LEHRHAUS Over Shabbat

Korah

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How To Cleanse A Sanctuary

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I

Every time I go to *shul*, I bow to objects I consider to be idols.

Like Jeroboam's golden calves, there are two of them, except these are both in the same locale. They are set up right next to the *aron kodesh*, so that there is no good way to avoid bowing towards them, to avoid looking at them, or to pretend they aren't there.

Like a Bizarro version of the seventh martyred son who refused to pick up the pagan tyrant's ring, knowing it was a ploy to have him also bow to an idol, I bow towards the *aron* and the objects I view as idols each and every time, unable to stop myself even though I know it's wrong.

It's possible to avoid looking at both of them, but at least one is always visible.

As a child, I noticed that the closer I got to the Kotel, the less I could see the Dome of the Rock. The closer I got to the locus of holiness, the less the foreign worship could be perceived. Pray at the Kotel and you can't even see the al-Aqsa compound, even though it's **right there** and you're facing it.

In the sanctuary of my *shul*, there is no relief. No matter where I sit, I see the intruding symbols.

It doesn't have to be this way.

II

The practice of situating the local national flag and Israeli flag on either side of the *aron kodesh* is a little over 100 years old in popularity. It is largely an American (and Canadian, to some extent) phenomenon. As a comparison: Buenos Aires, Argentina, home to over 175,000 Jews of various denominations, has dozens of *shuls* and *batei midrash*, and almost all of them have sanctuary and *aron kodesh* photos easily viewable online. I went through the photos. I can report that, as far as this photographic evidence can attest in this context, the *shuls* in Buenos Aires feature neither the Argentinian nor the Israeli flag on display within the prayer space. Stars of David yes, and plenty of them – but none in blue on white. I did the same checking with respect to a long list of synagogues in Australia. No flags in sanctuaries were in evidence as far as I was able to research (though I am told there are a few examples without photos online). The same is true for most *shuls* in the U.K. with interior photos available.[1]|

The history of this practice has been discussed in popular reporting in recent years. Josefin Dolsten wrote a piece for *JTA* in 2018 that was picked up by *The Times of Israel* and other outlets, which explains the historical background to the presence of dual flags in *shul*, but does not address the issue of placement of the flags alongside the *aron kodesh* as compared to anywhere else in the *shul* building.[2]

Dolsten explains that the presence of flags in *shuls* arose from two different situations and started with two different flags. On the one hand, some synagogues and churches in America began hanging banners known as "service flags" during World War I, honoring parishioners' family members who were serving, or had served, in the military effort. This led to a general comfort with the presence of patriotic banners in *shul* in many places, and through the 1920s and 30s that trend blossomed into the display of the actual American flag in sanctuaries. It is not hard to understand why the flag of Israel would be set up beside the American one once the modern State of Israel was founded.

On the other hand, many *shuls* came to have American flags on display only because they first determined that they wanted to display Zionist (after 1917) or Israeli (after 1948) flags, and felt

[1] United Synagogue in the St. John's Wood district of London has had a Union Jack and Israeli flag on display since at least the end of 2023, but didn't have them up in pictures from 2015. Central Synagogue on Great Portland Street in London also displays those two flags. There may be other examples.

[2] The article refers to flags flanking the *bimah*, but is illustrated with a 1924 photo of a pulpit and *aron kodesh*. The difference between *bimah* flags and *aron kodesh* flags is marginal in my eyes, with the key issue here being their presence in the sanctuary such that praying people cannot avoid facing them.

that it would be a bad look to fly only that flag and not also the flag of their own country of residence.

In both cases, however, even where *shuls* debated whether or not to display flags, it does seem that, once the decision was reached to display, there was generally no hesitation about displaying them in the sanctuary itself (as opposed to elsewhere in the building).

III

This matter has appeared before in the pages of *The Lehrhaus* as well. R. Moshe Kurtz authored a piece in 2022 asking, "Do National Flags Belong in Our Houses of Worship?," in which he presents a more extensive and more rabbinical-analysis-focused picture. The issue of Israel's founding as a secular state is unpacked; the role of flags as divine symbols is brought into the picture. It is overall a more detailed and research-heavy piece of commentary than this present opinion piece aims to be.

