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A Halakhic Case for Ta'amei Ha-Mitzvot

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The idea that the commandments of the Torah possess underlying rationales, *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*, was embraced by the Talmudic sages and subsequently complicated by the long history of Jewish thought.[1] If we survey this history, we find passionate debate regarding the origins and even the function of these rationales. Are they received through revelation, or are they discovered/invented through human inquiry? Are they a useful crutch for apologetics or an essential study for the committed Jew? This article will attempt to answer none of these questions.[2]

Instead, we will explore the subject of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* through a question that some may find surprising, even offensive: Is it possible to properly fulfill a commandment without knowledge of these elusive *te'amim*? This will be a strictly legal exploration. Many have already articulated the importance of the *spirit* of Jewish law and its necessary integration with the letter.[3] But rarely, if

[1] See *Sanhedrin* 21b, *Pesahim* 119a, *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:3.

[2] I would like to thank R. Adam Friedmann and R. Simi Lerner for their valuable comments on this article, and *Lehrhaus* editor Chesky Kopel for enhancing its style and presentation.

[3] In *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:51, Maimonides writes, "If we perform the commandments only with our limbs, we are like those who are engaged in digging in the ground, or hewing wood in the forest, without reflecting on the nature of those acts, or by whom they are

ever, do we encounter a defense of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* built upon a solid, halakhic foundation. For our purposes, that foundation will be the well-known principle of *mitzvot tzerikhot kavvanah*—that commandments require intention for their fulfillment.[4]

There is no obvious connection between this principle and the subject of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*, an inconvenient fact that arguably dooms my project from the start. But, as I hope to show, such a connection was indeed developed by some of our greatest sages, and it is now possible to argue for the indispensability of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* for satisfaction of the halakhic requirement of *kavvanah*. If this suggestion strikes you as surprising or farfetched, take comfort in this: I find it surprising too. And that surprise is only magnified by the fact that those rabbis who championed this view seemed to consider it painfully obvious.

My goal here is not to offer a practical halakhic conclusion. It is simply to throw light on an obscure halakhic subject that is as profound as it is mysterious. In exploring this subject, we are immediately challenged by some of the most difficult questions regarding the goals of the Torah, its commandments, and its vision for humanity. But we are also led to ponder much more subtle and personal questions about our daily practice as Jews, questions that chip away at the rust of rote ritual and spiritual indolence. Encouraging these types of questions, in whatever form they arise, is my goal for this article.

The Curious Case of the Three Commandments

Tzitzit. Tefillin. Sukkah.

As R. Yoel Sirkis delved into the *Arba'ah Turim*, one of the primary works of medieval *halakhah*, he knew there must be something special about these three *mitzvot*. After all, the *Arba'ah Turim*, known as the *Tur*, had inexplicably highlighted them with a unique requirement—*kavvanat ha-ta'am*, the obligation to contemplate their underlying rationales at the time of their performance. [5] But why? The *Tur* gave no explanation.

R. Sirkis would eventually offer his own explanation in his *Bayit Hadash*, a major commentary on the *Tur*.[6] He had recognized that the biblical verses for these three commandments all shared a unique feature—they explicitly characterized their *mitzvot* as being "for the sake

commanded, or what is their object. We must not imagine that [in this way] we attain the highest perfection" (Friedlander translation). In the modern era, R. Samson Raphael Hirsch's writings represent perhaps the most comprehensive and successful attempt to explore the spirit of Judaism through the lens of practical observance.

[4] *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 60:4, codifies that one must have the intention to fulfill a divine commandment at the time of its performance. See *Mishnah Berurah*, ad loc.

[5] *Orah Hayyim* 8 (*tzitzit*), 25 (*tefillin*), 625 (*sukkah*). Though the *Tur* does not state this explicitly regarding *sukkah*, R. Sirkis understands this to be its intention.

[6] *Bayit Hadash* to *Orah Hayyim* 8, s.v. "ve-nikra'im tzitzit," and 625, s.v. "ba-sukkot teishevu."

of" something beyond the mitzvah itself. For example, *tzitzit* are to be worn "for the sake of" remembering all of the commandments (Bamidbar 15:40). In R. Sirkis' view, R. Ya'akov ben Asher, the author of the *Tur*, had understood these verses to be teaching the unique requirement of *kavvanat ha-ta'am*. Despite a lack of precedent and no clear Talmudic source, R. Sirkis emphatically asserted his position, and it has been incorporated into all major works of *halakhah* ever since.

Later works attempted to define the exact parameters of R. Sirkis' position. Some claimed that contemplating these commandments' rationales is ideal, but a lack of contemplation does not invalidate the mitzvah. Others insisted that such contemplation is absolutely necessary, and one must repeat the mitzvah if one failed to contemplate its *ta'am*.[7] Within this latter camp was R. Tzvi Elimelekh Spira of Dinov, an early Hasidic leader known by the name of his principal work, the *Benei Yissaskhar*. And while he agreed with R. Sirkis' reasoning, he registered a major disagreement regarding its application. In his view, the Torah offers rationales for many more than three commandments.

A Rapidly-Expanding Project

Other rabbis had already suggested that R. Sirkis' reasoning might be extended to *mitzvot* beyond *tzitzit, tefillin,* and *sukkah*. R. Yosef Te'omim in his *Peri Megadim* claimed that the verse commanding *pidyon ha-ben*, the redemption of the firstborn son, also presents a clear rationale.[8] If we accept the principle that a rationale recorded by the Torah indicates an obligation to contemplate it, it becomes difficult to limit this to the three *mitzvot* identified by the *Tur*. After all, doesn't the Torah provide explanations, explicitly or implicitly, for many of its commandments?

This line of thought reached its apex in R. Spira's *Derekh Pikudekha*, a work on the 613 commandments with special emphasis on *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*.[9] Unlike R. Sirkis, R. Spira did not believe that a verse must contain the term *lema'an* ("for the sake of") in order to convey a *ta'am*. His reasoning was straightforward, if not entirely intuitive: Given that every mitzvah possesses innumerable *te'amim*, we must interpret any explicit mention of a *ta'am* as conveying a special obligation of *kavvanah*. With this foundation in place, R. Spira radically expanded the halakhic relevance of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*.

For example, when teaching the mitzvah of procreation, the Torah writes, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land" (Bereishit 1:28). R. Spira interprets this last clause, "fill the land," as the *ta'am* of the preceding, and therefore requires that one performing the mitzvah have the intention to settle the land. In some cases, the connection seems even more distant. Regarding

[7] See *Peri Megadim*, cited in *Mishnah Berurah* 25:15; *Bikkurei Yaakov* 625:3.

[8] *Peri Megadim*, *Orah Hayyim*, *Mishbetzot Zahav* 8:7.

[9] See *Derekh Pikudekha*, Introduction 1, section 5 (Lemberg, 1874).

the commandment to sanctify the new moon, R. Spira speculates that it may be necessary to contemplate the purpose of the heavenly bodies, taught at the beginning of Bereishit—"and they shall be for signs and for festivals" (Bereishit 1:14). This example, and another that we will encounter later, suggest that R. Spira himself was still grappling with which factors should qualify a biblical verse as providing a bona fide *ta'am*.

