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**Peshat and Beyond: The Emergence of
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PESHAT AND BEYOND: THE EMERGENCE OF A RELUCTANT LEADER

BATYA HEFTER

This article traces the development of Moses from a hesitant and resistant individual to the leader and redeemer of the Jewish People. In [a previous *Lehrhaus* piece](#), I showed how the straightforward meaning of the narrative can be interiorized to describe a process which takes place within human beings, allowing the biblical text to resonate with deeper psychological, spiritual, and theological significance. I call this method "*Peshat* and Beyond." I now propose to do the same for the story of Moses. Let us begin with the narrative.

***Peshat*: The Riddle of Moses' Resistance**

The second chapter of Exodus begins with the story of a privileged prince. Young Moses ventures out from the secure environment of Pharaoh's palace to encounter his people: "And it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown, that he went out to his brothers, and looked on their burdens; and he noticed an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, one of his brothers. And he looked this way and that, and when he saw that there was no man, he slew the Egyptian and hid him in the sand" (Exodus 2:12-13).

The following day, seeing two Hebrews fighting, he intervenes again reproachfully, "Wicked one, why do you smite your fellow?" Pharaoh, hearing of Moses' actions, wants to kill him, so Moses flees to the land of Midian. Upon his arrival, he sees Jethro's daughters being harassed by local shepherds. Once again, he does not stand idly by, but delivers the women from their oppressors. These three episodes, told in rapid succession, show Moses as a character consistently incensed by injustice and moved to action.

Given this portrait of Moses as a man of compassion for the downtrodden who rises up to fight in their defense, we wonder why he refuses to accept God's mission to free his enslaved brothers.

In Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush, he refuses to take on his assigned mission no less than five times (Exodus 3:1-4:17). He pleads verbal incompetence, claiming to be "slow of speech and of a slow tongue," and beseeches God to send someone else. Angered by Moses' resistance, God eventually responds by sending Aaron, his brother, to be his partner:

And he shall be your spokesman to the people: and he shall be to you instead of a mouth, and you shall be to him instead of God...And the Lord said to Aaron, Go to the wilderness to meet Moses. And he went, and met him in the mount of God, and kissed him. And Moses told Aaron all the words. (Exodus 4:16; 27-28)

The purpose of the meeting of the brothers seems clear. Moses' resistance is softened when his brother, Aaron, a gifted orator, is sent to support him. A partnership is forged, and together, the brothers embark on God's mission. If we understand Moses' hesitation at face value, this interpretation is sufficient. But perhaps, as the rabbis suggest, there is a deeper reason for Moses' resistance, which is in turn illuminated by his partnership with Aaron.

Beyond: The Midrashic Move

In the first stage of “beyond,” the midrash deepens the *peshat* narrative by adding an additional layer of symbolic meaning:

Go to meet Moses... and he **met** him at the mount of God and **kissed** him (Exodus 4:27). As it is written, “Loving-kindness and truth are **met** together; righteousness and peace have **kissed** each other” (Psalms 85:11). “Loving-kindness” - this refers to Aaron, as it says, “And to Levi he said, Let your *tumim* and your *urim* be with your pious one...” (Deuteronomy 33:8). “Truth,” this refers to Moses, as it says, “In all of my house he is truthful” (Numbers 12). That is what is meant by “loving-kindness and truth met, righteousness and peace kissed.” Righteousness is Moses... Peace is Aaron. (*Tanhuma*, Exodus 28; translation mine)

The midrash transforms the fraternal greeting into a cosmic encounter, showing that the significance of the meeting is not merely historical. Loving-kindness, truth, righteousness, and peace are universal concepts that go beyond the limits of a specific point in time. By saying that Moses represents truth and Aaron represents loving-kindness, the *Tanhuma* shifts the encounter from a particular instance in time. Instead, the brothers' meeting describes two divergent ways of being in the world. Moses and Aaron's reunion becomes a collision between two ideas, two tendencies; the midrash thus imbues it with eternal relevance.

Further Beyond: Shifting from the Symbolic to the Theological

After describing Moses' predisposition for resistance and attributing to it symbolic meaning of truth, we now extend this picture to include a theological layer, moving beyond human characteristics to a dynamic within God. This bold step is taken by [Mei ha-Shiloah](#), Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef Leiner (1800-1854), founder of the Ishbitz-Radzyn dynasty, who juxtaposes the *Midrash Tanhuma* quoted above with another midrash describing God's indecision prior to the creation of the world. The personifications of the characteristics of loving-kindness, truth, righteousness, and peace participate in a celestial debate weighing the pros and cons of creation, with God presiding:

When the world was being created, the Holy One blessed be He asked loving-kindness [if the world should be created]. [Loving-kindness] said, “Create – for the world is filled with loving-kindness.” Truth [*middat ha-din*]¹ said, “Do not create, for the world is full of lies.” Righteousness said, “Create, for the world is full of ‘righteousness.’” Peace said, “Do not create, for the world is full of strife.” What did the Holy One blessed be He do? He threw truth down to earth and created the world. (*Mei ha-Shiloah*, Exodus, s.v. *Va-yelekh*, citing *Bereishit Rabbah* 8:5)

