Humash Humor… Me? Rabbinic Wordplay, Playing on Rabbinics

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I. Start of Play

Everyone loves puns.

To defend the above claim, let us posit the following: a pun is an intentional instance of wordplay, and it works best when both the pun-maker and the pun-recipient are intimately familiar with the played-with words. Many unfavorably associate puns with the specific genre of a long-winded story concluding in an unsubtle punchline, but the world of wordplay is much richer and more variegated than any specific joke template. Indeed, who among us does not relish a delightful repartee characterized by turning the meanings of words on their heads, perhaps in playful banter, or, in more contemporary media, a rap battle? Yet puns pervade more than just specifically humorous settings: they appear, sometimes unbidden, sometimes hidden, sometimes sharply written, in essentially any and every literary and oratorical setting.

The Jewish canon, in both its written and oral instantiations, is rife with wordplay, as one would expect and indeed hope for any significant corpus of text. There are innumerable articles that cover the use of paronomasia (a classically derived word for punning that is somehow both delightful and

joyless) in Biblical and rabbinic literature, and I do not plan to survey them here, but let us highlight just a few brief examples to note the various forms puns can take in our traditional texts, before we examine our main sources.

Joseph's conversations in prison in Genesis 40 can, in the outermost layer of interpretation, be understood largely as playful, providing fertile ground for wordplay to blossom. Far from a wizened oracular sage interpreting the dreams of supplicants, Joseph appears to simply be passing the time chatting with his fellow inmates, the butler and the baker, only occasionally growing wistful. In this interpretation, Joseph would be as surprised as anyone when his predictions of the butler's rise and the baker's demise come to fruition. But let us restrict our focus to two particular exchanges. In v. 13, Joseph predicts that

בְּעוֹד שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים, **יִשָּׂא פַרְעֹה אֶת-רֹאשֶׁךָ**, וַהֲשִׁיבְךָ, עַל-כַּנֶּךָ

In another three days, **Pharaoh will lift up your head**, and restore you to your pedestal.

Employing an idiom of "lifting his head," an idiom that finds a variety of meanings throughout Biblical literature, Joseph predicts that Pharaoh will reverse the butler's fall from grace. Contrast this interpretation with the response he gives to the baker, in v. 19:

בְּעוֹד שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים, **יִשָּׂא פַרְעֹה אֶת-רֹאשְׁךָ מֵעָלֶיךָ**, וְתָלָה אוֹתְךָ, עַל-עֵץ

In another three days, **Pharaoh will lift up your head from upon you**, and hang you on a tree.

Joseph, predicting the baker's death, begins with the exact same set of seven words, but then flips the idiom on its head. One can imagine Joseph pausing for a moment after "Pharaoh will lift up your head," creating the expectation within his captive audience (pun intended) that the baker will emerge with the same fate as the butler, and then announcing, with a smile, "from upon you!" The audience would have presumably been darkly amused by the reversal, and thousands of years later, we readers can, if we try, have a similar reaction.

The above is an instance of a self-contained pun, as it were—linguistic, but not dependent on an external bank of knowledge. For a different sort of pun, let us hurry along in books and years to the Babylonian Talmud, specifically the first chapter of Tractate Pesahim (9b), to arguably the best-known instance of rabbinic wordplay. The Mishnah presented on the previous folio had declared that in determining the necessary extent of examining one's home for *hametz* prior to Pesah, one need not concern oneself with the possibility that a weasel had dragged crumbs from one home to another, because such concerns would preclude any possibility of confidence in cleanliness: rodents could have carried *hametz* across courtyards, or even across a city. The rabbis are not content to leave this statement alone, however: the subsequent Mishnah, after all, maintains that any *hametz* that one maintains

after doing the examination must be kept in a secure location, so as not to necessitate any further searches. Doesn't that imply that we in fact are concerned about the possibility of crumbs spread by members of the order *Rodentia*?

