

LEHRHAUS

OVER
SHABBOS
BESHELACH
5778

ARTICLES:

- | | |
|--|-----------|
| Moses Mendelssohn and the Mimetic Society: Then and Now | 1 |
| Lawrence Kaplan | |
| Why Do We Deserve God's Favor? | 9 |
| Ezra W. Zuckerman Sivan | |
| Cutting a Peace: The Story of Ketiah bar Shalom | 20 |
| Shlomo Zuckier | |

THIS WEEK'S "LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS" IS SPONSORED BY
TERRY AND GAIL NOVETSKY,
CELEBRATING THE ENGAGEMENT OF THEIR DAUGHTER
RIKKI TO JACOB PORTES.
MAZAL TOV!

MOSES MENDELSSOHN AND THE MIMETIC SOCIETY: THEN AND NOW

LAWRENCE KAPLAN

Does Moses Mendelssohn's epoch-making work, [Jerusalem](#), have anything to say to us today? In an illuminating [recent essay](#) in *Lehrhaus*, Rabbi Tzvi Sinensky focuses on a particular feature of a key passage from the work and shows how it sheds unexpected light on current day pressing social concerns. Extending Sinensky's observations, I would like to look at the passage as a whole from a broad socio-cultural perspective, and, through doing so, show how it can significantly contribute, in unexpected ways, to contemporary, indeed ongoing, discussions, both descriptive and normative, regarding the nature of traditional Jewish communities, including our own.

Mendelssohn's "Living Script"

In this passage, Mendelssohn engages in the area of Jewish thought dealing with *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*, the reasons for the commandments, or to use Mendelssohn's own language, offers a "surmise about the purpose of the ceremonial law in Judaism," about the "goal" of the "constitution" that God revealed to and imposed upon the Jewish people.¹

First some background. Mendelssohn writes that God chose the Jewish people "to be ... a nation which, through its establishment and constitution, through its laws, actions, [and] vicissitudes, ... was continually to call attention to sound ... ideas of God and His attributes. It was incessantly to teach, to proclaim, and to endeavor to preserve these ideas among the nations by its mere existence, as it were" (*Jerusalem*, 118). The question arises, however: What are the best means of "call[ing] attention to sound ... ideas of God and His attributes," of, to cite another formulation of his, "preserv[ing]... pure concepts of religion far removed from idolatry?"

Mendelssohn, referring to his previous lengthy discussion regarding two types of visible, permanent signs, images and hieroglyphics on the one hand, alphabetical script on the other, rejects their use as means of "preserving the abstract ideas of religion" (104-117). "Images and hieroglyphics lead to superstition and idolatry and our alphabetical script makes man too speculative" (118). In an earlier passage, Mendelssohn had written that "according to the original constitution [before the Oral Law was written down] ...the ceremonial law itself is a kind of living script rousing the mind and heart, full of meaning, never ceasing to inspire contemplation and to provide the occasion and opportunity for oral instruction" (102-103).

In a word, the revealed ceremonial law, as a type of "living script" that commands the performance of transitory actions and that therefore is not exposed to the dangers inherent in both images and alphabetical script in their character as visible permanent signs, serves to preserve and call to mind, undergird, and reinforce fundamental religious truths. For

¹ Moses Mendelssohn, [Jerusalem](#), trans. Allan Arkush (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1983), 117-18.

Mendelssohn himself these fundamental religious truths, these “pure concepts of religion,” are rational in nature, the three most basic ones being for him the existence of God, divine providence, and the immortality of the soul. But, presumably, even were we to disagree with Mendelssohn as to what are those fundamental religious truths that Jewish practice calls to mind and whether they are based on reason or revelation, his view regarding the relationship between divine practice and religious truth could still hold.

Open-Ended Divine Truth

But exactly how does the divinely commanded ceremonial law call these religious truths, whatever their precise nature, to mind? Here we arrive at the key passage referred to at the essay’s beginning, in which, Mendelssohn, following immediately upon his rejection of the use of images or alphabetical script to preserve the abstract ideas of religion, seeks to answer this question:

In order to remedy these defects [inherent in the use of images or alphabetical script to preserve the abstract ideas of religion] the lawgiver of this nation gave the *ceremonial* law.... The great maxim of this constitution seems to have been: *Man must be impelled to perform actions and only induced to engage in reflection.* Therefore, each of these prescribed actions, each practice, ... had its meaning, ; each was closely related to the speculative knowledge of religion and the teachings of morality, and was an occasion for a man in search of truth to reflect on these matters or to seek instruction from wise men.

Mendelssohn proceeds to elaborate upon the reasons why the Law prefers “actions and practices” over “signs” as the means for inducing reflection about “the speculative knowledge of religion and the teachings of morality.”

The truths useful for the felicity of the nation as well as each of its individual members were to be utterly removed from all imagery.... They were to be connected to actions and practices, and these were to serve in place of signs.... Man’s actions are transitory; there is nothing lasting ... about them that like hieroglyphic script could lead to idolatry... But they also have the advantage over alphabetical signs of not isolating man, of not making him to be a solitary creature, poring over writings and books. They impel him rather to social intercourse, to imitation, and to oral living instruction. For this reason, there were but a few written laws, and it was forbidden to write more about them. But the unwritten laws, the oral tradition, the living instructions from man to man, from mouth to heart, were to explain, enlarge, limit, and define more precisely what... remained undetermined in the written law. In everything a youth saw being done, in all public as well as private dealings, on all gates and on all door posts, in whatever he turned his eyes or ears to, he found an occasion for inquiring and reflecting, occasion to follow an older and wiser man at his every step, to observe his minutest actions and doings with childlike attentiveness and to imitate them with childlike docility, [and] to inquire after the spirit and purpose of these doings (118-120).

This is a very eloquent and suggestive passage, but, as Sinensky notes, “the precise correspondence between the commandments and divine truth is left open by Mendelssohn, leading to a wide range of interpretations,” which Sinensky very expertly canvasses. But,

and this is Sinensky's main contribution to our understanding this passage and appreciating its implications, if one looks beyond the question of the precise nature of the relationship set forth in this passage between the commandments and the religious truths they call to mind and turns instead to examining the teacher-disciple model described therein, one will see that this model indirectly but fruitfully addresses "one of the vexing challenges of modern life," namely, loneliness, a problem nowadays reaching the proportions, according to many contemporary observers, of a "plague of disconnection."

In this passage, Sinensky correctly maintains:

Mendelssohn emphasizes that the teacher-disciple model provides a salve for the modern ailment of alienation. ... Observing the risk of human disconnection in the individualist Enlightenment milieu of eighteenth century Berlin, Mendelssohn fears that the proliferation of books will have the effect of "isolating man" and "making him a solitary creature." The teacher-student relationship lying at the heart of the transmission of the Oral Law is intended to guard against precisely this peculiarly modern form of loneliness.... Mitzvah as living script is the central mechanism through which Judaism ensures Jewish continuity and human relationships. ...Via the transmission of the Oral Law the law is not just properly conveyed but also ... an existential relationship is kindled.

Mimetic Mendelssohn

This is very well put. But I would carry Sinensky's approach one step further. For while the teacher-disciple model described in this passage is of great importance—and I shall come back to it—of even greater importance is the broader issue of *the type of society* Mendelssohn describes therein. To return to this essay's beginning, what Mendelssohn portrays here in very rich sociological and phenomenological terms is nothing other than the traditional mimetic society so insightfully, colorfully, and forcefully depicted by Professor Haym Soloveitchik in his classic essay "[Rupture and Reconstruction](#)" and more recently by Professor Moshe Koppel in his ongoing fascinating series of lively, incisive blog posts, "[Judaism Without Apologies](#)."

Both Soloveitchik and Koppel, as does Mendelssohn, contrast a traditional mimetic society with a text-based one. And both, as again does Mendelssohn, prefer the traditional mimetic society to the text-based one, Soloveitchik more by implication, Koppel more openly.

