LEHRHAUS
Over Shabbat

Ki Tavo

Vol. 8, Issue 54 • 17 Elul 5784 / September 20, 2024

"Our Eyes": The Kenites and the Druze

Tamar Weissman teaches Tanach and Land of Israel studies, and is a licensed tour guide specializing in northern Israel.

In late July 2024, a Hezbollah rocket crashed into a soccer pitch in the Golan Heights town of Majdal Shams, killing twelve Druze children. This horrific event thrust the Druze community of the Golan, with their complex layers of identity and loyalties, into the limelight. Who are the Druze, specifically those that live in the Golan Heights? And is there anything instructive in Israel's past that might help us better understand and relate to this community?

The Druze minority in Israel is not monolithic; though all Druze throughout the world are bound together through shared religion, a tenet of that religion is dogmatic loyalty to the host state. The Druze of the Galilee, for instance, are considered model citizens, with a near-100% conscription rate to the IDF, and are significant contributors to the political and economic sectors of Israeli society. Only a minority of the Druze living in the Golan, however, are Israeli citizens, and most of them do not serve in the army. Since the Golan Heights is still not recognized internationally as part of sovereign Israel, the Druze living there are torn between two loyalties. The younger residents of Majdal Shams have mostly claimed Israeli citizenship, while the older generation, remembering their pre-1967 identity as Syrian citizens, are markedly colder towards Israel.

The value of loyalty to the government of their host country is a foundational element of the Druze identity. To be Druze is to be without any specific country, but to also be staunchly allegiant to one's hosts. This allegiance actually preserves the Druze's independence from other peoples:

they are essentially attached to no one specific state.

This independence, and flexibility, is also a defining characteristic of the Kenites, a biblical people who bear remarkable resemblance to the Druze. An examination of the Kenites, and the pattern which emerges from the Sages' careful reading of the biblical contexts in which they appear, prompts surprising associations with the contemporary Druze, and may provide a framework for considering how our two peoples might continue our partnership.

The Kenites[1] are an enigmatic people, surfacing throughout the Bible to interact with Israel in surprising, often contradictory, ways. The first biblical reference to the Kenites seems innocent enough: they are listed among the ten nations that Abraham's descendants are destined to conquer and inherit (Genesis 15:18-21), with no additional information provided. Perhaps they traced their origins to Cain,[2] the first child born to Adam and Eve, who was compelled to roam for his sustenance after murdering his brother Abel. Like Cain, "a ceaseless wanderer on the earth" (Genesis 4:12), the Kenites were perpetual nomads.

The next time the Kenites make an appearance in the biblical narrative is at the end of Israel's desert journey, as the gentile prophet Balaam levels curses on all the nations that had antagonized the Children of Israel: the Moabites, the Edomites, the Amalekites and, unexpectedly, the Kenites, who had never been singled out as having threatened Israel in the past.

> Then he looked on Amalek…
> And then he looked on the Kenites,
> and he took up his oracle and said:
> "Firm is your dwelling place,
> And your nest is set in the rock;
> Nevertheless Kain (i.e., the Kenites)
> shall be burned.
> How long until Ashur carries you away captive?" (Numbers 24:20-22)

Balaam juxtaposes this last nation alongside the Amalekites, which spurs Rashi's surprising comment:

> The Kenites were always firmly

[1]The earliest historical record of the Kenites dates to the Egyptian twelfth dynasty (early second millennium), from an Egyptian inscription from Sinai that mentions the "Keni" along with other semitic tribes. Later possible evidence of the Kenites is found in the annals of Tuthmose III (mid-15th c. BCE), which references a Nahal Kina near Megiddo.

[2] The spelling of the two is identical in Hebrew.

> encamped within the Amalekites. (Rashi, Numbers 24:21)

While this curious pairing is first mentioned explicitly in this context, it is actually alluded to much earlier on, with the introduction of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, ancestor of the Kenites (see Judges 1:16). [3] Jethro becomes interested in joining Israel when he hears of their defeat of Amalek:

> "Jethro, priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard about all that God had done for Moses and Israel His people…" (Exodus 18:1). What did he hear that specifically moved him to come? The splitting of the sea… the war against Amalek… (*Zevahim* 116a)[4]

Another pairing of the Kenites with Amalek surfaces explicitly later in Israel's history, as King Saul prepares to battle Amalek. He begins by sending a warning to the Kenites:

> Saul said to the Kenites: "Come, withdraw at once from among the Amalekites, that I may not destroy you along with them, for you showed kindness to all the Israelites when they left Egypt." So the Kenites withdrew from among the Amalekites. (I Samuel 15:6)[5]

This union of Amalek, sworn enemy of Israel, and the Kenites, Israel's erstwhile allies, is a strange and contradictory one. On the one hand, Balaam groups the Kenites with Amalek; additionally, the Kenites camp with the Amalekites in Saul's era. They seem to get along and are intertwined. On the other hand, Jethro the Kenite is inspired by Israel's defeat of Amalek, spurring him to visit Moses in the desert wilderness, and showing him there the "kindness" that Saul was referencing. (Jethro's kindness was in assessing and advising.

