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Shabbat on the Lower East Side Through the Prism of an Early American Posek

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The first collection of *she'elot u-teshuvot* (rabbinic responsa to communal queries) printed in the United States, *Ohel Yosef* by Rabbi Yosef Eliyahu Fried (1903), provides a glimpse into immigrant life on New York's Lower East Side at the turn of the twentieth century.[1] His series of *teshuvot* (responsa) related to Shabbat provide a vivid view of the dynamics of the Lower East Side community at the time, as well as the thought processes of a posek grappling with these communal dynamics. The responsa tell the story of how Jews on the Lower East Side observed Shabbat to varying degrees, or not at all. In his answers to the halakhic challenges with which he was faced, one encounters Rabbi Fried carefully navigating two motivations in tension with one another: finding leniencies to keep everyone as close to observance and to the community as possible, yet not being so overly lenient as to compromise the integrity of Shabbat. Rabbi Fried's responsa illustrate the efforts this early American posek took in order to maintain the cohesiveness

[1] Yosef Goldman, *Hebrew Printing In America, 1735-1926: A History and Annotated Bibliography* (Brooklyn, NY: YG Books, 2006), 519.

of his community in light of the varying levels of halakhic observance within it.

Rabbi Fried arrived in New York City from Saukenai, Lithuania in 1891[2], taking up residence on the Lower East Side, and eventually began delivering classes at the Eldridge Street Synagogue.[3] Ohel Yosef contains responsa on a variety of topics relevant to the lives of newly-arrived Eastern European immigrants adapting to life in New York City. Halakhic questions he dealt with touch on the propriety of using dance halls for prayer services, the permissibility of building a sukkah on a fire escape, and whether one can consume milk that was produced under government supervision but without rabbinic supervision (interestingly, he permits consumption of such milk, albeit reluctantly, approximately fifty years before Rabbi Moshe Feinstein's well-known and influential ruling on the topic).

Rabbi Fried's concern with maintaining communal cohesion is reflected in his attitudes towards both non-observant Jews as well as observant ones. In a responsum on the topic of whether non-observant Jews can perform the mitzvah of *birkat kohanim* (the priestly blessing, recited on holidays in Ashkenazic congregations), Fried begins by presenting his overall approach to Jews who are not observant and how the community and its leaders should relate to them. In Fried's view, most Jews in his time who left observance did so under pressure to earn a living, but fundamentally still believed in God and the Torah. As evidence of this assertion, Fried notes that during the High Holidays these people not only come to synagogue, but in fact ask God for forgiveness, showing that Torah observance is not something they outright reject but rather something they feel forced to violate. Even though one cannot rely upon these Jews in matters such as kosher food preparation, they should not be distanced further from observance, but rather kept in the fold as much as possible. With regard to observant Jews, Rabbi Fried makes it clear that he respects and admires their observance, placing a high value on attempts to keep halakha even if they may be less than ideal. Fried was asked, for example, about the propriety of returning a temporarily-moved vessel of hot water to a gas stovetop on Shabbat when the stove is covered with a *blech* (Yiddish for "tin," referring to a metal sheet that acts as a spacer between the heat source itself and the pot or kettle on the stove). Citing earlier authorities, Fried concludes that although one may consider ruling stringently in this case – Ashkenazic practice permits returning cooked solids to a *blech*, on the principle that they fundamentally cannot be "cooked" a second time, but liquids are considered cooked anew each time they are reheated – one need not do so. Since this is an example of the Jewish people's steadfastness about observing the commandment of *oneg Shabbat* (enjoying physical pleasures on Shabbat), one should allow them to continue the lenient (for Ashkenazim)

[2] Ibid.

[3] Annie Polland, *Landmark of the Spirit* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 92.

practice of returning water to a covered gas stove. These general approaches towards both the non-observant and observant elements of the immigrant community on the Lower East Side animate Rabbi Fried's responsa, particularly those related to Shabbat.

In two consecutive passages (*Ohel Yosef*, responsa 6 & 7), Rabbi Fried takes up the question of benefiting from the products of forbidden labor performed by a Jew on Shabbat. In the first case, he was asked, regarding bakeries which employ Jews on Shabbat, whether one can consume their bread after Shabbat. In the second case, he was queried regarding the general issue of using an item that was carried by a Jew from a private domain to a public domain on Shabbat. In both cases he rules leniently, following the majority halakhic opinions, but he adds caveats which most effectively reflect his approach to these matters. Regarding the bread baked by Jews on Shabbat, Fried states that despite it being fundamentally permitted to consume the bread, the rabbis of the community should ideally adopt the minority view and limit consumption of the bread until late enough on Saturday nights that it *could* have been produced after Shabbat (known in halakha as *be-ke'dei she-ya'asu*, "how long it would have taken them," a principle that normally only applies to benefiting from work performed by a non-Jew on a Jew's behalf on Shabbat). This, in Fried's view, would serve as a penalty and constraint against the immediate profits the bakeries would be capable of making. Similarly, in the case of a Jew carrying from a private domain to a public one, Fried recognizes that the majority view follows the lenient approach allowing one to benefit from the act, since no physical change has occurred to the item. Nonetheless, he states that one should follow the minority view and prohibit benefiting from the item, reasoning that ruling stringently in this case will prevent the community at large from treating Shabbat lightly. In both cases, one sees the balance Rabbi Fried is trying to strike. He recognizes the technical correctness of the lenient majority opinion, but takes into account the specific needs of his community, where it was critical to maintain the general framework of Shabbat observance.

While in the just-discussed cases Rabbi Fried was trying to strike a balance by incorporating more stringent approaches into his rulings, two other cases are examples of thorough leniency. Regarding the question of Jews riding the ferry across the river on Shabbat, as well as the question of carrying within an apartment building occupied by both observant and non-observant Jews, Fried rejects any argument that may interfere with the common practice amongst Jews on the Lower East Side.

Regarding riding the ferry, Fried comments at the start of his analysis that many people in the community are lenient about riding the ferry and are not concerned with any halakhic issues, including that of *tehumin* (traveling beyond the halakhically-dictated perimeter on Shabbat). Rabbi Fried raises all of the possible halakhic concerns with riding the ferry and systematically rejects each and every one of them. Relying upon earlier authorities, such as Hatam Sofer, Fried

rules that there are no concerns of *tehumin* or carrying from one domain to another. Furthermore, since most of the passengers are not Jewish and the ferry is operated by non-Jews, it is permissible for Jews to ride if needed. While this last point, restricting his allowance to cases of need, may be taken as a qualifying stringency, Fried's expansive understanding of what is considered a legitimate need, as well as his aforementioned rejection of other grounds for stringency, are reflective of his outright lenient approach to this issue.

In a case that perhaps carries the most weight in terms of the relationship between the observant and non-observant people in the community, Rabbi Fried again ruled outright leniently, thereby preventing conflict between these two communal elements: people literally living next door to each other. The question he was asked was about carrying within an apartment building inhabited by both observant and non-observant Jews. The Talmud (Eruvin 61b) states that if one lives in a common space with either non-Jews, or Jews who do not acknowledge the efficacy of an *eruv* (the mechanism by which different domains are considered halakhically joined, allowing one to carry amongst them), one is not permitted to carry from their home to the courtyard, i.e. into the common spaces. Commentaries on the Talmud (Rashi there, s.v. *Oser Alav*) qualify this ruling, explaining that the observant Jews can still carry into the common areas if they perform a *sekhirat reshut*: leasing the common areas from the other parties. The problem addressed by Rabbi Fried is that some non-observant Jews in his community were antagonistic towards their Shabbat observing coreligionists, and would therefore not comply with the *sekhirat reshut* process. Recognizing that this issue could cause intractable challenges, Rabbi Fried again dismisses any arguments towards stringency. His lenient opinion, based on earlier sources, is two-pronged. Firstly, he argues that even Jews who are known to be non-observant of Shabbat should very rarely be formally classified with the status *mehallelei Shabbat be-farhesya* (public violators of Shabbat), which means they are not individuals with whom one is obligated to perform *sekhirat reshut*. Additionally, Fried argues, one can assume that the owner of the building did not rent apartments to people thinking that they would have the opportunity or ability to restrict the other tenants from carrying in the building's common spaces; willingness to recognize the efficacy of an *eruv* might be considered implicit in the terms of residency. With these arguments Rabbi Fried is not only able to help people observe Shabbat in a less restrictive way, but more broadly, he is able to prevent friction between Jews residing in the same apartment building. By carefully addressing this particularly thorny issue, Rabbi Fried is able to thwart conflict in an effort to maintain cohesion between opposing members of the Lower East Side community.

In his book of sermons, Alumat Yosef (18-21), Rabbi Fried asserts that observance of Shabbat has sustained the Jewish people throughout their journeys in exile. Furthermore, Fried emphasizes that Shabbat is a unique gift given only to the Jewish people, and it is something the people

must cherish by observing it. These complementary values of observance and peoplehood are what informed Rabbi Fried's halakhic approach to Shabbat in the Lower East Side community. They are telling, not only as they pertain to Shabbat specifically, but as they reflect the attempts of this immigrant rabbi to best serve his community in the new environment he – and they – now occupied.

The Jewish Governess

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The following article is an honorable mention in Lehrhaus' 2024 Short Story Contest.

The story of how I came to be in the employ of my aunt and her husband before the burning of Longhaven Manor was unconventional, even from the beginning. My relations were in disagreement over the choice of governess: my aunt favored Mrs. Evelyn Porter, widowed young and nigh on twenty years of experience, including a few cousins of mine amongst her former students, while her husband had already sent for a Miss Sarah Rosen. Not yet five-and-twenty, never having worked in a household of note before, and a Jewess, but five pounds less yearly than Mrs. Porter, which settled the matter for him.

I was still studying for my ordination at the time and was acquainted with the reverend at the school in Freshford where Miss Rosen had once been educated and then later taught. Upon my support, they made their peculiar offer: they would hire me to be present for the children's lessons and ensure that nothing untoward occurred, and, for an hour or so daily, I would teach them the Bible studies the Jewish governess could not.

It was not, of course, an offer most would seriously consider, but with Longhaven Manor's proximity to Reverend Peter and his church, I could utilize his knowledge through daily letters, or conversation, and his well-kept, bursting library. I accepted their offer.

I was at Longhaven some weeks later, before the governess, and watched her arrival. She did not come in a carriage; from my bedroom window I saw her form come slowly into view from the direction of Freshford. Even from afar, though her dark hair was bound high on her head, I could see it curled naturally from the root, and her skin, though not quite brown, could never be described as ivory or porcelain or anything delicate a poet could imagine.

"Did you see her from the window?" my aunt, Isadora, asked me as I entered the parlor.

"Of course he didn't," her husband, Victor, answered. "Why would he be staring out the window all morning?"

I was spared an answer as a footman announced her entrance then. I turned to see my earlier

assessment of both hair and skin had been correct. Her arms were covered completely in the current fashion, and her chest even more modestly, to her neck. Her dress was dull grey, but clean, and the case she held at her side was fraying. I had never met a Jew before, but her eyes were in colour as I had expected—dark enough that there was no difference between iris and pupil—and in soul, they were cool and distant. Her face was thin, but not sallow, and when she spoke it was in a lower voice than any woman of her age I had heard.

"Good morning, sirs, lady," she said, dropping in a curtsy.

When my relations did not answer, I did. "Good morning, Miss Rosen."

"How did you find your journey?" Victor asked.

She answered that it was calm and pleasant and thanked them for having her in their home. My aunt stiffened at this; if Miss Rosen noticed, she did not say. She only asked if she could be shown to her room to settle her things, and how soon could she meet the children.

Now my aunt spoke. "Well, Frederic, can you sit with the children today?"

The governess, once again, did not comment, though she could not have known of our arrangement. She must have thought it strange that a man was charged with introducing her to her wards but remained professional. When I affirmed so, Victor directed the footman to help Miss Rosen with her things and then walk her back to the little library, where I would await with the children.

I had not spent much time with any children and did not know what to expect of my relations. I studied them carefully in their study room, where I would now spend time, too, trying to see any similarities between myself and either of them. The blue of the girl's eyes, perhaps, or the auburn of the boy's hair. But beyond those, I could not see any of myself in them, and felt it an ill omen: how could I have anything to do with these two young creatures who did not have anything to do with me? And how would the governess fare?

But Miss Rosen had a smile on her face as she entered the room, and it did not waver the whole time I watched her. She introduced herself to the children, told them of her favorite flower and dessert, and asked them to share theirs.

"And what do you like to study?"

"I like to listen to stories," the boy replied.