Abaye suggests a resolution to the seeming contradiction between the Mishnayot. Per Rashi's construction of the resolution, on the thirteenth of Nisan, well in advance of the prohibition of *hametz*, we need not concern ourselves with the possibility of rodents carrying food away, because *hametz* is found in abundance, and weasels are not so desperate as to hunt down hidden bread. But on the fourteen of Nisan, when the *hametz* ban is imminent, weasels will surely scurry around to scavenge whatever leaven they can. Rava, understandably, finds this resolution untenable: can weasels read the calendar? Why would a rodent know when Pesah is, and make plans accordingly? But Rava's objection is not simply worded straightforwardly as above. Instead:

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וכי חולדה נביאה היא?

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Is a weasel a prophet?

Of course, a weasel is not a prophet. But *Huldah* (the Hebrew word for weasel, and also a given name) surely was, as we know from 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, a prophet to King Josiah.

Note that in this second example, unlike our earlier instance in Genesis, the literary context does not inherently suggest or invite humor. This is an involved halakhic debate, yet amidst the discourse, Rava slips in a moment of whimsy. And it's a learned whimsy as well: not that knowledge of Tanakh is gatekept from a common audience, but the pun draws on shared founts of knowledge to resonate.

It is this second sort of wordplay, a pun that derives from a corpus known to both the teller and the hearer, that I wish to probe in the remainder of this article. There is truly a vast body of literature focused on the multifarious ways that rabbinic literature makes punny use of Biblical literature, as in the example above. However, I am not aware of any commentary, either from the walls of the beit midrash or the halls of the academy, that specifically treats *rabbinic wordplay on rabbinic sources*. It is perhaps unsurprising that traditional Talmud commentators, typically concerned with explication of content and ideas, would refrain from making note of literary features like wordplay, and the phenomenon is perhaps not widespread enough to merit much academic attention. But I hope to draw the reader's attention to two instances of Hazal punning on Hazal, if for no other reason than to highlight a specific instantiation of the percolation of the oral tradition in the minds and mouths of its own propagators.

II. A Pun (Satisfaction Not Guaranteed)

The second chapter of Tractate Berakhot in the Babylonian Talmud contains, toward its end, a lengthy series of what might be described as rabbinic speech formulas. Under particular circumstances, whether ritual or temporal,

various rabbis would orate particular speeches that, from the text itself, seem to have been carefully and artfully composed. One such example, on 17a, comes from R. Yohanan:

רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן כִּי הֲוָה מְסַיֵּים סִפְרָא דְּאִיּוֹב, אָמַר הָכִי: "סוֹף אָדָם לְמוּת וְסוֹף בְּהֵמָה לִשְׁחִיטָה, וְהַכֹּל לְמִיתָה הֵם עוֹמְדִים. אַשְׁרֵי מִי שֶׁגָּדֵל בַּתּוֹרָה וַעֲמָלוֹ בַּתּוֹרָה, וְעוֹשֶׂה נַחַת רוּחַ לְיוֹצְרוֹ, וְגָדֵל בְּשֵׁם טוֹב וְנִפְטָר בְּשֵׁם טוֹב מִן הָעוֹלָם, וְעָלָיו אָמַר שְׁלֹמֹה: 'טוֹב שֵׁם מִשֶּׁמֶן טוֹב וְיוֹם הַמָּוֶת מִיּוֹם הִוָּלְדוֹ'".

Rabbi Yohanan, when he would conclude the Book of Job, would say as follows: "Man's end is death, and the beast's end is slaughter; all stand to die. Great is he who grew in Torah and whose labor is in Torah, and produces satisfaction to his Creator, and grew with a good name, and departs from the world with a good name. About such a person said Solomon: 'A name is better than good oil, and the day of death from the day of his birth' (Kohelet 7:1)."

R. Yohanan's teaching serves as an appropriate thematic cap for a book like Job, and ties in thematic connections to Kohelet, a book similarly dreary in certain ways. At the end of the day, concludes R. Yohanan, the important thing in this all-too-fleeting life is to live in a God- and man-pleasing way. But let us focus on the literary elements that give this teaching its form. Its parallel clauses—man's death followed by that of an animal, growing up in Torah and with a good name—clearly demonstrate, along with the given context of R. Yohanan's regularly teaching it, that this text is very intentionally composed, and intended, in its current form, to be taught publicly, if not, as became its fate, disseminated in written

materials. One might even imagine that such a teaching is ripe, within its audience, for further reference, analysis, or skillful adaptation.