The question of whether to embrace R. Spira's expanded vision of *kavvanat ha-ta'am* remains open to the present day. R. Asher Weiss, in a work dedicated to general principles of mitzvah observance, argues that only the three *mitzvot* mentioned in the *Tur* require this special *kavvanah*. He rejects the many additions of R. Spira based on a novel distinction between a commandment's rationale and its purpose, a distinction on which he unfortunately does not elaborate in this work.[10] By contrast, R. Zalman Nehemiah Goldberg cites R. Spira's position in his own work on the halakhic implications of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* and adduces further support for it from a passage in the *Shulhan Arukh*.[11]

Until now, our exploration of this subject has remained firmly within the theory of R. Sirkis, who sought a textual underpinning for the *Tur*'s ruling. Only the mention of a *ta'am* in the Torah itself could justify a requirement of *kavvanat ha-ta'am*. But if we revisit the pages of the *Arba'ah Turim*, we find an even older and more influential commentary standing opposite R. Sirkis' *Bayit Hadash*—the *Beit Yosef* of R. Yosef Karo. And it is R. Karo's two-word explanation of this *halakhah* that offers us our second lens on this mysterious and protracted debate.

Painfully Obvious

"*Pashut hu*." It is obvious. This is all R. Karo finds necessary to write in explanation of the *Tur*'s revolutionary requirement of *kavvanah* for *ta'amei ha-mitzvot.*[12] And while this ruling may have been *pashut* to R. Karo, modern readers find themselves somewhat at a loss. Did R. Karo hold a text-based theory, similar to that of R. Sirkis or R. Spira, but simply feel it was too obvious to bother explaining? Or did he have a different theory altogether?

The *Bei'ur Ha-Gra* of R. Eliyahu Kramer, the legendary Vilna Gaon, provides sources for the rulings of the *Shulhan Arukh*, often with cryptic brevity. Regarding the obligation of *kavvanat ha-ta'am* for *tzitzit*, he cites *Nedarim* 62a, "Do things for the sake of their performance."[13] He follows

[10] R. Asher Weiss, *Minhat Asher: Kelalei Ha-Mitzvot* (*Makhon Minhat Asher*, 2018), 176.

[11] R. Zalman Nehemiah Goldberg, *Netiv Mitzvotekha* (*Makhon Mishpat Aruk*h, 2016), 46-47. R. Goldberg's proof is from *Orah Hayyim* 187:3, where it is codified that if one fails to mention the concepts of circumcision and Torah in the "blessing of the Land" in *birkat ha-mazon*, he must repeat the blessing. Based on Rashi, *Mishnah Berurah* ad loc. explains that circumcision and Torah are the *reasons* for our inheritance of the Land of Israel.

[12] *Beit Yosef, Orah Hayyim* 8, s.v. "ve-ye-khavein be-hitatefo." R. Karo does not explain the inclusion of rationales in *Tur, Orah Hayyim* 25 or 625.

[13] Translation follows R. Steinsaltz. Rashi *ad loc.* explains, "for the sake of Heaven."

this with a warning to avoid the rebuke of Isaiah 29:13, "and their fear of Me has become a command of people, learned by rote."[14] The Vilna Gaon seems to understand R. Karo's ruling as a particular expression of a much more general Torah principle of mindful mitzvah observance.[15]

But why not simply follow the *Bayit Hadash* and cite the verse of *tzitzit* itself as the obvious source? Perhaps because R. Karo's two-word explanation precludes it. R. Karo saw the *Tur*'s ruling as stemming from something so plain and obvious that no real explanation was necessary. R. Sirkis' approach, with its clever discovery of discrete textual parallels between three specific *mitzvot*, simply could not be what R. Karo intended. The *Bei'ur Ha-Gra* therefore alerts us to the fact that there is an opposing theory of *kavvanat ha-ta'am* at work in the *Shulhan Arukh.*

For R. Karo, the self-evident requirement to perform *mitzvot* with sincere intention and to avoid rote ritual includes an obligation to contemplate the commandments' underlying rationales. This understanding helps to explain the somewhat enigmatic rulings of later rabbis. R. Yehiel Mikhel Epstein, author of the influential *Arukh Ha-Shulhan*, writes in *Orah Hayyim* 25:8, "And know that even according to those halakhic decisors who hold that the commandments do not require intention, nevertheless it is certain that one must know the fundamental point of the commandment and its essence. And regarding *tefillin*, if one did not contemplate its meaning at all, he has not fulfilled the commandment, and it is simply like the act of a monkey." For R. Epstein, the necessary *kavvanah* for *tefillin* is just a more stringent instance of a requirement that applies to all of the commandments.[16] This position is difficult to justify within the approach of R. Sirkis, who limits our obligation of *kavvanat ha-ta'am* to only three commandments, but it fits well within the approach of R. Karo.

Even more explicitly, R. Shaoul David Botschko writes in his *Shulhan Arukh Kifshuto* (*Orah Hayyim* 8:8), "In the fulfillment of the commandments, there are always two necessary intentions: The first, that the act be done to fulfill the command of the Creator, and the second, the unique meaning of this particular mitzvah."[17] Once again, this generalized requirement to contemplate the rationale for any given commandment is difficult

[14] My translation.

[15] R. Aharon Rubinfeld highlights this understanding when he notes that this *Bei'ur Ha-Gra* seems to disagree with R. Sirkis regarding the source for the requirement of *kavvanat ha-ta'am*. The verse in Isaiah is "a general principle to have intention in the performance of the commandments," claims R. Rubinfeld, while R. Sirkis would explain that the source is to be found right in the verse commanding *tzitzit* itself. See his *Torat Ha-Mitzvah* (Jerusalem, 2016), 63.

[16] And one cannot claim that R. Sirkis' approach is necessary to explain R. Epstein's stringency here. Examining his treatment of the *mitzvot* of *tzitzit* and *sukkah* provides valuable context. In *Orah Hayyim* 8:13, R. Epstein indeed cites the requirement of *kavvanat ha-ta'am* for *tzitzit*, but there is no implication that one does not fulfill the mitzvah without this intention. It is the same with respect to *sukkah* in *Orah Hayyim* 625:5. R. Epstein's stringency regarding *kavvanah* for *tefillin* is best explained by the contemplative purpose of *tefillin* itself.

[17] Kokhav Ya'akov, 2014. My translation.

within the approach of R. Sirkis but fully aligned with our understanding of R. Karo. Later, in *Orah Hayyim* 25:5, R. Botschko explains that, although "in the majority of commandments, the author [R. Karo] does not bring their unique intention, in the commandment of *tefillin*, **due to its great sanctity**, the author wrote its unique intention" (emphasis added). R. Botschko sees the *Shulhan Arukh*'s incorporation of certain *te'amim* not as the result of discrete textual derivation, but as the application of a general principle that is sometimes taught explicitly.

We have explored two approaches to the obligation of *kavvanat ha-ta'am*: the textual theory of R. Sirkis and the more encompassing view of R. Karo. While both approaches seem to have left their mark on the halakhic process, it must be acknowledged that both share the quality of being unmoored from any concrete halakhic principle. R. Sirkis' theory, however compelling, is ultimately speculative and unprecedented, and R. Karo's view, however commonsensical, lacks clear definition and parameters. It might therefore be valuable to briefly explore a third approach to *kavvanat ha-ta'am* that, although radical, is grounded in an established principle.

R. Baruch Epstein was an influential Lithuanian rabbi and author, the son of R. Yehiel Mikhel Epstein, whom we met above. His work on Jewish prayer, *Barukh She-Amar*, contains a commentary on the Passover Haggadah, including a passage that has intrigued those interested in our subject.[18] Rabban Gamliel states that one who does not mention the three *mitzvot* of *pesah*, *matzah*, and *maror* at the Seder—including their rationales—has not fulfilled his obligation. Though some understand Rabban Gamliel to be referring to the obligation of recounting the Exodus from Egypt, others believe that his intention is the *mitzvot* of *korban pesah*, *matzah*, and *maror* themselves.[19] This provokes an important question: Since when must one articulate the *ta'am* of a mitzvah in order to fulfill it?