---

[3] Jethro is described in Exodus 3:1 and 18:1 as "the priest of Midian" rather than a Kenite, but Judges 1:16 identifies him as "the Kenite, father-in-law of Moses." *Sifrei,* Numbers 78 lists 'Keni' as one of Jethro's names (alongside five others), suggesting homiletical explanations for the name as opposed to indicating a national attributive.

[4] This exegesis is clearly based on the juxtaposition of Jethro's "hearing" with the story immediately preceding it – the clash with Amalek (Exodus 17:8-14).

[5] This pattern of the two nations dwelling together is also found in the Septuagint version of Judges 1:16, where the verse "And they [the Kenites] went and dwelled with the nation" is expanded to include the modifier Amalek: "And they [the Kenites] went and dwelled with the nation – with Amalek." The Septuagint version lays the groundwork for Saul's description in I Samuel 15:6 of the Kenites as dwelling amongst the Amalekites. The plain meaning of the verse, given the context in Judges, is that the Kenites moved south, from Jericho (The City of Date Palms) to Arad, to be close to the Israelites. Rashi specifies that the "*am*," the nation, are the students of Yabetz/Othniel who had flocked to him in Arad to study Torah (Rashi, Judges 1:16).

Sizing up the challenges posed to Moses' leadership, Jethro had advised him to set up a court system, an efficient procedural framework that would wean the nation from its dependence on one central authority.) In gratitude and admiration, Moses refers to Jethro as "*our eyes*" (Numbers 10:31), the objective observer who served Israel by remaining outside of the nation. Though he never definitively joins with Israel, Jethro is lauded by the Sages as a model convert.[6] Moses attempts to entice his father-in-law into continuing with Israel on their desert journey and ultimately into the Promised Land, promising "*we will be good to you… and bestow upon you the goodness which God grants us*" (Numbers 10:29-32). This "goodness" that Moses promised Jethro was the finest estate in Eretz Yisrael:

> When Israel was apportioning the land, there was the rich pasture ground of Jericho, five hundred *ammot* by five hundred *ammot*, and they set it aside from being apportioned [among the tribes]… They gave it instead to the sons of Jethro, to Jonadab the son of Rechab, as it says (Judges 1:16): "The sons of Keni, father-in-law of Moses, went up from the City of Date Palms…"[7] (Rashi, Numbers 10:32)

Jethro insisted on returning to his own homeland,[8] but this separation was not a divorce. He may have taken leave of Israel in the desert, but his descendants migrated with the nation into Eretz Yisrael, taking root in Jericho, City of Date Palms,[9] and then moving south to settle near Arad:

> The descendants of the Kenite, the father-in-law of Moses, went up with the Judahites from the City of Date Palms to the wilderness of Judah; and they went and settled among the people in the Negeb of Arad. (Judges 1:16)

The Kenites seem poised in a studiously ambiguous state vis-à-vis Israel. They are regularly with Amalek, but also attach themselves to Israel. Are they loyal to Israel, or are they in bed with her archenemy?

The emerging picture of the Kenites is further complicated by the comment of Rashi quoted above. He weaves in an additional layer of complexity by introducing another notable Kenite: Jonadab the son of Rechab, a figure who only

[6] *Tanhuma*, Jethro 1.

[7] See also *Sifrei,* Numbers 78.

[8] Jehthro's visit to Moses and the Israelites at Sinai is recorded twice in the text, once in Exodus 18 and again in Numbers 10. It is unclear whether the two versions reflect the same episode (Ibn Ezra), or whether the account in Numbers is of a subsequent visit that he made (Ramban). At some point, though, Jethro parted ways with Moses and returned to Midian, as per Exodus 18:27.

[9] Jericho is called the "City of Date Palms" in Deuteronomy 34:3 and II Chronicles 28:15.

surfaces much later on in Israel's story, in the Book of Kings. Jonadab makes a brief yet powerful appearance when he unhesitatingly joins the Israelite king Jehu in destroying the city of Shomron and slaughtering all the idolators there (II Kings 10). While nowhere in that context is Jonadab identified as a Kenite, a mysterious verse from the Book of Chronicles intriguingly links Rechab (Jonadab's ancestor) with the Kenites, and connects him to our context in Judges:

> The families of scribes, dwellers of Yabetz: Tiratim, Shimatim, Sukhotim – **these are the Kenites who came from Hamat, father of the house of Rechab.** (I Chronicles 2:55)

This verse adds another detail to the Kenite migration in Judges: the Kenites who moved from Jericho to settle with Yabetz (another name for the judge Othniel, suggest the Sages) [10] were Rechabites. The Midrash's[11] associative play will pleat back the most famous Rechabite, Jonadab, on top of this verse in Judges, and will also stretch forward, drawing our attention to another Jonadab reference elsewhere in the Bible, in the Book of Jeremiah. Jonadab's sustained influence is famously evoked by the prophet, who lauds his family as exemplars of loyalty:

> The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the days of Jehoiakim son of Josiah, king of Judah, saying: "Go to the house of the Rechabites and speak with them, and bring them to the House of the Lord, to one of the chambers, and give them wine to drink…"
> And I set before the sons of the house of the Rechabites goblets full of wine, and cups, and I said to them, "Drink wine."
> And they said, "We will not drink wine, for Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, commanded us saying, 'You shall not drink wine, you or your children forever. And you shall not build a house, neither shall you sow nor shall you plant a vineyard, nor shall you have [any], but you shall dwell in tents all your days in order that you live many days on the face of the land where you dwell.' And we hearkened to the voice of Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, to all that he commanded us…"
> And the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, saying:
> "The sons of Jonadab the son of Rechab have performed the commandment of their father that he commanded them–but this people has not hearkened to Me!"