"I like doing sums," the girl said.

"I do *not*."

"Well, we shall begin with our reading. Then you can both read stories to each other. How does that

sound?”

I sat in the corner of the room, not focused on my reading as much as I would have liked. I had not expected to be taken with observing them; she was cleverer than any governess I had ever known to be. Cleverer than most anyone, I daresay, even now. It was sly, how she pretended to need the children’s help in recognizing letters, or in remembering what sound they made, as she read aloud to them. She sneaked in a bit of arithmetic, too, pausing to ask them if there were forty pages in the book, and they had reached page five, how many were left. With the clarity of hindsight, I can see that trickery was second nature to her, but, at the time, I found it endearing.

Endearing, yet utterly ordinary. There was nothing exciting about watching this, and the alertness I had promised my aunt quickly faded. Nothing of note demanded my attention, and so it faded back to my text. The governess’ voice, low and smooth, provided a gentle, almost lyrical background to my studying. I heard her words, but I did not think of them. As far as I could tell, she did not think of me. Certainly, she did not look at me, speak to me, or pay me any mind whatsoever.

And thus began my routine at Longhaven: Monday through Friday, I would do my research in the corner of the nursery while the children studied under the tutelage of Miss Rosen, and when she took them to eat, I would sit with my aunt and uncle. Upon our return from lunch, I would spend an hour reading Scripture to them while Miss Rosen wrote quietly in a bound journal, but what she wrote, I never knew. Evenings were for further study, until the moon rose and I would go for a turn about the grounds before bed. Saturdays, when the governess took her Sabbath, left me to the library in peace while a housemaid would accompany the children as they played. On Sundays, the household would rise for church, and what the governess did whilst we were away I did not know, but she was always waiting for the children and me in the nursery when we returned in the afternoons.

One such Sunday, I had received word that the reverend was recovering from an illness, and a student of his would be leading the sermon, but I was invited to call upon him as he rested. I rose early that day and borrowed a carriage to journey down to Freshford and had not yet reached a mile from Longhaven when I saw her, the governess, walking along the road. I called for the footman to halt and called her name.

“Mr. Thompson,” she greeted me.

“Where are you going so early?”

“To my father,” she replied. “I visit him on Sundays. I leave at first light,” she said, “and reach Longhaven before you return.”

I admired her devotion to her father. Three miles there and back again for what would be no more

than a three-hour stay was not a trip most young women would make, certainly not weekly.

“Join me,” I told her. “I am visiting Freshford as well.”

She thanked me and climbed in; I reached out my hand to help her but she moved quickly enough that she did not need it. She smiled tightly as she sat, resting her small pack in the lap of her grey dress and averted her eyes from mine, gazing out the window.

“Miss Rosen,” I said, “I am visiting Reverend Peter. I believe you are acquainted.”

She looked at me now, smiling truly. “Oh, yes. I was educated at his school. The reverend has always been good to my family.”

“I am visiting him because he is ill.”

“I am sorry to hear that. Is it serious?”

“He is through the worst of it. Well enough to receive me, but not enough to lead services.”

“I see,” she said. “Please give him my best.”

She remained largely silent for the duration of the ride, answering my questions concisely. Her decorum never wavered, and after consideration, I admired her reticence. It was not a common quality in women I knew.
She bid me adieu at the reverend’s home, and I told her the hour I would be leaving and to meet me back here if she’d like. She thanked me and went about her way.

Inside his home, I saw, Reverend Peter was well recovered. He sat up in an armchair and had already begun drinking tea from his tray. I instructed him not to rise to greet me, and he argued with admirable vigour before acquiescing.

“Tell me, then, Frederic, how go your studies?”

I was eager to tell him and to ask his esteemed opinion on various interpretations and translations of text, and he answered diligently. It was an hour or so before he asked me how I was faring at Longhaven, and I turned the conversation to Miss Rosen, to give him her regards.

“Ah, yes, Miss Rosen,” he said fondly. “Quiet girl. Studious—good she ended up as a governess. How do your relations like her?”

“The children like her very well,” I said, pausing as I thought to answer regarding their parents. “My aunt was anxious at hiring her.”

“No reason, no reason,” he said. “After all, she taught at our school. Sums and history and grammar… no reason why she shouldn’t be capable.” He paused too, now, and I did not have to wonder long what he wanted to say. “When you teach the children Scripture, is she in the room?”

“Of course,” I answered. “She sits and writes in a

journal."

"Writes, you say? Is she taking notes?"

I didn't think so. She wrote much more than what I ever said. My lessons to the children were simple and not at all similar to my research; they did not yet possess the sense for me to share any of my research with them in any depth.

"She never, of course, stayed present for any of our Scripture classes when she was a child. Her mother's request, you know… died giving birth to her. But her father was honest and had sworn to her she would not stray from the Hebrew texts. Even while she taught, she would leave while the children took Bible study. I wonder what notes she takes when she hears you now. It is the first time she is hearing any of the New Testament, the first time in all her life. Imagine!"

While the topic of Miss Rosen was only a minor one during my visit that day, and never repeated itself during our missive correspondence, or any meeting in church, it stayed with me. What indeed did a grown woman of respectable intellect think to herself upon hearing the gospel of Christ for the first time? Should she not be curious? It was only, I thought then, as I do think now, natural of her sex to be so. But perhaps the habitual tendencies of the feminine mind did not affect Miss Rosen as they do her peers; perhaps she was something else entirely.

I did not think so over the course of the following weeks and months. I thought she was shy, or maybe ashamed to be failing her mother's dying wish. For she was bright, and patient, and kind, and I knew there was no way for her to hear the words and not wonder. When this became obvious and apparent, I sought ways to allow her to learn and obey her parents' wishes.

The Idea struck me at dinner with "y au't and uncle; I could scarcely wait for the night to pass and the next day to come and bring out the children's lessons. When Miss Rosen finally instructed the children to put away their arithmetic and provide me their full attention, I could scarcely contain my excitement. To maintain order and dissuade the governess from thinking anything was amiss, I remained calm as I informed the children we would be studying from the Old Testament today.

As usual, Miss Rosen did not look up from her writing as I spoke.

"Today you'll learn of the fall of man."

Still Miss Rosen did not look up. Not while I recited the days of creation, nor at God's prohibitions of the tree, and not of sin brought forth into the world. She did not shudder like the children did when I told them that, since then, we are all born with the blood of our transgressions upon us, nor did she join them in a relieved sigh when I told them we were saved by the Son of God.

After the hour, a housemaid came to collect the

children, and I asked Miss Rosen for a moment.

“Yes, Mr. Thompson?” she asked me, hands clasped.

“I wondered what you thought of my lesson today.”

She raised an eyebrow, her mouth curving in amusement. “I did not realize I was one of your students, too, Mr. Thompson,” she said.

“Of course not,” I laughed. “Merely curious as to your thoughts.”

There were quirks along her face: her brow, her lips, her nose, and I thought she was thinking something else as she said, “I confess I do not listen intently during your lessons. I take time for my own compositions. Lesson plans, letters…” She trailed off, finishing with a small smile. She stepped her foot backwards, awaiting dismissal, but I pressed on.

“I told them the story of Creation.”

“Yes,” she hurried to say. “Yes, I am aware. I was not listening, as I said, but I do hear.”

“Of course,” I said, matching her small smile with one of my own. When she did not respond, I said, “And what did you think?”

“Of Creation? I… marvel at God’s glory, of course.” Her smile slipped, briefly.

She did not want to discuss the matter further; that much was obvious. I had no doubt then, and still now, that it was my mentioning of Christ, my being Christian, that made her want to leave. I was conflicted; she had a good soul, worthy of God’s light, but there was no reason to force it upon her. She could come to it herself, in time.

“Don’t we all,” I said. “Good evening, then, Miss Rosen.”

“Good evening, Mr. Thompson.”

I was determined to concoct a plan. Old Testament stories, as it seemed, were not the right path, as the governess continuously answered my questions with only vague devotion. She was polite, but distant. Too guarded. I knew I would have to earn her trust some other way.

It was the dead of night, a week after my lesson on Creation, when I heard shrieking the first time. I, of course, was awake, studying, as my daylight hours provided too many distractions to focus. I threw down my quill and followed the woman’s voice as quickly as I could, before I realized it was my aunt’s and found myself at her door. I halted, not crossing the threshold, when I heard her husband shouting in return. An argument?

Before I could decide if I should slip back to my room and leave them to it, or if this was more than

a tiff and required my intervention, the door was thrown open. My uncle let out an angry shout when he saw me. “Look what you’ve done, you’ve awoken the whole house!”

“Good!” shrieked my aunt. “Wake them all! Now!”

“What has happened?” I cried, unable to remain calm.

“She’s stolen from me!” my aunt said, wailing. I heard movement; someone else was rushing to see what the noise was about.

“Who has stolen from you?”

“That horrible woman!”

I did not know of whom she was speaking, at first; it took me a few moments to remember her prejudices against the governess. “Aunt Isadora, are you certain?” I could not believe it.

“Of course I am! Who else would it be?”

“Sir!” This from some of the servants, at the corridor, pausing when they saw me.

“A moment,” I instructed them, raising a hand. I turned back to my aunt. “What is missing? Quietly, if you please, aunt, the children are still asleep.”

My aunt took a shuddering breath, pulling her dressing gown tighter around herself. “Three necklaces and two loose jewels. Diamonds, all. From my boudoir.”

It would not matter, in God’s eyes, the sum of what the thief had stolen, but to the courts of England it certainly did. Someone would pay dearly for this crime. “What is your evidence, aunt, that she has taken it from you?”

“There has never been a theft in this house before her!”

“But we can account for her whereabouts, can we not?”

“I am going right now to retrieve what is mine!” And she flew past without another word.

My uncle followed her, and I them, and by the time we had reached Miss Rosen’s room—separate from the servants, on the northern side of the house, a floor below mine—a small crowd had gathered. Miss Rosen stood at her door, dressed, like all of us, in her night clothes. Aunt Isadora was pointing a finger out.

“Search her things!” she cried.

“Aunt,” I said, “please, if you could—”

“Now!”

The servants did not pause to listen to me, and my uncle did not either. Miss Rosen’s dark eyes widened, watching as her things were unfolded before us: her dresses, checked inside and out, some dishware she kept, the pages of Hebrew books, undergarments—I could not bring myself to look either at them or at her while they were

searched—and a small comb. Her journal sat by her bed, knocked to the ground as the servants stripped the sheets, on command of my aunt.

Like an automaton, the governess moved to pick it up. She rose silently, pushing herself against the wall, as the mattress was lifted, to reveal the floor, and nothing below it. The jewels, if they had indeed been taken by her—or taken at all—were not here.

“It must be somewhere else,” my aunt said. “In the schooling room.”

“For God’s sake, woman,” my uncle said suddenly. “You lost them. If you don’t want her, we can dismiss her, but stop these banshee shrieks. At least until morning.”

He left, and soon after my aunt did, too.

Miss Rosen spoke for the first time as a maid tentatively stepped forward, hands outstretched, to the bed.

“No, thank you,” she said, cool and unbothered. “If you will all clear out, I think I can handle this myself. Thank you. Good night.”
Good, I thought to myself, relieved. She is stronger, on her own, in her soul, than most Christians are with their faith. She would stay and prove it to us all yet. We would see it in the morning.

But alas, when I rose at first light, I watched her from the window, leaving Longhaven. I dressed hurriedly and rushed after her.

“Miss Rosen!” I called.

She stopped, more out of habit than desire, I believed. Her brow was furrowed and, upon seeing me, turned around again and began walking, though I had caught up to her.

“What is it, Mr. Thompson?” Her voice was dull, lacking the morning cheer with which she normally greeted the children.

“Where are you going?”

“To visit my father.”

“It is not Sunday.”

“So it is not.”

“Miss Rosen,” I said, “I beg you, grant a moment.”

Sighing, Miss Rosen finally stopped. She did not look at me, keeping her gaze focused on the path, and far beyond. “What is it, Mr. Thompson?” she asked again, weary this time.

I knew she would not grant me much time.

“Miss Rosen, I understand that you were unfairly accused. You were not proven guilty and should have been treated as innocent. You were not more likely to have thieved than anyone else in the house. But I beg you, Miss Rosen, not to fan the flames. You have been given an opportunity.”

“And what opportunity is that?”

“To turn the other cheek,” I said firmly. “This is how you can teach the children—teach us all—a lesson in forgiveness. In grace.”

“Mr. Thompson,” she said, and this time she did look at me, but her eyes lacked all warmth. “Turning the other cheek is a Christian sentiment.”

