the Sanctuary. She also fashioned a golden tablet on which the portion of the *sota* was written. Nicanor, miracles were performed to his doors.. And the people would mention these favorably.

Finally, considering all the sacrifices brought daily, it must have been a challenge to ensure that a fire could be maintained on the altars to burn all the offerings on time. Wood was a precious commodity, and the Mishnah in [Ta'anit 4:5](#) celebrates the clans by providing the names of the wealthy patrons who willingly donated the supplies to keep the fire burning:

Times for the wood of priests and the people were nine. On the first of Nisan, the descendants of Araḥ ben Yehuda; on the twentieth of Tammuz, the descendants of

David ben Yehuda; on the fifth of Av, the descendants of Parosh ben Yehuda; on the seventh of Av, the descendants of Jonadab ben Rechab; on the tenth of Av, the descendants of Sena'a ben Binyamin; on the fifteenth of Av, the descendants of Zattu ben Yehuda... On the twentieth of Av, the descendants of Paḥat Moav ben Yehuda; on the twentieth of Elul, the descendants of Adin ben Yehuda; on the first of Tevet, the descendants of Parosh returned a second [time].

In all three cases, the content would not have been materially impacted by deletion of bolded text. However, the author of the Mishnah appears to have felt a need to insert a list of names of identifiable individuals: in the first, the men who supervised individual aspects of the Temple service and others who had a unique area of expertise; in the second, prominent individuals who donated distinctive ornaments and utensils for use in Temple services; and in the third, the names of the families who donated the wood that was needed to burn the sacrifices on the altar throughout the year.

The prevailing view among Second Temple scholars is that there were many compilations of

the law in circulation during the period of the Tannaim.⁵ Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi's singular achievement was to assemble these disparate catalogues and commit them to writing in a version that was seen as authoritative and which gained wide acceptance among the broad rabbinic community. If that reconstruction of events is correct, then one could speculate that Rabbi Judah inserted these exquisite but dispensable details into the legal compilations that were already in circulation at the time. The implication is that the Tanakh is not the only sacred composition that is characterized by vertical editing, as demonstrated by the later addition of engaging details to earlier versions of a text. This begs the question: Why was this editing technique adopted by the writers of these foundational texts, Chronicles and the Mishnah?

Secular Recording of Details

There are numerous secular examples of extraordinarily detailed documentation in historical records for which there appears to be no obvious practical reason. If one visits plantations in the American South and examines the ledgers kept by the owners of their financial interactions, it is striking how meticulously they recorded the acquisition of each slave, including the date of purchase, place of origin, and the physical characteristics of the person they had acquired. The Nazis recorded the date and time of arrival and the exact number of victims transported by

⁵ Shaye J. D. Cohen, ed., [*What Is the Mishnah? The State of the Question—The Proceedings of a Conference at Harvard University*](#) (Harvard University Press, 2023).

each train that entered the concentration camps in their demonic attempt to exterminate the Jews of Europe.

Some additional examples include the memorial arch to victims of the brutal winter of 1777–1778 in Valley Forge, Maya Lin’s stark wall listing the names of all the soldiers who died in the service of their country during the Vietnam War, and the many monuments to Israel’s many wars. All have the names of the individuals who perished in battle engraved into the stone or marble. There is a universal recognition that this granular detail is important to ensure proper memorialization of events. The specificity of the names, dates, and places represents facts that concretize the events and buttress the believability of what is recorded for the people who will read the lists and learn about the events in the future. The details are hard facts that serve to ground the occurrence in a reality that the target audience will accept, empathize with, and be less able to deny.

Implication of the Inclusion of Details in Jewish Sources

For Jews, the importance of incorporating details to ground their narrative in historical reality is especially relevant. One of the breakthrough insights of the ancient scribes who composed the Tanakh was their revolutionary conception of a God who—unlike the polytheistic deities of the

pagans among whom they lived—was not divorced from humanity but rather fully engaged in history. The God of the Tanakh chose the Jewish people as a covenantal partner and was actively involved in their ongoing development as individuals and as a moral nation.⁶ The Jewish people would be held accountable to a mutually agreed-upon code of conduct. The degree of their observance of the law would be manifest in their well-being in the promised land or their suffering in (or even banishment from) their homeland. For the writers of the Tanakh, the story of the Jewish people was not pure myth but rather an ongoing epic of their relationship with their God—sometimes good and more often bad—over the grand sweep of human history.