R. Epstein writes, "It is possible to explain that Rabban Gamliel holds, as is codified in *Berakhot* 13b, that *mitzvot* require *kavvanah*, and the idea of *kavvanah* is to intend their meaning. And he explains here what the meaning of these *mitzvot* is, and he expresses them in order,[20] and according to this, these *mitzvot* are not different from all other *mitzvot*, for one must intend the meanings of the *mitzvot*, and he therefore explains them."

In R. Epstein's view, Rabban Gamliel believes that *kavvanat ha-ta'am* is part and parcel of *mitzvot tzerikhot kavvanah* (*mitzvot* require intention), a concrete halakhic principle with substantial implications for the performance of any mitzvah. Though surprising and perhaps radical, R. Epstein's explanation demonstrates the acute necessity of developing a robust theory of *kavvanat ha-ta'am* that incorporates the principle's diverse

[18] *Bikkurei Yaakov* 625:3, cited above, notes this passage as a source or parallel for his ruling concerning *sukkah*. See also the responsum of R. Hayyim Tyrer, cited below.

[19] See Abudarham; *Orhot Hayyim*; Rashbam (attributed), commentary to Haggadah, s.v. "Rabban Gamliel."

[20] Or, "in the Seder."

manifestations, from the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit* to the Passover Seder.

A Renaissance of *Ta'amei Ha-Mitzvot*?

We have surveyed three approaches to unraveling the mystery of *kavvanat ha-ta'am* and unearthed new mysteries in the process. The source for this principle remains elusive, its application remains debated, and its core premise—the validity and discoverability of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*—remains deeply contentious. One need only read *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:31 to realize that this discipline has been an object of major historical debate.

But even if we bracket the question of the validity and importance of these *te'amim*—and this is indeed reasonable given the strong Talmudic support—we are still left with the question of their discoverability. How can we ever know which rationale we are expected to contemplate for a given mitzvah? What determines an authoritative *ta'am?*

The textual approach of R. Sirkis and R. Spira would seem to offer us a solution, since we are only expected to contemplate what the verses already make explicit. But, as we have seen, R. Spira was not always certain about which verses represent clear-cut rationales. And, even when a rationale is clearly present, its precise meaning is often debatable. The verse commanding circumcision includes the apparent *ta'am*, "and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and between you" (Genesis 17:11). R. Spira writes that the proper interpretation of this verse is found in the *Sefer Ha-Hinnukh*, who explains circumcision as a symbol of servitude to a master. However, R. Spira also embraces the explanation of R. Moshe Hagiz, who interprets it as a symbol of devotion between two loved ones. R. Spira ultimately obligates one to have both intentions in mind, indicating that even the process of interpreting an explicit, scriptural *ta'am* carries a challenging element of subjectivity.[21]

R. Hayyim Tyrer tackled this issue directly. Best known for his *Be'eir Mayim Hayyim*, a classic work of Hasidic exegesis, R. Tyrer was also an *av beit din*, head rabbinic judge, in multiple communities throughout Europe. His *Sha'ar Ha-Tefillah*, a work on Jewish prayer, includes a responsum that is directly relevant to our subject.[22]

Like some of the authorities we have seen, R. Tyrer believes that *kavvanat ha-ta'am* is "an obligation" in the performance of any mitzvah, and he adduces numerous Talmudic passages in support, including the statement of Rabban Gamliel above.[23] R. Tyrer acknowledges that this ruling may appear novel, but he insists that it is in fact

[21] *Derekh Pikudekha*, *Mitzvah* 2, *Heilek Ha-Mahshavah*, Section 3.

[22] R. Hayyim Tyrer, *Sha'ar Ha-Tefillah* (Warsaw, 1874), 3. Reprinted: Brooklyn, 1990.

[23] R. Tyrer's other primary sources are the requirement that a divorce document be written with a special *kavvanah* for its purpose (see *Even Ha-Ezer, Seder Ha-Get* 55), and *Zevahim* 4:6, which teaches that an offering must be brought both for the sake of Hashem and for the sake of bringing Him satisfaction, the latter of which R. Tyrer interprets as *kavvanat ha-ta'am.*

explicit in R. Karo's codification of most commandments in *Orah Hayyim*.[24] He then turns to the issue of subjectivity:

> However, you should know that this matter is not set for him, and each person according to his own capacity, in reflecting upon the inner meanings and rationales for the commandments, based on the Torah as guided by the teachings of our sages … the intention that he knows and intends is also one aspect of His intention and will, may His Name be blessed, which He transmitted to us through Moses, His prophet and faithful servant. And [if] he does what he can to grasp and understand; this will be considered before His blessed Name as if he had intended, grasped, and understood in every necessary way, and thus his mitzvah is certainly accepted and pleasing before Him, blessed be He, and all according to the sincerity of his heart and the extent of his intention.

In other words, R. Tyrer acknowledges that *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* are endless, and no individual has a chance of comprehending them all. Nevertheless, if one earnestly investigates the rationale of a particular mitzvah, guided by the words of our sages, the *ta'am* he derives is certainly a true and acceptable *kavvanah* that fulfills his obligation. This approach is remarkably novel. While R. Spira argued that there is essentially an objective *ta'am* that one must strive to discover, R. Tyrer claims that our attempts to understand the underlying philosophies of the commandments are inherently exploratory and subjective. This reality is not a problem to be overcome, but rather a feature of the Torah's boundless wisdom. And the fact that any sincerely derived rationale fulfills our obligation of *kavvanat ha-ta'am* serves as a source of encouragement in our personal efforts at discovery.

I began by noting that the aim of this article is not to suggest a practical halakhic stance. The issue is weighty, and the ramifications are vast. What I have hoped to show is that for a diverse and venerable collection of our great rabbis, the question of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* was central—not due to a theoretical interest in an abstract philosophy of Judaism, but due to a deep conviction that daily practice must be imbued with a contemplation of the Torah's goals and values. Whether we conclude that such contemplation is obligatory for all *mitzvot* or only three, this underlying conviction, this desire to enliven ritual through personal inquiry, is something to which we all aspire.

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[24] Somewhat strangely, R. Tyrer only gives the examples of *tefillin* and *tzitzit*, commandments that even the minimalist position of R. Sirkis would acknowledge. However, we have already seen that R. Goldberg identified this principle in the laws of *birkat ha-mazon* as well, and the *Shulhan Arukh's* treatment of *mitzvot* such as Shema, prayer, Shabbat, and the various holidays includes passages that may arguably be considered to present the *kavvanat ha-ta'am.*

A Torah Theodicy: The Very Goodness of Evil

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The problem of evil has confounded theologians and people of faith for millennia. First articulated by the Greek philosopher, Epicurus, in the 3rd century BCE, he asks how evil can exist in a world created by a God of untainted goodness and omnipotence. Either God is unable to prevent evil and, as such, is lacking in power, or, alternatively, God is able but unwilling to prevent evil, which makes Him malevolent.[1]

There is a second question pertaining to the problem of evil that is of specific relevance to the Jewish people. While atrocities have been committed against people of all ethnicities, races, and religions throughout the ages, the Jewish people have endured persecutions with a frequency and intensity that is unique in history. Why does evil seem to specifically target the Jews?

Let us begin by addressing the first, and more general, question of evil.

A 'Good' World

The theme of good and evil is central to the Book of Genesis. We read there of God's creation of a world filled with goodness, but in which we also discover the foundations of evil and of the eventual destruction of the world due to humankind's iniquitous ways. However, as we closely consider the purpose behind God's creation of the world, it becomes evident that not only is the potential for the existence of evil compatible with the notion of a supremely benevolent Creator, it is a key component to both the splendor of God and His world.