[10] *Temurah* 16a.

[11] *Sifrei,* Numbers 78.

(Jeremiah 35:1-16)

The Rechabites, as a branch of the Kenites, are a people who maintain their identity through absolute fealty to their ancestral code. This code demands not only that they abstain from wine, but that they always be primed to pick up and move, suggesting the original Cain, who did not maintain deep ties to any specific land. So central is nomadism to the House of Rechab, and to the Kenites, that it is a value enshrined in the family name (the root *r-kh-b* means to ride!)

To be detached from land meant that the Kenite national character was fiercely independent and autonomous. They were so independent that they could even remain in close contact with two nations engaged in a deadly, endless war, drawing sustenance from both. The Kenites' constant migration thrived on regular and sustained interaction with two peoples that existed on opposite philosophical poles: Israel and Amalek.

The Kenites accompanied Amalek as readily as they supported and encouraged Israel. Jethro, symbolic of the Kenites and their relationship with Israel, was colleague with some of Israel's most hateful enemies–

> Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba says that Rabbi Simai says: Three were in Pharaoh's counsel [where Pharaoh questioned what should be done with the Jewish people]. They were Balaam, and Job, and Jethro. (*Sotah* 11a)

–yet he also visited with Moses after hearing of Israel's victory over Amalek, and advised him wisely. He might have been reluctant to join with Israel when asked, yet his descendants chose to settle alongside Israel, first in Jericho, and then near Othniel in the south. In the era of the Judges, the Kenites maintained friendly ties with the Canaanites, enemies of Israel ("*Heber the Kenite had separated from the other Kenite descendants of Hobab, the father-in-law of Moses…and there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor (of the Canaanites) and the house of Heber the Kenite")* (Judges 4:11-17), yet Yael the Kenite would ally with Israel to kill Sisera, the Canaanite general (Judges 4:18-22). The Kenites are intermingled with the Amalekites in the period of the first monarchy, but they willingly separate from them at King Saul's behest. And when Jehu seeks the loyalty of the Kenite Jonadab ben Rechab, he offers it unhesitatingly (II Kings 10:15).

The Kenites' wandering made them suitable bedfellows for Amalek, also a nomadic people.[12] But their itinerant lifestyle also served them well. By maintaining their independence and never fully assimilating into Israel's ranks, the Kenites consistently offered another voice, an important perspective that Israel could call upon when they lost their way. "Whenever things will be hidden

[12] Regarding Amalek's nomadic nature, see "Amalek," *Encyclopedia Biblica* [Hebrew], vol. 6 (Bialik Institute, 1971).

from our eyes, you will enlighten us about it,"[13] Rashi interprets Moses' plea to Jethro that he stay on and be "*our eyes*." The Kenites contributed to Israel from the uniquely unthreatening position of the foreign resident, one who does not challenge land ownership or Israelite rule, and whose cordial ties with Israel's great enemies never spills over into suspicions of dual loyalty. Clearly, their ancient affiliation with Amalek does not dampen God's admiration for the Kenites. He promises them eternity as a reward for their faithfulness to their ancestral code:

> Because you have obeyed the commandment of Jonadab your father, and you have kept all his commandments and have done according to all that he commanded you, therefore, so said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: 'There shall not be cut off from Jonadab the son of Rechab a man standing before Me for all times.' (Jeremiah 35:18-19)

What drew the Kenites to Israel, enticing them to maintain close ties, yet consistently stop short from fully assimilating? These delicate terms of engagement were first established by Jethro, who insisted on maintaining independence while still honoring and supporting the unique covenant between God and Israel. The care and closeness between God and His chosen people, first manifested in the Exodus saga and then affirmed in their victory over Amalek, was what attracted Jethro to join with Israel in the first place.[14]

Jethro may not have been present at the culmination of the Torah covenant at Mt. Sinai,[15] but he yearned for access and proximity to the Torah and its custodians:

> [Jethro's] name was Keni, for he acquired (*k-n-h*) the Torah for himself. Just as Jethro cherished the Torah, so did his descendants… for it is written, "the family of scribes who dwelt with Yabetz" (I Chronicles 2:55) – they [the Kenite scholars] left Jericho and traveled down to Yabetz, in the Judean desert that was in the Negeb of Arad, so as to learn Torah from him.[16] (*Sifrei*, Numbers 78)

The emergent pattern of the Kenites is one of a

[13] Rashi, Numbers 10:31.

[14] M. Weinberg, *Frameworks: Exodus*, 135-148.

[15] "Jethro arrived only after Matan Torah" (*Zevahim* 116a).

[16] That the Kenites settled down in the southern stretches of Eretz Yisrael is manifest in later narratives, such as I Samuel 15:6, 27:10, and 30:29. Perhaps their claim is also alluded to in the names of some of the cities granted to Judah's deep south: Kinah (Joshua 15:22), and ha-Kayin (Joshua 15:57).

nation that consistently accompanies Israel, yet retains remarkable autonomy and detachment.