Soloveitchik argues that contemporary Orthodoxy has undergone a fundamental transformation, inasmuch as an Orthodox text based society, by a "process ... [that] began roughly in the mid-nineteen-fifties, gathered force noticeably in the next decade, and by the mid-seventies was well on its way to being.. the dominant mode of Orthodoxy," displaced the hitherto dominant Orthodox mimetic society. Koppel, by contrast, sees these two societies standing side by side, though he admits that the Orthodox mimetic society is located more among older Orthodox Jews, the Orthodox text-based society more among younger ones.

But let us focus on their depictions of the mimetic society. Soloveitchik describes it thus:

The Halakhah [as] a sweepingly comprehensive *regula* of daily life cover[s] not only prayer and divine service, but equally food, drink, dress, sexual relations between husband and wife, the rhythms of work and patterns of rest. It constitutes a way of life. And a way of life is not learned but rather absorbed. Its transmission is mimetic, imbibed from parents and friends, and patterned on conduct regularly observed in home and street, synagogue and school.

Similarly, Koppel in his blog post 18, "[Leading from Behind](#)," though he does not explicitly use the phrase "mimetic society," writes that for the person growing up in such a society, the Halakhah "[is] learned mimetically... practiced intuitively, and [is] a communal phenomenon[on]." Such a person, in contrast to a person growing up in a text-based society, "speaks Halakhah like a first language...fluently, intuitively, and without much conscious knowledge of the rules."

Halakhah as a First Language

If we now turn back to Mendelssohn, it becomes clear that what we have in the extended passage cited above, is a description of a mimetic society that, if anything, is even richer than the portraits of Soloveitchik and Koppel. As Mendelssohn argues, the transitory actions commanded by the law "impel [man] to social intercourse, to imitation, and to oral living instruction." As a result, "in everything a youth saw being done, in all public as well as private dealings, on all gates and on all door posts, in whatever he turned his eyes or ears to, he found an occasion for inquiring and reflecting, occasion to follow an older and wiser man at his every step, to observe his minutest actions and doings with childlike attentiveness and to imitate them with childlike docility, [and] to inquire after the spirit and purpose of these doings." Note here the repeated resort to such mimetically inflected phrases as "social intercourse," "imitation," "in everything a youth saw being done," "whatever he turned his eyes to," and, finally, "to observe [the wise man's] minutest actions and doings with childlike attentiveness and to imitate them with childlike docility."

Examining now Rabbi Sinensky's main point from the perspective of this ideal mimetic society limned by Mendelssohn, a key element of this society, missing in Soloveitchik's portrait, though found in Koppel's, is the role played by the personal teacher-student relationship. But while for Koppel—to oversimplify a characteristically sophisticated and elegant argument he makes in his Blog Post 20, "[Between Elitism and Egalitarianism](#)"—this relationship serves a form of subtle social signaling allowing the tradition to recalibrate itself when necessary, for Mendelssohn, as he clearly indicates, it serves a more critical and ongoing function.

That function is not just, as Sinensky maintains, to guard against loneliness and "the plague of disconnection," though that should not be underestimated, but to serve as one of *the two prime agents of mimetic transmission*. That is, to borrow a leaf from Koppel, the young man being initiated into the mimetic community learns to speak *Halakhah* like a first language not just from parents, family, friends, and more broadly society at large and its institutions, but especially from "an older and wiser man," whose "minutest actions and doings" he observes "with childlike attentiveness" and imitates "with childlike docility."

We may have here, though Mendelssohn does not say so, a chronological mimetic progression. In one's childhood, one absorbs, by osmosis, as it were, the practices

prescribed by the ceremonial law from family, friends, and more broadly society at large and its institutions. It is at a later stage of mimesis that the youth “follow[s] an older and wiser man at his every step.” Yet, though the youth at this stage is no longer a child, he must observe the wiser man’s “minutest actions and doings with *childlike* attentiveness and ... imitate them with *childlike* docility,” for, again drawing on Koppel’s comparison between learning *Halakhah* mimetically and learning a first language, is not one’s first language precisely the language one learned as a child, when one was open and impressionable, when one absorbed the language with a unique, inimitable blend of attentiveness and docility?

Mendelssohn and the Law

At this point, let us return to the question as to how precisely, in Mendelssohn’s view, the divinely commanded ceremonial law succeeds in calling the fundamental truths of religion to mind. Mendelssohn states: “The great maxim of [the Mosaic] constitution seems to have been: *Man must be impelled to perform actions and only induced to engage in reflection.*” But, and this is Mendelssohn’s key claim, the mimetic society established by the Mosaic constitution, whose members, as he indicates, absorb the *Halakhah* naturally and intuitively both from the community at large and its institutions and from its “older and wiser [men],” through a process of total immersion, as it were, is, at the same time, the community *best suited* to stimulate its members “to engage in such reflection.”

Why is this so? Mendelssohn answers that “each of [the Law’s] prescribed actions, each practice,” serves as a stimulus to “inquire after the spirit and purpose of these doings,” as “an occasion for a man in search of truth to reflect on these matters or to seek instruction from wise men.” I believe that in light of Professor Koppel’s illuminating analogy between *Halakhah* and language, where members of a halakhic mimetic community “speak *Halakhah* like a first language... fluently, intuitively, and without much conscious knowledge of the rules,” while members of a halakhic text-based community “speak [*Halakhah*] like a second language ... haltingly and stiltedly, [since] a part of the mind is occupied with retrieving the relevant rule,” we may arrive at a deeper understanding of Mendelssohn’s point.

When people speak in their first language, that language in which they are at home, that language which they speak so fluently and intuitively, then, precisely because they are so at home and so comfortable in it, it is easy and natural for them to use that language for higher purposes, to exploit its possibilities, capabilities, and resources to explore the most abstract, the most imaginative, most demanding, the richest intellectual, cultural, political, literary, scientific, philosophical, and religious issues.

On the other hand, when people speak in their second language, that language which they “speak haltingly and stiltedly, [since] a part of the mind is occupied with retrieving the relevant rule,” then, precisely because they are so ill at ease and so uncomfortable in it, so afraid of making mistakes, they will tend to use that language more functionally and practically, will play it safe and seek to avoid any discussion which might make untoward demands on their still limited and fragile linguistic capabilities.

Consider, then, that for Mendelssohn the relationship between the actions commanded by the ceremonial law and their “spirit and purpose,” the “pure concepts of religion” they are intended to call to mind, is like the relationship between a language and the ideas and

concepts it is used to express. It would follow that members of a halakhic text-based community, for whom the *Halakhah* is a second language, for whom, to use Koppel's pungent phrase, it is "an obstacle course of seemingly arbitrary rules" requiring careful navigation, would be so busy and concerned with avoiding mistakes and getting their halakhic practice *right*, with "retrieving the relevant rule," that they would hesitate to use those halakhic practices as a way of discussing the fundamental principles they are intended to preserve and call to mind.

On the other hand, members of a halakhic mimetic community, for whom the *Halakhah* is a first language practiced fluently and intuitively, who when observing the *Halakhah* "ride easy in the harness," are consequently able to use the language of halakhic practice in which they are so skilled and comfortable to intelligently and thoughtfully discuss and explore the great principles and truths of religion.

Moreover, as Elias Sacks argues in an important essay, precisely because in the original Mosaic constitution "Man [is] impelled to perform actions and only induced to engage in reflection," because that constitution avoids the use of fixed creedal formulas, "Jewish law permit[s] its adherents to revise [their] understanding of [Judaism's] core principles in light of shifting conceptual models," of changing philosophical systems.²

Again, I would argue that this flexibility derives, at least in part, from the mimetic nature of the halakhic society established by that constitution. For since the members of this community speak the language of halakhic practice as a *first* language, when they use this first language to discuss and explore the great principles and truths of religion, they are able, precisely because they are so skilled and competent in the use of that language, to, if necessary, shift conceptual and philosophical registers in the course of their discussion, while continuing to adhere to the same fundamental religious truths and principles. In sum, it is precisely the mimetic nature of Jewish society as established by the original Mosaic constitution which contributes to that constitution's achieving its goal of linking the "prescribed actions" of the ceremonial law "to the speculative knowledge of religion and the teachings of morality."