Such an adaptation appears in what would seem to be a wholly unrelated passage in Masekhet Shabbat (105b), concerning the prohibition of tearing on Shabbat. The Mishnah states that tearing a garment either in anger or in anguish over the death of a loved one, or indeed anyone who acts destructively rather than constructively, is exempt from a Biblical violation of the Sabbath laws. Immediately, the gemara challenges the Mishnah from an unspecified Tannaitic source, which indicates that, to the contrary, tearing in anger or in anguish does in fact result in violation of a Biblical prohibition (as well as sufficing, in the case of grief, for the obligation to tear a garment in response to a death). In seeking to reconcile the two sources, the gemara eventually turns its attention to the specific conflict that the sources present on the severity of tearing a garment in anger. The Talmud initially posits that the two Tannaitic sources derive from two broader, divergent schools of thought regarding intentionality in Shabbat violations: R. Yehudah maintains that a forbidden labor "*she-einah tzerikhah le-gufah*" (a category that we will define imprecisely as "unmotivated by its inherent purpose," generally meaning that the labor was carried out for reasons unrelated to the typical outcome of the labor) is Biblically prohibited, whereas R. Shimon believes that such a labor is only rabbinically prohibited. Thus, the Mishnah is in accord with R. Shimon's position, whereas the countertext is in accord with R. Yehudah's.

Eventually, this framework is accepted by the gemara, but not before a further challenge: R. Yehudah's stance on the severe prohibition of *melakahah she-einah tzerikahah le-gufah* is understood to apply to constructive actions: one's intention was to *produce* a result separate from the typical result of that labor. But would it apply to destructive actions as well, where the actor has no constructive desired outcome? R. Avin finds another way to characterize the angry garment-rending in question that circumvents the question entirely:

אָמַר רַבִּי אָבִין: הַאי נָמֵי מְתַקֵּן הוּא, דְּקָעֲבֵיד נַחַת רוּחַ לְיִצְרוֹ.

R. Avin said: This, too, is a constructive act, because he produces satisfaction for his (evil) inclination.

The remainder of the passage, in challenging the validity of the presented resolution, goes even further than R. Avin, in comparing angry outbursts to idol worship, again drawing on the role played by the evil inclination. But for the purposes of this essay, let us focus on the final four words of R. Avin's response: "he produces satisfaction for his (evil) inclination," or, in an apparent combination of Aramaic and Hebrew, "דקעביד נחת רוח ליצרו." This is, I believe, unambiguously meant as a direct reference to R. Yohanan's phrase in Berakhot: "ועושה נחת רוח ליצרו", "he produces satisfaction for his Creator." The phrases, after accounting for the translation of the Hebrew עושה to the equivalent Aramaic קעביד, are identical, save for

the vowel in יוצרו (*yotzero*, his Creator) and יצרו (*yitzro*, his inclination).

Before proceeding further, let us deal with the perhaps obvious question: which line came first, and which is the pun? I think a careful examination of the texts in question suggests that R. Yohanan's is the referent and R. Avin's is the reference. First of all, R. Yohanan's statement, as we have demonstrated, is a carefully constructed formal one, and meant for public consumption. This would suggest that it is likely to have entered the cultural conversation, or at least would be more likely to do so than a line of discussion in the beit midrash, as R. Avin's appears to be. Along these lines, the move from R. Yohanan' fully Hebrew pronouncement to R. Avin's partially Aramaic (and thus vernacular) statement would suggest that the latter is making reference to the former. Secondly, R. Avin's statement is worded somewhat stiltedly: does the evil inclination truly draw satisfaction from anger? Presumably, the argument itself means that tearing a garment in anger is a way to calm oneself down, but R. Avin's formulation, as veteran punsters can surely relate to, sacrifices some semantic coherence for some inspired wordplay. Finally, let us consider the personalities making the statement. R. Yohanan was a second-generation Amora, while R. Avin was not only a member of the third generation, but one of R. Yohanan's students. It is surely to be expected that R. Yohanan's statements, to borrow a rabbinic phrase, would be "gems in the mouth" of R. Avin. Arguably, there can be no greater show of respect

for a teacher than to be so familiar with his frequent turns of phrase that the student uses and plays on them, with love and delight.