I will briefly note some pertinent portions of R. Kurtz's discussion. First of all, he brings up a (differently reasoned) version of the viewpoint to which I personally subscribe, namely, that there is a concern of idolatry when it comes to placing flags in worship spaces.[3] Mention is made of R. Mordechai Savitsky's contention that "the Israeli flag represents a form of *avodah zarah*." (The opposing viewpoints which R. Kurtz cites include R. Menashe Klein, who says it's heresy but not idolatry, and R. Moshe Feinstein, who says it's vanity and silliness but not idolatry.) It is noted further that the American flag has, in some circles, been afforded "near deification."

R. Kurtz contextualizes this within a broader religious framework, focusing on Christian commentators who have opposed American flag displays in their own sanctuaries, invoking terms such as idolatry and false worship. In remarking on the similar attitude expressed by R. Hillel Posek, R. Kurtz notes with an air of equanimity that while "most people are likely not directing their prayers" to the American or Israeli flags themselves, "the optics convey a certain set of values that some rabbinic authorities find questionable."

R. Kurtz's article is valuable for his framing of the factor of placement in his discussion: "While [one] may grant that national flags do not carry the problematic associations of another religion, displaying them in the sanctuary, especially next to the ark, risks conveying an erroneous message. … The Israeli or American flag may not be inherently idolatrous in nature, [but] placing them next to the holy ark might come uncomfortably close to conveying such a message. Appreciation

[3] My take on this concern is a broader halakhic objection, and applies to all symbols of nationalism imbued by their adherents with inappropriate sanctity; in the case of R. Kurtz's representative cited opinion, it is a more focused halakhic objection deriving from the notion that worshipers who revere the Israeli flag *in particular* may be venerating the secular State of Israel or the institution of Zionism rather than, as is proper, worshiping God. (For the record, it is not my goal here to convince readers that flags are idols. Let it suffice that they bother some of us.)

for Israel and America should be encouraged, but… the sanctuary may not be the right place to express [it] – for it is solely the house of God….

[O]ne can maintain a strong appreciation for their country while still believing that the sanctuary is not the most appropriate place for such demonstrations."

Another passage potentially addresses those of us to whom flags next to the *aron kodesh* are an automatic source of distress and distraction: "*Shulhan Arukh* is generally concerned with anything that presents a distraction during prayers, and R. [Aharon Simcha] Blumenthal believes that flags would qualify as such." However, the ultimate underlying principle of that concern is the distraction that any illustrated, decorated, or ornamental object may cause – not the distraction that a flag per se, as an unwelcome object in the prayer space, may cause. Thus, R. Kurtz's remark, that "some of the other ornaments" in synagogue sanctuaries might be just as distracting but receive less scrutiny than flags, does not really express anything useful or compelling in this specific context. To many of us, one or both of these flags present(s) a particularly persistent and pointed form of distraction, whether displayed with great ornamentation or not.

R. Kurtz repeatedly displays acute awareness of the distinctions between "in the synagogue," "in the sanctuary itself," and "right next to the ark" in his discussion:

"...whether the synagogue, **particularly its sanctuary**, serves as the appropriate place…"

"...it is forbidden to hang [a mat with an image of scales] in the synagogue – **certainly next to the side of the sanctuary**…" [quotation from Rosh]

"...displaying them in the sanctuary, **especially next to the ark**, risks conveying an erroneous message…"

However, he also elides this distinction in some places, using the catchall phrase "the synagogue and its sanctuary."

R. Kurtz clearly believes that it is more appropriate, if flags are to be displayed, to situate them somewhere outside of the sanctuary. However, he does not discuss specific alternate options for the placement of flags within a *shul* building outside the sanctuary itself.

IV

R. Moshe Feinstein z"l (*Iggerot Moshe* OH 1:46), briefly cited in R. Kurtz's piece, discusses the presence of flags in *shul*. Though he believes flags have no place in *shul*, he does not share my conviction that flags are idols and that nationalist chauvinism is a form of false religion, and in fact he ultimately advises that flags that are already set

up in synagogue buildings can surely stay if removing them would cause communal rupture and discord. But what interests me, again, is how he speaks about the placement of these flags during his explanation of his rationale.