“But surely it must have its roots in Judaism!” I said, not surprised she was still angry but surprised she would be brazen about it. “Or how else could Christ have learnt it? What do you suppose a Jewish sentiment would be instead?”

In a voice colder than the morning air, she said, “To rise up and strike first.”

She left me then. I did not stop her.

That night was the second time I heard screaming. I was awoken from my sleep, sweltering. For a wild moment, I forgot where I was, confounded by the hellish heat, the shouting, the lack of air. When I realized what was happening, I too joined the cacophony.

“Fire!” The word was a reflex. I leaped out of bed, coughing, waving my arms to clear the smoke around me. Pushing my whole body at the window, I tipped it open and breathed in air, clean and cool. People swarmed around outside, but whether these were rescuers, observers, or members of the household who had escaped, I could not say.

My door was thrown open. “Sir!”

I turned to see a footman. A rush of heat followed him in the room.

“Calm yourself,” I said, finding reason in his panic. “We’ll get out now.” I dunked three dress shirts in a water basin and handed one to him. “Cover your mouth like so,” I said, “and you shall exit.”

I sent him on his way—he barely argued—keeping the other two shirts bunched against my mouth. Miss Rosen did not sleep with the servants, and not on our floor either—she would be alone and frightened. I would guide her out.

But as I descended the stairs three at a time and made my way down the hallway I had been last night, the smoke grew thicker. I could not see ten feet in front of me; it was choking blackness. When I called her name, I could not hear my own voice over the fire.

At the sound of the walls before me groaning, I turned and fled. This was the side of the front of the house, and I would need to take the servants’ exit. I did not fear the flames around me, but I felt a sharp anxiety for my relations, the servants, and the governess. Had she made it out? Had she even returned?

When I reached the exit, I lurched forward to the arms of the men outside, who were quick to grab me and pull me out. Clumsily, I followed them a dozen paces away, until the frigid air on my face felt free of ash.

"Who else is left in the house?" I asked, taking the cup of water someone handed me.

"They're coming now, sir, they're coming now…"

"Where are the children? My aunt?"

"Out, out sir… Her ladyship will want to see you…"

"Frederic!" My aunt appeared as though she had been summoned. She threw her arms around me, sobbing. "Oh Frederic, when I got out and you were not there…"

"I am all right, aunt, where are—"

"They've already been taken into town," she said, breaking apart from me. "Both of them, to the inn. And tomorrow we will travel to Bath. But Victor has gone with the other men…"

"Aunt Isadora," I said, clutching her arms tightly. "Do you know if Miss Rosen ever made it back from her father's house?"

She gave me an odd look, and for a moment I worried the smoke inhalation had gotten to her. "What do you mean?"

"Had she returned? Her room is separate from the others, I don't know if they would have gotten her out in time."

"Frederic," she said, pointing behind me. "Look."

I turned: the house, burning to the ground. From here on the west, I could see the front crumbling to the earth, while the back stood. It must have begun there, at the entrance—a merciful thing, as most of the household slept in the back. The only two rooms that faced the north were mine and…

"She started it, Frederic. Who else would?"

"No," I said.

But it was reflexive. I did not know.

"No," I said again. My aunt did not answer. She raised a hand to wipe her tears as the northern walls of Longhaven Manor crumbled where the fire had been struck first.

The Shekhinah as a Tool for Political Critique: The Mystico-Political Thought of Rabbi Menachem Froman

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The Life and Times of R. Menachem Froman: A History of Synthesis

R. Menachem Froman was a figure of contradictions. He was an alumnus of the Reali School in Haifa and a member of the "Young Labor," a student at the Hebrew University in

Jerusalem, where he studied philosophy and Jewish thought, a disciple at Yeshivat Merkaz Ha-Rav in Jerusalem and personal aide (*shamash*) to R. Tzvi Yehuda Kook, a member of the Gush Emunim settlement movement, and, at the same time, a voice calling both for peace and for Jews to return to the full expanses of the Land of Israel.

In his activism, Froman sought to apply to Israeli politics the fundamental conceptual framework of the *Zohar*: the general encounter between opposite and contradictory movements within divinity, and particularly between its masculine and feminine elements. From this standpoint, he attempted to create bridges between different groups and positions within Israeli society: between religious and secular, left and right, Arabs and Jews. Froman took the radical step of applying the frameworks and faith of the *Zohar* to the reality of Israeli politics, and to the Jewish-Arab conflict in the Middle East.

In this article, I aim to show, through analyzing a story written by Froman, his sharp internal critique of the inherently "masculine" nature of the settlement enterprise, and how he sought to fix it by giving greater space to the "feminine" element or the divine feminine, referred to in Kabbalah as the "*Shekhinah*." As part of my analysis, I will argue that the literary form in which Froman expressed this critique of the settlement enterprise is no less important than the content of his critique. Although Froman frequently shared this critique in oral lectures and in short opinion pieces published in the Israeli press, his choice to write creative works of literature can be seen as a part of his wider critique of Religious Zionism's rigid ideologies, and of the ideological stance of Rav Kook's disciples who led the settlement enterprise and founded the Gush Emunim movement.

Before beginning my analysis, a note is in order about feminism and the terms "masculine" and "feminine" as I use them throughout this article. Without rehashing the history of various feminist movements and their internal divisions and distinctions, we can say simply that some feminist movements have jettisoned the idea of essentially masculine and feminine qualities as, at best, outdated and unhelpful, while others have argued for the importance of maintaining some sense of essentially masculine and feminine qualities. These latter groups have argued that, in rejecting gender essentialism wholesale, we will end up enforcing an even more rigid societal order than before, because society will continue to celebrate masculine qualities and dismiss feminine qualities, but will now lack the language to critique that hierarchical organization. Both the analysis of the article and the thought of Rav Froman analyzed therein work from within a framework of gender-essentialist feminism, seeing equality and liberation as emerging through gender, not despite it.

Choosing the Literary Genre as a Feminist Act

The choice of the literary genre as a medium for conveying critique is a conscious one, engaging with life on an existential rather than merely intellectual level. In Froman's words, it means

choosing the "Tree of Life" rather than the "Tree of Knowledge."[1] When writing literature—as a genre—the author does not have in mind that they possess and are conveying absolute truth. Literature creates social change by telling its truth with nuance, capturing the full palette of human experience in a developing narrative of emotions, interactions, doubts, and more.

Froman primarily taught Torah orally, but he put his original mystico-political social theory in writing: as essays published in the press, as unpublished plays, as two books of poetry (only one of which was published during his lifetime), and also in literary prose, some of which was published in the press and some of which has since been archived by his family at the National Library of Israel.[2]

Against the backdrop of the choice of the vast majority of R. Tzvi Yehuda Kook's students to teach and study Torah while composing ideological-theological treatises, Froman's choice of the literary genre as an additional means of expression constitutes a form of rebellion. We might even interpret it as a decision to forge an alternate path to the elder Rav Kook, avoiding the mediating figure of Rav Tzvi Yehuda, whose interpretations of his father's thought had become canonical in the Religious Zionist community. Froman sought to connect with a vision of the elder Rav Kook, who wrote that literature is the genre best fit for expressing spirituality.[3] According to Froman, literature is the genre most capable of linking reflective philosophical thought with human experience.

Froman also relates the dichotomy between reflection on life and "life itself" to the binary distinction between Left and Right in Israel. While the Right lives life itself, the Left is more engaged in observing life and analyzing it from an external perspective.[4] Froman wrote about this in an essay titled "For the Sake of Unification," published in 2008.

> Here we come to a central idea that I've been walking with for years: In my opinion, the Right is the religious perspective, in the sense of the very relationship between man and God, and the Left is the intellectual world that defines things. That is, if while a person prays, he also defines to himself 'I am praying,' then he's moved to

[1] "For the Sake of Unification: Societal Engagement as Linking Heaven and Earth" [Heb.], in *On the Economy and Sustenance: Judaism, Society, and Economy* [Heb.], eds. Aharon Ariel Lavi and Itamar Brenner (Reuven Mass, 2008), 355–379, at 374–375. Available in English.

[2] For an analysis of one of Rav Froman's unpublished stories preserved in the NLI archive, see Tchiya Froman, "For the Sake of Unification: The Dialectic Between the *Ayin* and the *Yeish* in the Thought of Rav Froman" [Heb.], in *The Philosophy of Talking Peace (Siach Shalom): Kabbalah, Halacha and Antipolitics*, ed. Avinoam Rosenak (Carmel Books, 2024).

[3] R. Abraham Isaac Kook, *Ma'amarei Ha-Ra'ayah* 9, 53-54; idem, O*rot Ha-Teshuvah* 17:5. Cf. Moshe Tzuriel, "Literature and the Value of Writing."

[4] This is related to Froman's primitivism, a motif which appears throughout his writings. See, for example, R. Menachem Froman, *Ten Li Zeman* (Maggid Books, 2017), 132, 140–141.

> the Left, because he exited the relationship between him and the Holy One, Blessed be He, and is now looking at himself from above. You have a relationship with God, but the moment you define it intellectually, it descends to the world of the Left, to the horizontal axis, to the world of objects—prayer as an entity. On the other hand, there is prayer in its occurrence when it essentially does not belong to the world of entities, it is the movement itself. Entities are the world of the Left, and the relationship is the world of the Right. The Right is divine abundance; in the Right, you flow, but the moment you say 'I am flowing,' you've already descended to the world of the Left.[5]

On the one hand, literary and theatrical forms of expression provide the opportunity to observe life "from the outside" because they are presented with a certain distance from life itself, reflecting on and conceptualizing life. On the other hand, they maintain a sense of being "internal" to life because the genre evokes the emotional experience of the viewer or reader. Therefore, according to Froman, they are forms of expression capable of creating a bridge between internal experience and external observation. Froman's choice to write stories, plays, and even poetry was an attempt to invigorate the religious world around him with Rav Kook's hope for a Judaism that fully engages the human experience, rather than remaining in the theological or ideological realms.

Froman's second motivation for reclaiming the elder Rav Kook's call for a literary renaissance is rooted in the latter's call for the free expression of creativity and the elevation of freedom as a significant religious value. Froman was drawn to Rav Kook's championing of freedom and argued that freedom is a central value in the life of a religious person:

> People can't accept that the call to freedom can be a religious project. Despite our sages' statement that "no one is truly free except one who engages in Torah" (Mishnah Avot 6:2), most religious Jews are taught, for the sake of religion, to give up on their freedom... But for me, freedom is the primary aim of religion.[6]

Religion is often identified with obedience and with slavish submission before the power of God. What room is there in such a religion, Froman asks, for free creativity? Rav Kook argued that keeping the Torah is about freedom and authentic

[5] "For the Sake of Unification - Societal Engagement as Linking Heaven and Earth," 366. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by Shaul David Judelman. For more on this essay, see Tchiya Froman, "Beyond Monotheism."

[6] R. Menachem Froman, *Hasidim Tzohakim Mi-Zeh* (Dabri Shir, 2014), §2. Translations of *Hasidim Tzohakim Mi-Zeh* by Levi Morrow and Ben Greenfield.

self-expression,[7] and Froman connects that to his call for creativity. As a religious value, Froman argues, freedom does not only mean authentic observance of the commandments, but also free, creative expression via the arts in general, and literature specifically.

Froman's concept of freedom is not about the absolute expression of the "self," but rather the human attempt to be liberated from it.

> Everyone thinks that being free means being "Me." But in my life experience, the primary chains holding me back are my internal chains. My self-definitions. When I liberate myself from myself, that's when I am truly free... Getting married—as the all jokes say—is like committing suicide, like going to sleep. Finally being free.[8]

True freedom, Froman says, is not merely freedom from external compulsion or constraints, but freedom from the ego, from your internal self-definitions. Freedom from your own self-conception can be achieved in a variety of ways. One way Rav Froman champions is through engaging with and committing to other people—hence he sees "getting married" as "finally being free." Another path to this freedom, one he returns to on several occasions, is the creative medium of theater, where a person can disguise themselves as another character and free themselves from themselves.[9] Similarly, in writing literature, the author consciously tries to step into the minds of their characters, which may be very different from their own.