The embeddedness of Jewish destiny in human history has been expressed by Rav Soloveitchik in his combination of terms, *berit yi’ud* and *berit goral*.⁷ Regardless of whether or not a person chooses to adhere to the Halakhah and live by the law, all Jews are linked together in history. Similarly, Eliezer Berkovits eloquently articulated the need for the fate of the Jewish people to unfold in history that plays out in the land of Israel, in a sovereign state that fulfills the moral and ethical requirements of the Torah.⁸ The ultimate moral imperative of Judaism is to improve this world in real, historical time. The achievement of that goal can best be judged based on observable

⁶ Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, [*The Triumph of Life: A Narrative Theology of Judaism*](#) (Jewish Publication Society, 2024).

⁷ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, [*Fate and Destiny: From Holocaust to the State of Israel*](#) (Ktav Publishing, 2000).

⁸ Eliezer Berkovits, “On Jewish Sovereignty” (1973), in [*God, Man, and History*](#), ed. David Hazony (Shalem Press, 2004).

facts that are accessible to everyone for public review and confirmation. The solid grounding in history accentuates the importance of documenting the national narrative in sufficient detail—people, place, and activity—to ensure communal acceptance and long-term transmission.

The Unique Importance of the Details in Chronicles and the Mishnah in Historical Context

With the importance of history in mind, the vertical editing with added details in Chronicles and the Mishnah may be especially salient and reveal a shared purpose. These works were composed in the wake of two catastrophic events in Jewish history—namely, the destruction of the First and Second Temples, respectively. In the aftermath of these calamities, it would have been natural to question the persistence of the covenantal relationship with the Jewish God. The fracture of the social fabric and political structure of the surviving community could have easily led to the complete dissolution of the nation and abandonment of the cultic center. The authors of Chronicles, writing after the destruction of the First Temple, and the compilers of the Mishnah, working after the destruction of the Second Temple, may have felt significant pressure to firm up the commitment to the Torah and reinforce the people's confidence in the faith community.

Although we are unable to confirm the historicity of the details in Chronicles or the Mishnah, they represent facts known to the people of the time. They were not manufactured out of mythic cloth

or simply literary ornamentation to spruce up the story. For readers of these books, the vertical editing and the profusion of details added into Chronicles and the Mishnah—the resulting granularity of the text—may have served a common function. They concretized the people's story, verified its legitimacy, and solidified their identification with the historical narrative. This would have bolstered the people's confidence that they had not been abandoned by their covenantal partner and reinforced continued allegiance to the national mission. Ultimately, the details were added to substantiate the storied backdrop in the service of the writers' overarching theological and social objectives—namely, preserving the people's social cohesiveness and religious commitment.

Conclusion

There is a perennial fascination with the authorship of the canon, both the Written and Oral Torah. Regardless of who actually “wrote” things down, the texts that we have in our hands have endured and continue to provide moral guidance and spiritual inspiration. How they do this remains a religious and intellectual mystery. There are many structural and literary features of the Tanakh and Mishnah that contribute to this staying power and impact. The layering on of details may be one such factor. A belief in continuity through history and a conviction that God is eternally involved in their narrative have been identifying features of the Jewish faith. Details serve to strengthen the documentation and acceptance of the story. In the end, in contrast to the customary phrasing, one could say that the

divinity is in the details.

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The Divinity Is in the Details

Beth Kissileff is the co-editor of the forthcoming anthology, [Bound in the Bond of Life: Pittsburgh Writers Reflect on the Tree of Life Tragedy](#) (University of Pittsburgh Press, October 2020).

What is Moses' complaint when he says that he cannot nurse or carry the Israelite people ([Numbers 11:12](#))? This complaint is in response to the people's demand for meat, the penultimate test of the ten times the Israelites tested God in the wilderness ([Bartenura to Avot 5:4](#)). For many of the earlier tests, including the one immediately prior to this one, Moses successfully prays to God on behalf of the people. So why does Moses resist interceding for the Israelites when they ask here

for meat ([Numbers 11:4](#)), and what does his response tell us about his character and fitness for leadership? Something in this demand leads Moses to state emphatically what he is incapable of providing to the Israelites. When this grievance is brought to him, he feels that the demands of his job have become beyond what he can impart to the people. Moses tells God that he is physically unable to do what he thinks is being asked of him. But Moses' idea about his role and his capabilities for it may be part of his problem as a leader.