> Even if it is not appropriate to bring flags into *shul*, which is a holy place – and certainly flags should not be left in *shul* in a permanent fashion, **even the more so not next to the *aron kodesh*** – it is not relevant to speak of a true prohibition that is implicated here, rather it is [just] a worthless and silly thing to do. And if it is possible, in a peaceful way, to remove them from the *shul*, this would be a good thing to do. But to create controversy in order to remove the flags is forbidden.[4]

For R. Feinstein, the primary calculus is weighing a very real possibility of communal disunity against the possibility of doing something simply worthless and inappropriate that doesn't actually violate *halakhah*. He strongly believes that one ought to tolerate the (explicitly stated to be inappropriate) presence of flags in *shul* for the sake of maintaining harmony within a community.

R. Feinstein says that those who would break off and make a new *minyan* rather than pray at the *shul* with flags "are not acting appropriately, and it is merely a matter of political division that comes from the power of Satan." The flags can stay, but the important solidarity is not the *tzibbur* coalescing around national pride in America or Israel; the important solidarity is the *tzibbur* remaining a *tzibbur* for prayer.

R. Feinstein brings the issue of placement to bear, if only tangentially to his longer argumentation. He stresses that, as a matter of principle, flags inherently have no place in *shul* (like any other secular symbol[5]), not just in general, but especially when they are permanently placed, and ***especially*** when they are set up flanking the *aron kodesh*, towards which prayers and bowing are directed.

V

Some people reading this will have already dismissed me as *pasul le-eidut*, unfit to speak impartially, on the matter of flags. It is a matter of some public record that I personally believe

[4] This translation was done by R. David Wolkenfeld for his Sefaria sheet and lecture entitled "Religion and Nationalism Points of Conflict: Flags in Shul." I am very grateful for this translation. I made minor edits for flow. The entire passage is worth reading beyond what I have excerpted here.

[5] That R. Feinstein objects to flags as secular rather than religiously-charged objects is clear from remarks he makes in the course of talking through the issue: "[A]t the heart of the matter it is not clear what prohibition is truly entailed in setting up flags, for, after all, there is no prohibition against bringing secular items, even those that have no purpose, into a *shul*." "[T]hose who made the flag into the sign of the State of Israel… did not intend it to be something holy… and it is known to everyone that they made the flag into a mere symbol like any other non-sacred thing."

national flags are inherently symbols of division, and that I would be glad to see the day when they are all gone forever. This is, of course, a somewhat hyperbolic way of expressing a disdain for hypernationalism in general, and a deep frustration at the boundaries that divide human beings into "usses" and "thems." I do subscribe to the view that nationalist chauvinism is a form of false religion, with flags as its various convenient *teraphim*, household idols. The U.S. Flag Code states that the American flag is "itself considered a living thing" (4 U.S.C. § 8(j)), which is an obscene concept vis-a-vis the actual value of actual living people, created in the image of God, who regularly die just because someone else had a different flag. I do, in fact, believe that flags *themselves* are symbols of the political division that comes from the power of Satan.

(You can understand why these objects would present a bitter distraction to me, even if they are not idols per se in the consensus view of the major *posekim*. Hopefully you can also infer that it provokes discomfort for those with a similar but much less extreme version of my attitude towards nationalism and national-symbol veneration. Whether we view flags as ideologically repellent idols or just as intruding secular objects, we don't want to feel those negative feelings when praying or learning in *shul*.)

So it may surprise you that what I'm arguing for here is *not* the removal of flags from synagogues – against my own inner voice, I will join with the *tzibbur* and stipulate their presence. Rather, I am arguing passionately in favor of that which R. Kurtz more gently endorses, and which R. Feinstein urges, if it will not cause communal rupture: that the flags we display in our synagogues should not be visible to people praying in the sanctuary and should absolutely not be permanently set up flanking the *aron kodesh* towards which we pray and bow. **Keep the flags, but move them.**

I would argue that the most useful way to display flags on *shul* premises would be to hang them either outside or in public-facing windows (some congregations already do this!). If we as a community want to show support for Israel and America, then we should be showing it to the world – not facing ourselves with it in our prayer spaces. Indeed, many *shuls* already hang Israeli flags in one window of the building, and plenty of *shuls* displayed American flags in one window in the years following the 9/11 attacks.