Elevating creative freedom as a theological value shifts the entire constellation of religious hierarchies and constructs. Froman cites Rebbe Nachman's claim that Judaism in his time had undergone a shift from "beginning" at Passover to "beginning" at Purim and provides his own dramatic gloss:

> Rebbe Nachman often stops in the middle of a discussion. However, there is one place where he actually stops right in the middle of a sentence. "For in the beginning, all the beginnings began at Passover, and therefore the mitzvot are all in memory of the exodus from Egypt. But now - " (*Likkutei Moharan* II:74). His intent was that, in classical Judaism, all of the commandments commemorate the exodus from Egypt, but now we have reached a new era, an era of laughter and freedom. Until now, all the commandments were very serious. Passover is about pathos. The Torah has lots of pathos, it's very serious. Now, we have a new

[7] It would be impossible to cite every source in Rav Kook's writings on this, and the secondary literature is voluminous. For one source, see *Orot ha-Kodesh* III:97-98.

[8] *Hasidim Tzohakim Mi-Zeh*, §3.

[9] Cf. R. Menachem Froman, *Kof Aharei Elohim* (Hay Shalom, 2017), 20.

> era, a new Torah, the Torah of the land of Israel, the Torah of the Messiah. All the commandments commemorate the laughter of Purim, not the pathos of Passover. To be or not to be is a serious, weighty question. However, Shakespeare wrote in the very same play that the whole world is a stage, that everything is a game. Do you hear me asking the most important question there is in life, whether or not to be? This question is just a joke, it's a game… it's just a game…[10]

Not only does religion encourage freedom—"no one is truly free except one who engages in Torah"—but religion is itself a kind of play. A person should perform the commandments with the mindset of an actor who knows that, while getting their part right is of the utmost importance within the context of the play, the play itself is just a form of entertainment. The idea that Jewish observance of the commandments is a joke or a game—this Froman identifies as "a new Torah, the Torah of the land of Israel, the Torah of the Messiah."

Reflecting on the relationship between the Torah and Zionism, Froman makes a similar claim. In the process, he identifies the value of freedom, as expressed in the choice of the medium of literature, as a fundamentally feminine element.

> Many years ago, before I began learning Torah, I felt that the Jewish religion needed the redemption of becoming feminine, and that's why the Zionist project arose.
>
> The Torah of exile is a masculine Torah... The Zionist enterprise brought us to the land. Zionism's purpose was to make the Jewish religion and the Jewish spirit more feminine, softer. The Torah of the land of Israel is a Torah of peace, not defensiveness and overcoming. This difference manifests in the transition from learning halakhah and laws, which are hard as iron, to learning Zohar, which is soft as light. The goal of alchemy is to turn iron into gold, into light. The alchemy of religion transforms it from obligation into freedom.[11]

This freedom is not simply a personal virtue. Not only the religious individual, but also Judaism itself must undergo a transformation. This is the same transformation to which Rebbe Nachman gestured, only Froman isn't pointing just to the commandments, but also to Jewish life as a whole—how Jews orient themselves toward the world, each other, and the rest of humanity.

Froman enacts this same transformative shift in choosing to write stories and plays. This writing is

[10] *Hasidim Tzohakim Mizeh*, §28.

[11] Ibid., §102.

a search for freedom, which he sees as both feminine and as the highest religious value. This feminine freedom is a radical freedom, standing opposite the masculine position which claims to discover truth and essence.

> Freedom is the opposite of truth, for nothing is more slavishly restrictive than truth, from which you truly cannot escape. The entirety of human history can be seen as one long struggle between truth and freedom. Our era is characterized by rejecting truth and seeking freedom. This revolution is feminist in nature, for truth is masculine, active, and domineering. Freedom, on the other hand, is female. The masculine *sefirah* of "*Hokhmah*" [wisdom], the supernal father, is called "*Ḥokhmah*," an anagram for the words "*koaḥ mah*." It is the power (*koaḥ*) to ask, "What (*mah*)?" "What did you say?" "What is the truth?" In contrast, the feminine *sefirah* of *Binah* [understanding] asks, "Who?" ... From a feminine point of view, who says a thing is more important than the thing that is being said. Existence precedes essence.[12]

Here Froman's understanding of freedom takes its most radical form as the very opposite of truth. Truth is typically imagined as the correspondence between what a person says and the facts of the world. On this model, the value of a person's words—to say nothing of their actions or art—is determined by the already existing state of affairs in the world. In contrast, free creativity makes things which bear at most incidental similarity to what already exists. Froman cites the existentialist slogan, "Existence precedes essence," meaning that who we are and what we choose in life determine the meaning of our lives more than any pre-existing ideas about who we are supposed to be.

This radical, creative feminine freedom is both artistic and political. Froman's very choice to write his theological-political messages as literary works of fiction was a bold statement about prioritizing the existential realm of life over ideological doctrine. In doing so, he also chose to center creativity and creative expression as the supreme religious value, superseding the classic claim of truth as the exclusive foundation of religion. In both of these steps, Froman sought to create and drive a feminization of religion.

Literary Influences: Rebbe Nachman and the *Zohar*

Froman's departure from the path of Rav Kook's students can also be seen in his adoption of the

[12] Ibid., §114. The Kabbalistic themes of this piece draw on *Zohar* I:1b.

Zohar and Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav as additional primary sources for his spiritual and political approach. Both of these sources are uniquely literary—in addition to being philosophical-exegetical—in how they convey their spiritual messages. In addition to its analytical sermons, the *Zohar* often expresses its ideas through stories, and Rebbe Nachman is also known for embedding his novel spiritual ideas within stories. Drawing on these sources of inspiration enabled Froman to forge a different path, one that contains more hybrid spiritual elements, full of movement, humor, and imagination. This is opposed to purely philosophical-ideological writing which seeks to arrive at final, exclusive truth and present a consistent system—a method and goal that Froman perceived as dogmatic and rigid.

Analysis of the Story "Life as an Arrow"

The Historical Background of the Story

The story "Life as an Arrow" was published in the Gush Emunim journal *Nekudah* in 1986, roughly a year after the trial of the members of the Jewish Underground.[13] The Underground crisis saw core members of Gush Emunim convicted for attempting to blow up the Al-Aqsa Mosque and assassinate Arab community leaders. This event, coming at the tenth anniversary of the Gush Emunim movement and on the heels of the evacuation of the Sinai settlements, forced Gush Emunim to engage in introspection regarding its methods of operation and directly confront fundamental issues such as the relationship between Gush Emunim and the state, and the tension between national unity and the sanctity of the land. Froman's story, printed in the movement's journal, can be read as a theological response to these issues.

The story describes the relationship between a man and his wife, the first settlers in a small, early-stage settlement. This couple serves as an allegorical representation through which Froman examines the relationship between the masculine and feminine elements within the settlement enterprise. It is evident that Froman believes that the act of conquering the land and settling, which was the practical end of Gush Emunim's ideology, stands in opposition to and even harms the marital and intimate dimension. Conquest is a masculine act, which, in its intensity, did not allow the feminine aspect to be expressed and developed.[14]

The Arrow as a Representation of Masculinity

The arrow, a central motif in the story "Life as an Arrow," is both a symbol of masculinity and a military image that joins together human power, warfare, and sexuality. Putting this image in the story's title establishes from the outset its central

[13] *Nekudah* 89 (Adar I 5746/February 1986), 16–17. Froman's language is rife with references to traditional texts, only some of which can be explicated here.

[14] Cf. *Hasidim Tzohakim Mizeh*, §133: "Settling the land can be an expression of love for the soil and commitment to it, but it can also be a crushing, aggressive act of conquest… It's not always easy to distinguish between loving the land and strangling it."

theme: the exploration of masculinity and masculine power within the context of conquering and settling the land. In this context, the arrow represents the continuous, unidirectional effort of a man both to conquer and dominate the land and to realize his identity.

In the Jewish tradition, the arrow is employed as a phallic symbol, combining military strength with the sexual meaning of seed. The Book of Psalms even makes the meaning of seed primary. For example, Psalm 127, which forms the background of Froman's story, presents the arrow as a metaphor for sons, a man's offspring and his true "inheritance," as opposed to the land. The verse emphasizes that a man's seed, his children, are the arrows leading to his inheritance, not weapons in the classical sense:

> **3** Lo, children are a heritage of the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward. **2** As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man, so are the children of one's youth. **3** Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them, they shall not be put to shame, when they speak with their enemies in the gate.[15]

In the following chapter, Psalm 128, which describes those who fear God and walk in His ways and bring peace upon Israel, a man's children are represented by the image of olive saplings planted around his table.

> **1 …** Blessed are those who fear the Lord, who walk in His ways. **2** You shall eat the fruit of your labor. You will be blessed, and it will be well with you. **3** Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine within your house, your children will be like olive shoots around your table. **4** Behold, thus shall the man who fears the Lord be blessed. **5** May the Lord bless you from Zion. May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life. **6** May you see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel!

The psalm envisions bringing peace to Israel through the image of a healthy, fertile family home. The man is God-fearing, his wife is as a fertile vine, and their children are like olive trees growing around the table.

In our story, this ideal picture never materializes. The couple's wellbeing and that of their family are flawed from the start, exemplifying a deeper spiritual defect in the settlement movement at large:

> How good and pleasant it is to return to a home filled with love in the evening. She wasn't waiting for him. He peeked in and entered (*u-faga*) his caravan, wondering and gazing at how this small, humble

[15] Tanakh translations adapted from JPS 1917.

> room could become such a vast and defiant space. Around the unlaid table were several fresh olive-wood chairs. His wife sat at the far end of their home.
>
> "Hello," he said faintly, but she couldn't respond. He shut his eyes to block out the bad. He needed to do some soul-searching. Repentance. Regret for the past. But he hadn't merited it. The sons of Gad and the sons of Reuben once went out armed, each with his sword girded at his side. But he? He feared the nights. His wife wouldn't come to greet him with song and dance.
>
> He thought their journey to the new settlement would bring salvation. Like a tightrope walker, he'd led her after him into an unyielding land. But the rope had reached the wall. The fire of the founders licked at straw, and now they both burned, the fire consuming them together. He opened his eyes and saw the cracks in the bare walls of his caravan. Perhaps it could still be repaired?[16]

While the man returns home and even expects to find a house filled with love, his wife isn't waiting for him or even to speak to him, let alone coming out to greet him. And this is because he desecrated his piece of Eden, the shared space between him and her. The phrase "He peeked in and entered" (*heitzitz u-faga*) is borrowed from the famous Talmudic story (*Hagigah* 14b) where four Jewish sages entered the *pardes* [orchard]—the Garden of Eden, or some other exalted realm of consciousness. In the story, three of them don't return in peace, and one of those three, Ben Zoma, "peeks and is wounded" (*heitzitz ve-nifga*). In our story, the word "is wounded" is exchanged with "he wounds." This means that the wounding is his, and that it is an active wounding, a toxic masculinity that expresses itself in acts of settlement and conquest. The active harming happens in the realm of partnership, within the home itself.

The passage ends: "The fire of the founders licked at straw, and now they both burned, the fire consuming them together. He opened his eyes and saw the cracks in the bare walls of his caravan. Perhaps it could still be repaired?" Here, too, the story alludes to a rabbinic text, this time to a famous teaching of R. Akiva, the only sage to safely enter and exit the *pardes*: "R. Akiva taught: man and woman – if they merit, the Divine Presence rests between them. If they do not merit – they are consumed by fire" (*Sotah* 17a). From the overwhelming ideological flames of the settlement movement's founders, the Divine Presence left the home and the marriage, and all that remained was a consuming fire. The marriage

[16] Unless otherwise noted, all uncited quotations are from "Life as an Arrow." Translations by Shaul David Judelman.

in Froman's story bears no fruit: The table is not set, and instead of the children, the table is surrounded only by empty olive wood chairs. The promises of Psalm 128 do not come to fruition in this home—neither "your wife is like a fertile vine" nor "your children are like olive saplings around your table."

From the very beginning of the story, Froman is sharply asking the questions that interest him: How can one settle the land? To where does the settlement movement lead? What price does it exact? And how can it be redeemed from itself?

The metaphor of the arrow also appears in Jewish tradition as a symbol of wasted seed, or seed that never bore fruit. For example, the sages in the Jerusalem Talmud interpret a verse from Jacob's blessing to Joseph: "But his bow abode firm, and the arms of his hands were made supple, by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob, from there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel" (Genesis 49:24), connecting it to the story of Joseph resisting Potiphar's wife and overcoming his urge to lie with her.

> It is written: "But his bow abode firm." R. Shmuel bar Nachman said: His bow was stretched and then returned; R. Abun said: His seed was scattered and came out from his fingernails, as it is said, "and the arms of his hands were made supple" (*y. Horayot* 2:5).[17]

The sages saw the release of Joseph's seed through his fingertips—rather than through a physical union with a woman—as an act of restraint, demonstrating his moral rather than physical strength. Yet in our story, this act is re-interpreted as a waste of seed and an inability to connect with the woman:

> He looks once again at his hands. His ten long fingers are like hollow pipes of influence: they sowed across all fields and scattered to all directions. Could this hand possibly open like that of a beggar seeking kindness?