III. A Pun – Intended?

The other instance we shall examine of wordplay with rabbinic texts, in comparison with the foregoing, is perhaps even more obvious in its directionality. The source text that carries the discussion pertains to the institution of *hatra'ah*, or explicit warning before commission of a particular sin, that the Talmud typically assumes is required for courts to carry out any punishment, and appears in five separate contexts, scattered across Tractates Sanhedrin (8b, 41a, and 72b) and Makkot (6b and 9b). Let us focus on the fourth such case. The Mishnah cited in [Makkot 6b](#) presents the opinion of R. Yosi, who maintains that in order for a murderer to be sentenced to capital punishment, both of the witnesses who saw him commit the crime must also have warned him about it, in keeping with the literal phrasing of [Deuteronomy 17:6](#): "By the word of two witnesses [...the condemned is to be executed]." R. Papa, in conversation with Abaye in the gemara, points out a contradiction: a subsequent Mishnah in Makkot cites R. Yosi making exactly the opposite claim! In the second Mishnah, R. Yosi opines that a murderer who is established as having hated his victim before the murderer is eligible for execution, because he is considered to have previously been cautioned and warned. Evidently, R. Yosi of the second Mishnah believes that explicit verbal warning is not necessary in all cases. Abaye deftly sidesteps the issue: R. Yosi of the second

Mishnah is not the previously assumed R. Yosi ben Halafta, but in fact R. Yosi bar Yehudah! The latter of the two Tannaitic sages is cited by name, across Shas, as saying:

רַבִּי יוֹסֵי בַּר יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר: חָבֵר אֵין צָרִיךְ הַתְרָאָה, לְפִי שֶׁלֹּא נִיתְּנָה הַתְרָאָה אֶלָּא לְהַבְחִין בֵּין שׁוֹגֵג לְמֵזִיד.

R. Yosi bar Yehudah says: a *haver* (learned person) does not require warning, because warning is only given in order to distinguish between an unintentional actor and an intentional actor.

In each of the five appearances of this phrase throughout Seder Nezikin, R. Yosi bar Yehuda's explanation of the purpose of *hatra'ah* (warning) serves to evade a potential contradiction, either in the opinion of R. Yosi or in the details of capital case law where verbal warning appears to be absent from a scenario under discussion. The statement, which presents a less rigidly formal view of the institution of warning than that presented by other Tannaim, is surely familiar to those who study the laws of punishment by Jewish courts.

With this background in mind, let us examine a passage in Tractate Horayot, a relatively obscure volume that concerns itself with the processes around a court that issues a mistaken ruling, an event that generally triggers an obligation to bring a unique sacrifice. The Mishnah cited on folio [3b](#) quotes a debate: If a court issues an instruction to the community, but subsequently recognizes that it was in error and retracts the ruling, how do we treat a community member who follows the

initial, mistaken ruling? R. Shimon maintains that the individual is exempt from punishment, while R. Elazar holds that the answer depends on the individual's opportunity to have heard the retraction. In the gemara, R. Yehudah in the name of Rav explains, perhaps unsurprisingly, that R. Shimon's exemption of the community member is because the individual acted under the authority of the court. The gemara then presents an alternative version of R. Yehudah's quotation of Rav:

אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר רַב, אוֹמֵר הָיָה רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן: כָּל הוֹרָאָה שֶׁיָּצְאָה בְּרוֹב צִבּוּר – יָחִיד הָעוֹשֶׂה אוֹתָהּ פָּטוּר, לְפִי שֶׁלֹּא נִיתְּנָה הוֹרָאָה אֶלָּא לְהַבְחִין בֵּין שׁוֹגֵג לְמֵזִיד.

R. Yehudah said in the name of Rav: R. Shimon would say: "Any instruction that was issued to the majority of the community, an individual acting in accord with that instruction is exempt, because instruction is only given in order to distinguish between an unintentional actor and an intentional actor."