Another option would be to display the flags in front halls, lobbies, social event spaces, and other non-sanctuary rooms (some *shuls* already do this, as well). I'm not asking congregations to hide their flags away in coatrooms; I'm just saying that the flags don't belong inside the prayer space. The average *shul* is not a one-room *shtiebel*[6] – there ought to be no problem finding another place to

[6] And in a one-room *shtiebel*, the community can place them against the wall opposite the *aron kodesh*, so that the people praying do not face them during services.

situate these symbols. *Shuls* could even display them right outside the sanctuary entrances in designated places of honor, perhaps even dedicated in someone's honor or memory.[7]

VI

When I tried to put myself in the headspace of those who feel about flags the opposite of how I feel, I still could not think of a compelling logic one of them would advance to argue that no, the **only** proper place for these flags is *davka* in the sanctuary right next to the *aron kodesh*, and that anywhere else in the *shul* building would be an unacceptable downgrade. Perhaps they would believe it is now some sort of *minhag*, a practice with a formal protocol? 'The *ner tamid* goes above the *aron*, and the flags have to go on either side of it; that's the rule.'

I hope not.

The fact is, there is no compelling reason to situate national flags beside the *aron kodesh* or *bimah*, or have them in the prayer space at all, and there are legitimate objections to this display choice well-attested.

And the fact is that there are more venerable banners and slogans that we display in our sanctuaries that are inherently appropriate and already occupy the space we face, namely, the *parokhet* curtains on our arks and the words we embroider upon them:

"Know before Whom you stand." "I have set God before me always." "Open the gates of heaven to our prayers."

"God's Torah is perfect." "Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace." "It is a tree of life for those who cling to it."

[7] An interesting case study is Temple Israel in Dayton, Ohio. This Reform congregation began displaying the American and Israeli flags in its lobby in 2004, and almost immediately one of its members, a veteran of the Marines, began petitioning to have the flags moved inside the sanctuary, specifically onto the *bimah* itself. The congregation voted down these requests three times: in 2004, 2007, and 2017 (in the latter case, the petition asked for the flags to be next to the *bimah*, not on it). Finally, in 2019, a fourth vote saw the congregation agree to move the flags from the lobby into the sanctuary. I obviously believe that this congregation had things right the first three times.

Another case worth mentioning is the Central Synagogue in New York. Following the return of the last of the October 7 hostages, R. Angela Buchdahl announced that the Israeli flag that had been on the *bimah* at Central Synagogue since the attacks would be moved off the *bimah*. It had been displayed on an empty chair representing those who were not yet recovered. However, rather than move the flag to a display in the lobby or another place in the *shul* building, Buchdahl chose to have the flag retired from display by being folded up and placed **in the *aron kodesh* itself**.

While I appreciate that this instance is not quite the typical case of a national flag in a *shul*, it bothers me to think of a flag sitting alongside Torah scrolls as a co-resident of an *aron kodesh*.

(I freely admit that I do not come from a Reform background; a scholar of sociology and/or religion may be better situated to unpack the range of different denominational ideas on the scope of the role of an *aron kodesh*.)

"They shall make ***for Me*** a sanctuary, that I may dwell amongst them."

150 years ago, there were no flags[8] next to the *aron* where we keep our Torah scrolls. In most of the world, in most *shuls* in countries where diaspora Jews live, there are no flags in the sanctuary to this day.

Service banners gave way to American flags; Zionist banners gave way to Israeli flags. This is a modern practice, with no formal parameters, and it can once again give way, this time to a more refined and thoughtful choice of location. Let's stop bowing to flags.

Avot 5:6: The Mouth of Korah's Earth and the 2nd Edition of the Tosafot Yom Tov

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What changes between the first and second editions of a major Torah work? We only rarely have the opportunity to compare and analyze the situations when a rabbi or scholar changed his mind over time in his interpretation. Yet R. Yom Tov Lipman Heller uniquely published his famed Mishnah commentary, Tosafot Yom Tov, twice in his lifetime, first between the years 1614 and 1617, and then again in 1642.[1] As such, we are able to see how R. Heller shifted interpretations over the course of his life. This essay will look at how R. Heller interprets one specific ambiguous term in Avot 5:6, *pi ha-aretz*, literally "the Mouth of the Earth."