The critique of the man, representing the founders of the settlement movement, intensifies. The land becomes a destructive substitute for the woman—the seed does not reach its proper destination and instead falls to waste, simultaneously corrupting the man's own soul. The man's sin in our story is that he chooses only one movement—the outward, masculine force directed toward the land—without coming into contact with the feminine, receptive movement represented by his wife.

The possibility of change and repair in this story is presented here as a question: "Could this hand possibly open like that of a beggar seeking kindness?" Could the movement of occupation and settlement, represented here by the hands that have worked both the land and the winds,

[17] And cf. *Sotah* 36b: "'And the arms of his hands were made supple,' meaning that he dug his hands into the ground and his semen was emitted between his fingernails" (Koren Steinsaltz translation).

endure a transformation from a limb of action and impact (masculine) to open (and thus feminine) hands of receptivity?[18]

The Motif of the Arrow in Rebbe Nachman's Story of the Seven Beggars

The contrast between the motifs of the active arrow and the receiving hand is built on a reference to Rebbe Nachman's "Story of the Seven Beggars" (*Sippurei Ma'asiyot* 13). In the middle of the tale, one of the figures tells of an attempt to save a princess, or, as interpreted by Froman, the feminine foundation of reality. In Froman's story, the protagonist tries to repair the damage to his marriage and suggests to his wife that they read together from Rebbe Nachman's stories. He opens with the chapter of the sixth beggar,who claimed that he had no hands precisely because he had tremendous strength in his hands but used them for something else. Within the framework of "Story of the Seven Beggars," arrows receive a place of prominence when the sixth beggar takes the stage, and Froman's protagonist immediately applies the tale to his own life:

> "*One [beggar] boasted that he had such strength and power in his hands that when he shot an arrow, he could pull it back towards him.*" He paused and listened closely: Above them hovered the question: Could he retrieve the arrows he had shot at her throughout his years of activity? And the sound of her wounded wings, struggling to hold her weight, was heard in the air.

The protagonist realizes as he reads that true strength is measured in the ability to retrieve the arrows—in other words, the ability to recover from masculine power. In simpler terms, by limiting the force and ideology inherent in the settlement activity, he would metaphorically retrieve the arrows that he had shot at his wife during his years of ideological activism. The story depicts his wife as a bird flying through the air, with wounded wings and nowhere to rest—reminiscent, of course, of the biblical flood and Noah's sending of the dove to see if the waters had receded and if it could find rest on the land. This suggests that, at the exact time that the protagonist sought to inherit and possess the land, he actually drove his wife away. The image of the wounded bird with no place to rest also alludes to the *Tikkunei Zohar*'s portrayal of the *Shekhinah* as a bird, which persists in an exiled and desolate state, flying without the ability to rest on land.[19]

The man in the story understands that he must begin a process of repair within the home and seeks to study Rebbe Nachman's text with his wife as an act of healing. The lines between Rebbe Nachman's story and Froman's protagonist blend

[18] Cf. *Hasidim Tsohakim Mizeh*, §2: "The settlements are the fingers of a hand extended out in peace, safeguarding peace."

[19] *Tikkunei Zohar*, Introduction, 1b.

as the latter searches desperately for a way out of his personal-political crisis.

> He thought again and whispered: "He can still return [the arrow]." He who knows to despise or fear retreat—does he also know how to return? "But what kind of arrow can he return, etc." He replied: "A certain type of arrow he can return." I said to him: "If so, you cannot heal the princess since you cannot return or draw back any arrow but a certain type. Therefore, you cannot heal the princess." His voice fell. He knew: she was beyond repair. From every type of arrow, she was wounded. Too many nights she waited for him while he planted caravans on every high hill. Too many times he was not with her. His existence was amidst the checkpoints, the crowds, the excitement of activism. The friction with history. In essence, all the arrows he had shot at her were of one type. As a man of valor. To scatter the arrows away from him and move on. To ascend. To climb. To conquer the mountain. For years he had shot his life outwards, life as an arrow.

The man faces an impasse. First, the movement of retreat is the greatest enemy of the settlement movement. He asks himself whether he, for whom retreat is the greatest existential threat to his life's work, can take up this movement of retreat in his personal life. Second, he realizes that his wife is already too hurt by him. The masculine force of the settlement movement has succeeded in harming the woman—representing the *Shekhinah*—and she hovers in the air, wounded, with no place to rest her feet.

Continuing to read Rebbe Nachman's story, the man discovers the solution:

> *"'I asked him what wisdom can you put in your hands? For there are ten measures of wisdom.' He replied, 'A certain wisdom.' 'If so, you cannot heal the princess because you cannot know her pulse, as you can only discern one pulse, and there are ten types of pulses, and you cannot know more than one pulse because you cannot place in your hands more than one wisdom.'"*
>
> Here his heart stood still. This is the wisdom—to feel the pulse. Many times he had taught his wife as now, but he had never seen the wisdom as clear as in this moment. Like a meteor, it came down from the heavens and crushed him: To give wisdom is to feel the pulse.

He suddenly understands that the repentance and repair he needs cannot be accomplished by his hands or his male organ, but only by his heart. The person who can heal the princess must possess the wisdom of the pulse. He must listen to the heart and hear the pulse of reality. In other words,

to heal and repair the feminine aspect of reality, he can no longer impose his opinions and actions on reality but must listen to reality itself and the pulse of life within it. However, as the story goes on, his study of Nachman's tale casts a shadow on the solution he has found—his realization may have come too late.

> "'*For there is a story that once a king desired a princess and endeavored with tricks to capture her, but the king did not know what to do to her. Meanwhile, her love for him became corrupted little by little, and each time it became more and more corrupted.*' … Like Amnon and Tamar, he managed to think, under the tumbling words. *'So she too lost her love for him more and more each time. She hated him and fled from him...*'"
>
> The text sealed his fate. Pain froze his body. His bones dried up. His hope was lost. He was condemned. With difficulty, he looked directly at her—to see his wife fleeing from his house. His eyes met hers, on the edge of the two abysses before him, she stopped. Abyss called unto abyss. The sound of the waves and breakers they had crossed. The arrow that would not return crossed them both. His hands groped with no handhold to be held. Forward and backward at once. The beating of his heart seemed to echo in the air and fill the room.

In this description, there appears to be no way back: The man cannot repent, the damage has already been done and cannot be healed. The man tries with all his might to cling to the actions he knows: He begins to share with her the events of his day and every feverish statement he spoke on television, casting his words at her one after the other. But the imagery of these words is no longer like arrows but rather like rings, which join together to form a choke-chain around his neck. He suddenly views the day's events from an external, reflective point of view, and the scene in which he spoke with such fervor appears to him like a scene from a horror play, as he suddenly becomes aware of being trapped within the male paradigm:

> As if possessed, he began to confess to her. The drowning man grasped at a straw and spun with it in a whirlpool, beginning to tell her what he had done today. As he repeated the events to her, ring joined ring, and the heavy chain closed around his neck. He had no more defense. He saw his day's work as if it were a terrifying play. Everything culminated in his appearance today on television. Finally, he was given the opportunity to explain to the Israeli people the decision of the Council. In the fire of enthusiasm, he shot arguments that could not be

> answered, straight to the heart of the defeatist public opinion. He gave and gave again irrefutable proofs that there was no way—no way at all—to accept its state of mind. In the closed studio, there is no way to feel the pulse of the listeners, but he was sure that public opinion could only follow him.

At this point, when masculinity overflows its banks and tries to justify itself through self-inflating words, he suddenly experiences a complete fall into the abyss and a sense of returning to his source, recognizable by its circular imagery. These images began with rings joining into a choking chain and continued into the image of an egg.

> Into the abyss, he fell, down, down, for the promised land seemed to flee beneath him. He sank rapidly, and in great terror, a deep darkness descended after him like a vulture. [20] Then he raised his hands—he knew there was nothing left to hold on to. He who does not know how to give, take, and feel has no hands. He threw them away from himself and withdrew into himself. Not only did his hands disappear, but also his legs, and the rest of his limbs; everything seemed to contract towards the navel. All the branches returned to their root. During the fall, his body turned into a rounded egg that kept shrinking until it was the size of a grain of earth. His thought encompassed the point, he gave up everything, tore all his perceptions and all his feelings, and they flew around him.

The surrender of the many limbs and the return through the navel to the point of origin allows him a kind of death and rebirth. This process is elucidated by the employment of circular imagery: navel, rounded egg, grain of earth, point. The transition from linear phallic imagery, such as arrows, to circular imagery is critical to understanding the transformation the protagonist undergoes—from the masculine to the feminine.

Connecting to the Feminine Element of Reality – Circumcision in the *Zohar*

Given Froman's deep and persistent engagement with the *Zohar*, it is unsurprising that his story resonates deeply with the *Zohar*'s understanding of gender—both in its essentialism, and in the way it sees gender relations as underlying the very stability of reality itself. The *Zohar*'s understanding of the relationship between the masculine and the feminine, and particularly this relationship's connection with circumcision, provides the backdrop for the resolution of "Life as an Arrow." After the protagonist's dramatic fall,

[20] Cf. Genesis 15:11.

> He saw a fire passing between the pieces.[21] This was the sign of the covenant (*ot-berit*). The hovering over the water ceased, and, from the chaos, a new land was created…[22]

The *ot-berit*, the sign of the covenant, is a classic Zoharic term for circumcision. As Froman interprets the *Zohar*, "circumcision" is an expansive mystical symbol, referring not just to the physical cutting of the male's flesh, but also to the joining of the masculine and feminine divine powers through stamping the feminine upon the masculine. The *Zohar* understands circumcision (*berit milah*) to be a world-founding act, similar to the covenant (*berit*) that constitutes and maintains the relationship between a husband and wife.

> Come and see: When the blessed Holy One created the world, it was created only through Covenant, as is said: *Bereshit*, *In the beginning, God created* (Genesis 1:1)—namely, *berit*, covenant, for through Covenant the blessed Holy One erected and sustains the world, as is written: *Were it not for My covenant day and night, I would not have established the laws of heaven and earth* (Jeremiah 33:25). For Covenant is the nexus of day and night, inseparable.
>
> Rabbi El'azar said, "When the blessed Holy One created the world, it was on condition: 'When Israel appears, if they accept Torah, fine; if not, I will reduce you back to chaos. The world was not firmly established until Israel stood at Mount Sinai and accepted Torah; then the world stood firm. Ever since that day, the blessed Holy One has been creating worlds. What are they? Human couplings, for since then the blessed Holy One has been matchmaking, proclaiming: 'The daughter of so-and-so for so-and-so!' These are the worlds He creates.[23]

The *Zohar* here makes a radical claim: Without the covenant, the world could revert to chaos and void. This passage describes the covenant as the connection between day and night, between the people of Israel and their God, as well as the bond between the masculine and feminine. Indeed, the man in our story experiences the breach of the covenant between him and his wife as a return to a state of chaos: "Into the abyss, he fell, down, down, for the promised land seemed to flee beneath him." The land represents the woman,

[21] Froman continues to reference Genesis 15, here 15:17.

[22] This section of "Life as an Arrow" translated by Levi Morrow.

[23] *Zohar* I 89a. *Zohar* translation from the Pritzker edition by Daniel Matt.

fleeing from him, leaving him plunged into the abyss. As his toxic, conquering masculinity has destroyed his relationship with his wife, so too the relationship between Gush Emunim and the land.

Another Zoharic passage discussing Abraham's circumcision presents a homiletic reading of the verse, "And your people are all righteous; they shall inherit the land forever" (Isaiah 60:21). The homily asks why the verse claims that all of Israel is righteous, given that there are wicked individuals within the people who violate the laws of the Torah. The *Zohar* answers that the righteousness it speaks of is connected to the act of circumcision as a union of the masculine (the *sefirah* of *Yesod* and the male organ) and the feminine (the *sefirah* of *Malkhut*).