God's primary objective in His creation of the world can be gleaned from one statement that appears recurrently throughout the Creation narrative. Following God's formation of light (1:4), His division of the waters from the dry (1:10), the sprouting of vegetation (1:12), His forming of the celestial bodies (1:18), the teaming of the seas with aquatic life (1:21), and the flourishing of animal life on the dry land (1:25), we read:

> God saw that it was good. (1:25)[2]

In each of these examples, the good that God perceives follows critical stages in the Creation enterprise in which the conditions for the sustenance of life are secured. And so, as Jon D. Levenson observes, the primary message of the Creation narrative is not, in fact, of Creation *ex nihilo* but, rather, of God's "establishment of a benevolent and life-sustaining order" (Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (Princeton University Press, 1994), 47.

[1] This essay explores the problem of *moral* evil (i.e., evil perpetrated willingly by man) as opposed to *natural* evil (i.e., natural disasters and sickness). While the author contends that the two are related, the topic of natural evil is beyond the scope of this essay.

[2] Translations are my own except where indicated.

However, it is following God's final act of creation – the formation of man – where we discover yet a further refinement of God's work. Now, with man in the picture, all the *good* that had been achieved prior to man's arrival is elevated in God's eyes to an even loftier "*very* good" (1:31).

What is it specifically about man that contributes to the enhancement of what is already a magnificent world?

Rabbi Hayyim ibn Atar (1696-1743), author of the *Or Ha-Hayyim* commentary on the Torah, offers a profound response. He explains that, while the work that preceded man was not lacking in goodness, there was not yet in existence a creature to contemplate and appreciate that goodness. Only man, as an intelligent being, can reflect on and ponder the good that permeates his environment, and it is, therefore, only man who can respond to and give gratitude to his provider (*Or Ha-Hayyim*, Genesis 1:31).

Without man, all the beauty and splendor of God's world remains a silent and unrecognized good. While it is certainly true that the other creatures experience and benefit from the earth's bounty, they are not *cognizant* of it. As Rabbi Yitzchak Arama explains (*Akeydat Yitzchak*, trans. by Eliyahu Munk, vol.1, 9:1), while the animal is "governed wholly by his senses," humans are "governed by a combination of the sense[s] and the intellect." The fact that man can reflect on his experience means that he can contemplate the source of that which benefits and sustains him. As such, it is only *man* with whom God communicates,[3] affectionately informing him that He is the provider of all the good that fills the earth:

> God said, 'Behold, I have given you all the vegetation that bears seed which is across the surface of the earth, and all the fruit-bearing trees that produce seeds. It is for you for consumption.' (Genesis 1:29) [4]

In other words, it is the newfound potential for *relationship*, that comes with man's arrival, that marks the evolution of the Creation project to a higher good. Indeed, according to Ramban, the ultimate objective in God's creation of the world was for man to recognize and give thanks to his Creator (Ramban, Exodus 13:16).

Knowledge of Good Contingent on Knowledge of Bad

In fact, man's ability to reflect on the good he experiences is not limited to his awareness of

[3] Although God does appear to communicate with the animals in instructing them to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:22), as R. Arama points out, God's speech to them takes on the form of *blessing* rather than directive (*Akeydat Yitzchak*, 3:10). Indeed, it is only in addressing man that we read, "And God said *to* them…(1:28).

[4] So too, God informs man of the goodness He provides for the other creatures, presumably because they lack the intellectual capacity to reflect on, or contemplate, the blessings they experience.

good alone. Something can qualify as good only in relation to that which is *less* favorable. A beautiful painting is *good* only relative to other works of art considered less aesthetically appealing. If one could not distinguish the quality of one painting from another, there would be nothing good or bad about any particular painting, because there would be nothing to measure it against. Stated differently, the awareness of *good* demands an awareness of that which is *bad*.

It is this capacity to ponder both the good *and* the bad which defines man as a *rational* being. For to think rationally is to engage in a process of reasoning through which one is able to achieve knowledge of truth, the ultimate good.[5] This, in turn, creates the foundations for that uniquely human attribute called *free choice*. In other words, it is human reason – the ability to reflect on and evaluate that which we experience or observe – which gives birth to the freedom to choose.[6]

To be certain, the animals are similarly capable of distinguishing between good and bad, and, when presented with options, will invariably 'choose' the good over the bad. However, such choice is neither rational nor contemplative; it is purely impulsive and, therefore, does not qualify as *free*.[7]

As such, it is not merely man's capacity to contemplate his Creator that is so significant to the enhancement of the Creation enterprise; it is the fact of his acknowledgement of God as an act of volition. It is because man *chooses* to recognize his Creator – meaning that he could choose *not* to give such recognition – that makes him such a crucial contributor to the success of this endeavor.[8] Once again, the animal kingdom offers no such value. The animals function precisely as intended and, as such, reflect the goodness of God's world. However, they are not capable of independently contributing to the enhancement of the earth's goodness; they do not reflect on

[5] Rambam (*The Guide* 1:2, 24) limits rational awareness to the distinguishing of truth from falsehood, while relegating man's awareness of good and bad to "things generally accepted as known," and not accessed via the intellect. However, Abarbanel (*Peirush Abarbanel al Ha-Torah*, Genesis, Hapoel Hamizrahi, Tel-Aviv, 1983, 111) argues against Rambam and includes awareness of truth and falsehood under the rubric of *knowledge of good and bad*, explaining that arriving at truth in exercising rational thought is always desirable (and, therefore, *good*), just as arriving at false conclusions is undesirable (hence, *bad*).

[6] This follows the Kantian and Hegelian view of rational thought as the foundation of free choice.

[7] I return to R. Arama's point above in which he distinguishes between human and animal intelligence, in that animals are governed by the senses alone, while humans are governed by a combination of the senses and the intellect.

[8] This view of man's freedom of choice as complementary and beneficial to the Creation endeavor contrasts with Leon Kass' argument that man's autonomy is problematic and that God desires for him not to exercise choice but, rather, to remain in childlike innocence and to allow his instinct to guide him towards "natural good" (Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, University of Chicago, 2006, 66).

their experience or contemplate the source of their sustenance, and they do not, indeed cannot, choose to recognize or not recognize God's beneficence.

The Symmetry Between Man and God

Remarkably, it is precisely those qualities that mark man's exaltedness which are some of the defining attributes of God Himself in the Creation narrative. As noted above, each stage in the Creation process culminates with God's perception of the "good," thus demonstrating the integral role of God's own rational awareness in executing the Creation project. Indeed, God is the epitome of a free, choosing, and independent being. And so, when the Torah describes man as a divine-like creature, it is specifically the attributes of rational thought and autonomy that exemplify such grandeur.[9]

As we shall see, it is precisely man's divine-like stature that gives rise to the tension between him and God through which emerges man's rebellion against his Creator in the third chapter of Genesis. For just as God is an autonomous creator of good, so too, man seeks to be an independent creator and provider.[10] And yet, as man looks out across the beautifully landscaped Garden, all sculpted by the divine hand, his own creative energies are stifled as he ponders what there is for him to contribute to this already seemingly perfect world.

There is, however, a mechanism through which man can accommodate those divine impulses. Once again, the elevation of God's world to that of *very* good is dependent on man's choice to acknowledge God's providence. Therefore, should man choose *not* to recognize God as the Creator of the earth's bounty, he prevents God's vision for a *very* good world from materializing, while simultaneously staking his own claim as master and provider.[11]

Of course, irrespective of man's acknowledgment, God remains the earth's true benefactor. Nevertheless, lacking man's endorsement, God remains, as it were, a king without a crown.[12] As such, God's providence is left solely in the hands of man. The Midrash offers up the following

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[9] Abarbanel argues that it is man's divine image that enables him to recognize God as the Master of the world. It is through his *tzelem elohim* that the gift of rational thought is born to man (*Peirush Abarbanel al Ha-Torah*, *ibid.*, 68-69). See also Malbim (*Otzar Ha-Mefarshim, Malbim*, vol. 1, 17).