They share in Israel's eternity–

> You have settled in the stronghold and citadel of Israel. You are fortunate in that you are entrenched with this power, because you will never be driven out of the world. Even if you are destined to go into exile with the Ten Tribes, you will return with the rest of the exiles" (Rashi, Numbers 24:21-22),[17]

–yet also remain linked to the wider, sometimes antagonistic, surroundings.

It is hard to miss the contemporary iteration of this pattern within the Druze people, who themselves venerate Jethro as their ancestor and prophet, and whose holiest worship compound is Kubur Nabi Shuayeb, Jethro's burial site, located in the Lower Galilee. As mentioned above, the Druze are exceptionally loyal to national authority. Yet enshrined in their social and religious structures is a strong reluctance to assimilate too deeply into their host cultures. They fiercely protect their genetic purity, and consider intermarriage a strong taboo. They guard their mysterious religion zealously, loyal to their ancestral code, just like Jonadab ben Rechab. The Druze of Israel are uninterested in converting to Judaism, yet do wish to accompany Israel as "resident aliens."[18] Many contemporary Jewish Israelis consider the Druze to be our "eyes" along this journey, providing necessary objectivity and fortifying our resolve with their loyalty to the State of Israel.[19]

Reflecting on the current situation of one of Israel's valued minorities not only engenders profound grief for the tragedy of young lives lost to Hezbollah's murderous regime, but it also encourages us to dig deeper into the Druze's national concept and to consider the surprisingly compelling parallels with the biblical Kenites. The Kenites provide a model of fealty to ancestral tradition, for how tradition can provide a baseline of identity that transcends even the connection to

[17] This echoes the divine promise made to the Rechabites (Jeremiah 35:19).

[18] In January 2004, the spiritual leader of the Druze community in Israel, Sheikh Mowafak Tarif, met with a representative of Chabad-Lubavitch to sign a declaration calling on all non-Jews in Israel to observe the Noahide laws. The mayor of the Arab city of Shefa-'Amr (Shfaram) – where Muslim, Christian, and Druze communities live side-by-side – also signed the document. ("Druze Religious Leader Commits to Noachide Seven Laws," Israel National News, January 18, 2004. https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/56379).

[19] Beit Jann Mayor Radi Najm highlighted the specific role that the Druze might play in this current war when he suggested that "We can be a bridge between the Israelis and the Palestinians. We know both communities and understand the cultures and languages." Taylor Luck, "Why Oct. 7 Has Bound Israeli Jews and Druze Even More Tightly," *Christian Science Monitor* (January 31 2024).

the land. What is more, the Kenites provide a model of how Israel can connect to others, expanding beyond the boundaries of their own identity, saving them from the very-present dangers of narrow parochialism. What the Kenites symbolize – tradition, connection, and also ultimately independence from other peoples – is shared by their modern-day conceptual iteration, the Druze. And the age-old attachment between our peoples is as strong, and complicated, as ever.

Rosh HaShana and God's Battle For Compassion

Akiva ecently received his rabbinic ordination from Yeshivat Hadar.

Editor's Note: This piece was originally published in September 2018.

***U**-netaneh Tokef*, one of the most memorable pieces of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, imagines the central drama of the day as a trial in which humanity is called to account before God, as the angels in the divine retinue declare, this day is "the day of judgment" [*yom ha-din*]. Often when we reflect on the significance of Rosh Hashanah as a day of judgment, we consider what it will mean for us to be judged: we engage in protracted self-reflection and a sober consideration of our shameful misdeeds. We try to embody sincere remorse and attempt to turn toward a path of righteousness. Our attention is focused on the tragedy of human sinfulness and the redemptive possibility of repentance [*teshuvah*].

Less often do we consider what it will mean for God to judge us. Yet, thinking through God's relationship with judgment may fruitfully complicate our picture of Rosh Hashanah as a cosmic trial of humanity. What's more, attending to God's part in the drama of judgment may be valuable in achieving a different understanding of the ritual fabric of the day. To engage in this theological work, we will turn to the corpus of rabbinic literature and consider the striking ways in which our sages imagined God's relationship with judgment.

God's Distinctive Strength: The Quality of Compassion

We should begin by noting the following: for the sages, God's strength, prowess, and power is most on display not in acts of stern judgment but in acts of tender compassion. This idea is explored in a moving *midrash* from the *Sifre* on Numbers. The textual locus for this *midrash* is the verses in Numbers in which Moses is told to gaze out over the land of Israel before meeting his end at its border. Drawing on the parallel account found in the book of Deuteronomy, the sages direct our attention to the impassioned plea for entrance into the land offered by Moses at this juncture:

> And I pleaded with YHVH at that time, saying, 'My Master, YHVH, You Yourself have begun to show Your servant Your greatness and Your powerful hand, for what god is there in the heavens and on the earth who could do like Your deeds

> and like Your might? Let me, pray, cross over that I may see the goodly land which is across the Jordan, this goodly high country and the Lebanon. (Deuteronomy 3:24–25)

In the course of his plea, Moses recollects God's great and unparalleled strength, which God has only begun to reveal. A plain-sense reading of these verses would understand the strength in question as something like physical might and dominance – the kind of physical might and dominance that was on display in God's liberation of Israel from Egypt. Indeed, throughout the book of Deuteronomy the "powerful hand" [*yadkha ha-hazakah*] of God is tied to the moment of the exodus and the miraculous, thundering power with which God punished the Egyptians and saved Israel. This point also helps make sense of the connection between Moses's reference to God's strength and his prayer for entrance into the land: He has only just begun to bear witness to God's might and strength through the punishment of Egypt and the conquest of the lands east of the Jordan. Thus, he prays for the allowance to see more of this might and strength as the people enter the land and conquer its inhabitants with the aid of God's strong arm.