This Zoharic homily directly raises the key theopolitical question which underlies Froman's short story: Who are the righteous that can inherit the land? What is the act of righteousness that enables a person to inherit the land? The *Zohar* answers:

> But so it has been taught in the mystery of our Mishnah: Happy are Israel who bring a favorable offering to the blessed Holy One, offering up their sons on the eighth day. When they are circumcised, they enter this fine share of the blessed Holy One, as is written: *The righteous one is the foundation of the world* (Proverbs 10:25). Having entered this share of the Righteous One, they are called righteous—truly, all of them righteous! So, they will inherit the land forever, as is written: *Open for me gates of righteousness.... through which the righteous will enter* (Psalms 118:19–20). Those who have been circumcised are called righteous. …
>
> *The righteous will inherit the land* (ibid. 37:29). *They will inherit the land le-olam*, forever. What does *le-olam* mean? As we have established in our Mishnah. This word has already been discussed among the Companions. It has been taught: What prompted Scripture not to call him Abraham until now? So we have established: Until now, he was not circumcised; once he was, he entered this ה (he), and *Shekhinah* inhered in him. Then he was called Avraham, Abraham, corresponding with what is written: These are the generations of heaven and earth *be-hibbare'am*, when they were created (Genesis 2:4)—it has been taught: *be-he bera'am*, With a ה He created them; and it has also been

> taught: *be-Avraham*, through Abraham."[24]

In other words, the act of circumcision marks a person with the seal of the "righteous," represented by the *sefirah* of *Yesod*. According to the *Zohar*, the term "land" signifies the *sefirah* of *Malkhut*, that is, the divine reality also known as the *Shekhinah*. Therefore, circumcision, the ability to create a covenant through "offering up"—as opposed to conquest and domination—joins the masculine element, *Yesod*, to the feminine element, *Malkhut*, which is the *Shekhinah*, and thereby leads to inheriting the land.

The seal in the flesh enables a person to come into contact with the feminine element, referred to as "land." The seal itself is a circular cut around the phallus. Only after Abraham was circumcised could the *Shekhinah* dwell within him—as represented by the letter ה added to his name. From the moment the feminine element was sealed in Abraham's flesh, he became able to inherit the land, meaning he could establish a connection and a sense of belonging with the land, which to the *Zohar* is nothing other than the *Shekhinah*.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have analyzed R. Menachem Froman's short story, "Life as an Arrow." Framing the story with his understanding of literary writing as a feminine act, I located Froman's writing of stories, poems, and plays within his broader concerns to elevate the feminine, and his sense that Judaism itself needs a feminine revolution. Zionism, he says, was supposed to be one such feminine revolution. "Life as an Arrow" makes it clear that Gush Emunim and the settlement movement—and perhaps Religious Zionism as a whole—have not created the feminist revolution for which he hoped. Instead, they have become a masculinist ideological project of territorial domination—in need of their own feminist revolution. Thus "Life as an Arrow" ends with its protagonist abandoning his masculinist projects in a desperate—if doomed—attempt to restore his relationship with his wife, to reintroduce an element of covenant (*berit*) into his life. For as the *Zohar* teaches, the land is inherited not through conquest but through covenant—not through the masculine qualities of domination and power but through the feminine qualities of openness, receptivity, and faith:

> His broken, war-making hands melted away. In essence, he had no hands at all. Yet he was not an amputee (*ba'al-mum*)—his hands were steady (*emunah*), outspread in prayer.[25]

[24] *Zohar* I 93a. Matt translation.

[25] This section of "Life as an Arrow" translated by Levi Morrow.

Why is Tabernacle Construction the Foundation of Shabbat?

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Children who grow up in Shabbat-observing households learn to develop a fine-tuned, deeply embodied intuition for what is proscribed on Shabbat and what is allowed or even encouraged. But those of us who must coordinate our lives with people who are unfamiliar with Shabbat observance often struggle to explain the logic behind these parameters. Even our closest, most sympathetic friends who are given a sense of the beauty of the Shabbat experience, and even those who can appreciate that there may be something very valuable in a collective break from quotidian life every seventh day, may find it hard to grasp what is allowed and what is not.

We, in turn, often struggle to explain the method to our madness. It certainly does not help to explain that Shabbat proscriptions are derived from the 39 types of *melakhah* or 'creative labor' delineated by the rabbis. For one thing, anyone who is conversant with the Torah will reasonably ask where these 39 types can be found, and they will most likely not be satisfied by the claim that they can be derived from the set of actions taken to build the Tabernacle. After all, this idea is not explicit in the biblical text. Particularly if our friend is Christian, they may even begin to harbor the suspicion that the rabbis invented a legal framework out of whole cloth. It does not help that the rabbis themselves acknowledged that the laws of Shabbat are "suspended as if on a strand of hair" (Hagigah 1:8) without providing a rationale for why this is nonetheless theologically justifiable.

Meanwhile, if our friend is a scholar who is aware that the sabbath cycle is the historical foundation for the temporal platform we know today as the seven-day week,[1] they might also be puzzled. Such a scholar should expect that just as the origin of civil calendars has a straightforward logic (for dating contracts and public events requiring substantial investment and planning), and just as the origin of ancient market cycles has a straightforward (commercial) logic, the same would be true of the sabbath cycle. But what is the logic underlying the idea that Shabbat is based in Tabernacle construction?

In resolving this puzzle, observe first that the rabbis in fact had quite a good scriptural foundation for grounding the parameters of Shabbat observance in Tabernacle construction. As pointed out by many commentators, the Torah

[1] Although internet sources and even some scholarly sources claim that the week emerged prior to its earliest attestations in Israelite/Judean society, or that it was invented independently in Rome, there is in fact no evidence for these claims and very strong reasons to doubt them. This is covered in the book manuscript I am currently completing, and the interested reader can email me for more information. For now, the best source remains Eviatar Zerubavel, *The Seven-Day Circle: The History and Meaning of the Week* (University of Chicago Press, 1985). Archived.

twice links Shabbat observance to Tabernacle construction – first in God issuing a warning to the people, through Moses, that they must not engage in Tabernacle-building on Shabbat (Exodus 31:13), and then in Moses providing a special preamble on Shabbat observance (including the news that its violation is a capital offense and that it is forbidden to light fires on Shabbat) before the command to build the Tabernacle (35:2-3). In addition, the term *melakhah* is almost never used in the Torah except in the context of Shabbat and Tabernacle-construction. This, moreover, is part of a much deeper set of literary connections (noticed by many commentators)[2] between the Torah's account (in Genesis 1-2:3) of God's creating the world as a place for humankind to dwell in God's world and its account (in Exodus 35-40) of the building of the Tabernacle as a place for God to dwell in the human world. Finally, R. Yoel Bin-Nun has shown convincingly (and uncovered an independent tradition preserved in the *Midrash Hagadol* of David bar Amram al-Adani of 14th century Yemen) that the tradition of 39 categories seems to be anchored in the 39 newly constructed elements that are (twice) described in constructing the Tabernacle and the priestly vestments.[3]

Once we accept the premise that the Torah goes out of its way to ground the laws of Shabbat in Tabernacle construction, the heart of the puzzle comes more quickly into view. Or at least it should, perhaps especially if we don't take the Shabbat for granted and instead imagine a world where the sabbath cycle (and week more generally) is unknown. This is the deeper puzzle that our Christian or scholarly friend might wonder about: the *logic* of the Shabbat-Tabernacle link. We might frame the puzzle as follows:

Say you were God and you were intent on establishing the Shabbat cycle as a perpetual institution when, prior to this, there had been no such institution– no continuous, globally synchronous, cycle of days, let alone one that pivots on a day in which 'creative labor' is forbidden.[4] There were many ways you could distinguish such labor from other activities. What would make you choose Tabernacle construction for this purpose rather than any other productive

[2] For contemporary overviews and syntheses see e.g., Nahum Sarna, Chapter 8 ("The Tabernacle") in *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (Schocken, 1986). R Jonathan Sacks, "Two Narratives of Creation." Covenant & Conversation, 2007. R Shai Held, "Building a Home for God." *Center for Jewish Leadership and Ideas*, 2014.

[3] See Dr. R. Yoel Bin-Nun, "The Textual Source for the 39 Melachot of Shabbat." *TheTorah.Com.* The Hebrew original may be downloaded at https://tanach.org/shmot/39Ryoel.doc.

[4] As I have discussed in previous *Lehrhaus* essays, the plain text of the Torah presents the seven-day week as a new invention that is first introduced in Exodus 16. This reading has a long pedigree in Jewish tradition (consider e.g., elements 10-11 in the text of *Dayenu*, Jubilees 50:1, and Nehemiah 9) and is best represented by R. Aryeh Kaplan (see his *Day of Eternity*, pp. 14-15) among modern commentators.

activity?

Another way of putting this question is to wonder why the Torah (or would-be inventor of the sabbath cycle) is so focused on construction workers. They are only a small fraction of society at any point in time. Why should their experience be paramount? One might be tempted to beg this question, by proposing that the link to construction– at least in the rabbinic interpretations of the 39 types of *melakhah*– is so diffuse that the link to construction is essentially invisible and unimportant. But then doesn't that defeat whatever purpose the Torah had in linking Tabernacle construction and Shabbat? *If it's meant to be general, don't link it to the Tabernacle!*

In what follows, I will offer a resolution to this puzzle. In short, I will suggest that Tabernacle-construction is in fact an exquisite and inspiring choice for setting the parameters of Shabbat observance because it signals a deep message about the threat of authoritarian tyranny with Shabbat (and therefore the week) instituted as a bulwark against such tyranny. Put differently, a polity in which authorities are committed to Shabbat is one in which they are restrained in what they can demand and extract from the individuals and communities who are subject to their power. Put even more succinctly: *Looming behind Shabbat is the threat of mass enslavement, with Shabbat as its antidote*.

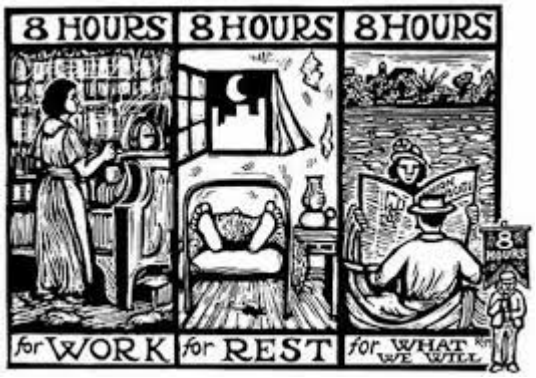
This message may not be very clear to us on a typical Shabbat. But it becomes tragically clearer in situations like Hamas captivity when Jews are prevented from observing Shabbat. And it is certainly clear in situations like Nazi concentration camps where Jews were forced to engage in nonstop work, especially of a demeaning or dangerous nature. Such conditions may be outside our personal experience, but they have occurred at many times in history. In fact, and as we shall see, the Torah itself describes how Israel was subject to such conditions when they were drafted into large-scale construction projects – with the glaring exception of the Tabernacle project. So what's hard for us to see today would have been quite clear to the ancient audience for the Torah. And as we will see, the Rabbinic Sages were quite attuned to this message of the Torah's as well.

The 19th Century West as Entry Point

To see the Tabernacle-Shabbat construction in a new light, it is useful to reflect on something else we may take for granted– how rare it is in the history of settled civilization for the question of how much time the common members of society[5] should devote to work to be prominent in public discourse.

[5] That is, people who have no special status, pedigree, or authority that might give them an unusually high degree of control over their schedules.

To be sure, this question has significant prominence today, and it had even greater prominence in the 19th and early 20th centuries in the West. Starting with the early stages of the industrial revolution in Britain, various forms of this question rose to the fore. The question of how many days per week should be devoted to work would not become a major focus for another century or so, as it was not yet imaginable that it could be possible or feasible for work to be limited to as few as five days a week. But it is obvious that the entire 24-hour cycle cannot be devoted to work, at least not by a single person, and so the question of how many of those hours should be allocated to work was quite salient. In particular, the idea of "8 hours for work, 8 hours for rest, and 8 hours for what you will" was promoted by the Welsh capitalist and social reformer Robert Owen in the 1820s and adopted by the British and American labor movements by the 1880s, where it became a cause celebre. In the 1910s, Henry Ford became world renowned, in part due to his commitment to an 8-hour day. And it was finally enshrined into federal law in the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act, together with the 40-hour week (with 150% pay mandated for hourly workers who go beyond these limits). Since then, the issue of the length of the work day has largely died down, though a series of 4-day workweek movements have arisen over the ensuing decades.