As we seek to understand a shift in interpretation, we must use a series of tools that help us identify when an explanation follows mostly from the interpreters' direct interaction with the text, and when the explanation is impacted more by changing external, personal, or historical factors.[2] Most of the time, commentaries' direct struggle with a text and its ambiguities leads them towards a new interpretation later in life; occasionally, however, an external factor makes one interpretation more appealing and leads a

[8] The Altneuschul in Prague features a "flag" that has hung without any controversy in the sanctuary for hundreds of years. However, this banner (now on display as a replica of the original) is not a national flag – it is a gold-on-red irregularly shaped artwork featuring a Star of David, a "Jewish hat," the words "Shema Yisrael," the Tetragrammaton, and some other lettering. In other words, though the artwork is popularly referred to as a "Jewish flag," this example is not historical evidence for a *shul* sanctuary displaying what we would now mean by a "flag."

[1] While there are two different vowelizations for the work, the other being Tosefet Yom Tov, we use this vocalization as it is used more colloquially among modern readers. On the two editions, see Joseph Davis *Yom Tov Lipmann Heller: Portrait of a Seventeenth Century Rabbi* (Portland, Oregon: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004), 66-67.

[2] Dr. Haym Soloveitchik has written widely on this topic. See for example Haym Soloveitchik, "Halakhah, Hermeneutics, and Martydom" *Collected Essays* II (Portland, Oregon: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2014), 230-231, 254. "…Massive and atypical gaps in reasoning [from which] we

commentator to prefer one view over another. Commentaries on Pirkei Avot in particular, which has ethical and personal resonance beyond the halachic Mishnayot, are more susceptible to external factors guiding interpretation than are other Torah works.[3]

Avot 5:6 is one of the more philosophically famous Mishnayot in Avot, insofar as it was often cited as proof for Rambam's view that minimized the miraculous and highlighted the natural within Judaism. The Mishnah lists ten great miracles which at first appear to defy nature, but that the Mishnah claims are actually part of nature, as they were included within the fabric of the universe at the final moment of creation. These "miracles" are the rainbow,[4] Manna, the Shamir, Aharon's staff,[5] three miraculous aspects of the Luchot,[6] and three openings of the Bible (Miriam's well,[7] Bilaam's donkey, and Korah's pit). The Mishnah argues that the items on this list were not miraculous departures from nature; they are part of nature from the dawn of time. The Mishnah begs more questions than it answers – what is to be said of all the other miracles of the Tanakh that do not appear in this list?[8] And what does it mean for

may conclude that something is deflecting their thought process from its normal course."

[3] To quote a modern example, Irving Bunim's three-volume commentary "Ethics from Sinai," written in the 1960s, regularly applies the teachings of Pirkei Avot to the struggles of his days, including the response to Conservative and Reform movements, the Holocaust, Israel, and assimilation.

[4] The inclusion of the rainbow on the list is somewhat troubling, given that modern science considers the rainbow to be an entirely natural occurrence, with no miraculous component to it at all. Ramban to Bereishit (9:12) is bothered by this problem ("we have no choice but to believe the Greeks") and instead grants that the rainbow is indeed purely natural. Seforno attempts to solve the problem with the interpretation of the inverted double-rainbow which had not been explained by the science of his time, but which is now understood as also being a natural phenomenon.

[5] Following the version of the baraita in Pesachim 54a (end of page); as per Tifferet Yisrael. Most commentaries translate Moshe's staff (Rashi, Machzor Vitri, Rabbeinu Yona, Pirkei Derabi Eliezer 40). However, Moshe's staff was a *tool* to perform miracles, but was not itself miraculous (see Machzor Vitri, though, for an Excalibur-like story: see Rachel Mikva *Midrash VaYosha: A Medieval Midrash on the Song at the Sea* (Germany: Mohr Seibeck, 2012), 103-104). Aharon's staff was itself miraculous when it blossomed at the end of Parashat Korah. See also Chizkuni to Bamidbar 20:8 in trying to translate what "the staff" refers to.