[10] According to R. Soloveitchik , man's likeness to God is most reflected in his creative nature (Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition* 7:2 (Summer 1965), 11).

[11] For instance, proponents of the naturalist materialist position on the origins of the universe assert man's ownership of the earth's resources based on the view that those raw materials are the product of nature alone, lacking any intelligent design by a willing and benevolent Creator.

[12] As stated in *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (ch. 3), "If there be no people to praise the king, where is the honor of the king?" (translation from sefaria.org.il).

parable to illustrate:

> [This is] like a king who built a palace and inhabited it with mutes. They would rise each day and greet the king with gestures, their fingers, and their handkerchiefs. The king said, "If only my subjects were intelligent, how much more honor would I receive!" He wondered why he hadn't done this and then placed intelligent people inside the palace. They rose up and took over the palace and said, "This is not the king's palace, but ours!" (*Genesis Rabbah* 5:1)

A Divine Dilemma

And so, God faces a dilemma in considering His uplifting of man. For the very means by which the Creation project can be elevated, at the same instant, it sows the seeds for God's potential banishment from the world He formed.[13] God cannot have it both ways. Either create an uplifted creature and, with it, the possibility of revolt, or choose not to and avoid the threat of insurrection but forgo any prospect for an enhanced world.

In returning to our question, the God of the Torah, while not lacking in goodness, *is* a vulnerable deity. It is a vulnerability initiated by God Himself as a consequence of His unmitigated benevolence (i.e., the fact that He creates man as an intelligent being), and which exposes Him before His most esteemed creature. In kabbalistic tradition, this concept is known as *tzimtzum*, that is, in His great benevolence, the omnipresent God retracts His presence and his omnipotence in order to make room for the world, for man, and, ultimately, for man's free will.

The precariousness of God's decision to take the risk that comes with creating an exalted being is reflected in the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad that He places in the middle of the Garden (2:9). For we must ask why God would plant a tree in the Garden that He proceeds to forbid man to partake of; simply refrain from creating such a tree and there would be no concern of man eating from it. Rather, the tree represents the rational mind instilled in man which grants him the capacity to reflect upon the earth's goodness (hence, the Tree of Knowledge of *Good and Bad*) and to contemplate his Creator while, at the same instant, giving him the power to reject God and replace Him as sovereign ruler on earth. The serpent narrative in Genesis 3 demonstrates the potency of this power that man yields over God.

The Nakedness of the Serpent

The serpent is introduced as the most "*arum*" of God's creatures (3:1), a term typically translated as "cunning" or "wily." But while there is little doubt as to the serpent's evil intentions in its efforts to

[13] Rabbi Yechiel Tucazinsky explains that it is precisely man's capacity to contemplate the wondrousness of God's creation that leads him to believe that he is his own provider and to even rebel against his Maker (Yechiel Tucazinsky, *Gesher HaChaim*, translated by Nissan Aharon Tucazinsky, Jerusalem, Moznaim, 1983, 77).

persuade Eve to defy God's injunction, close inspection of the serpent's rhetoric betrays a distinctly bold and brazen character as opposed to deceptive and cunning. To God's warning that man will "surely die" (2:17) by eating the fruit, the serpent mockingly responds, "You will surely *not* die" (3:4). Then, in a shocking display of *hutzpah*, the serpent proceeds to charge that the true motivation behind God's edict is that of self-preservation:

> "For God knows that on the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will become like God, knowing good and bad." (3:5)

And yet, there is nothing ingenuous in the serpent's statement. Indeed, its bold prediction is proven prophetic when, following Adam and Eve's consumption of the forbidden fruit, God Himself confirms, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and bad" (3:22).

Recognizing God's dependence on man's agency, the serpent has no need to employ guile in its efforts to sway Eve.[14] It must merely point out the truth: that man, too, is a rational being, capable of discerning goodness independent of God's input. Sure enough, as Eve places her gaze upon the forbidden fruit, it is not only her animal instinct that draws her towards it ("*ki* ***ta'avah*** *hu la-einayim*"); it is also her rational mind that perceives its goodness (*"ve-nehmad ha-eitz le-****haskil****"*).[15]

In reality, man possesses knowledge of good and bad even *prior* to eating the fruit; the very fact that God issues an edict to man demonstrates the latter's capacity to distinguish between good and bad. However, until man *actively* chooses to defy God's will, such awareness remains in the purview of the *theoretical*; it is only through actively defying God's command that man becomes an autonomous (and, therefore, divinelike) being substantively. In other words, while it is true that man exercises choice in obeying God's command, such volition is passive in nature. Hence, God's perception of man's achievement of divine status only *following* the latter's consumption of the fruit.

God, meanwhile, is helpless in preventing man's achievement of divinity because – as discussed – to do so would mean to strip man of the very attribute that enables him to contemplate his Creator and, thereby, elevate the Creation enterprise.

In fact, the text's characterization of the serpent as *arum* alludes to the serpent's unbound temerity. Note that this very same term appears just one verse prior in characterizing Adam and Eve in the

[14] Ramban (on Genesis 2:9), in referencing *Pirkei De-*R*abbeinu Ha-Kadosh*, asserts that the serpent does not lie.

[15] *Ta'avah*, translated as "lust," refers to man's physical senses. *Le-haskil* is associated with rational knowledge.

Garden:

> And the two of them were *arumim*, the man and his wife, but they were not ashamed. (2:25)

Clearly, in its application to Adam and Eve, *arum* means "naked." Nakedness connotes transparency and openness. And so, while Adam and Eve's lack of shame in their exposure before God reflects, on the one hand, their intimacy with their Maker prior to sin, it may also hint at an unhealthy lack of fear in the presence of their Creator which comes as a direct consequence of their proximity to Him. The serpent is the embodiment of that confidence and self-assuredness that is generated through man's recognition of God's dependence on him to achieve a 'very good' world.[16]

Man's Limitation as Creator

While man has the power to exile God from his world, the question of whether he can succeed in God's place as sovereign ruler is a very different matter. For while man is certainly capable both of recognizing and generating goodness, he cannot do so with the same precision as God. This is because man's perspective on what is good and true is always of a limited and subjective nature. Each individual or group sees goodness through their own particular lens. What one deems to be good will inevitably be less than ideal in the eyes of others. And yet, that divine component with which we are all imbued does not like to acknowledge those limitations. As such, we tend to respond impatiently with those who resist our ideas of the good and the true in favor of their own.[17] The inevitable outcome is conflict and discord.

Not so with the Creator of the universe. Lacking boundaries or limitation, God's perspective of good is objective, pure, and unadulterated. Others may not always see the goodness in His ways, but that is due to their own deficient perspective, as opposed to any defects in God's judgment.[18]

And so, with man's independence comes, by necessity, imperfection. A world with man in charge is one that will ultimately produce strife and division. This is evident immediately following Adam and Eve's assertion of their autonomy, where each shifts the blame for his/her actions; Adam accuses Eve, while Eve deflects blame onto

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[16] *Bava Batra* 16a identifies in the serpent man's evil impulse. See also *Nefesh Ha-Hayyim* (1:6) and *Mikhtav Mei-Eliyahu* (E. Dessler, *Strive For Truth*, vol. 2, 138).

[17] For instance, most imperialist endeavors are rooted in good intentions. The ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, and Roman empires all sought to bring peace and prosperity to the world under their dominion.