Yet for the sages, the strength at stake in this passage is not that of overpowering might but overpowering compassion manifested in forgiveness and generosity. The *midrash* reads as follows:

Another interpretation: *You have begun* [*hahilota*] (Deuteronomy 3:24) – You have profaned [*hehaltah*] the vow. You wrote in the Torah, *Whoever sacrifices to a god* [*other than YHVH alone shall be proscribed*] (Exodus 22:19), and your children worshipped foreign worship, and I requested for them compassion and you forgave – You have broken the vow.

Your greatness (Deuteronomy 3:24) – this is the quality of your goodness, as it is said, *And now, let the strength of my lord be great* (Numbers 14:17).

And your hand (Deuteronomy 3:24) – this is your right hand, which is extended to all those who come through the world, as it is said, *your right hand, YHVH, glorious in strength* (Exodus 15:6), and it says, *but your right hand, your arm, and the glow of your face* (Psalms 44:4), and it says, *By Myself have I sworn, from My mouth has issued righteousness* [*tzedakah*]*, a word that shall not turn back* (Isaiah 45:23).

The powerful (Deuteronomy 3:24) – For you subdue [*kovesh*] with

compassion your quality of judgment, as it is said, *Who is a God like You, forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression* (Micah 7:18), and it says, *He will return, he will have compassion on us, he will subdue* [*yikhbosh*] *our sins, You will keep faith with Jacob* (Micah 7:19–20).

For what god is there in the heavens and on the earth (Deuteronomy 3:24) – For unlike the way of flesh and blood is the way of the Omnipresent. The way of flesh and blood: the one greater than his friend nullifies the decree of his friend, but you – who can withhold you [from doing as you please]? And so it says, *He is one, who can hold him back?* (Job 23:13). R. Yehudah b. Bava says: A parable – to one who has been consigned to the documents of the kingdom. Even were he to give a lot of money, it cannot be overturned. But you say, "Do *teshuvah*, and I will accept [it/you], as it is said, *I wipe away your sins like a cloud, your transgressions like mist* (Isaiah 44:22).

The text begins with a playful revocalization of Moses's opening words that transforms "You have begun [*hahilota*]" into "You have broken [*hehalta*] the vow." In so doing, the sages shift our attention from the scene of the exodus suggested by the plain sense of the verses to the scene of the golden calf, in which God broke His vow to punish those who worship other gods. In that moment of Israel's profound failure, God's strength manifested itself not through physical might but through forgiveness and compassion. What's more, in speaking of God breaking the vow, the text implicitly rejects another pervasive conception of divine power and strength – namely, that divine power rests in stern and difficult judgment. It is not uncommon to hear compassion and forgiveness referred to as a kind of feebleness in contrast to the strength at work in administering justice even when it is difficult or tragic. The sages carefully avoid such a perspective and assert that divine strength lies not in holding to a vow even when it is challenging but in breaking a vow for the sake of compassion and forgiveness.

The themes introduced in this first part of the *midrash* are explored as the *midrash* continues. First, God's greatness is translated into God's goodness through the invocation of a verse tied to another scene of divine forgiveness and compassion – namely, the scene in the aftermath of the sin of the spies. Second, the hand of God, rather than extended against the enemies of Israel in a gesture of physical might is extended in a gesture of compassionate generosity. Indeed, verses tying the hand of God to the destruction and conquest of Egypt and other nations are reread in light of this rabbinic commitment to rendering divine strength as compassion. Third, God's power is understood as His compassion

overcoming and subduing His quality of judgment. In the final piece of the *midrash*, we are reminded that God, unlike earthly kings, can break vows and overturn decrees in displays of compassionate forgiveness. Furthermore, when God does vow, it is to bind Himself in commitment to the kindness of *tzedakah*, as noted in the verse from Isaiah quoted by the *midrash*: "By Myself have I sworn, from My mouth has issued righteousness [*tzedakah*], a word that shall not turn back" (Isaiah 45:23). There is none who can withhold or nullify His decrees of compassion, generosity, forgiveness, and kindness.

God, Anger, and Judgment: The Divine Struggle to be Compassionate

Thus, what constitutes divine strength, what makes God unique and incomparable, is a capacity for compassion. This compassion sits in an uncomfortable tension with the rage that lights God against the enemies of Israel and the stern judgment that calls for unmitigated punishment. Yet it is precisely this tension that marks divine compassion as a strength. For it is only in mightily subduing a predilection for unmitigated judgment that God's compassion emerges victorious. This is the meaning of the striking phrase found in our *midrash*, "For you subdue [*kovesh*] with compassion your quality of judgment." There is struggle and conquest involved in the victory of compassion over divine judgment. The phrase calls to mind a teaching found in *Mishnah Avot* 4:1: "Ben Zoma says… Who is mighty? The one who subdues [*kovesh*] his impulse, as it is said, *one slow to anger is better than a mighty person and one who rules his spirit than the conqueror of a city* (Proverbs 15:16)." Just as human might emerges in the difficult and effortful conquest of our impulse toward wickedness, divine might emerges in the difficult and effortful conquest of God's impulse toward judgment and anger.