If we think about the book of Numbers as the opportunity for God to teach the people of Israel trust, so that they are readied for their transition from slavery of Egypt to the freedom of the land of Israel, then the job of the leader is to be encouraging of that goal. The giving of the Torah at Sinai enables the Israelites both to live in a particular way with Jewish law and also to access the most optimal human traits as fully as possible. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg takes a psychoanalytic approach to many texts she analyzes; in her discussion of Numbers she explicates attachment theories of children and parents and how they engender trust and enable the child to eventually function autonomously; the time in the wilderness prepares the Israelites for the new role they will have in the land of Israel. In the words of Zornberg, "The *midbar* is an inner condition, which challenges the individual to become human. The most sublime experiences contain

that ‘wilderness energy,’ the primal forces out of which one generates a larger humanity. The theater of that struggle is called *midbar*.¹ Moses then is the one to be at the forefront of enabling the people in the wilderness to learn to access the primal energy that can be found there. Yet he explicitly rejects his role.

Moses’ complaint is that what he is being asked to do is wholly unnatural. He pleads to God that he did not conceive this people, nor did he bear them, and he certainly is unable to physically nurture them and carry them: “Did I conceive all this people, did I bear them, that You should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as an *omen* (nurse)² carries an infant,’ to the land that You have promised on oath to their fathers?” ([Numbers 11:12](#)). However, upon examination, the claim that the role God has put him in is unnatural is suspect.

Moses is not the only person to be cast in the role of nurturer who one might think is biologically incapable of feeding a child. For example, Naomi emphasizes to her daughters-in-law that she is past her childbearing years ([Ruth 1:11](#)), and yet she embraces the role which she chooses for herself as nurturer to the child of Ruth and Boaz ([Ruth 4:16](#)). This role is all the more remarkable because the child, Oved, is biologically related to her late husband Elimelekh through his kinship with Boaz, but has no biological link to Naomi herself.

¹ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, [Bewilderments: Reflections on the book of Numbers](#) (Schocken, 2017), 88. See also Zornberg, [Moses: A Human Life](#) (Yale University Press, 2016).

Yet another biblical figure appearing to be biologically unable to nurse and yet still providing suckle is Mordecai, who nursed Esther, as described in Genesis Rabbah ([30:8](#)): “R. Yudan said: On one occasion [Mordecai] went round to all the wet nurses but could not find one for Esther, so he himself suckled her. R. Berekiah and R. Abbahu said in the name of R. Eleazar: Milk came to him and he suckled her [and he never even tried to find a wet nurse].” This story, where a number of options for a nurse were tried and the most suitable was a close relative, parallels the midrash in [Sotah 12b](#) that Moses refused to nurse from Egyptian women. The Gemara asks why the daughter of Pharaoh sought a wet nurse among the Hebrews ([Exodus 2:7-9](#)), and responds that

prior to this, they took Moses around to all the Egyptian wet nurses and he did not agree to nurse from any of them, as he said: “Shall a mouth that in the future will speak with the Divine Presence actually nurse something impure?” And this is as it is written: “Whom shall one teach knowledge? And whom shall one make understand the message?” ([Isaiah 28:9](#)). The prophet is asking: To whom shall God teach the knowledge of the Torah, and to whom shall God make to understand the message of the Torah? The answer is as the

² Other places in the Hebrew Bible where the word *omen* is used for ‘nursing man’ are [II Kings 10:1,5](#) and [Isaiah 49:23](#).

verse continues: “Them that are weaned from the milk, them that are drawn from the breasts” (ibid.). The conclusion of the verse indicates that the Torah should be taught to the one who did not want to nurse from the milk of a gentile woman, i.e., Moses.³

There is a certain level of irony that Moses, who was so careful about his own nurse, now refuses to play the role of wet nurse to the Israelite people.