The Mimetic Society

The mimetic society Mendelssohn describes ended, in his view, with the writing down of the Oral Law. Both Soloveitchik and Koppel, however, who describe contemporary mimetic halakhic communities or those of recent times, explain how it is possible for such a society to exist alongside such canonized written texts as the Talmud and its commentaries, not to mention the responsa and codes, which provide more specific and direct guides for religious practice.

Koppel, in his blog post "Leading from Behind" notes:

Codes actually reflect popular practices more than they determine them, and are incapable of preventing disinclination to abide by their rulings. In a considerable

² Elias Sacks, "Anarchy and Law: Mendelssohn on Philosophy and Judaism" in [Moses Mendelssohn: Enlightenment, Religion, Politics, Nationalism](#), eds. M. Gottlieb and C. Manekin (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2015), 237-73.

number of cases, rulings cited in codes lose general support and subsequent codes reflect the later practice.... When new issues arise, popular consensus often precedes rabbinic consensus.

After offering a number of interesting examples illustrating his point, Koppel concludes, alluding to his post's title, that many a time *poskim* may seem to be setting standards for the community to follow, but, in truth, they are "leading from behind."

Of particular relevance to Mendelssohn's discussion are Soloveitchik's remarks. Soloveitchik points to the "classic ... position" of the Ashkenazic society for centuries

which saw the practice of the people as an expression of halakhic truth. It is no exaggeration to say that the Ashkenazic community saw the law as manifesting itself in two forms: in the canonized written corpus (the Talmud and codes), and in the regnant practices of the people. Custom was a correlative datum of the halakhic system.... Received practice is... inherently valid. And on frequent occasions the written word was reread in light of traditional behavior.

In light of Soloveitchik's observation, we may say that while, according to Mendelssohn, the ideal Jewish mimetic society ended with the writing down of the Oral Law, in truth Ashkenazic society until Mendelssohn's own time was a traditional mimetic one; and if this society was significantly weakened in his day, it was as a result of Jewish acculturation, of Jews in Berlin, Hamburg, and Königsberg becoming part of these cities' "individualist Enlightenment milieu."

One can very well imagine that the young Mendelssohn growing up in Jewish Dessau, even though signs of incipient enlightenment were present even there, could witness Jewish law being practiced there "in all public as well as private dealings," could see it inscribed there "on all gates and on all door posts."

Certainly, the same could not be said for the Berlin of Mendelssohn's adulthood. We even have an example in the Dessau of Mendelssohn's time of a devoted youth attentively following the doings of "an older and wiser man," namely, the young Mendelssohn himself, who benefitted from his own close relationship with his great teacher, Rabbi David Frankel, author of the famous commentary, *Korban ha-Edah* on the Yerushalmi, with whom he studied from the ages of about ten to fourteen while Frankel served as Chief Rabbi there, and whom in 1743 he followed to Berlin when Frankel left Dessau to take up a post there. There was, not surprisingly, no such similar role model in Berlin for Mendelssohn's children, for the social conditions necessary for such a teacher-student relationship to arise were lacking.

Ironically, Franz Rosenzweig, writing almost one hundred and fifty years after Mendelssohn, and coming at the end of the rich, fruitful, but problematic and ultimately tragic era of German-Jewish interaction that Mendelssohn had so brilliantly initiated, eloquently appealed to German Jewry in his famous essay "The Builders" to fashion a neo-traditionalist mimetic Jewish society where time honored custom would play the central role and the law only a secondary one, and even then only in an attenuated form. In a recent essay I expressed scepticism as to whether in our rapidly changing world, where

even many Orthodox Jews are culturally integrated into surrounding society, custom alone can bear the heavy weight that Rosenzweig seeks to put on it.³

But perhaps one might be able to conceive of the existence of a contemporary mimetic *halakhic* community along Mendelssohnian lines. In such a community the law would be seen “as manifesting itself in two forms: in the canonized written corpus and in the regnant practices of the people;” its members would learn those practices like a first language, absorbing them from Jewish society at large, from “all gates and ... all door posts,” from “parents and friends, ... and conduct regularly observed in home and street, synagogue and school,” and especially, through the cultivation of personal teacher-student relationships with “older and wiser men”—and women—; and, perhaps above all, its members precisely because they have learned the *Halakhah* as a first language and are at ease and at home in it, will consequently be able to use the language of halakhic practice to intelligently and thoughtfully discuss and explore the great religious principles and truths of Judaism, if necessary shifting conceptual and philosophical registers in the course of their discussion, while continuing to adhere to those same fundamental religious truths and principles.

Or have I just succumbed to Mendelssohn’s penchant for devising fictitious “dream[s] of almost allegorical significance” to wile away the morning hours?⁴

Lawrence J. Kaplan is Professor of Rabbinics and Jewish Philosophy in the Department of Jewish Studies of McGill University, Montreal Quebec. He received his B.A. from Yeshiva College, his M.A. and PhD. from Harvard University, and Rabbinic Ordination from the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University. He was a Tikvah Fellow at the Tikvah Center for Law and Jewish Civilization of New York University Law School, a Polonsky Fellow at the Oxford Center for Hebrew and Judaic Studies, and a Research Fellow at the Maimonides Center for Advanced Studies at the University of Hamburg.

³ Lawrence Kaplan, “Kashrut and Kugel: Franz Rosenzweig’s ‘The Builders,’” *Jewish Review of Books* 4 (Winter 2014): 41-43.

⁴ Moses Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God’s Existence*, trans. Daniel Dahlstrom and Corey Dick (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 57.

WHY DO WE DESERVE GOD'S FAVOR?

EZRA W. ZUCKERMAN SIVAN

“Does God exist?” would appear to be the most important question for monotheistic religion.

But imagine we could put that question aside. In particular, let us put ourselves at the far shore of the Sea of Reeds just after God has miraculously drowned the pursuing Egyptian army. At that moment, the text (which will be read in synagogues this coming Shabbat) tells us that “the people feared God and they believed in God and in Moses his servant” (Exodus 14:31). Moses and the people then break into song (15:1-19), proclaiming their recognition of God as their miraculous benefactor; of His sole responsibility for their deliverance from Pharaoh; of His preeminence over pagan gods; and of how God, their invincible “man of war,” would soon be leading them to victory over the peoples of Canaan and Transjordan.

This text describes a people who no longer have any doubt as to the existence of God. Moreover, they do not believe in a deist God who set the world in motion and then stands outside history. Rather, they believe in a God who actively intervenes in history on their behalf.

Remarkably however, these people soon have a crisis of faith. Just days later, after stopping in Marah and encamping in Elim, they enter the Wilderness of Sin. Soon the people begin to panic. Here is the description of this panic:

And they traveled from Elim, and the entire congregation of the children of Israel arrived at the Wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the 15th day of the second month of their departure from the land of Egypt. And the entire congregation of the children of Israel complained to/leaned on Moses and on Aaron in the wilderness. And the children of Israel said to them, ‘Who will give us our deaths at the hand of God in the land of Egypt, when we sat on/at the fleshpots, when we ate bread to our fill? Whereas you took us out to this wilderness to cause the deaths of this entire assembly by famine!’ (Exodus 16:1-3).

This crisis is very strange. How could anyone who just experienced divine deliverance—and who publicly testified to their expectation of future deliverance—give up on God so quickly? And if they can give up on God, how are we— who struggle for hints of God’s presence and favor in our own lives—to avoid doing likewise?

To address this fundamental question, I will first lay out a set of more specific questions about the puzzling panic at the Wilderness of Sin. The good news is that once these questions are set before us, they emerge as puzzle pieces that allow us to arrive at a deeper

understanding of this crisis of faith. Furthermore, when we examine God's response to this crisis, it provides us with important insight into the Torah's answer to a more important question than whether we should believe in God: What relationship with God should we strive for?

The Puzzle in the Panic

In the context of the story of the Exodus through chapter 16, the panic at the Wilderness of Sin poses multiple difficulties.