[18] According to R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (on Genesis 1:4), God's objective judgment of good is evident in the verse, "God saw that the light ("*or*") was good (*"tov"),* in which the adjective ("*tov*") follows the direct object ("or"). This, in contrast to Eve's subjective human perspective on goodness in the verse regarding the fruit, where the adjective ("*tov*") precedes the direct object ("*ha-eitz*").

the serpent. Each, in his or her own mind, is innocent, and others are to blame for their own shortcomings.

Similarly, man's life outside the Garden is marked by disharmony as Cain, motivated by his own subjective sense of injustice, strikes and kills his younger brother (4:3-8). Note God's encouragement to Cain following His rejection of Cain's offering to "do good" ("*im teitiv*"), implying that Cain has failed in his subjective judgment of good. Later, the children of Elohim take wives for themselves from the daughters of man "from whoever pleased them" and were deemed to be "good" in *their* eyes (6:2).

And, with each passing generation, as man continues to distance himself from his Creator in pursuit of generating his own independent goodness, humanity descends into greater moral corruption and decadence, culminating in the destruction of both man and his world in the generation of Noah.[19] But, while man is doomed for chaos and ruin in a Godless world, God – despite feeling genuine sadness and disappointment[20] – will endure without man. As such, man's expulsion of God from the world is to his own detriment.[21]

A New Beginning

Following the failure of the Creation project, God embarks on a new initiative in which he no longer looks to universal man for acknowledgement. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch explains:

> Because men had eliminated God from life, and even from nature, they found the basis of life in possessions and its aim in enjoyment… Thus, it became necessary that one people be introduced into the ranks of the nations which, through its history and life, should declare that God is the only creative cause of existence, and that the fulfillment of His will is the only goal in life. (S.R. Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters*,

[19] The Torah states that God "saw the earth and behold it was *nishhatah* (corrupted)… And God said to Noah, behold I shall *mash'hitam* (destroy) the earth (6:12-13). Discerning the identical language in describing man's corrupt behavior and God's destruction of the world as punishment for man's waywardness, Seforno states (on 6:12) that it is, in reality, man himself who destroys the earth, and that God merely carries out to completion the process which man initiates.

[20] Upon recognizing the failure of the Creation endeavor, and that the "end of all flesh" (6:13) had come before Him, we read, "And the Lord regretted that He had made man on the earth, and His heart was saddened" (6:6).

[21] One of the founding principles of the Torah, according to Rambam, is: "All things that exist in the heavens and the earth, and everything between them, only exist from the truth of His [God's] existence." Furthermore, "If one would imagine Him not to exist, nothing else could exist." Finally, "If one would imagine that nothing else would exist except for Him, He would continue to exist, and their nullification would not nullify His existence, for all that exists needs Him, while He does not need them" (Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:1-3).

> translation by Bernard Drachman, Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1969, 54)[22]

This "one people," the nation of Israel,

> …must remain alone and do its work and live its life as a separate entity until, refined and purified by Israel's teaching and Israel's example, humanity as a whole might turn to God and acknowledge Him as the sole Creator and Ruler. (ibid.)

With humanity, as a whole, demonstrating little interest in forming a relationship with Him, God acquiesces to man's desire for independence, and looks, instead, to a particular people with whom to forge a relationship and through whom to advertise His providence to the nations. The founding father of this future nation is Abraham, an individual who, despite his material wealth and renown, seeks answers to the deeper questions of life:

> Though he (Abraham) was a child, he began to think [incessantly] throughout the day and night, wondering: "How is it possible for the sphere to continue to revolve without having anyone controlling it? Who is causing it to revolve? Surely, it does not cause itself to revolve." (Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Laws of Idolatry* 1:1, translation by chabad.org)

Thus, for the first time in history, God encounters an individual who yearns to know his Creator and, as such, will "bring blessing to all the nations of the world" by promoting faith in God to the masses "through commanding his children and his household after him to perform righteousness and justice" (Genesis 18:18-19).[23]

With God's election of Abraham and his future progeny, the nation of Israel, universal man is relieved of its responsibility to forge a relationship with God, and is given the distance he demands in order to access his own creative energies without God's dominating presence looming over him. Aside from some basic ethical requirements detailed in the Noahide laws, man lives free from God, while still maintaining awareness of God's providence through the history of God's chosen people, Israel.

Amalek: The Serpent Evolved

As man's relationship with God evolves postdiluvian, so too, we discover an evolution in the manifestation of those primal evil impulses. Now, with the nation of Israel standing in for God as His representative on earth, the primeval serpent refocuses its assault on God's chosen people. For if God's existence is advertised through the history of Israel, then God's removal

[22] I would like to thank Rafi Eis for directing me to this source.

[23] See S. R. Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters*, Letter 8.

from the world is achieved through the annihilation of Israel. Of course, for most, the knowledge of an existent (albeit, distant) God is a comforting thought. If there is a God, then there is an order to the world, there are ethics and morals where the righteous are rewarded and where punishment is meted out to the wicked. However, for those for whom freedom and autonomy are not enough but who demand complete sovereignty, the very existence of God poses a threat. It is the latter that are epitomized in the nation of Amalek.

Following Israel's miraculous departure from Egypt, Amalek unleashes a brutal assault on the recently liberated nation of slaves. Recounting the details of the attack, God issues an edict to Israel to never forget Amalek's cruelty:

> Remember what Amalek did [to] you on your way out from Egypt; when [he] happened upon you on the way; and [he] attacked the weakest amongst [you] who tarried at the rear, and you were tired and spent, and [he] did not fear God. And it will be that when the Lord your God grants you respite from all your enemies around, in the land that the Lord your God gives to you as an inheritance, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heaven. Do not forget! (Deuteronomy, 25:17-19)

But while the ruthlessness of Amalek's assault certainly contributes to God's indignation, the Midrash highlights another dimension to the offense which helps explain God's interminable rage against Amalek:

> Like a boiling cauldron into which no creature is able to enter, this wicked one (Amalek) comes and jumps into it. Although it is burnt, it cools it off for others. (*Tanhuma* 9)

More significant than the physical harm caused to Israel is the spiritual damage inflicted upon humanity that is such an affront to God. In fact, Israel overcomes Amalek on the military battlefield (see Exodus 17:13). Nevertheless, Amalek is able to claim victory in its greater mission to conceal God's presence from the world, thereby *cooling* the spiritual temperature attained through Israel's miraculous exodus from Egypt. Indeed, coming on the heels of the most awe-inspiring display of God's power in all of history, in which the mighty Egyptian military machine is vanquished without Israel so much as lifting a sword, Amalek's engagement with the Israelites in a physical battle that displays the typical features of conventional warfare recasts Israel's victory over Egypt as a natural – albeit impressive – military achievement.

> In this manner the moment of awe at the mighty hand of God passed away and the atmosphere of

> astonishment at His miracles evaporated. The world returned to its former rut, to its idols of gold and silver, its faith in mortal power and brute force. (Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim,* World Zionist Organization, 1980, 256)

Drawing from the primeval serpent, Amalek seeks to convince man that he reigns supreme on earth. And, just like the serpent, Amalek exhibits shocking impudence and fearlessness in its assault on God, fueled by its awareness of God's point of vulnerability.[24]

Indeed, in characterizing the iniquity of Amalek, the Zohar states that Amalek attacked "both on high and below, for at that time the *evil serpent* gathered all of its forces both above and below" (*Zohar*, *Vayakhel* 194b).