A look at other places in *Hazal* where men find themselves in a position of nurturer can help us understand the validity of Moses’ complaints. The Talmud in [Shabbat 53b](#) tells the story of a man whose wife has died and left him a son to nurse. Without money for a wet nurse, “a miracle was performed on his behalf, and he developed breasts like the two breasts of a woman, and he nursed his son.” This is not the only place in the Talmud where male lactation is mentioned; there is reference to milk from male goats in [Hullin 113b](#). Are *Hazal’s* statements scientifically possible, or are they just a metaphor? Dr. Jeremy Brown [discusses this question](#) in his Talmudology blog, writing that “there are other mammalian species in which the male has been known to lactate, including sheep, rats, free-ranging Dayak fruit bats in Malaysia and the masked flying fox bats of

Papua New Guinea. Male lactation was also recorded in World War II prisoner of war camps when malnourished detainees were later liberated and provided with adequate nutrition.” Brown concludes that male lactation “is, at least in theory, *an entirely natural event* [emphasis mine].” Thus, at least according to *Hazal* as supported by science, Moses’ complaint that he can’t nurse the Israelites is not without merit.

If we assume then that theoretically Moses could have nursed the people, whether physically or metaphorically, what does his refusal here say about his understanding of which parts of his role as leader and nurturer he is willing to accept?

Moses’ explicit rejection of his ability to nurture can be seen as a precursor to his cursing at the people, calling them rebels and then striking the rock ([Numbers 20:10-12](#)). Really, what Moses is saying by distancing himself from the people by labeling them “rebels” ([Numbers 20:10](#)) is that he no longer wishes to connect himself to them. At a time when the Israelites want more variety in their food, Moses explicitly says he will not nurse them; when they need water he cannot give it to them without anger and verbal and physical violence. While Moses claims that he is unable to provide for the Israelites, there are in fact things he could have done; for example, he could have suggested ways to cook the manna to enable it to taste more like meat, or reminded the people that even

³ Translation from Sefaria. The parallel between Moses and Esther only nursing from a relative makes even clearer the rabbinic idea that adherence to the Torah was completely affirmed only during the time of Esther, based on the verse

“the Jews ordained and took upon them” ([Esther 9:27](#)). Both Moses and Esther in these parallel midrashim require the same purity in their food since they will both be recipients of Torah.

though they are frustrated, God is providing for them. He could even correct their faulty memories of the ease with which they got sustenance in Egypt - they claim that the food they ate in Egypt was “free” ([Numbers 11:5](#)), but that in fact they performed backbreaking labor to earn it ([Exodus 1:13](#)). However, Moses does not do what he can, even in some kind of incremental way, to help those he is tasked with leading, his response showing a total lack of empathy to the Israelites’ needs.

The people are complaining about the food they are given. But this same food is part of the trust-inducing plan of God for them in the *midbar*, teaching them that they will be provided for each and every day. The complaints of the people about lack of variety in their diet are without merit. The food itself is fungible, lending itself to being prepared in a variety of ways, by being grounded or pound, boiled, or made into cakes ([Numbers 11:8](#)). As well, there is an assortment of tastes with the food God sends the Israelites. The taste of the manna is compared to something thick and delicious ([Numbers 11:8](#)), which the Talmud in [Yoma 75a](#) suggests is comparable to breast milk: “Rabbi Abbahu said: ‘*Shad*’ ([Numbers 11:8](#)) means breast. Just as a baby tastes different flavors from the breast, so too with the manna, every time that the Jewish people ate the manna, they found in it many flavors, based on their preferences.”

⁴ Another assessment of the feminine body as negative and weak is that of [Rashi](#) (following [Sifri Bamidbar 91](#)) to Moses’ request to God to kill him ([Numbers 11:15](#)). Rashi speaks of the fact that the verse has “you” (*at*) in the feminine form to

Essentially, God is the one nursing the people, providing nourishment that is explicitly compared to the milk a baby drinks from a mother’s breast. If so, why is Moses so upset about his role? He is not in fact called upon to nurse the people; God is doing that already!

Moses’ refusal to nurture the people, or even to simply encourage them to enjoy the manna, is essentially a devaluation or even rejection of the role of nurturer. Ultimately, he even entreats God to kill him ([Numbers 11:15](#)) because of his inability to “bear” the people by himself ([11:14](#)). One might see what Moses is doing in these verses as a critique of the feminine body and its ability to bear children and nourish them.⁴ However, this criticism actually becomes one of *Moses himself* because of his refusal to participate in the process of bearing and nurturing the people; to be an ‘*omen*’ (nursing father) is clearly part of his refusal to teach them *emunah*, trust, which comes from the same root word. The process of developing trust is the hallmark of why the people must spend forty years wandering in this desert. God is willing to bear, nurse, and nourish the people; it is Moses’ refusal of that role and denigration of it that makes him unfit to be the leader who is going to increase their attachment to and trust in God during this time in the *midbar*. A nursing mother teaches her baby trust and fosters attachment. It is Moses’ disparagement of the role and its

“intimate that Moses’ strength grew weak as that of a woman when the Holy one, blessed be He, showed him the punishment which He was to bring in future upon them for this (for their sin).”

importance that shows that he is unfit for leadership.