The first difficulty is that the people have no apparent cause for complaint. In the text excerpted above, there is no mention of the fact that the people lack food. By contrast, the Torah tells us of multiple prior occasions when the people or their representatives had good reason to complain:

1. When their burdens were increased by Pharaoh after he rebuffed Moses and Aaron's initial appeal to let the people go (Exodus 5).
2. When the Egyptian Army bore down upon the people at the Sea of Reeds (14:9-11).
3. When, immediately after crossing the sea, they walked for three days in the Wilderness of Shur with no water (15:22).
4. When they then arrived at Marah and discovered that the water was too bitter for drinking (15:23-24).

In the third case, the Torah goes out of its way to tell us (seemingly to register praise) that they had no water but seemingly did not complain. And while the people do complain or cry out in the other episodes, there is no indication that such cries are inappropriate: indeed, who could blame them for crying out at a time of distress? Accordingly, God responds positively to their cries: He delivers them from their Egyptian taskmasters; He saves them from the Egyptian army; and He shows Moses how to sweeten the water. And He then sustains the people with 70 date palms and 12 springs at Elim. At this point, you would think that the people would hold off from complaining till they had some reason to complain.

But no. Why complain well before there is reason to complain?

A second difficulty concerns the target of their complaints, and how this evolves over time. In the first of the four episodes, the Hebrew overseers first cry out to Pharaoh for mercy (5:15) and then accost Moses and Aaron (5:20), accusing them of misrepresenting God. But having witnessed the ten plagues and presumably having learned that God is indeed intervening on their behalf, their response at the Sea of Reeds is first to pray ("cry out") to God (14:10) and then to accuse Moses of having led them astray. Next, at Marah, after experiencing deliverance from the Egyptian army, the people issue the simple complaint to Moses of "What shall we drink? (15:24)" Moses then prays to God (15:25), apparently ("crying out") in a public manner.

Given this pattern, one would think that the people would recognize that God is the address for all entreaties and that the proper form of entreaty is to “cry out” in prayer. Why don’t they cry out to God here instead of “complaining” to Moses and Aaron?

Third, why is there such a strong emphasis on the fact that the entire people participated in the complaint? In the aforementioned appeals to God and Moses, there is no mention of what proportion of the people participated, but here the Torah emphasizes that “the entire congregation (עדה)” arrived at the Wilderness of Sin (16:1) and again that “the entire congregation” complained to Moses and Aaron (16:2). And then when they formalize their complaint, they emphasize that it would have been better for “this entire assembly (קהל)” to be killed with famine. Why the emphasis on the entire congregation/assembly?

Fourth, it’s strange that the Torah goes out of its way in 16:2 to tell the reader that this happened “in the wilderness (במדבר).” One is reminded of a similar oddity in Numbers 15:32, at the outset of the [story of the wood-gatherer](#). If anything, the emphasis on the wilderness is odder here because the location is unclear in Numbers. But in this case, we have just been told the exact location of the camp—in the Wilderness of Sin. So why emphasize that this took place “in the wilderness?”

Fifth, one wonders why the date of arrival in the Wilderness of Sin is mentioned—i.e., one month since the new moon that marked the departure from Egypt. No dates are mentioned up to this point in the narrative, and no dates are mentioned again until the very end of Exodus. We aren’t told the date of the first Sabbath (soon after this complaint, but precisely how many days after is disputed) or the date of the giving of the Torah on Sinai (soon after the third month [Exodus 19:1], but how soon after?).

Why is this date so important?

Finally, there is a set of interlocking difficulties concerning the formulation of the complaint:

- a. The most obvious difficulty concerns the rosy memories of Egypt they invoke. They were oppressed slaves, after all. How can they—with straight faces—recall living the good life there?
- b. Furthermore, it is curious that there appear to be two distinct rosy memories of Egypt—one pertaining to meat, the other to eating bread—rather than one: “when we sat on/at the fleshpots, when we ate bread to our fill.” If it were just one memory, there would be a *and*, a simple coordinating conjunction, between the two components of the memory: either “when we sat on/at the fleshpots and ate bread to our fill” or even “when we sat on/at the fleshpots, *and* when we ate bread to our fill.” But that *and* is missing, implying two distinct memories. What are these two memories, one involving the enjoyment of meat and the other involving the enjoyment of bread?
- c. Next there is the second half of the complaint. It is odd that they are they so focused on the prospect of dying by “God’s hand” such that this is the preferred alternative to death by starvation. This is in sharp contrast to their plea to Moses when the

Egyptian army approached at the Sea of Reeds. At that point, they argued that Moses should have left them alone to be oppressed by Egypt and die there (14:11-12). Why do they now see the alternative as meeting their deaths at the “hand of God?” This question is reinforced by the fact that the “hand of God” had just saved them from the Egyptians! Their first recognition of God’s “great hand” is at the moment of deliverance at the Sea of Reeds, just prior to the description of Israel as fearing God and believing in God and Moses his servant (14:31): “And Israel saw the great hand that God did to Egypt.” The expression “hand” (with variants “arm” and “right (hand)”) of God is a key word in the Song of the Sea that follows, appearing 6 more times. If God’s hand was so recently the source of their deliverance from Egypt, why are they suddenly so afraid of it?

- d. Finally, if it is strange that they have rosy memories of Egypt (difficulties a and b) and if it is strange that they are terrified of God’s hand (difficulty c), it is stranger still that these two ideas are combined. Consider: on the one hand, they seem to be alleging that absent Moses and Aaron’s intervention, they would have enjoyed the good life in Egypt; but on the other hand, they seem to be alleging that absent Moses and Aaron’s intervention, they would have ‘enjoyed’ a preferred mode of death—at God’s hand rather than starvation. Which is it? How can such diametrically opposed ideas appear in the same complaint?

Resolving the Puzzle

A close reading of the text offers a solution to the puzzle embedded in the panic at the Wilderness of Sin, and this solution in turn suggests an answer to the deeper question that the people are posing. The key idea is that after the deliverance from Egypt, Israel may recognize God as creator of the world and master of history, but this makes two intertwined theological questions all the more pressing: (i) When God intervenes in history, is He simply a destroyer or is He a more benign benefactor? (ii) If God does destroy those who sin against Him, why is Israel more deserving of His favor than Egypt is?

Let’s consider the first of these intertwined theological questions and why it should be salient to Israel at that moment. To this point in the narrative, Israel has witnessed God act as a destroyer of Egypt, meting out a series of plagues with His “strong hand,” culminating in the drowning of Pharaoh and his army. This has caused Israel to fear God and to proclaim His preeminence. But there is so far little reason for Israel to believe that God’s dominance of history goes beyond destroying those who would dare to defy or rival Him. After all, the Song of the Sea depicts God as a “man of war” Who is more powerful than all other gods and Who destroys His enemies, thereby clearing a path for Israel. But there is nothing in the song that depicts an active relationship between God and Israel, one where God plays the role of teacher (no hint of Sinai!) or benefactor (no hint of providing water or manna!).

Perhaps this is not such a problem. It might seem attractive for us to accept a world where God acts as a destroyer so long as He is focused on destroying our enemies, those who oppress us or block us from assuming our rights to the Promised Land. But then comes the second problem: why are we so sure that this all-powerful destroyer won’t turn His wrath on us as well? That question shouldn’t concern us if we are confident we have done well by the divine destroyer. But has Israel done well by God?

Nowhere in the Torah does it say that Israel behaved well in Egypt (or during the Exodus). The *midrash* (*Vayikra Rabbah* 23:2) states: “These [Egyptians] and those [Israelites] are uncircumcised. These grow their hair long and those grow their hair long. These wear garments of wool and linen and those wear garments of wool and linen. Thus, the attribute of justice would not have permitted Israel to be redeemed from Egypt.” There is also a Kabbalistic notion that the Israelites had descended to the forty-ninth level of impurity. Rabbi Menachem Leibtag [argues persuasively](#) that this theme is already apparent in Tanakh, particularly in Ezekiel 20:5-8, which records that Israel had succumbed to idol worship in Egypt. And while forty years after the Exodus Moses relates that “we cried out to God” (Deuteronomy 26:7), in fact the Torah describes only anguished cries that are undirected (Exodus 2:23). Moses himself stresses that the people have behaved poorly from “the day he has known (them)—i.e., from the time of their enslavement in Egypt (Deuteronomy 9:24).