Regardless of any questions about how the second formulation of R. Yehudah's citation of Rav's explanation of R. Shimon substantively differs from the first formulation—it should be noted here that the editorial layers of Horayot are notoriously less seamless than elsewhere in the Talmud—the second formulation itself is, indeed, somewhat difficult to parse on its own merits. It is hardly true, after all, that a court's instruction serves even primarily to elucidate the intentionality of an action. The fact that, in this case, the presence of a court's instruction

suggests that one following it in error is acting without intent to sin appears to be only a downstream outcome of the instruction in the first place.

Of course, as readers of the previous paragraphs, we understand clearly how this formulation unfolds: it is, without a doubt, a pun on the oft-repeated statement about the utility of warnings. The word for warning, התראה (*hatra'ah*) differs by just one letter from the word for instruction, הוראה (*hora'ah*). The remainder of the phrase, "A (warning/instruction) is only given in order to distinguish between an unintentional actor and an intentional actor," is identical. Once again, we have a clear instance of wordplay between two *sugyot*, in a context of discourse which does not independently suggest humor.

The provenance of the reference in Horayot is, admittedly, slightly less clear than the others we have seen. R. Yose bar Yehudah, the authority behind the "warning" phrase, was a member of the fifth and last generation of Tannaim. R. Shimon (ben Yohai), who ostensibly formulated the "instruction" phrase, actually preceded R. Yose bar Yehudah, in the fourth generation of Tannaim. However, the gemara makes it far from clear that the punny formulation is in fact directly attributable to R. Shimon. For one, it is explicitly quoted through two layers of Amoraim, R. Yehudah and Rav. Secondly, the presence of the two different formulations of the explication of R. Shimon surely mitigates against a literally reliable direct quotation of the Tanna, or even the Amoraic summation thereof. Instead, it is much more

reasonable to assume that the "instruction" phrase significantly postdates the "warning" phrase. Beyond the specific dating arguments, it is surely more straightforward to assume that the "warning" phrase, which appears in the Babylonian Talmud five times versus the "instruction" phrase's single instance, is the referent for the glaring case of wordplay.

IV. End of Play

The first instance we saw in this essay of rabbis punning on rabbis could, in a sense, be understood as a tribute from student to teacher. In the midst of a section of fairly dry halakhic discourse, R. Avin recalls the unrelated words of his teacher R. Yohanan, perhaps not terribly consciously, and weaves a punny reference to a statement he may have heard repeatedly into a separate Talmudic argument. But this second instance is harder, at first glance, to parse. Not only does the pun render the statement confusing, at best, but is there a direct personal connection between the Amora R. Yehudah (or his teacher, Rav) and R. Yose ben Yehudah?

Perhaps there is not, but for the most profound connection of all: the corpus of Torah. The layers of interpretation and meaning that accrete in rabbinic discourse, and have in fact been in the process of accretion through millennia now, are an ever-productive mine of profundity, concepts, and, yes, language. And where there is shared language, there is always shared humor, even in the least expected contexts. There are surely more instances of the phenomenon of Hazal using their

predecessor's words in humorous ways, and I look forward to seeing the identification of further cases with all due pun-ctuality.

The Other Patriarchal Narratives

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The patriarchal narratives of Genesis 12–50 are often taught as a cohesive narrative that tells the story of how God cultivates a relationship with the family of Abraham and Sarah, whose descendants develop into the nation of Israel. This linear narrative, however, occasionally digresses into stories about other families whose descendants form nations that later become antagonists of the Israelites. In contrast to the biblical narratives about Abraham and Sarah, the stories about these other families are covenantal dead ends. They appear as active players just once in Genesis, in the wake of massive catastrophe, and their descendants don't appear again until later in the Torah, when they provoke the Israelites centuries later.

Two such stories, the story of the flood in Genesis 6–9 and the story of Sodom's destruction in Genesis 18–19, bear striking parallels to one another. The flood story, which is framed in Genesis as a divine response to humanity's sins, is preceded by a brief passage that describes how

the sons of God sleep with human women, a union that raises God's ire. The flood culminates in a story about Noah's sons—Shem, Ham, and Japheth—who become patriarchs of nations from which a new human family emerges. This story gives special attention to Ham, who observes Noah's nakedness after Noah plants a vineyard, makes wine, and becomes drunk. Rather than covering Noah, Ham tells his brothers Shem and Japheth about their father's nakedness, and his brothers cover Noah without observing his naked body. When Noah awakens, he understands what Ham has done and curses Ham's son, Canaan. When read back into the flood story, Noah's curse suggests that the flood narrative is about the formation of a tripartite human family. Each member of this family bears certain characteristics that can be traced to their earliest ancestors, and the nation of Canaan is associated with corporeality, indulgence, and sexual shame.