[6] The Kaufmann codex reads Ktav, Michtav, and Luchot, based on Shemot 32:16. Others read Ktav, Machtev, and Luchot – translating script, pen, and Luchot stones (Rashi Pesachim 54a). Rambam says the three miracles are Torah content, Luchot stone, and inscribed words. Rashash says they are written language, Hebrew Script, and Luchot stones. See also Targum Yonatan on Bamidbar 22:28.

[7] Following Rashi, most commentaries refer to the miraculous water source that accompanied the Jewish people for 40 years in the desert as Miriam's well. In Rashi's view (Bamidbar 20:2, 20:10, 21:17, Pesachim 54a, Avot 5:6, and elsewhere, largely based on the implicit statement in Taanit 9a and Tosefta Sotah, 11) there are three separate known facts about the well: (a) it accompanied the Jews for 40 years, (b) it was in Miriam's merit, and (c) it is synonymous with the water that came from a rock (Shemot 17:1-7, Bamidbar 20:1-8, 21:16-20, Tehillim 114:8). Others disagree. For example, Derech Ha-hayim argues that the "opening of the well" was actually a subterranean water source that was accessed through a moving opening in the Earth and was not a stone that miraculously bore forth water.

[8] Rambam's solution to this question, in his Mishnah commentary, is to argue that the general rule that miracles

people of faith to minimize the miraculous and make it part of nature? But for R. Heller, two words were of particular interest, and we will focus on these two words. These words are "the mouth of the Earth" – the miracle of the Earth opening to swallow Korah and his fellow rebels.

After the Torah gives a lengthy description of the terms of the disagreement between Moshe and Korah, the rebellion reaches its climax with Moshe's dramatic words that his appointment by G-d will be proven "If G-d will create a new creation,[9] and the Earth will open its mouth and swallow them and all they have, and they will descend living to *She'ol*,[10] then you shall know that these men have angered Hashem (Bamidbar 16:30)." Moshe promises that the Earth will open (using the word "mouth") and swallow the rebels as they descend into She'ol. Moshe's promise is fulfilled, and the rebels[11] are swallowed by the Earth (16:30-34). The story is read this way by virtually all the commentaries preceding R. Heller, including Rashi (16:30), Ibn Ezra (16:30 – noting the explicit use of personification in the verse), Ramban (16:30 – saying the word "mouth" distinguishes this from an earthquake, as in this case the Earth closed itself), Chizkuni, and others. This appears to be the way R. Heller understood the story in the first edition of Tosafot Yom Tov.

When R. Heller revised the Tosafot Yom Tov for its second edition, he offered a new interpretation which stands out for two different reasons – one external to the Tosafot Yom Tov and one internal to the way Tosafot Yom Tov works. Why is the interpretation so shocking? This new view is one that had not been offered *by any Midrash or commentary* before the publication of the second edition of the Tosafot Yom Tov, and which also has not been subsequently presented *by any other commentary* after the Tosafot Yom Tov. This commentary is so surprising, unconventional we might say, that it was never given before and never given again. So much of Tosafot Yom Tov is adapted from interpretations and investigations in the Tosafot on the Talmud or other commentaries;

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are part of creation applies to other miracles as well, but only these ten were from the last moment of creation.

[9] The word "new creation" may seem to invalidate the view of Avot 5:6 that the Mouth of the Earth preceded the beginning of time. Chizkuni poses the question, and his solution is to propose the new creation is not the opening of the Earth (and ancient people knew sinkholes existed, anyway) but is instead the idea of individuals entering *she'ol* alive (see next note). See also Ramban and Rashi, who may have had the question in mind, but do not ask it explicitly.

[10] *She'ol* is often used in the Tanakh to refer to the place to which people descend after death. In general, commentaries take one of two approaches in understanding the word – some take it to mean "the grave" – the place the physical body descends after death (see Ibn Ezra and Radak to Bereishit 37:35, based on loc. cit. and Bereishit 42:38, 44:29, 44:31). Others take *She'ol* to mean "the underworld," the place beneath – either in a physical sense, or potentially in an axiological sense – this world where souls go and are perhaps punished after death (see Rashi to above sources and to Bamidbar 26:11 explaining our verse). R. Heller clearly adopts the second view in his analysis here. I discuss the term and debate in more length in *Isaiah and his Contemporaries*, (Kodesh Press, 2023), 297-300.