To be sure, Israel deserves credit for believing Moses and Aaron when they first report that God is coming to save them (Exodus 4:31), even though they quickly get cold feet; and Israel deserves some credit for publicly declaring God’s dominion by sacrificing an Egyptian god and painting their doorposts with its blood. But who wouldn’t do this after seeing what God the destroyer had already done in the prior nine plagues? After all, by the end, many Egyptians are heeding God’s word (9:20; 10:8). It is only Pharaoh who remains stubborn, and God has hardened his heart!

Overall, it is at best ambiguous whether Israel has been faithful to God. In fact, Israel’s record is considerably more discomfiting—involving sins “against their fellow man” as well as “sins before God.”⁵ But before we examine this record, let’s first consider what might have made Israel engage in such introspection.

In particular, I propose that in Marah, Elim, and at the point of their arrival at the Wilderness of Sin, Israel saw and experienced things that would have led them to ponder these questions.⁶ Consider in particular their sojourn at Elim, which was just prior to the panic of the Wilderness of Sin. What might have happened at Elim to precipitate such a panic as soon as they left and entered the wilderness?

⁵ The Torah’s silence on Israel’s merit is even louder when one considers that Noah is explicitly described as a “righteous man” (Genesis 6:9, 7:1) and was apparently saved for that reason; and Abraham is contrasted with Sodom’s wickedness in that God expects he will teach his children “righteousness and justice” (18:19; cf., 15:6). By contrast, Israel in Egypt is never described as righteous—nor are they described as wicked. Adding to the ambiguity, in response to the destructive plague of hail, Pharaoh calls *God* “the righteous one” and when he says that “his people” are wicked, he could be including Israel (Exodus 9:27). That the Torah does not attempt to clear up the ambiguity is noteworthy.

⁶ Such mnemonics seem to be important devices in Biblical stories. In particular: (a) [As argued by Rabbi David Fohrman](#), elements of Pharaoh’s dream appear designed to make Joseph think of his personal history; (b) Joseph appears to have designed a scenario that would put his brothers against one another in order to induce them to recognize that they had turned against him many years before [Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky on Genesis 42:19-21]; and (c) in sending a gift that recalls the Ishmaelites’ wares (compare Genesis 43:11 with Genesis 37:25), Jacob appears to be signaling to Joseph that Jacob suspects Joseph is the viceroy who has imprisoned Simeon.

The text gives us three clues.

The first clue is that they came to Elim shortly after their stay at Marah. It seems natural that one of the things they would have done at Elim is to think carefully about the challenge that God had just set before them at Marah. After laying down enigmatic rules (perhaps concerning the allocation of water)⁷ and “testing” the people’s obedience to them, God proclaims: “If you listen to the voice of the Lord your God, and what is correct in His eyes you shall do, and if you heed His commandments, all the sickness that I put upon Egypt I will not put upon you, for I am the Lord your healer” (Exodus 15:26).

God is here introducing Himself as both a source of “tests” and as the source of human sickness and healing. Moreover, God is providing a strict and somewhat ambiguous standard for avoiding such sickness. Since the Torah and its relatively detailed laws had not yet been given, and since God had heretofore spoken only to Moses, how exactly was Israel to live up to the standard of “heeding God’s word, and doing what is correct in His eyes?” I don’t know about you, but if an all-powerful destroyer were to tell me that I am likely to suffer from sickness unless I meet a high, ambiguous ethical/legal standards, I would be terrified I was doomed to fail.

Now let’s consider the second hint of what they might have pondered at Elim. The text tells us that while they were there, they had the benefit of 12 springs and 70 date palm trees.

Let’s say you’re a child and you notice the 12 springs and 70 date palms that God had given you. You might ask your parent, “What is the significance of 12 and 70?” Your parent might think about it, she might ask around, and soon the people are collectively pondering the question. As many commentators note, the significance of 12 seems obvious: 12 tribes!

But what about 70? Rashi and others suggest that it hints at the seventy elders. But no mention of 70 elders has yet occurred in the text (the first is in Numbers 11:24), and it’s not clear what such symbolism has to do with the 12 tribes. Here’s a more straightforward idea: 70 stands for “70 souls”—the family of Jacob/Israel who left Canaan for Egypt, who were divided into 12 tribes (Genesis 46:27; cf. Deuteronomy 10:22).

The complementary symbolism of the 12 tribes and 70 souls who were lured down to Egypt should surely prod Israel to ponder their collective history. And if they do so, there is ample reason for them to become quite uncomfortable. Beyond the fact that they did little to distinguish themselves in Egypt in their service to God, they should recall the sibling rivalry that led the brothers to sell Joseph into slavery, and which was never fully resolved by the end of Genesis.

In addition, they should also recall that at the same time that Joseph saved their family from famine, the Egyptian people had good reason to be resentful of this. Israel was treated very well—eating bread “to their fill” (לִשְׂבֹּעַ just as in the years of plenty) with nothing

⁷ See Yaakov Medan, *Ki Karov Elekha: Shemot* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth, 2014), 216-18.

demanded in return. Egyptians were selling themselves into slavery because they were starving for bread (see the sharp juxtaposition of Genesis 47:12 with Genesis 47:13)!

To be sure, this form of servitude was milder than what Israel later endured. And to be sure, Joseph and his brothers may have had no alternative but become Pharaoh's tools in the disenfranchisement of the Egyptian populace. But if they consider how they grew from 70 people to such a large congregation/community, they might recall that they prospered and multiplied precisely when the Egyptian populace was under great pressure (compare Genesis 47:13-26 with 47:27). They might even begin to wonder whether their own enslavement had been just desserts.

Finally, as Israel enters the Wilderness of Sin, they are provided with yet another powerful mnemonic device—the full moon, which should remind them of the evening of the tenth plague one month before.⁸ Indeed, one imagines that their memories were first jogged by the new crescent moon on the first of the second month.

At that point, they would presumably be prompted to recall how carefully they had monitored the moon's progress from the moment the calendar and commandment of the paschal lamb were first declared until it was finally the tenth of the month, when they took a major social risk (compare Exodus 8:22) by setting aside an Egyptian god for slaughter on the fourteenth. The four days leading up to full moon must then have passed excruciatingly slowly. And when the moment finally came, they *feasted on meat* while Egypt resounded with the anguished cries of the non-Israelite households. The Egyptians then ushered Israel out of the country to prevent further death and the Egyptians acceded to Israel's request to 'borrow' their property (Exodus 12:33-35).

As the moon of the second month led Israel to recall this sequence of events, would it not induce discomfort? In reviewing these events, was it clear to them why individual Egyptians—who, after all, would have had little ability to challenge Pharaoh's oppressive system—deserved such punishment and humiliation while Israel deserved freedom and deliverance?

Let us now clarify how the proposed approach addresses each of the difficulties raised above:

1. They panicked because they are suffering from a form of survivors' guilt and fear that they don't deserve God's favor.
2. Since they don't expect God to help them, they turn to Moses and Aaron.
3. The focus is on the collective because the problematic events that put them in this situation was a collectively shared family history. They are in this together.

⁸ It is interesting to note that "Sin" [means](#) "moon" in Babylonian.

4. The wilderness is emphasized because it connotes a place where survival is impossible without God's intervention (Genesis 16:7, 21:14; Deuteronomy 8:2-17).⁹
5. The full moon of the second month is mentioned because it reminds Israel of its last night in Egypt, a moment when Israel ate meat while their Egyptian neighbors were losing their first-born children and animals and having their property stripped.