A few moments' reflection is sufficient to explain why the question of how much time workers should work rose to such importance in the 19th century. Before the industrial revolution, the vast majority of workers worked in agriculture or occupations that were shaped by the economic and social rhythms of agriculture. Those rhythms can be extremely demanding, especially during high seasons when the work often exceeds the number of hands available and there is enormous time pressure to get the work done for fear of economic loss. We should thus not be surprised that of the three major pieces of legislation in world history that introduce restrictions on the work week, each pays special attention to the often overwhelming demands of farming. In particular, Constantine's Sunday laws of the 320s CE and the U.S. Fair Labor Standards Act each provides a special carve out for agriculturists. For its part, the Torah insists (Exodus 34: 21) that Israelite farmers must observe Shabbat even during plowing and harvest seasons.[6]

[6] This verse is also interpreted as referring to sabbatical law (ee Rashi, *ad loc*) and to the 'Omer sacrifice (*Menachot* 65b)

Whereas the demands of agriculture on worker time were ancient and well-known by the early 19th century, there was something dramatically new afoot. On the one hand, the commodity capitalism of the 19th century entailed intense pressure for owners of "the means of production" (in Marx's influential language) to extract as much labor as they could get from workers.[7] This was because capitalists would borrow significant sums to obtain the real estate and machinery necessary for extracting or producing commodities at high volume, with special intensity at periods when demand was very high. This pressure was so great because if a given capitalist did not supply the market at times when the commodity was scarce (and profits were therefore high), rivals were sure to get there first and drive him into bankruptcy. This dynamic would regularly lead to oversupply, with market crashes, the failure of producers and banks, and a starving proletariat. This in turn motivated workers to take any job they could get under as dangerous and onerous conditions as were available. And so the cycle restarted. Moreover, in addition to getting as much time from workers as they could, capitalists cared a great deal about the *specific shifts* that workers were in the factory. This is because both the scale and the complexity of operations was increasing, and workers needed to be present *at the same time* to coordinate their work with one another.

But these pressures on workers are insufficient to explain why the question of how much time to devote to work became so central to (and so contested in) public discourse. To flesh out our explanation, recall that the very same period of increasing industrialization was also the period of increasing democratization. In short, if the Industrial Revolution transformed peasants and craftsmen into workers, the American and French Revolutions transformed subjects into citizens. And these citizens were increasingly assertive of their rights, with growing attention to better working terms and conditions. Moreover, with the rise of modern and distributed communication technologies, citizen-workers were better able to organize and press their claims.

If the revolutionary conditions of the 19th century drove the question of the time devoted to work vs. non-work to greater prominence in public discourse than at any time in history, this was not the first time such questions were prominent. Notably however, each such case can be understood as resulting from the presence of some version of the 19th century conditions. In particular, not only are there cases where peasants or serfs revolted due to the onerous demands (including on their time) placed on them by landowners, but there are cases such as the textile workers of the 14th century Ciompi Revolt

[7] The conditions of 19th century commodity capitalism are not representative of all forms of capitalism, which can be experienced as emancipatory in various respects. That is certainly true for the market. For an eye-opening example of how regular markets can be experienced as a source of liberation (from slavery), see Natasha Lightfoot, "Sunday Marketing, Contestations over Time, and Visions of Freedom among Enslaved Antiguans After 1800." *The CLR James Journal* 13, no. 1 (2007), 109–35.

in Florence, whose grievances anticipate those of industrial laborers half a millennium later. Put differently, it is hard to see why such questions would be prominent in a given culture unless a production system had arisen that created strong incentives for employers to extract as much labor time as possible from regular people and the workers had some ability to "cry out" from the onerous work (Exodus 2:23) and be heard.

Corvée as Key Context for Exodus and Shabbat

As the reference in the prior sentence suggests, one way to read the opening chapters of the book of Exodus is as a critique of the employment system that most resembles capitalism before its rise: the "corvée" -- a system in which a king or ruler taxes the time of peasants or commoners, by having them participate in public works projects for significant portions of a year. This system has gone by many names in world history, but historians have come to use this French term in the wake of the French Revolution; resentment about the corvée was a central theme in the *cahiers de doleances* (lists of grievances) that animated the revolution. There was nothing particularly unusual about the pre-revolutionary French version of this system. If we review the history of large scale, settled civilizations (from China to the Near East to Mesoamerica), any time we observe major public works projects, the basic assumption among historians and archeologists is that the work was done by workers who were drafted for months at a time (often outside the most intense periods of the agricultural cycle) by the king.

Accordingly, it is widely accepted among academic bible scholars[8] that the opening chapters of the book of Exodus are describing a corvée system, and the same goes for the construction of Solomon's Temple in I Kings (6-7). In neither case do these systems exhibit the hallmarks of slavery as it was practiced in the Caribbean or United States,[9] in which workers were commodities to be bought and sold by private enslavers who frequently separated family members from one another. Nor do these systems exhibit the hallmarks of slavery common throughout history and particularly the ancient Near East as referenced elsewhere in the Torah, in which enslavement occurs via kidnapping (Genesis 37:28), conquest (Joshua 9:22-27) or debt peonage (Genesis 47:19). Rather, Exodus 1 describes a large-scale construction project run by the state for which workers (including native Egyptians) are drafted. And I Kings (5:27-28) is explicit in describing how this draft worked:

> King Solomon imposed a labor draft on all Israel; the levy came to 30,000 men. He sent them to the Lebanon in shifts of 10,000 a

[8] Sarna, 1986. *Op cit*.

[9] Note in particular that the Israelites are not treated as chattel, and (accordingly) families are not broken up.

> month: they would spend one month in the Lebanon and two months at home. Adoniram was in charge of the labor draft.

In many attested cases of corvée in the ancient world, workers apparently supported the project and were treated humanely, and sometimes quite well.[10] Accordingly, corvée contracts in Mesopotamia exhibit reasonable terms of work (including regular days off, though apparently without giving all workers off at the same time).[11] The biblical stories of corvée deviate from these patterns, in that they describe suffering and/or resentment at the corvée, eventually leading to its failure and to a successful, divinely sanctioned rebellion by the workers.

To be sure, since I Kings does not describe working conditions or day-to-day rhythms under Solomon's corvée, it is unclear whether it was harder on workers than typical ancient Near Eastern corvée systems. Seemingly not. Solomon gave workers one month off out of three (I Kings 5:28); he "did not reduce any Israelites to slavery *'-v-d*" (9:22) as he did non-Israelites (9:20-21). Moreover, the northern tribes' petition for relief merely asks for a lessening of the workload, not the elimination of the corvée (12:7), which by then had been institutionalized and applied to other public works projects (9:15). Indeed, the northern tribes explicitly pledge to serve (*'-v-d*) Rehoboam in perpetuity (12:7). It may thus be that the source of the northern tribes' resentment was ultimately political, deriving less from any mistreatment than from the fact that they were subjected to corvée by a Judean monarch. Certainly, it didn't help that the young and insecure Rehoboam rejected the elders' advice to accede to the request (and frame his role as the people's servant [*'-v-d];* 12:7) but instead accepted the advice of his fellow "children" of the court and responded with:

> My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father flogged you with whips, but I will flog you with scorpions. (12:11)[12]

But if the biblical lessons about what is

[10] As Steinkeller puts it, "the national building projects" undertaken under Mesopotamian corvée "functioned, at least on one level, as social events, whose spirit was akin to those of public festivals…" And "contrary to the common belief (which goes back to Herodotus, who thought the pyramids were built by an army of slaves numbering 100,000 individuals), these laborers were well treated and amply fed." Piotr Steinkeller, "Corvée Labor in Ur III Times". *From the 21st Century B.C. to the 21st Century A.D.: Proceedings of the International Conference on Neo-Sumerian Studies Held in Madrid*, 22–24 July 2010, edited by Steven J. Garfinkle and Manuel Molina, University Park, USA: Penn State University Press, 2013, 347-424.

[11] Natalia Kozlova, "Absence from Work in Ur III Umma: Reasons and Terminology." 313-332 in Garfinkle and Molina.

[12] One could read this line as suggesting that Solomon had indeed maltreated the corvée workers. But especially given the hyperbolic nature of this line (referencing whipping via scorpions), he seems to be speaking in metaphorical terms. Again, it is telling that the narrator describes no such maltreatment (cf., the narrator of Exodus) and that the northern workers themselves do not describe such maltreatment.

problematic about Solomon's corvée are subtle and political, this is hardly the case for the Pharaonic systems described in Exodus. The Torah is clear (Exodus 1:8-10) that Pharaoh's corvée is a ruse by which to subjugate the Israelites and thereby neutralize a political threat, one likely made more effective by the majority's resentment towards an erstwhile pariah minority that appeared complicit in the majority's prior enslavement.[13] And while the first incarnation of the corvée described in chapter 1 culminates in a program of infanticide (one that would ostensibly undermine the corvée by eliminating its male workers); in the Pharaonic corvée's second incarnation eighty years later (Exodus 5), it culminates in a program that echoes Nazi concentration camps in its divide and conquer system of control and in its explicit effort to break the spirit of the workers. This is not typical corvée. Rather, the reader is treated to two dramatic illustrations of what can happen when an otherwise difficult but potentially fair system for mobilizing popular contributions to important public projects is warped and corrupted by tyrants bent on subjugation.

As I discuss in a previous *Lehrhaus* essay, chapter 5 of Exodus also hints at an antidote to this system – i.e,. the institution of Shabbat. Based on a midrash in which the Sages described this as a moment in which Pharaoh abrogated a sabbath cycle which Moses had persuaded his step grandfather, the previous pharaoh, to introduce,[14] I suggested that this chapter can be usefully labeled "Pharaoh's anti-shabbat tantrum."[15] The textual clues to this midrashic idea are abundant, from the fact that the first time a biblical character references the verb *sh-b-t* is in the context of Pharaoh's incredulity that Moses and Aaron would be foolish enough to give the people a rest from their work; to the repeated insistence that work be conducted 'day after day'; to the use of the rare sabbath-related root *k-sh-sh* to describe the pernicious social competition that threatens the Shabbat; to the strong intertextual links to chapter 16 (known traditionally as "parashat ha-man"), when a system of work (for collecting food, the manna) is instituted that resembles the rhythm of the brutal Pharaonic corvée in its daily gathering activity on the surface, but with major and radical differences: the workers were gathering life-sustaining food rather than useless bits of straw; they were not competing with one another because there was enough for everyone; and they enjoyed a full day of rest every seven days when they could enjoy the (divine) king's bounty "without any fear." (Micah 4:4; cf., I Kings 5:5).[16]

[13] See Ezra Zuckerman Sivan, "Where is the Justice in the Tenth Plague?" *The Lehrhaus,* April 18, 2019.

[14] Exodus Rabbah 5:18; cf., 1:28.

[15] See Ezra Zuckerman Sivan, "Between Shabbat and Lynch Mobs." *The Lehrhaus*, June 15, 2017

[16] The reference to the famous imagery of the good life under a benevolent king is licensed by the climactic call of Exodus 16:29 "to dwell under" the Shabbat. As I have noted, the only other uses of this phrase in the Bible are in reference to "dwell under a vine and fig leaf" of Micah 4:4 and I Kings 5:5. See Zuckerman Sivan, Ezra. "When Shabbat first provided a Taste of the World to Come," January 28, 2021.

With these textual elements and themes in mind, the aforementioned midrash's elaboration on Exodus 5 hardly seems fanciful:

> It teaches us that they (the Israelites) had in their hands scrolls with which they would divert themselves/seek salvation from Shabbat to Shabbat. When Pharaoh said to them, "the work will (now) become (an even) heavier (burden) upon you such that you will do it and not be diverted/find salvation in false matters (Exodus 5:9)" (he means) 'Don't be diverted/find salvation' i.e., you (can't be allowed) to rest/exhale on Shabbat.[17]

The deep point here is clear: a king – or large-scale employer such as the 19th century commodity capitalist – who in his bid for control has so distorted the system of production such that it has become a system of pure subjugation – cannot afford to give the workers any extended time off. And he certainly cannot give his effective slaves off *at the very same time*, such that they have the capacity to engage in their own civil society's activities and culture. They will soon come to conspire against the tyrant, won't they? Such a tyrant may even see threats in the people's engagement in diversions and cultural activities. Give them an inch and they will take a foot.

The Shabbat-Tabernacle Link as Commitment to Popular Welfare

Readers of the chapters describing the construction of the Tabernacle (Exodus 35-40; read this past Shabbat and the upcoming one) or of the instructions on building and consecrating it (Exodus 25-31) do not usually consider this project in the context of the opening chapters of Exodus. After all, the Israelites' contribution to the Tabernacle construction is depicted as voluntary and indeed enthusiastic (36:7). But we should not take this enthusiasm for granted. On the contrary, the very fact that Exodus is bookended by construction projects invites us to consider each case as a counterfactual to the other. After all, each case begins with a king (Pharaoh in the former, God in the latter) confiding in advisors (Pharaoh's court in the former, Exodus 1:9-10; Moses in the latter, 25-31) about his plans for a massive construction project in which the people will contribute their time and creative energies (and in the case of the Tabernacle, their valuables).