[11] There is a debate whether Korah, who simultaneously rebelled against both Moshe's political leadership and Aharon's temple leadership, was swallowed by the ground or burnt by the fire. See Ibn Ezra to 16:35, based on Sanhedrin 110a.

this new interpretation therefore stands out. Perhaps recognizing the shocking nature of the commentary, R. Heller prefaces the interpretation with four questions on the conventional interpretation; it is a rarity for him to include so many original questions before giving his own view. He recognized that a commentary this unusual could only be given in response to a significant interpretative demand. Thus, the first reason why this interpretation stands out is that it seems to have been adopted by no commentary outside of the 2nd edition of the Tosafot Yom Tov commentary.

The interpretation also stands out against the backdrop of the second edition of Tosafot Yom Tov. The updated edition contains many additional comments and observations across the full corpus of the Mishnah, but most function as small added notes to the core commentary; a citation is added to a new prooftext, or an alternative translation is offered. [12] Indeed, most of the changes tend to be linguistic in nature and not interpretive. Yet the new interpretation to Avot 5:6, 500 words long, is one of the longest additions from the first to second editions, and it goes far beyond a new citation or proof as it offers an entirely novel interpretation of the Korah story.

R. Heller begins by asking a series of questions concerning the end of the story of Korah's rebellion.

- If the mouth of the earth was already part of the fabric of the universe, why is it called a new creation? (This question was already asked and answered at Sanhedrin 110a, but R. Heller rejects the Talmud's answer to the question).

- Why does the Torah use two different verbs for opening ("*patzetah*" and "*patcha*") instead of using the same verb both times?

- Why does the word *she'olah* end with the locative suffix -*ah*? [13] Could the text just have read "they descended alive *she'ol*?"

- Why did the people flee in 16:34 when hearing the noise of those screaming to their deaths? Shouldn't they have run towards the noise to curiously gaze at what was happening?

We should note that the three final questions are not asked by any other commentator, before or after R. Heller, and can be easily deflected. It is reasonable for people to flee when hearing shouts. Also, the word *she'ol* takes the locative suffix in eight other instances (Bereishit 37:35, 42:38, 44:29-:31; Yechezkel 31:15-17, Tehillim 9:18) and Hebrew grammar often allows for a

[12] In general, the notes in the second edition are marked with brackets. See Davis, Ibid.

[13] For a discussion of the uses of the locative suffix, see E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, Ed. A.E. Cowley (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006), 249-250. Online here.

suffix *-h* to indicate location or direction. Lastly, the root *p.tz.h.* also finds other uses for openings (see especially Bereishit 4:11), particularly in poetic instances. To summarize, decades after publishing the first edition of his work, R. Heller decided to ask a series of Biblical questions that do not appear germane to the Mishnah, and that had not bothered the other commentaries. Still, he uses them to justify a wondrous explanation:

> Now I say, that the noise of the opening – though Mizrachi says that it was like thunder – I am able to say that the noise were words, [the ground] was telling that they entered *she'olah* alive – namely the lowest level. And this was a great sign that the Earth made the noise of speech, saying that they had reached the lowest level alive, in pain until they reached there. This is what Moshe intended when he said *u-patzeta*, as for opening for swallowing it would have *u-patecha* as it says when this happened. But *u-patzeta* of Yiftach (Shofetim 11:35) and Tehillim (66:14) mean to speak…[14]

Tosafot Yom Tov argues that the miracle of the death of the rebels was not merely that the Earth swallowed them, but that the Earth also spoke and proclaimed that the rebels descended to the lowest levels of the underworld. Though the text of the Torah barely hints at this interpretation, R. Heller uses his interpretive questions and the Mishnah's use of the word "mouth" to justify a new, radical account. But why? What changed to motivate this unbelievable explanation?