Finally, we have clarified the formulation of their complaint. The complaint can be read as follows:

You must save us for we are no better than the Egyptians! After all, we ate meat while they suffered, and earlier we ate bread to our satisfaction and prospered while they starved and slipped into servitude. The Egyptians may have taken revenge with an even more oppressive regime, but is that the fault of individual Egyptians? And if we are any better, are we sufficiently better that we are likely to attain the high standard set by God at Marah? No! On our merits, we deserved to die by God's hand in Egypt, just as the Egyptian first-born did. Why did you take us out here to the wilderness, and get our hopes up? God will surely leave us to die of starvation now!

More deeply, the people are issuing a difficult theological challenge: If God exists and intervenes in the world, and if He judges us (determining life and death, health and illness) based on our ability to reach high ambiguous standards of ethical behavior, we are surely doomed. And if we are not doomed, how can we say that God is just?

God's Response

The full response to this challenge, by God and by Moses and Aaron, is quite extensive, so we will focus on unpacking the short initial response (with a little help from Moses in Deuteronomy):

And God said to Moses, 'Behold I will now rain for you food/bread from the heavens; and the people will go out and collect every day; this is so that I will test them as to whether they will follow my instruction or not. And it will be on the sixth day, and they will prepare all that they bring, and it will be double what they collect each day (Exodus 16:4-7).

The heart of God's response is to introduce the cycle of manna and Sabbath (represented by a double portion to tide them over the short God-created 'famine' that will follow). In short, God is declaring that He is not a destroyer but a sustainer,¹⁰ One Who can be expected to provide food for the people on a regular basis, along with a regular pause to remind us that He is the source of that food. As I argued in [an earlier *Lehrhaus* essay](#), the

⁹ Note also how the Torah goes out of its way to note that "the wilderness" (Genesis 37:22) is the setting for the episode—the sale of Joseph—that led Israel down its problematic path.

¹⁰ Accordingly, by the time of Numbers 11:23, the meaning of "the hand of God" has been transformed to mean He Who sustains with food.

experience of manna/Sabbath provides Israel with a unique experience of God as creator. This experience encompasses both the first account of creation, where human beings are enjoined to emulate God, and the second account of creation, where human beings are challenged to form direct relationships with God.¹¹

Notably, the root used here for rain is **רָטַם**. In every instance in the Hebrew Bible where the root is used, it denotes God's supernatural intervention in history. This is the fifth time the root is used in the Torah. The three most immediate past uses of the root refer to God as destroyer: the flood (Genesis 7:4); Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24); and the plague of hail (Exodus 9:18). And so, if we are following the use of the term, we have good cause to wonder whether, after Eden, God intervenes only to destroy. God is now declaring that the answer is no. In setting in motion the manna/Shabbat, God is hearkening to the very first use of **רָטַם**: to denote God's role as sustainer in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:5).

But God's response goes beyond affirming that He is a sustainer rather than a destroyer. It also hints at answers to the questions of why Israel is more deserving than Egypt and how Israel can attain the high ethical standards set by God.

The answer to the first question is that (as Moses reinforces throughout the book of Deuteronomy) Israel is *not* more deserving of God's favor than anyone else. Rather, Israel is being given a clean slate. As former slaves, they have been fully stripped of whatever delusions of glory and status their forebears once had. They enter Canaan just as Adam and Eve entered the world beyond Eden: shaped by the experience of being clothed and fed directly by God (Deuteronomy 8:3-4).

God is thus redirecting Israel's eyes from its checkered past to its open future, a future in which it is possible to do right by one another and by other people even if their forebears had not. While "testing" can be scary if applied to past sins, it contains a certain amount of hope if applied to future actions, as long as the testing standard is attainable.

God's response provides good news in this regard as well. Note that the word **נִסּוּיִם** has broader meaning than "test," encompassing "trials" and "training." The [egalitarian system dictated by the manna/Shabbat regime](#) is instructive in this regard as it disciplines the people to [limit social competition](#). Moreover, the consequences of the initial test are relatively benign: God expresses frustration when "some of the people" go out to collect manna on Shabbat, but that is the extent of it (Exodus 16: 22-30). Perhaps it is understandable that his children would need some time to develop trust in this new system. Later in Deuteronomy (8:2-5), Moses captures the essence of the relationship that is first forged here:

And you should recall the whole path along which God made you travel these forty years in the wilderness; in order to afflict you and test you, to discern what is in your heart, whether you will indeed follow his commandments or not. And he afflicted you and starved you and He fed

¹¹ [Rabbi Gad Eldad's](#) analysis complements the argument developed here. He suggests that the experience of the manna is not simply a reenactment of Eden but a recalibration of humankind's search for knowledge (of God).

you the manna that you hadn't known—and neither had your fathers known; in order to inculcate in you the lesson that it is not by bread alone that man lives, but by all that comes from God's mouth that man lives. Your garment did not wear out from upon you and your leg did not become weary, these forty years. And you came to know in your heart that it is just as a man trains his son, so does the Lord your God train you.

In returning to the “testing” theme first invoked by God in Marah and then in the Wilderness of Sin, Moses conjures the image of a stern but caring parent—one who cares for her child's survival and for the development of their character. This is what ultimately redeems Israel: not their past good deeds but their willingness and ability to abide by God's teaching and training. The experience in the wilderness is meant to be a training period, one that prepares Israel for entry into the land where God will rain (רַטַּח) upon them, thereby allowing them to live off the land and not starve, just as long as Israel abides by the Torah and the ethical standards it demands (Deuteronomy 11:11-17; 28:12, 28:24).¹²

Moreover, having taught the Torah to Israel and trained Israel to live by it for forty years, Moses is surely credible when he returns a final time to the question of what it means to “listen to God's voice” at the close of the Torah (Deuteronomy 30:10). Moses (Israel's other parent; Numbers 11:12¹³) emphasizes that God's commandments are not ambiguous but detailed in “this book” he is leaving them. And he proclaims that God's commandments are not unattainable— “in heaven” or “the other side of the sea” —but are “very close to you, in your mouths and your hearts to do” (Deuteronomy 30:12-14). Finally, since these commandments are not only attainable but wise (Deuteronomy 4:6), they provide a path to life rather than death. Moses's response to the complaint of the Wilderness of Sin is thus straightforward: “Choose life!” One does so by “loving the Lord God and cleaving to Him” (30:20).

Contrast this moment with the crossing of the Sea of Reeds. After the crossing, Israel may have been in awe of God's might but it is hard to imagine them feeling love for God. By contrast, love for God seems possible and even natural after forty years of God's stern but caring parenthood.

Conclusion

In short, the Torah's answer to the question of what relationship we should seek with God is captured in this image of love for a stern but caring parent. This is a parent who is less concerned with whether our past actions were up to standard than with providing us with an environment and framework for facilitating our ethical growth towards higher

¹² Notably, the foundation for these standards is the memory of Israel's standing as slave and foreigner in Egypt and the corresponding injunction to treat the poor, the weak, and the foreigner with compassion and charity (Deuteronomy 5:11-14; 10:18-19; 14:22-29; 15:12-18; 16:9-14; 23:8; 24:12-24:22; 26:11-13; 27:19; 29:10; 31:12).

¹³ In personal communication, Elli Fischer helpfully points out how the text subtly hints at God and Moses's provision of manna and water as mother's milk (see Numbers 11:1-15, *Sifrei ad loc.*, Deuteronomy 32:13-14, and *Shir Ha-shirim Rabbah* 4:13; also [see my analysis of the widow of Zarephath from 1 Kings 17](#)); Fischer also referenced [Rabbi Ari Kahn's complementary analysis](#).

standards. Surely what it means to have faith in God means more than simply to believe God exists but to believe that He is helping to guide our growth in this manner.

In particular, this is what the divine gift of the Shabbat/week is designed to accomplish as is the Torah more generally. For those of us who are fortunate to have experienced these gifts as such, faith remains difficult but perhaps not impossible. It is often difficult to see justice in the world, and we may even feel guilty when we seem undeserving of our health and prosperity. But if we are blessed with a set of shared principles and practices that guide us to a higher standard in our behavior towards others, we have an opportunity to emulate God and be His partner in enhancing our world's capacity to enhance life and uphold justice. This in turn instills love in one another (Leviticus 19:18) and in God.