But while Amalek is successful in its efforts to distract the nations from God's presence through its battle with Israel in the wilderness, so long as the Jewish people endure, there remains a place for God in this world, and a future in which "God will be King over the entire earth, on that day shall God be One, and His name One" (Zechariah 14:9). And God promises that, despite having to endure constant persecution and oppression, the nation of Israel will never be destroyed – "The eternity of Israel will not fail" (I Samuel 15:29).

Conclusion

Can a world infused with evil possibly bear the imprint of a supremely benevolent Creator? Not only is it possible, but a world fashioned by a God of pure goodness *demands* the potential for evil. To rid the world of the possibility of evil would necessitate the removal of man as an exalted creature. For man's evil inclination is but a derivative of that rational awareness instilled in him by God through which God's providence can be recognized, thereby elevating the Creation enterprise to a higher good.[25] This sheds light on the prophet Isaiah's attribution to God as "Fashioner of light and Creator of darkness, Maker of peace and Creator of ***evil***" (Isaiah 45:7).

But while the foundations of all evil can be traced to the very condition of man upon his formation, the evil which existed prior to the Great Deluge and that of the postdiluvian epoch are each manifested in accordance with its unique historical context. Pre-Flood, evil emerges as a consequence of man's failed attempt to manufacture good independent from God, following man's banishment of God from the world. With God's new plan for humanity

[24] In declaring God's eternal battle against Amalek, the Torah states, "There is a hand on the throne of God" (Exodus, 17:16). The word "throne" ("*keis*") is deficient of the letter *aleph* (the usual, normative form is "*kisei*") which, according to Rashi, alludes to the incompleteness of God's name so long as Amalek remains in existence.

[25] The contribution of man's evil impulse to the enhancement of the world is illustrated in the *midrash* that states, "'Behold, it was *very* good' – this is the evil inclination'" (*Genesis Rabbah* 9:7).

following the Flood, evil metastasizes into an unrestrained assault on God via His chosen representative, the nation of Israel. It is this more aggressive and deliberate brand of evil that has been brandished throughout most of history, and which so often targets the Jewish people.

Nevertheless, in pondering a world absent of evil, we must be prepared to consider a return to the basic but stagnant goodness that presided on earth prior to man's arrival, a world without choice and without the potential for improvement. Most certainly, given the options, we would choose the world as we know it, despite the inevitable pain and anguish it brings with it.

THE METAPHYSICAL BALANCE OF THE UNIVERSE

Mel Waldman is a psychologist, poet, and writer, a past winner of the GRADIVA AWARD in Psychoanalysis.

(Inspired by a conversation with Rabbi Zalmen)

Long ago,
in the vastness of my past, at the Tree of Life shul,
I studied Hebrew, prepared for my bar mitzvah, and
prayed to Hashem, our G-d, the *Ein Sof*, the *Without End.*

I was a young man of deep faith.

Some,
like Mr. Kaman, the shamash, and Mrs. Koenig, my Hebrew
teacher, thought I was destined to be a rabbi. It wasn't
bashert.

Seven years
of trauma passed, and with Mother's death and Father's wrath
came the shattering of my faith – a sacred realm of calmness,
well-being, trust, and awe, nestled within my soul – the holy
universe hidden within.

Father expelled me from our home. I went into exile.

My being exploded! My mournful soul
shattered by loss and betrayal into broken glass.
I thought it would never mend.

Yet perhaps, by Hashem's design,
in 1978, I found a Brooklyn apartment across from Congregation Etz Chaim of Flatbush,
our family shul.

I returned *home.*

Still,
decades galloped by, bereft of faith, I thought.
But always, across time & space, Chabad Jews found me,
often in Dunkin' Donuts, and helped me put on tefillin while
saying the holy prayers.

Israel,
my Chabad friend, comes most Fridays, and puts efillin on me as
we recite the holy words. After, he asks me to express additional
prayers. I reach out to Hashem across the invisible universe and
pray for perfect health for my wife Michelle, who has multiple
myeloma, cancer of the plasma cells. Overflowing with love,
she is close to Hashem.

Michelle,
my beautiful warrior wife, is in Menorah Nursing Home
relearning how to walk with a walker. She inspires me to
be my higher self. I too am learning to walk in the presence
of the *Without End*, the *Ein Sof.*

When I put tefillin on, I feel close to Hashem.

Once
Orthodox, I now exist between the secular and religious world,
my soul swinging back and forth, in the divine pendulum of
faith and doubt, in search of Hashem.

I yearn for the Divine Presence of Hashem!

A few years ago,
I met Rabbi Zalmen, an ebullient man overflowing with the joy of Hashem. The holy luminary offered to be my mentor. We did not
speak again until we met by chance earlier this year
on a summer night.

"I don't do much," I told him. "I go to the Tree of Life once a year.
I put on tefillin most Fridays and feel close to Hashem."

Rabbi Zalmen
revealed the meaning of my few mitzvot. "They change the balance
of the universe."

Each mitzvah
affects the cosmos, increases spirituality and alters the metaphysical balance,
feeding and filling the invisible universe with divinity.

My soul
swings back and forth, in the divine pendulum of faith and doubt, in search
of Hashem.

On a summer night,
a chance meeting changed the metaphysical balance of my life.

I yearn for the Divine Presence of Hashem! I perform mitzvot and search for Him
everywhere in the vastness. Even the darkness conceals the
scattered sparks of divinity, waiting to be discovered and
released, bringing me closer to redemption.

A Word Search Adventure

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Review of Mitchell First, *From Eden to Exodus: A Journey into Hebrew Words in Bereshit and Shemot* (Kodesh Press, 2024).[1]

Mitchell First is a noted author, and this is his sixth book. The first, *Jewish History in Conflict* (Jason Aronson, Inc., 1997), deals with a single topic: the length of the Second Temple period. The second, *Esther Unmasked* (Kodesh Press, 2015), comprises 11 essays, and is based on articles he had previously published in *Hakirah* and *seforimblog.com*. Next, he published three books based on his *Jewish Link* columns, each with approximately 60 short articles about history, liturgy, holidays, and etymology: *Roots and Rituals* (Kodesh Press, 2018), *Links to Our Legacy* (Kodesh Press, 2021), and *Words for the Wise* (Kodesh Press, 2022).

From Eden to Exodus: *A Journey into Hebrew Words in Bereshit and Shemot* is his newest book. It is written mostly in a *parashah*-based format, and is dedicated to the memory of his close friend of many years, Sam Borodach. In First's tribute, he credits Borodach for the insightful feedback he received during their years of friendship, which enhanced his written work.

This book covers Bereshit and Shemot in Parts 1 and 2, usually devoting two essays per *parashah*, although in some cases, (Bereshit and Va-Yehi; Shemot, Beshalah, and Mishpatim) three essays are presented, and for Miketz, Va-Yakhel, and Pekudei, just one. As is evident from the book's subtitle, his main focus in these sections is on etymology-related issues. Starting with the root, he explores its meanings, often traces it to its source, and follows its connection to other apparently potentially related words in Tanakh – e.g., *dam, adom, adamah, adam,* and *Edom*. First presents various scholars' viewpoints on each word he investigates. In many instances, he finds no single, definitive answer but, instead, many intriguing possibilities. As the author notes, the array of scholarly opinions provides fertile ground for homiletics. He touches briefly on wordplay, e.g., *lashon nofel al lashon*, a literary feature that appears throughout Tanakh. By juxtaposing similar sounding words in the text that are not necessarily related etymologically, Tanakh provides an enriching and engaging experience for the careful reader. One example that First cites is Edom for Eisav as related to "ruddy" (*adom*) (4), a form of wordplay.