In the summer of 1629, R. Yom Tov Lipman Heller spent two months in prison with his life in danger. The reasons for his arrest are somewhat unclear, but it appears that some of the actions he took as leader of the Jewish people of Prague, possibly related to taxation rates and the Thirty Years' War, had upset some members of the community, and they badmouthed him before the secular government in an effort to depose him from his leadership position. R. Heller's autobiography gives great attention to his emotions and feelings

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[14] Interestingly, Malbim seems to have made this distinction on his own in his commentary to Bereishit 4:11, but not in his commentary to Korah.
R. Heller recognizes the lack of proof for his thesis, and he goes on to offer a very weak additional piece of corroborating evidence, which he introduces with the words "semblance of a proof," recognizing that this fails to definitively make the case. His proof is based on a parallel to the other two mouths - of the donkey and the well.

> And I also have the semblance of a proof, how the Mishnah said concerning the donkey "the mouth of the donkey" – not that this donkey was made at the end of creation. All mouths are alike, and what is different about this donkey's mouth that it needs to be made before creation? Unless "mouth" means the donkey's speech, that this was made at creation. If so, the mouth of the earth also refers to speech. And the mouth of the well, according to the view mentioned by Bartenura that the well sung.

at that time[15] – it is not an understatement that he felt at that moment that his neighbors-turned-adversaries were rebelling against him, just like Korah had rebelled against Moshe. R. Heller lost everything – his reputation, his possessions, his position, and nearly his life, and he was torn apart by the experience. He carried the story with him for the rest of his life, and it impacted many of his other derashot and writings in the years after.[16] The Korah story would have gathered far greater meaning and resonance for him by 1642, when the second edition was published, than it had in 1617, when the first edition was published.

With this background, we can now reconstruct R. Heller's thought process in composing his two versions of his commentary to Avot 5:6. At first, the story of Korach and the rebels lacked personal significance, energy, or charge, and so R. Heller gave a neutral interpretation for the phrase "mouth of the Earth." In the intervening years, when editing his Mishnah Commentary, R. Heller took a second look at, or was drawn to more deeply analyze and process, the Korah story. His personal investment in the punishment of rebels, and in particular the assertion that their punishment would take place at the lowest levels of *she'ol*, is something that pulled at him, and led him to suggest an unusual interpretation. The miraculous demise could not be something minor, like a special type of earthquake; it needed to be even more dramatic, more punitive and critical of the conduct of the rebels. The changes in the life of the rabbi between the two editions of his published work, and his personal interaction with rebels against Rabbinic authority, led to a radical change in interpretation between the two editions.

Sometimes, commentators change their views because, over the course of a lifetime of learning, they think about an interpretive problem differently and develop new insight about a text. Other times, they are exposed to other interpretations in time, which might replace their original interpretations or which might be adapted by the author. In a third paradigm, Nahmanides famously made many adaptations to the first edition of his Bible Commentary based on new realia he encountered after moving to Israel (e.g., Bereishit 35:16-18, Shemot 30:13).[17] Yet this addition in Tosafot Yom Tov is different, as it reflects a rabbi responding to a personal experience by adjusting his commentary. A new reading of the text sprung forth from personal experience and travails.

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[15] *Megilat Eivah* Ed. J. Wreschner (Jerusalem, 1999), 38-55.

[16] Such as, for example, his *Derush Chidushei Ha-Levanah* Ed. Zuckerman (Vilna: 1866).

[17] Yosef Ofer and Jonathan Jacobs, *Nahmanides' Torah Commentary Addenda Written in the Land of Israel* [Hebrew] (Herzog, 2013), 126, 135, 145, 148, 181, 186, 229-237, 262, 269. 285, 287-292, 335-342, 375-378, 437, 491, 508-510. On Nahmanides changing his view based on further study see 349. On Nahmanides changing his views on account of exposure to new scholarship, see 45-51. The authors do not cite instances where Nahmanides changed his view based on personal experiences.

The Mishnah of the ten miracles would be of passing interest to most rabbis, but it would offer a gripping call to a rabbi who was overthrown by a rebellion in his community. The punishment of Korah and the rebels would become more miraculous, more extravagant, more shocking and final than it was thought to have been before. And so when R. Heller adapted his commentary, a new insight came forth. Korah and his followers were not just punished, but even Earth and nature gave signs of woe that they were lost.

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