In many situations, including the current one with the coronavirus, feminine leadership qualities enable better outcomes for countries with female political leaders.⁵ As Louise Champoux- Paille and Anne-Marie Croteau write in their article [“Why women leaders are excelling during the coronavirus pandemic,”](#) “This new type of leadership primarily involves resilience, courage, flexibility, listening, empathy, collaboration, caring and recognition of collective contribution. The participation of everyone’s intelligence becomes the key to success. These are all characteristics of traditionally feminine management.” Moses’s refusal of feminine traits that might have led to better outcomes made it impossible for him to properly manage the various outbreaks in the desert.

What keeps Moses from being a leader who might engender more trust in those he is trusted to lead? Avivah Zornberg says that when Moses negates his ability to be an *omen* he is expressly limiting himself from the possibilities of the role God has given him as wilderness guide. Zornberg writes, “In one moment of imaginative genius, [Moses] frames his constancy and compassion, merging self and other. In such a relation, he would indeed

be an *omen*, a source of unbounded nurturance, of *emunah*, of trustworthiness. As such, he could not fail to elicit a responsive trust from them. But the very words in which he articulates this image undermine its force. Framed in rhetorical questions – ‘Did I conceive this people, did I bear them?’ his fantasy of himself is deflected from the outset. Even as a fantasy, it is not viable.”⁶ The non-viability even of Moses’ briefly-posed role for himself as nurturer is yet another reason why his leadership too is becoming unsuitable. Moses raises the possibility that he might nourish the people in a way that promotes trust and attachment, only to immediately reject it as inconceivable. Had Moses thought that part of his role as leader was to nourish in a way that would foster *emunah*, trust, in the people he might have entered the Promised Land. It is his refusal both to physically sustain the Israelite people, as well as to encourage their faith that shows he is unfit to continue as a leader. Given the entirety of the character traits of Moses as leader, we see that even imagining himself in the role of procreator, bearer, nurturer, and carrier of this people is a non-starter which ultimately leads to his removal from his role.

During the forty years in the desert, God wants to train the Israelites in faith. This training started with the understanding that manna will be a

⁵<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/world/coronavirus-women-leaders.html> and <https://www.forbes.com/sites/avivahwittenbergcox/2020/04/13/what-do-countries-with-the-best-coronavirus-reponses-have-in-common-women-leaders/#354858d93dec>, [https://thehill.com/changing-](https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/equality/493434-countries-led-by-women-have-fared-better-against)

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⁶ *Bewilderments*, 80.

constant like mother's milk, a food to soothe, comfort and nourish all at once, the substance itself a stand-in for the physical presence of God. Just as a mother must be physically present to nurse a child, God in providing manna is promising God's continued presence. Moses wants no part of either nourishing or creating an atmosphere where the people will be able to feel God's presence. Perhaps it is a lack of faith in himself and his own abilities, as we have seen at every stage of his commission as leader that he has excuses such as stuttering, why he cannot speak or lead, that disables him from taking on the nurturer role. The negation of the specifically female traits of being an *omen*, a nurturer or wet nurse, and of physically bearing the people, with concomitant positive empathetic and collaborative attributes connected with women leaders, is the very thing that makes Moses unfit to continue as leader.

God is portrayed as like a mother and a nurse, but Moses will not embrace those roles. Jordan Rosenblum, in an article about the role of breastfeeding in rabbinic literature,⁷ writes, "Fortunately, unlike a human nurse from whom one receives physical milk for only the first two or three years of life, God is a nurse who nurtures for the entirety of one's life." Moses does not instill or encourage trust, so his role as leader is diminished. Though the final declaration of the sentence against Moses comes through his refusal to get water appropriately at the waters of Merivah in Numbers 20, his inability to give milk

⁷ Jordan Rosenblum, "Blessings of the Breasts': Breastfeeding in Rabbinic Literature" *Hebrew Union College Annual* Vol. 87 (2016).

here in Numbers 11 plays a significant role in signaling to God that a new leadership style needs to be sought.

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