In the Bereshit chapters, I particularly liked First's discussion on the etymology of *melekh* (king), addressed in his essay on Parashat Lekh Lekha (since the "battle of the kings" is found in this *parashah*) (21-23). In leading us to attempt to

[1] All parenthetical citations refer to this volume.

determine the underlying verb of *melekh,* he provides background rather than simply providing conclusions. In this way, he allows the readers to follow along on his journey of investigation. First takes the reader to Aramaic and Akkadian sources, to standard references including Brown-Driver-Briggs, Ernest Klein, Marcus Jastrow, and Matityahu Clark, and then segues over to Samuel David Luzzatto and R. Shamshon Refael Hirsch. He points out that in Aramaic, aside from the "rule" meaning, the verb has meanings like "decide," "advise," and "consult." He also points out that many relate the "king" meaning to the above meanings. Others, however, reject any connection between these meanings. Although First does not reach a clear conclusion on the underlying root of the word, he points out that S.D. Luzzatto (commenting on Gen. 36:31) makes the interesting suggestion that it derives from *molikh* (leader), which is from the root h-l-kh..

In the same essay, the author also mentions the similarity between *melekh* and *Molekh*, the name of a pagan god mentioned eight times in Tanakh. He states that most scholars relate the name of this pagan god to the "king" meaning. Finally, in a postscript, he writes briefly about the etymology of the English word king.

The beginning of Parashat Hayei Sarah introduces the root s-p-d, as in *lispod,* which is often translated as "to eulogize." Recognizing that this is a later mishnaic meaning, First checked several Bible translations. In an early JPS edition and the Hertz chumash it is translated as "to mourn," but he saw that Rabbi Hertz had commented in his text that "The Hebrew word (*lispod*) indicates the loud wailing still usual in the East as a manifestation of grief." Hiring a professional mourner may also have been part of this practice, and is mentioned by Jeremiah (9:16). A grief ceremony that involves trembling and body movement is cited in *Daat Mikra,* while the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* further describes a grief ceremony that involves beating the breasts while crying out "ho, ho" (as is seen in Amos ch. 5, portraying a scene of great mourning, and in association with the word *misped*). *Sefod* appears in Kohelet 3:4 as a contrast to *rekod* (dancing), and *misped* contrasts with *mahol* (also dancing) in Psalm 30:12. The ceremonial explanation, says First, aids our comprehension of these contrasts.

Next, First traces the root s-p-d to the Akkadian source, where it means mourning, and also means to "beat the breasts," which First suggests is probably its original meaning. He cites several sources, e.g., Tawil's *Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew*, the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, the etymological works of Ernest Klein, and Marcus Jastrow, who seems to believe that "beats or strikes" is the original meaning. First searches Tanakh for a proof text, and quotes a verse in Isaiah (32:12). The prophet has called upon the women to mourn immediately for the approaching calamities, saying, "*Al shadayim sofdim*, ("Lament on breasts"), for the pleasant fields, for the fruitful vine." Since we now know of an ancient Near Eastern grief ceremony that involves beating of the breasts, and we have an Akkadian root, we may have found the answer

to this difficult line of text, puzzled over by many *mefarshim* (commentators) whom First lists in his discussion of "beating the breasts" as a sign of mourning.

In the section on Shemot, the title of a Va-Era chapter caught my eye: *John Lennon and the Plague of Arov*. First notes that the word *arov* simply means mixture, but does not specify the variety. He goes on to cite interpretations that range from a mixture of wild animals, to insects (from a Latin root), then to night wolves and scarab beetles (but definitely not "Beatles"!)

Part 3: Miscellaneous Essays presents six additional short chapters or sections that are unrelated to the *parashah*; instead, the author suggests that they can be read leisurely during the seasons of Va-Yikra, Bemidbar, and Devarim!

I was intrigued by First's chapter in this section on the word *anak* (176-179). It sometimes is a word for a race of giants. Other times, it has the meaning "necklace." He explains that most likely there is a connection here. In ancient times, when people saw a tall person, they called him an *anak*, because a tall person gave the impression of having a long neck. Indeed, in Arabic, their cognate to *anak* means "neck." (First states that R. Hirsch on Devarim 2:11 figured out the necklace-giant connection, even though he did not know of that clue from Arabic.)

By carefully delving into the roots of significant words in the text, the author imparts an extra layer of meaning, sometimes offering a new approach to a long-held understanding of a word or a phrase, which may even impact our understanding its meaning in other contexts, and may enhance our appreciation of prayer texts.

For example, in the second paragraph of the *Aleinu* prayer, First asks if the word *le-taken* is spelled with a kuf (to perfect) or a kaf (to establish) (173-176). He notes that in the *siddurim* most of us use, whether *nusach Ashkenaz* or *Sefarad,* tav-**kuf**-nun is the common spelling, and he reminds us that *tikkun olam* is a Jewish value and human action referred to many times in the Mishnah. But then he learned from a shul friend that the Yemenite siddur has *le-taken* (to establish) spelled with a kaf, obviously referring the action to God who establishes and maintains the world. Discovering this difference led First on a search to try and determine which version is the original: kuf or kaf. When he looked in Rambam's *Sefer Ahavah*, using modern critical editions based on manuscripts, and 10th-13th century *Aleinu* scripts from the Cairo Genizah, he found the word spelled with a kaf. A manuscript of the R. Saadia Gaon Rosh Hashanah *Amidah* prayer also shows a kaf spelling. However, although R. Saadia lived in the 10th Century (d. 942), our manuscript is a later document. Ashkenazic texts from the time of the Rishonim, such as *Mahzor Vitry* (12th century) more typically have a kuf spelling. Although First cannot prove definitively (to date!) that kaf was the earlier spelling, he argues strongly that the kaf spelling (to establish) is a better reading in the context of the prayer, and thinks it more likely that

kaf would have evolved to kuf, rather than the opposite.

Later, in reviewing this research, which he had already published, First realized that there was a much more significant question to address in the *Aleinu* prayer: who was to do the *le-taken* action, man or God? Many of us may automatically assume that *"tikkun olam"* is a responsibility to be shouldered by the Jewish people. But looking at the word in isolation must be balanced by its inclusion in the full section of text: *"Al kein nekaveh lekha Hashem Elokeinu, lirot meheira*[*h*] *be-tiferet uzekha, le-haavir gilulim min ha-aretz, ve-ha-elilim karot yikareitun, le-taken olam bemalkhut Sha-dai …."* First says that *"lirot meheira*[*h*] *be-tiferet uzekha"* is almost certainly a request for the speedy rebuilding of the Beit ha-Mikdash, citing sources in Psalms for variations on *"tiferet uzekha"* that clearly refer to the Beit ha-Mikdash, and he points to *"meheira*[*h*]*"* (speedily) as confirmation to his theory. He then states that this excerpt is a prayer for rebuilding the Temple and establishing God's kingdom on earth. The next step is to find out who is the actor, God or the Jewish people, and he concludes that only God is capable of removing *gilulim* (idols) and cutting off *elilim* (other gods). To strengthen his theory, he quotes Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and the scholar Gerald Blidstein, who both point to this as a prayer by the people to God, expressing our hope that He will take the action(s) cited. Both of these modern scholars are referring to the word *le-taken* with a kuf.

I find the path of discovery described by the author, the range and scope of his sources over the centuries, and his willingness to correct and enlarge upon his own earlier works, a testimony to his intellectual curiosity, his honesty, and his interest in following the line of *mesorah* from generation to generation.

I am pleased to say that *From Eden to Exodus* meets the high standard of Mr. First's previous books. He has once again produced a scholarly work, replete with references (including many cross-references to his earlier books). It is written in a congenial, conversational tone. His writing is easy to understand, and he delivers an intellectually compelling body of information that readers who love textual Bible study will enjoy. They will learn many things about which they might never even have thought to ask.