The story of Sodom's destruction in Genesis 18–19 shares similar features. God's plan to destroy Sodom is justified when its inhabitants reveal their sexual depravity by mobbing the house of Abraham's nephew Lot and demanding that he turn over his guests to be raped. Lot responds by offering his daughters instead. Like Noah, Lot and his immediate family become the sole survivors of a divine act of destruction that is prompted by the moral abominations of an entire community. And like Noah, Lot is not deserving of his own salvation, and his children do not prove themselves to be immune to the temptations of moral depravity. The story ends much like Noah's: with Lot's sexually tinged humiliation at the hands of his

children, which takes place after Lot drinks too much wine. Finally, just as the flood story closes its story of destruction with a vignette about survivors who become ancestors of nations that later become enemies of the Israelites, the story of Sodom's destruction culminates in sexual humiliation that leads to the birth of two boys, Ammon and Moab, whose descendants form nations that later antagonize the Israelites.

Genesis 6–9:

The flood story is bracketed by details that clarify the sexual nature of humanity's evil behavior. It begins with a description of people breaching the chasm between the human and divine realms:

> When humankind began to increase on earth and daughters were born to them, the [males among the] divine beings saw how pleasing the human women were and took wives from among those who delighted them. The LORD said, "My breath shall not abide in humankind forever, since it too is flesh; let the days allowed them be one hundred and twenty years." It was then, and later too, that the Nephilim appeared on earth—when divine beings cohabited with the human women, who bore them offspring. Such were the heroes of old, the men of renown. The LORD saw how great was human wickedness on earth—how every

plan devised by the human mind was nothing but evil all the time. And the LORD regretted having made humankind on earth. ([Gen. 6:1–6](#))

The description of humanity's sins uses language from Genesis 1–3, which describes the world's creation and the story of the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden. [Genesis 6:2](#), which states that "the [males among the] divine beings saw how pleasing the human women were," evokes the first human sin recorded in the Torah, when the first woman sees that "the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes" ([Gen. 3:6](#)). In both verses, someone sees a forbidden object, deems it "good," and partakes of it. The presence of the first two parallels—in which people see something and observe its goodness—suggests that the third parallel, which marks the sin itself, is linked. As these parallels imply, the forbidden unions described in Genesis 6:2 perpetuate the sin of Eden. These unions, moreover, undermine God's mandate to procreate and build families and thus breach God's intended natural order.

The flood story is not merely a story about human sin. It is an origin story about the family of nations and their moral tendencies. For this reason, genealogy brackets the flood story. Just as the story introduces Noah, it diverts to introduce his sons:

> This is the line of Noah. Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God.

Noah begot three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with lawlessness. ([Gen. 6:9–11](#))

The reference to Noah's sons disrupts the flow of the narrative and forewarns the reader that Noah's sons will reappear later in the story and play a central role in its conclusion. This foreshadowing is confirmed in the story's coda, which picks up on the theme of sexual violation and confirms that the human propulsion toward sexual shame has not been quashed. After Noah departs from the ark onto dry land, he plants a vineyard. This act marks a new relationship between humans and the earth they cultivate—rather than obtaining sustenance by planting and sowing the earth, Noah converts what food he has into something else: wine. This wine, it turns out, will yield a moral abomination that culminates in a curse that will impact later generations. This closing story reads:

> The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth—Ham being the father of Canaan. These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the whole world branched out. Noah, the tiller of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told

his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a cloth, placed it against both their backs and, walking backward, they covered their father's nakedness; their faces were turned the other way, so that they did not see their father's nakedness. ([Gen. 9:18–23](#))

After Noah falls into a drunken slumber and Ham tells his brothers about his father's nakedness, Noah awakens and, realizing what has happened, declares that his sons and their descendants will share an entangled destiny:

> When Noah woke up from his wine and learned what his youngest son had done to him, he said, "Cursed be Canaan; the lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers." And he said, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem; let Canaan be a slave to them. May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be a slave to them." Noah lived after the Flood 350 years. And all the days of Noah came to 950 years; then he died. ([Gen. 9:24–28](#))

Noah's realization of his shame is encapsulated in the phrase *vayeda*, "and he learned." This word is associated in earlier Genesis stories with sexual intimacy and is thus indicative of the sexual

undertones of what Ham has done: something akin to a forbidden act between parent and child, though the specifics are left vague in the text. In response to this humiliation, Noah speaks for the first time in the flood story. His opening words curse his grandson Canaan and, by extension, his son Ham. Noah's curse introduces a new player into his lineage, Canaan, whom he mentions three times. The meaning of Canaan's curse is only fully understood in light of what comes later: Canaan becomes a thorn in the side of the Israelites and does not enjoy divine favor.

The stories that bracket the flood narrative suggest that the people who lived prior to the flood, and some of the people who lived after it, perpetuated the sin of the first man and woman, a sin that led to sexual awareness and shame. Like the first man and woman—who were tempted by the snake's assurance that eating from the forbidden tree of knowledge would give them divine-like powers—the people who lived prior to the flood mingled with divine beings and, in so doing, endangered the line between the human and divine realms. Rather than leading to the elevation of humanity, it leads to sexual shame.

The flood story itself, moreover, can be read as a divine effort to establish a firm line between the divine and human realms. It culminates in a revised covenantal relationship between God and humanity, in which God promises to refrain from destroying the earth again, regardless of how evil its inhabitants may become. It does not, however,

culminate in a promise to refrain from wiping out an entire city.

Genesis 18–19:

The language and structure of the biblical account regarding Sodom's destruction evoke the flood story of Genesis 6–9. When divine messengers inform Abraham in Genesis 18 that God intends to destroy the city of Sodom, Abraham attempts to negotiate by asking God to spare the city if righteous people live in it. Abraham's issue, it seems, is not with the notion of destruction per se but with the notion of collective punishment, wherein righteous people die with the wicked. The language that Abraham uses to ask God to spare the city of Sodom if it contained just fifty, forty, thirty, twenty, and then ten righteous people— "Will You sweep away the innocent (*tzaddik*) along with the guilty?" (Gen. 18:23)—recalls the language used to describe Noah in Genesis 6:9, which introduces him as a righteous man (*tzaddik*).

The stories' descriptions of destruction also parallel one another. In Genesis 7:4, God brings destructive precipitation, described with the verbal form of *matar*:

> For in seven days' time I will make it rain (*mamtir*) upon the earth, forty days and forty nights, and I will blot out from the earth all

existence that I created.

The same form of *matar* appears in the later description of God destroying Sodom:

> The LORD rained (*himtir*) upon Sodom and Gomorrah sulfurous fire from the LORD out of heaven. (Gen. 19:24)

These two verses, which describe God's destruction of the created world, contrast with the creation story, which uses the same verb to denote God's intention to irrigate the earth and prompt humanity to till it. In this account, *matar* denotes a future blessing and plays a central role in the natural order that God has established. According to Genesis 2:5,

> No shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth and there were no human beings to till the soil.

These stories are also linked in their descriptions of God's remembrance following widespread destruction. According to Genesis 8:1,

> God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark, and God

caused a wind to blow across the earth, and the waters subsided.

God's "remembering" of Noah, which makes no mention of the rest of his family, indicates that Noah was the sole person deserving of God's attention. Genesis 19 similarly notes God's remembering of one individual following an act of divine destruction. In this case, however, the person saved and the person remembered are different people:

> Thus it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain and annihilated the cities where Lot dwelt, God was mindful of Abraham and removed Lot from the midst of the upheaval. (Gen. 19:29)

God only saves Lot because of his connection to Abraham, to whom God is loyal. Unlike Abraham, Lot has not earned God's beneficence through pious actions.