This notion that God is locked in a fierce struggle with His tendency toward judgment and anger and is striving mightily to act compassionately with His creatures comes to the fore in a beautiful text from *Berakhot* 7a:

> R. Yoḥanan said in the name of R. Yosi: From where [do we know] that the Holy Blessed One prays? As it is said, *I will bring them to the mount of my sacredness, and let them rejoice in the house of my prayer* (Isaiah 56:7) – 'their prayer' is not said, rather *my prayer*. From here [we know] that the Holy Blessed One prays. What does he pray? R. Zutra b. Tuviah said that Rav said: May it be my will that my compassion subdue my anger, and my compassion prevail over my [other] qualities, and I will behave with my children with my quality of compassion, and I will enter before them short of the line of the law.

Critically, God's will for compassion rather than anger or judgment is couched in the language of prayer. To pray for something is in some ways to admit that achieving that something lies beyond the ken of one's intentional capabilities. There is a

measure of hope in prayer that signals a desire that may go unfulfilled. In this case, God's prayer for compassion signals the degree to which victory against judgment and anger is not a forgone conclusion and the prevailing of compassion is something that will require effort and struggle.

This struggle is powerfully dramatized by the sages in a number of texts that reimagine God's anger and judgment as independent personified characters. The retributive aspects of God's nature become angels who can preclude Him from enacting His will and are often at cross-purposes with this compassionate God. Thus, in the case of divine anger we encounter the following passage from *Yerushalmi Ta'anit* 2:1:

> devastation. I will send them a ways away so that if Israel angers me, before I have chance to send for them and bring them, Israel will do *teshuvah* and I will accept their *teshuvah*." This is that which is written, *They come from a distant land, from the edge of the sky* [*YHVH and the weapons of his wrath–to ravage all the earth*] (Isaiah 13:5). R. Yitzḥak said: And what's more, he locked the door on them. This is that which is written, *YHVH has opened his armory and brought out the weapons of his wrath* (Jeremiah 50:25) …
>
> R. Levi said: What is the meaning of *erekh 'apayim*? Distancing anger. [This is compared] to a king who had two tough legions. The king said, "If [the legions] dwell with me in the province, when the citizens of the province anger me, [the legions] will make a stand against [the citizens]. Instead, I will send them off a ways away so that if the citizens of the province anger me, before I have a chance to send after [the legions], the citizens of the province will appease me and I will accept their appeasement." Similarly, the Holy Blessed One said, "*Af* and *Hemah* are angels of

Af and *hemah*, terms often used in the Bible to describe God's anger, are here transformed into "angels of devastation" that operate almost independently of God. In the *mashal*, they are compared to two military legions who would loose devastation on the citizenry at the slightest sign of the king's anger. It appears almost as though the king would be unable to hold them back from their rampage once they set forth against the people. This frightening independence is confirmed in the *nimshal*, wherein God sees a need not only to send them far away but also to lock them up. If they are allowed to roam free, who knows what havoc they might wreak. One senses in this text the precariousness of God's relationship with anger and wrath. At the same time, the sages make clear the profound efforts God makes to

favor compassion and forgiveness.

Middat hadin, or "the quality of judgment," also becomes an autonomous character in the rabbinic imagination. Thus, in *Pesaḥim* 119a we read:

> R. Kahana in the name of R. Yishma'el b. R. Yose said that R. Shim'on b. Lakish in the name of R. Yehudah Nesi'ah said: What is the meaning of that which is written, *and they had the hands of a man under their wings* (Ezekiel 1:8)? 'His hand' is written. This is the hand of the Holy Blessed One that is spread under the wings of the *Ḥayyot* [i.e. angels] in order to accept those who do *teshuvah* from the grips of *middat hadin*.

In this dramatic scene, God spreads His hand beneath the wings of the angels so as to collect up the remorseful and repentant and protect them from falling into the hands of the less than sympathetic *middat hadin*. One is given to imagine that were these people to fall into the grips of *middat hadin*, God would be powerless to retrieve them or at the very least would need to valiantly struggle for their release. In the cosmic drama, *middat hadin* is God's adversary, attempting to uphold the strict letter of judgment while God vies for the victory of compassion and forgiveness. The sages make this point clear in several texts that situate this struggle at various moments in our mythic-history. Thus, we are told that God constructed a sort of tunnel in the firmament so as to sneak Menasheh – the repentant wicked king of Yehudah – past *middat hadin,* who would surely have prevented his acceptance in heaven (*Sanhedrin* 103a). Similarly, when creating humankind, God disclosed to the ministering angels only that righteous people would emerge from Adam. God chose to conceal the future reality of wicked people, precisely because He was certain that had *middat hadin* known, it would have prevented the creation of humanity (*Bereishit Rabbah* 8:4). *Middat hadin* was also critical in delaying and precluding the exodus from Egypt. Witnessing the utter depravity of captive Israel who had adopted the customs and practices of the Egyptians, *middat hadin* could not allow for their liberation. Only on the strength of God's prior commitment and oath to redeem Israel was God able to defeat the uncompromising will of *middat hadin* (*Vayikra Rabbah* 23:2).