If it seems a stretch to link Pharaoh's corvée

[17] Exodus Rabbah, 5:18.

systems with the construction of the Tabernacle[18] where no corvée is described, this link is strengthened when we consider that Solomon's construction of the Temple was clearly a corvée system and that it is thematically and intertextually linked, both to Tabernacle construction[19] and to Pharaoh's corvée.[20] The latter connection is clearer when we consider that Solomon's corvée is linked to the devolution of Solomon's kingdom into warring northern and southern kingdoms, each led by ruthless and godless leaders. As noted by many commentators, while on the surface the text of chapters 4-9 presents an inspiring vision of a unified, prosperous, peaceful, and god-fearing kingdom (punctuated by the Shabbat-resonant vision of each man living under his own vine and fig tree; I Kings 5:5),[21] the subtext presents a king who is becoming increasingly prone to concentrating power in himself backed by a cult of personality. Similarly, while we have seen that there may have been nothing explicitly problematic about Solomon's corvée, it risked sowing resentment among northern tribes. The lesson is that even the greatest genius in the history of Israel's leadership can fail to manage such production systems well – perhaps because he is too taken with his own genius and doesn't appreciate that it will die with him.

The warnings associated with the biblical presentations of corvée should lead us to appreciate the message of the Torah's depiction of Tabernacle construction and to be amazed by the significance of the Torah's linking it to the parameters of Shabbat. In short, the Shabbat emerges as what modern game theorists call a "commitment device." This is when a "player" who has multiple options for action chooses to give up one of those options in a way that thereby reduces his power and makes it harder for him to realize his ostensible goals. We should therefore not be surprised that there is no evidence in world history of a king instituting a general rest day for the entire populace, certainly not one that applies even during a corvée (or during high agricultural season, when large landowners and traders will be especially impatient). The issue is not merely that such a king will constrain the amount of labor time he can extract (and thereby suffer the

[18] Some have noted formal similarities between the Tabernacle layout and the layout of the throne tent of Ramesses II; see, e.g., the visual comparison in Joshua Berman, "Was There An Exodus?", Mosaic Magazine, March 2, 2015. These parallels pertain to the physical proportions and space demarcations of the two transportable structures, and to their visual symbology; they do not extend to the system of manpower management utilized to produce the components.

[19] For instance, see the use of *vayakhel* to refer to mobilizing the people at the inception of Tabernacle construction in Exodus 35:1, and at the inception of the dedication of the Temple in I Kings 8:1-2; and see the use of *vayechal* in the conclusion of each project (Exodus 40:33; I Kings 7:1). See also the descriptions of God's dwelling (*sh-k-n*) in the temple/tabernacle (Exodus 25:8, 29:44; 40:35-38; I Kings 6:13 8:12)

[20] See especially the use of the same word *mas* to refer to the draft of the construction project in each case (Exodus 1:11; I Kings 5:27-28). It's also notable that the same term is used for the storage cities (*'arei miskenot*) commissioned by both Pharaoh (Exodus 1:11) and Solomon (I Kings 9:19).

[21] Zuckerman Sivan, "When Shabbat first provided…", *op cit.*

inefficiencies of low "capacity utilization"). It is also that (as the midrash on Exodus 5 suggests), regular universal breaks increase the risks of rebellion.

But now consider a key implication. If you are a king (or a private employer) and you know that you are bound by a commitment to provide regular, universal breaks to your workers, you will surely treat them more benevolently, and indeed be solicitous of them to understand their needs and desires. It becomes important to you to figure out what it takes to prevent thoughts of rebellion from entering your workers'/subjects'/citizens' minds and discourse. On the contrary. You will be more inclined to work with them to find how collective projects – which will always require sacrifices of time and creative energy – can be designed to promote the people's understanding of its welfare.

In his landmark book *Created Equal*,[22] Joshua Berman makes a complementary point. He argues that whereas proclamations of debt release were widely used by ancient Near Eastern kings to reward their subjects for exhibiting the behavior he desired, the Torah is unique in mandating such releases on a set (seven-year) schedule outside of kingly discretion. For the latter, Berman writes,

> the unscheduled and sudden nature of the enactments… would be crucial to their efficacy. Like the devaluation of currency in modern times, the proclamations of debt release cannot appear too predictable, or measures will be taken to circumvent them. By contrast, the Bible addresses debt release as prospective in nature, with the intention that the people will alter their affairs accordingly. Yet surely only a fool will extend a loan knowing that he would not be able to exact repayment. It would thus seem inevitable that credit would dry up within such a system. Yet this goes to the heart of a proper understanding of biblical 'law': the (codes) are themselves presented as a body of teaching. The purpose of biblical law is to shape the form of the polity, not merely to address cases and provide remedy.[23]

The resolution to the puzzle at the outset of this essay is thus straightforward. Why would the inventor of the week – on the Torah's account, God and His agent Moses – define the parameters of the sabbath cycle via the construction of the Tabernacle? The answer is that the institution thereby encodes within it a powerful message about the dangers of tyranny and a device for

[22] Joshua A Berman. *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought*. Oxford, 2008.

[23] *Op cit.,* 99-100.

addressing these dangers.

The Shabbat is thus a remarkable commitment device instituted in the name of a benevolent and far-seeing divine sovereign, one who realizes that a better social order can be built if they constrain their human agents and their successors from using all of their power to control and exploit the people. Indeed, as Berman suggests, the king in such a system has relatively limited capacity to *use his discretion to reward workers with "release" for exhibiting the behavior he deems desirable* (and which may not be in the public interests). But such constraints commit the king to granting a societal schedule that allows the people to regularly gather outside the king's control. And it thereby redirects them to renew their culture and creative energy towards the public welfare.

Of course, the people can often be their worst enemy, given how pernicious competition among them can undermine social cooperation. Indeed, I have argued that while Shabbat-observing Jews have a strong intuition for how the Shabbat reinforces social cooperation and collective identity, the Torah hints that when the sabbath cycle was new, it would have exacerbated the fragility of such cooperation at a particularly vulnerable moment in the people's history.[24] This explains why Shabbat-desecration was a capital crime, and why the Torah goes out of its way to describe how a Shabbat-violator (depicted as a threat to the social order known by modern social science as a "commons-raider") received such punishment (Numbers 15:32-36).

A paradox thus emerges at the foundation of the Shabbat (and thus the week itself). On the one hand, the Torah mandates a shockingly strict level of enforcement of Shabbat rules by powerful authorities,[25] which is motivated by the effort to counter the "horizontal competition" that threatens the Shabbat (and the restoration of creativity,[26] social cooperation, collective identity, and faith in God it is intended to cultivate). But on the other hand, the Torah also mandates a shockingly strict set of *limits* on powerful authorities due to its recognition that the Shabbat

[24] See especially Zuckerman Sivan, "Between Shabbat… "*Op cit.* See also Ezra Zuckerman Sivan, "How to Curtail Pernicious Social Competition: The Legacy of Zelophehad and his Daughters." The Lehrhaus (July 29, 2019). Ezra Zuckerman Sivan, "The Triple Threat to Social Order." *The Lehrhaus* (June 14, 2023).

[25] Notably, these powerful authorities are not kings, but judges. And these judges are expected to follow in Moses's footsteps (perhaps including his hesitation to employ capital punishment against the wood-gatherer without a divine directive that his successors would not be able to access) and his directive, "Justice, justice you shall pursue" (Deut 16:20). Accordingly, although the rabbis view Shabbat violation as a capital offense, they make the conditions for conviction too high to ever be practicable. See Makkot 1:10; Talmud Bavli, *Sanhedrin* 57a–59b, 72a, and 107a.

[26] In a recent address to Cong. Shaarei Tefilah in Newton, Mass., Emily Beck suggested that the juxtaposition of the edict to appoint of Bezalel and Oholiab to oversee Tabernacle construction (Exodus 31:1-11) with the injunction to "nonetheless (despite the imperative to build the Tabernacle) observe Shabbat" (31:13)" reflects the importance of Shabbat as a source of renewal for our creative energies.

and all of its benefits, including political ones, are also threatened by "vertical competition"-- i.e, the tendency of powerful actors to exploit the common people. At the heart of the Shabbat is deep wisdom about both a) when and how public institutions can be used to constrain the people's worst collective tendencies and shape their best tendencies; and b) when and how public institutions can be used to constrain political authorities' worst tendencies and bring out their best tendencies.

Conclusion: The Inspiring Political Theology of Shabbat

The parameters of Shabbat observance – and the weekly cycle for which they laid the foundation – thus carry a powerful and inspiring message that is at once theological and political. This message is also deeply humanistic, in that it addresses humanity's worst collective tendencies with a revolutionary solution. To be sure, the solution is hardly a failsafe. After all, Solomon's failures occurred in a society that had been given the laws of Shabbat and presumably lived by them. Moreover, if the Torah's model is meant to curtail the ability of human kings to exploit the people and it generally seeks to promote the people's welfare, it hardly grants *sovereignty* to the people as modern revolutions claimed to do (even when they were more clearly giving power to the revolutionaries).[27] At the same time, though, it cuts the king down to size, building a set of institutions and norms that greatly constrain him and effectively render him an equal to his fellows.[28] In the Torah, there is a clear, abiding, sovereign: God.

In an insightful essay,[29] Matitiahu Tsevat argued that since the laws of the seven-year sabbatical cycle and the laws of Shabbat are linked by the same unique phrase "Shabbat to/for God,"[30] they must be motivated by a parallel theological principle. And while the Torah does not provide an explicit theological rationale for Shabbat, it does so for the sabbatical laws. As such, the former can be derived from the latter. In particular, since the sabbatical laws enshrine the principle that "the land belongs to God" -- i.e., God is sovereign over the earth and the people are mere "sojourners on

[27] A fascinating irony is worth noting here. The French and Bolshevik revolutions each introduced radical experiments in the temporal organization of day to day life, the central element of the former being a ten-day cycle and the latter including a five-day shift cycle. These campaigns are also linked in that they were justified by an attempt to rid the system of religious backwardness and to promote the public welfare guided by scientific rationality. But there is in fact no scientific basis for preferring one cycle over another, and these campaigns were widely rejected by the people who cherished the weekly cycle, perhaps in part because it was theirs and could not be claimed by any flesh-and-blood ruler. See 28-43 in Zerubavel, *Op cit.*

[28] Berman, *Op cit*.

[29] Matitiahu Tsevat. "The Basic Meaning of the Biblical Sabbath." *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 84: 447-59. 1972.

[30] On Shabbat, see Exodus 16:23-25, 20:10, 31:16; Leviticus 23:3, and Deuteronomy 5:14. On the sabbatical year, see Leviticus 25:2-4.

(it)" (Leviticus 25:23) -- the Shabbat laws reflect a parallel principle:

> Man normally is master of his time. He is free to dispose of it as he sees fit or as necessity binds him. The Israelite is duty-bound, however, once every seven days to assert by word and deed that God is the master of time…. In other words, God's dominion over space and His dominion over time are largely two aspects of the same thing: His dominion over man and especially over Israel. There is, therefore, nothing incongruous nor bold in the conclusion that every seventh day the Israelite is to renounce dominion over time, thereby renounce autonomy, and recognize God's dominion over time and thus over himself. Keeping the sabbath is acceptance of the sovereignty of God.[31]

Tsevat's analysis is persuasive. It is certainly a core message of the Torah's presentation of Shabbat that God is sovereign over the passage of time. But Tsevat's rendition of the Torah's political theology is overly austere and insufficiently humanistic, missing as it does the points developed in the foregoing essay.

The tragic truth is that human beings are never fully the masters of their time, as we face pressures due to our rival efforts to secure resources to ensure our survival and prosperity, and due to the fact that we are always vulnerable to powerful actors and institutions' efforts to leverage and exploit our time. If one views the matter especially pessimistically, one could go as far as to counter Tsevat with the assertion that humans are 'normally' enslaved to one another's' efforts to control our time.

Against this predicament, the Torah teaches that God's sovereignty is a bulwark against such slavery. In fact, it is no mere message, but an *institution* that was deeply implanted in the day-to-day routines of the people of Israel and remains its practice (and which then spread, after a fashion, to the rest of the world) to this day– despite our competitive tendencies and despite the best efforts of tyrants to run roughshod over it. Merely by continuing to provide a regular taste of the good life, it helps to cut the tyrants down to size and declare God's benevolent and humanistic sovereignty.

[31] *Op cit.*, 72. Cf., Berman, *Op cit.,* 100-01.