Ezra Zuckerman Sivan, an economic sociologist, is the Alvin J. Siteman Professor of Entrepreneurship and Strategy at the MIT Sloan School of Management, where he currently serves as deputy dean with responsibility for faculty affairs. Among his current research projects is a book on the emergence of the seven-day week. Ezra is the immediate past president of the Young Israel of Brookline in Brookline, MA. He welcomes feedback at ewzucker@mit.edu and he tweets at [@ewzucker](https://twitter.com/ewzucker).

CUTTING A PEACE: THE STORY OF KETIAH BAR SHALOM

SHLOMO ZUCKIER

Avodah Zarah 10b features a fascinating story about an obscure figure, Ketiah bar Shalom, situated in Caesar's court. More than just a story about Roman-Jewish relations, we will see that it represents a rabbinic meditation on the nature of the part and the whole, on belonging and representation.

קטיעה בר שלום מאי (הוי)? דההוא קיסרא דהוה סני ליהודאי, אמר להו לחשיבי דמלכותא: מי שעלה לו נימא ברגלו, יקטענה ויחיה או יניחנה ויצטער? אמרו לו: יקטענה ויחיה. אמר להו קטיעה בר שלום: חדא, דלא יכלת להו לכולהו, דכתיב: כי כארבע רוחות השמים פרשתי אתכם, מאי קאמר? אלימא דבדרתהון בד' רוחות, האי כארבע רוחות, לארבע רוחות מבעי ליה! אלא כשם שא"א לעולם בלא רוחות, כך א"א לעולם בלא ישראל; ועוד, קרו לך מלכותא קטיעה. א"ל: מימר שפיר קאמרת, מיהו כל דזכי (מלכא) שדו ליה לקמוניא חלילא. כד הוה נקטין ליה ואזלין, אמרה ליה ההיא מטרוניתא: ווי ליה לאילפא דאזלא בלא מכסא! נפל על רישא דעורלתיה קטיעה, אמר: יהבית מכסי חלפית ועברית. כי קא שדו ליה, אמר: כל נכסאי לר"ע וחבריו. יצא ר"ע ודרש: והיה לאהרן ולבניו - מחצה לאהרן ומחצה לבניו. יצתה בת קול ואמרה: קטיעה בר שלום מזומן לחיי העוה"ב. בכה רבי ואמר: יש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת, ויש קונה עולמו בכמה שנים.

What is the story of Ketiah bar Shalom? There was a certain Caesar who hated the Jews. He said to the notables of his Empire: "One who has a strand [of desiccated flesh] on his leg – does he amputate it and live or leave it and remain in pain?" They said to him: "Let him amputate it and live."

Ketiah bar Shalom said to them: "Firstly, you will be unable to [overcome] all of [the Jews], as it is written (Zech. 2:10): 'For I have spread them [out] like the four winds of heaven.' What [is the verse] saying? If it is saying that He scattered them to the four winds, this [phrase] '*ke-arba' ruhot* [like the four winds] should be '*le-arba' ruhot* [to the four winds]! Rather, just as the world cannot exist without winds, so too the world cannot exist without Israel. Furthermore, [if you kill all the Jews] they will call you 'a cut-off Empire.'"

[Caesar] said to [Ketiah]: "You have spoken well. Nevertheless, whoever bests the Emperor, they throw him into a furnace full of dirt [and he suffocates]."

When they had seized [Ketiah] and were going, a certain lady said to him: “Woe to the ship that sails without [paying] the tax!” [Ketiah] fell on the tip of his foreskin, and cut it off. He said: “I have paid my tax. I will pass.”

When they were throwing him [into the furnace], he said: “All my possessions [are bequeathed] to R. Akiva and his colleagues.” R. Akiva went out and interpreted: “(Ex. 29:28): ‘and it shall be to Aaron and his sons’ – half to Aaron and half to his sons.”

A Heavenly voice went out and said: “Ketiah bar Shalom is invited to the life of the World to Come.” Rabbi wept and said: “There are those who acquire their world in one instant, and there are those who acquire their world over a number of years.”

This story depicts a Caesar planning to exterminate the Jews in his kingdom, only to be convinced otherwise by one Ketiah bar Shalom, the figure for whom the story is named. Despite his successful arguments, Ketiah is nevertheless seized and taken out to be killed. Prior to his demise, he is convinced by a certain noblewoman to self-circumcise, and bequeaths his estate to Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues, as he earns a share in the World to Come.

This fascinating story is wide-ranging, as it vacillates between a genocide averted, a righteous courtier’s untimely demise, and the determination of his legacy.

However, upon closer inspection, one common theme – or, rather, one common tension – holds this story together, and it is contained in the name of its protagonist, for whom the story itself is named. Ketiah bar Shalom literally means “the cut one, son of peace.” Now, the name bespeaks an internal contradiction, as cutting and peace are hardly natural friends. Moreover, the word *shalom* is related to the term *shalem*, or “whole,” the polar opposite of something that is cut. Indeed, this creative tension between being whole and being divided is the central theme of this story that brings its overall cohesiveness into focus.

The Caesar, hating the Jews, wishes to excise them. The metaphor used to describe the Jews in his rhetorical question is instructive: “One who has a strand [of desiccated flesh] on his leg – does he amputate it and live or leave it and remain in pain?” The term used for “amputates” is *yikta’elah*, built on the same root as that of our protagonist Ketiah! What is at stake is the possible removal of Israel from the empire, purportedly to eradicate this irritant and preserve Rome’s structural integrity.

Caesar’s council recommends amputation, until the peacemaker Ketiah bar Shalom enters the scene. He offers two possible arguments against the plan of “cutting off” the Jews: Citing a verse from Zechariah 2:10, he compares Israel to the four corners of the earth, in the sense that “the world cannot exist without Israel.” While it might be possible to amputate a limb, Israel is a vital organ. His second argument is that, if Caesar does somehow “amputate” Israel, his will be known as a “cut off empire,” recognizably deficient

absent its Jews. Both arguments – whether based on the unworkability of the procedure or the undesirability of its outcome – militate for the inseparability of Israel from the nations, or at least from this nation. Rather than cutting Israel off from Rome (*keti'ah*), Caesar settles on keeping the empire whole (*shalom*).

While Ketiah's arguments win the day, he falls victim to the rule that anyone who bests the king is placed in a furnace packed with dirt (as explained by Rashi), presumably a form of burial alive and attendant asphyxiation. One cannot help but note the fitting result that one asserting Israel's inseparability from the four corners of the earth is now himself to be united, fatally, with that same earth.

As he is being sent to his demise, a Roman matron mourns the fact that “the ship is sail[ing] without [paying] the tax.” As the story makes clear, Ketiah's uncircumcised foreskin stands to prevent him from participating in Israel's inheritance in the World to Come. [It is not clear throughout this story whether Ketiah is Jewish or not, possibly an intentional ambiguity contributing to the question of Israel's status among the nations. We will assume that he is not Jewish, since his Jewishness is never asserted.] This matron is mourning the fact that, despite his successfully argued defenses on behalf of Israel, he will not inherit along with them. Although Ketiah succeeds in convincing Caesar of Israel's integrity within the Roman Empire, which should rightfully earn him a connection to Israel, his lack of circumcision serves to block this naturalization process. Ketiah's immediate response is to fall upon his foreskin and cut it off, with the word “cut” represented as *kate'ah*, our *leitmotif* for the story. [The root *k.t.a* appears in the story a total of seven times, appropriately a typological number.]