These texts are theologically audacious and undoubtedly jarring to ears accustomed to the staid contours of a Maimonidean God. God is a vulnerable, struggling God, fearful of the most dangerous and powerful members of the divine family – anger and judgment – and intent on defeating them through precautionary measures, wily maneuvers, and whatever resources are available. As we briefly alluded to earlier, this picture departs in certain ways from that painted by *Sifre Bemidbar* and *Berakhot*. In those texts, the struggle for compassion is rendered internal to God's person. Judgment and anger and compassion compete for attention in the divine psyche and God struggles mightily for the victory of His more compassionate side. Here, by contrast,

judgment and anger are reified and externalized as members of the angelic retinue. It is worth pausing to consider how this impacts the drama. In externalizing anger and judgment, God is rendered wholly and incorruptibly compassionate rather than divided against Himself. This constitutes a certain sacrifice in divine psychological complexity. However, this sacrifice allows for richer imaginative possibilities when it comes to considering how God fights against judgment and anger for the victory of compassion – bolting the door against them, concealing facts from them, tunneling beneath them, etc. I don't wish to advocate for one of these images to the exclusion of the other. Each of these images captures something about the character of God's struggle with judgment and anger, and it will only be through the cumulative effect of seeing this struggle in multiple successive perspectives that we will appreciate its full-bodied richness.

"The Day of Judgment"? A Reconsideration

With this consideration of God's relationship to judgment in mind, we can now turn to consider the day of Rosh Hashanah and how it fits into this broader narrative. In *Vayikra Rabbah* 29:3, we encounter the following passage:

> Yehudah b. Naḥmani in the name of R. Shim'on b. Laqish opened: *God ascends amidst acclamation* [*teru'ah*]*; YHVH, to the blasts of the shofar* (Psalms 47:6). When the Holy Blessed One ascends to sit on the throne of judgement on Rosh Hashanah, he ascends for judgement. This is that which is written, *God* [*Elohim*] *ascends amidst acclamation* [*teru'ah*]. And once Israel take their *shofarot* and blow them, immediately *YHVH, to the blasts of the shofar*. What does the Holy Blessed One do? He rises from the throne of judgement and sits on the throne of compassion, and is filled with compassion for them and transforms the quality of justice into the quality of compassion for them. When? On Rosh Hashanah, in the seventh month on the first of the month.

In the rabbinic imagination, the names of God are to be associated with distinctive traits (see for example, *Sifre Devarim* 26). Thus, Elohim signifies God's quality of judgment while YHVH signifies God's quality of compassion. Capitalizing on this rabbinic trope, our *midrash* imagines the shift in divine epithets found in the Psalmic verse to signify a shift in God's character on the day of Rosh Hashanah. While God initially ascends the throne of judgment, the blasts of the *shofar* sounded by Israel move God to abandon the seat of judgment for that of compassion. This idea is one worth examining more closely.

First, this text might push us to reconsider the aptness of *yom ha-din* or "the day of judgment" as a name for Rosh Hashanah. If we take this text seriously, the day is less one of judgment and more one of the abandonment of judgment for the sake of compassion. It is part and parcel of the

story of God's struggle against the potent force of strict judgment. The day is one on which the singular strength of God is on display, as God succeeds in conquering and subduing God's quality of judgment with compassion. In a certain sense, we might even take the commandment issued by God for Israel to sound the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah as a prophylactic measure against *middat hadin*. God knows that the sound of the *shofar*'s blast will move Him to remember His deepest commitments, His truest self, and His love and compassion for Israel. For this reason, God assigns this tasks to Israel on the day He has set aside for judgment.

If we wish to deepen our appreciation of *Vayikra Rabbah*'s claim, we might turn to Maimonides' articulation of the purpose of the *shofar*. In *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:4, Maimonides writes as follows:

> Even though the sounding the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is a decree of the text, there is a hint for it. That is to say, "Wake up, sleepers, from your sleep and comatose from your comas, and return in *teshuvah* and remember your creator. Those who forget the truth through time's hollow things and wile away all their years with hollowness and emptiness that won't be of use and won't save, look to your souls and improve your ways and your deeds. And each one of you, abandon his wicked way and his thoughts, which are not good."

For Maimonides, the *shofar* is a piercing cry that wakes us from our slumbering attitude. In a world where we find ourselves forgetful of what is important, the sound of the *shofar* shocks us back into an awareness of our deepest commitments and moves us to abandon the hollow and useless things in life in favor of righteousness. In R. Yitzhak Hutner's rendering of this idea, "the *shofar* can bring to life the traces and transform something's trace or impression into its embodied fullness" (*Pahad Yitzhak*, *Rosh Hashanah* 20). For both Maimonides and R. Hutner, hearing the *shofar* is an activity designed for the benefit of human beings. However for *Vayikra Rabbah*, it would seem that hearing the *shofar* is something that also benefits God. If the *shofar* has the capacity to wake *us* from our slumber and restore vitality to our sedimented commitments, perhaps it has the same capacity to do so for God. Parallel to Maimonides' "Wake up, sleepers" might be the Psalmist's cry: "Rise, why do you sleep, lord?" (Psalms 44:24). God calls on us to sound the *shofar* to wake Him from His slumber and transform the trace of reserve compassion into its embodied fullness.