Perhaps the most significant parallel between the flood story and the story of Sodom is that they are bracketed with anecdotes about sexual violation. In the account of Sodom's destruction, messengers who have just informed Abraham of God's intent to destroy Sodom arrive at Lot's house to warn him of the plan. Lot implores these mysterious men to stay with him overnight rather than sleep in the street, and when Lot's lustful neighbors arrive with the intent to assault them,

Lot—in a perversion of Abraham's earlier hospitality—offers his own daughters in their stead. After Sodom's destruction, these daughters panic that the entire world has been destroyed and seduce their father in order to perpetuate humanity upon the earth:

> Lot went up from Zoar and settled in the hill country with his two daughters, for he was afraid to dwell in Zoar; and he and his two daughters lived in a cave. And the older one said to the younger, "Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to consort with us in the way of all the world. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and let us lie with him, that we may maintain life through our father." That night they made their father drink wine, and the older one went in and lay with her father; he did not know when she lay down or when she rose.

> The next day the older one said to the younger, "See, I lay with Father last night; let us make him drink wine tonight also, and you go and lie with him, that we may maintain life through our father." That night also they made their father drink wine, and the younger one went and lay with him; he did not know when she lay down or when she

rose. Thus the two daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. The older one bore a son and named him Moab; he is the father of the Moabites of today. And the younger also bore a son, and she called him Ben-ammi; he is the father of the Ammonites of today.

While readers of this story understand that the scale of Sodom's destruction is exponentially smaller than the scale of destruction in the earlier flood story, the daughters within this story perceive the destruction of Sodom as universal and on the same scale as the flood generations earlier. Their misperception clarifies why they decide to seduce their father, and it adds heightened irony. While the flood story marked God's response to the sexual perversion of humanity, acts of sexual perversion that undermined God's natural order continued, first with Ham and Canaan and then with Lot's daughters.

Genesis includes another story about a city, notorious for sexual depravity, that is destroyed. When Shechem abducts Jacob's daughter Dinah in Genesis 34, her brothers Simeon and Levi hatch a plan to take their vengeance on him and his city, also called Shechem, by pretending to engage in a treaty that would require the men of Shechem to undergo circumcision. After they undergo the procedure and are in the process of recovering, the brothers invade Shechem and slaughter its men. Upon receiving the news of this attack, Jacob is furious with Simeon and Levi and later curses them on his deathbed. Like the stories of the flood and Sodom, the account of Shechem's destruction can be understood as an origin story for a community that would later provoke the Israelites. But Jacob's unfavorable response to Simeon and Levi's zealotry suggests that acts of vengeful destruction can only be wrought by God. Humanity does not have the moral authority to go on the offensive by wreaking collective punishment upon the cities of their enemies.

Connecting These Stories:

The stories of the flood and Sodom's destruction both describe God's response to humans who defy the natural order that God established at the moment of creation. Rather than leaving one's ancestral home to produce new families, as dictated in Genesis 2:24, the people of Noah's generation and the people of Sodom breached the chasm between humanity and the divine, producing moral abominations that prompted God to destroy their societies and create new ones. Yet immediately after their destruction, the natural order is once again undone: first by the son of Noah, who fathers Canaan, and then by Lot's daughters, who become the mothers of Ammon and Moab. These acts of transgression lie at the foundation of their descendants' identities, and those descendants later antagonize the Israelites and denounce the natural order with which God created the world.

The story of Sodom highlights God's expectation that all people, even those who live outside the

covenantal community, observe the natural order established at creation. The failure to preserve this order prompts a divine realization, so to speak, that without a binding covenant that obligates a community, a sustained relationship with God will not be cultivated. As other nations fail to preserve the natural order in Genesis, the onus of covenant shifts from God to the people who receive God's love but do not reciprocate it by observing its moral terms.

All told, the stories about Noah and Lot can be read as responses to the problem of chosenness. While it seems that Abraham was chosen by God in Genesis 12 at random, these stories imply that, even if Abraham did not actively choose God, other families refused to comply with God's moral precepts and were therefore undeserving of a special covenant. In the early Common Era, rabbinic writers would pick up on this theme by recording midrashic traditions suggesting that, at the moment of creation, God offered the Torah to other nations, who rejected its moral precepts. For these writers, the story of Genesis is indeed one cohesive story about how the Torah functions as a moral blueprint—not just for the Abrahamic family, but for the world.