Circumcision plays an important thematic role in this story. In one sense, a circumcision is a sort of amputation, albeit of a relatively minor organ, and thus it relates to the metaphoric amputation of Israel situated at the outset of the story. However, while that proposed process would *separate* Israel from Rome, the cutting off of a foreskin is precisely what serves to *integrate* an individual into the nation of Israel, both for born Jews and converts. In fact, this concept of integration by excision is a central theme (and pun!) of the biblical discussion of circumcision. As Genesis 17:14 puts it:

וערל זכר אשר לא ימול את בשר ערלתו ונכרתה הנפש ההוא מעמיה את בריתי
הפר

Any uncircumcised male, who will not circumcise his flesh, will be cut off
from his people; he has broken my covenant.

An uncircumcised male, who does not cut off his foreskin, is himself cut off (*k.r.t*)! Retention of the foreskin entail a rejection of the covenant; to circumcise means to join the covenant. As Israel's founding covenant, Abraham's “Treaty between the Pieces,” implies (Gen. 15:7-21), covenants are set, or, more literally, cut (*k.r.t*), by splitting an animal into two and walking between the pieces, joining the two parties over the split animal. The inversion of this Biblical verse, then, is the amputation of Ketiah's foreskin, the elimination

of that vestigial organ, which earns him membership in Israel and its corresponding reward. In this case, the amputation serves not to break up an integrated whole but to shed a superfluous appendage in the interests of a larger unity. The Heavenly voice calls out that Ketiah is invited to the World to Come. A cutting (*keti'ah*) for the sake of integrity (*shalom*).

But Ketiah's name signifies more than that. The Roman Empire's centuries-long dominant reign was known, from as early as 55 CE, as the *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace, as wars were purportedly eradicated due to the Empire's overwhelming power. The Jewish people, by contrast, are signified symbolically by circumcision, possibly more than through any other mark; the term "circumcised" is used throughout rabbinic literature as a synonym for "Jew." (See, e.g., mNed 3:11.) The transition from notable of the Roman Empire to Jew can thus be properly described as a shift whereby a son of the *Pax Romana* (=bar *Shalom*) becomes a Jew who is circumcised, or cut (=keti'ah).

While Ketiah has done his part to deserve an otherworldly inheritance, the question of who will receive his this-worldly estate remains to be determined. As Ketiah has entered the Jewish covenant, he wishes that his assets be kept within Israel, and he thus bequeaths his monies to the great rabbinic court of the generation, to "Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues." But this Talmudic meditation on the whole and its parts would hardly allow this ambiguous line to stand unprobed. Does this bequest mean that Rabbi Akiva and his students are each to receive a proportional share of the pie? Or does it mean that half of the estate is destined for Rabbi Akiva, with the other half to be split among his students? Do we first split the estate in two or do we divide it as one whole entity? Rabbi Akiva, the great Torah scholar, resolves this issue himself. Like the Heavenly voice that "went out and said" what Ketiah's fate in the next world would be, Rabbi Akiva also "went out and interpreted" the law, determining the fate of his material possessions in this world through biblical exegesis. Referring to one of the priestly entitlements, the verse reads "And it shall be for Aaron and his sons," (Ex. 29:28) understood in rabbinic tradition (tKip 1:5, yYom 1:2, bYom 17b, bBB 143a) as meaning "half for Aaron and half for his sons." Death portends the demise of the holistic individual, and inheritance, the distribution of the deceased's personal effects among inheritors, reflects this dissolution. Rabbinic tradition implies that, in cases where two groups are named in a will, it is first split in half and then divided among relevant parties. Of all biblical characters to be associated with this splitting in half, it is Aaron, known in the Talmud as the great splitter (*botzea*; see bSan 6b), not to mention the great peacemaker (mAv 1:12). Who better than Aaron to teach about splitting Ketiah's inheritance! It might be intriguing to consider how this relates to Aaron's grandson Pinhas, who has his own experiences with *keti'ah* and *shalom* (see bKidd 66b and my analysis [here](#)) and excising in order to make whole.

There is also an economic question at play here, relating to inheritance and empire. As history has made clear, the cleaving of an empire into multiple parts after the death of its sovereign holds great risk. Empires split in such a manner run the risk of rapidly losing influence. The way to preserve an empire's, or an estate's, power and integrity (*sheleimut*) is

primogeniture, which ensures that all or most of the empire is given to one heir, preserving the large mass to maintain its great influence. Bestowing the estate primarily to one individual ensures that Ketiah bar Shalom's estate remains largely held by a single party, no less than the great Rabbi Akiva, a veritable "Caesar of the Jews." Although the estate is split (*keti'ah*), it remains largely whole (*shalom*).

As we have seen, this story includes more than one metaphor – Israel is an infected limb, Ketiah's death represents a boat's passing through a toll port. I suggest that another metaphor, although unstated, presents itself in this story's structure. With apologies to the man, it is possible to view Ketiah as representing a foreskin undergoing the process of circumcision. He is cast out of Caesar's council, to his death, but it is only through this removal of Ketiah that a greater integrity can be achieved, between the Roman Empire and Israel. If a foreskin can be understood as an offering of sorts, a small sacrifice to preserve a greater integrity and peace, Ketiah is similarly cast off from the Romans, an individual sacrificed for the cause of maintaining Roman-Jewish integrity. Ironically, while this self-sacrifice separates him from the Roman people, it ensconces him in Israel and its reward for all eternity.

Rabbi is moved by this story, exclaiming: "Some earn their place in the World to Come in a single moment, while for others it takes many years"! Ketiah manages, in this final act, to earn eternal life, bypassing the usual, more extensive process of living a life of virtue. Here again, the part stands for the whole, with one action, a single moment, fatefully sealing Ketiah's fate for all time, determining the reward on behalf of his entire life. The importance of the minor part – Ketiah – a single council member, in one moment of his life, can have ramifications for his entire legacy, as for all of Israel, for eternity. For Ketiah, whose single voice won the day in saving Israel, a single moment was sufficient to seal his own fate. In this case, the part (*keti'ah*) determines the fate of the whole (*shalom*).

A final note: one wonders about the context of this rabbinic meditation on part and whole. As several studies have made clear, the Jews (or Judeans) held a liminal position within the Roman Empire – were they comparable to other inhabitants or citizens of the Roman Empire, or was there something distinct about them? It is in this context that the rabbis consider not only questions of part and whole but also Israel's place among the Romans: Are they a festering limb awaiting amputation or an intrinsic part of the Roman empire? Additionally, how might one shift from Roman to Jewish status, as Ketiah did? In this story primarily about Romans, the rabbis find an opportunity to express some core questions facing the Jews: Part and Whole, Israel and the Nations, sacrificing for the greater good, and earning the World to Come.

As this story teaches, whether a cut yields a peace or mere pieces is no simple matter and depends on complex questions of identity, belonging, and integrity. Our protagonist stands at the crossroads of all these issues; he offers his piece, rests in peace, and shows that the "cut Jew" can coexist with the "Rome of Peace." In so many ways, this is fittingly called the story of Ketiah bar Shalom.

Note: This story has received some attention in academic circles, including in extended analyses by [Daniel Boyarin](#) and [Alyssa Gray](#), and a shorter treatment in the recent [thesis](#) and [book](#) by Mira Beth Wasserman. The translation of the passage used here largely follows Gray, although modified in several places, following Rashi and other considerations. Rather than trying to recover a redactional stage or process, this article presents a literary analysis of the received form of the text. Many thanks to Ayelet Wenger, Wendy Amsellem, Elli Fischer, Eli Natan Kupferberg, and Chana Zuckier for their insightful comments.

Rabbi Shlomo Zuckier is a PhD candidate in Ancient Judaism at Yale University and a member of Yeshiva University's Kollel Elyon. Previously he served as Director of the Orthodox Union's Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus at Yale University. Shlomo is an alumnus of Yeshivat Har Etzion and Yeshiva University (BA, MA, Semicha), as well as of the Wexner, Tikvah, and Kupietzky Kodshim Fellowships. He has lectured and taught widely across North America, and is excited to share Torah and Jewish scholarship on a broad range of issues. Shlomo serves on the Editorial Committee of Tradition, is co-editor of Torah and Western Thought: Intellectual Portraits of Orthodoxy and Modernity, and is editing the forthcoming Contemporary Forms and Uses of Hasidut.