The Sound of the Shofar and the Tragic Costs of Judgment

But what is it about the sound of the *shofar* that so moves God to abandon judgment and return to His deep and fundamental commitment to compassion and forgiveness? We might find the

beginnings of an answer through reflecting on the story of the binding of Isaac and its aftermath, a story we in fact read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. In considering what motivated God to test Abraham with the sacrifice of his child, the late midrashic collection, *Yalkut Shim'oni*, imagines the following:

> Another interpretation: [This is compared] to a king who had a beloved [friend] who was poor. The king said to him, "It is on me to make you wealthy," and he gave him money with which to do business. After a time, he [i.e. the poor friend] entered the palace. They said, "For what reason is this one entering?" The king said to them, "Because he is my faithful beloved [friend]." They said to him, "If so, tell him to return your money." Immediately, the king said to him, "Return to me that which I gave you." He did not withhold, and the members of the palace were embarrassed, and the king swore to grant him more wealth. The Holy Blessed One said to the ministering angels, "Had I listened to you when you said, *what is a human being, that you are mindful of him* (Psalms 8:5), could there have been Abraham, who glorifies me in my world?!" *Middat ha-din* said before the Holy Blessed One, "all of the trials with which you tested him involved his money and property. Try him through his body." He said to him, "He should sacrifice his son before you." Immediately, "He [i.e. God] said to him [i.e. Abraham], *take your son* (Genesis 22:2). (*Yalkut Shim'oni*, *Vayera*)

In the eyes of this *midrash*, God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac was issued at the prodding of *middat ha-din*. Skeptical of the fortitude and authenticity of Abraham's commitment to God, *middat ha-din* asks God to *truly* test Abraham through his flesh and blood rather than through his material possessions by asking him to sacrifice his son. The story of the binding of Isaac is thus cast as a concession of God to the skepticism of *middat ha-din*, the quality of judgment. Unobscured by the love God feels toward Abraham, *middat ha-din* coldly assesses the situation and desires a strict test of Abraham's righteousness.

This *midrash* is particularly striking as it evokes and plays with another narrative found in the Biblical canon – namely, the story of God's test of Job (Job 1–2). In the beginning of the book of Job, God boasts of Job's righteousness, prompting the Adversary or '*ha-satan*' to question the authenticity of Job's commitment. Like the attendants to the king in the *mashal* of our passage, the Adversary suggests that robbing Job of the material wealth God has showered upon him will test the strength of Job's piety. When this fails, the Adversary responds by discounting the previous test as insufficient. A true test of Job's

piety will come when his body and flesh are inflicted rather than merely his wealth. This again is echoed in the comments of *middat ha-din*, who insists God try Abraham "through his body" [*be-gufo*]. The implication of this parallel is hard to ignore. By drawing on the narrative framework of the book of Job, the *midrash* in *Yalkut Shim'oni* casts *middat ha-din* in the role of satanic adversary to God. This text would then continue the trend we have seen of depicting *middat ha-din* in a tense and difficult struggle with God. Yet remarkably, if *middat ha-din* is the satanic adversary to God, then its suggestion of binding Isaac to the altar would seem to emerge in a strikingly negative light.

What then is the source of this ambivalence about testing Abraham through the sacrifice of his son? And what does all of this have to do with the sound of the *shofar*? One possible answer emerges from a *midrash* that first appears in *Vayikra Rabbah* 20:2:

> He took Isaac his son and led him up mountains and down hills. He took him up on one of the mountains, built an altar, arranged the wood, prepared the altar pile, and took the knife to slay him. Had [God] not called upon him from the heavens and said, *Do not reach out your hand* (Genesis 22:12), Isaac would have already been slain. Know that this is so, for Isaac returned to his mother and she said to him, "Where have you been, my son?" And he said to her, "My father took me and led me up mountains and down hills." And she said, "Woe for the son of a hapless woman! Had it not been for an angel from the heavens, you would have already been slain!" He said to her, "Yes." At that moment, she uttered six cries, corresponding to the six blasts of the *shofar*. They said, "she had scarcely finished speaking when she died." This is that which is written, *And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her* (Genesis 23:2). Where did he come from? R. Yehudah b. R. Simon said: He came from Mount Moriah.

For this *midrash*, the binding of Isaac to the altar and his near-sacrifice had tragic consequences in the form of the death of his mother, Sarah. What's more, this *midrash* explicitly ties the pained cries of Sarah to the piercing sound of the *shofar*. If we consider this text together with our passage from *Yalkut Shim'oni,* what emerges is a searing indictment of *middat ha-din*. Strict judgment leaves casualties of pain, tragedy, and death in its wake, and it is for this reason that it should be seen as an unsympathetic, almost satanic adversary to which God sadly succumbed in asking Abraham to sacrifice his son. When administering strict judgment, one may become so myopically focused on the subject at hand that the unintended and violent consequences of rendering a certain verdict go unnoticed. *Middat*

ha-din fails to note the mothers who suffer pangs of sorrow at the loss of children taken in the name of judgment and justice. Sounding the *shofar* recalls God to the moment of Sarah's tragic death and awakens God to the reality of *middat ha-din*'s violence and its many casualties. God cannot help but return to Himself, to His deepest commitments, and subdue the impulse toward judgment in the calming waters of compassion and forgiveness.