In this midrash, the personification of the concepts of truth and loving-kindness are to be understood as projections of God's mind. God, as it were, is of a divided mind: “To create or not to create, that is the question.” The obstacle blocking the act of creation is “truth” – the demand for uncompromising justice. God's desire to create is repressed by a powerful force,

¹ Here in my discussion I am addressing the meaning of truth as *middat ha-din*. *Middat ha-din* has many nuances. Here I am focusing on its meaning as exacting justice. Both terms will be used interchangeably in the article to refer to this characteristic.

the desire for perfection. According to this principle, the world and everything in it must be perfect, or there will be nothing. But the uncompromising, inflexible demand for absolute truth is incompatible with creation, as humanity is full of imperfection and shortcomings. In the midrash, God decides in favor of kindness and casts truth aside. The drama is resolved, and God creates the world.

Even though the concepts described in these two *midrashim* (*Tanhuma* and *Bereishit Rabbah* quoted by *Mei ha-Shiloah*) are the same, the circumstances are different; they don't seem to have anything to do with each other. The first concerns Moses' meeting with Aaron, the second God's reluctance to create the world. *Mei ha-Shiloah's* innovation is in the fact that he juxtaposes these two *midrashim*. Seeking to unravel the riddle of Moses' resistance, he compares Moses to God.

Notice that both God and Moses share the trait of "truth." God's resistance to creating the world is borrowed to shed light on Moses' resistance to redeem the Israelites. And just as the midrash describes God as being conflicted, *Mei ha-Shiloah* similarly depicts an inner conflict within Moses. Recall that in *Tanhuma*, Moses represents both truth and righteousness. In *Bereishit Rabbah*, these two qualities represent opposing positions. Truth said not to create, but righteousness said to create. How then, can Moses embody both the will to create and not to create, or, as *Mei ha-Shiloah* extends it, how can Moses both yearn to liberate and yet refuse to redeem his people?

To resolve the conflict within Moses, Rabbi Mordechai Yosef posits a dynamic process which enables Moses to shift from being the embodiment of inflexible truth to being the embodiment of the human characteristic of righteousness. It is this mode of interpretation that I conceive as moving "beyond" the traditional spheres of reading to an innovative, perhaps unexpected level of understanding.

Beyond: The Transformative Stage

Looking back at the path we've traveled so far: we began with Moses in *peshat* as a man who can't tolerate injustice and is propelled to action; next, we highlighted his reluctance to take action. In the first stage of seeing beyond the *peshat*, the midrash portrayed Moses as an archetype for justice. Shifting the narrative beyond the historical moment, the midrash directed us to contemplate Moses as an embodiment of the eternal concept of truth. The next stage moved us onto the theological plane. By comparing Moses' truth to God's truth and Moses' reluctance to God's reluctance, this approach asserted that the source of *middot* as manifest in human beings, in this case in Moses, has its roots in the divine.

Finally, the hasidic master conflates the psychological, symbolic, and theological planes of meaning to facilitate the final stage: Transformation.

To understand it better, we return to our initial question. What rests at the bottom of Moses' resistance? *Mei ha-Shiloah* explains:

And the matter is that truth said, "Do not create!" And also Moses, who personified truth, was exceedingly distressed [to see that] the path of the wicked prosper. How was it possible for Pharaoh to enslave the People of Israel and Israel be obedient to him? This was a lie, since in truth, Pharaoh was completely evil. This distressed

Moses greatly. And Aaron his brother embodied the attribute of *hesed*. He always taught the path of tolerance, to accept everything with love, without any grievances against God. (*Mei ha-Shiloah*, Exodus, s.v. *va-yelekh*)

Moses cannot tolerate the heinous situation which God allows. Pharaoh as Master and the Jewish People as his submissive, obedient subjects offends him. Moses resists entering into the corrupt reality which God tolerates.

Just as God, who resists creating an imperfect world, says, “Do not create,” so too, Moses will not redeem. But, just as God discarded truth, casting it down from heaven to earth, so too Moses must undergo a metamorphosis from the embodiment of truth to the personification of a more temperate trait, here called righteousness. But how does this transformation occur within Moses?

The events in Moses’ life are read as a corrective process through which Moses will experience tolerance and develop patience, qualities essential for him to be a leader.

Who taught you to run away from Pharaoh? Truth would never run away. That is the quality of Aaron. But I, Myself [God] taught you the quality of patience and tolerance, when I appeared to you in the burning bush. There I showed you that “I will be with him in trouble,” I tolerate Pharaoh. (*Tanhuma*, Exodus 10)

Unbeknownst to Moses, feeling the need to run away from Pharaoh is the beginning of his transformation. According to *Mei ha-Shiloah*’s reading, Moses is encouraged by God to reflect upon and reread the experiences of his life. The uncharacteristic impulse to run away is a compromise. “Truth” in its rigid formulation would never run away; it would stand and fight for its principles. But if Moses were to assert the truth with a direct assault on Pharaoh, far from achieving the freedom he desires for his brethren, he would only bring about his own death. By fleeing, Moses has already begun to accommodate, to “let go” or shift from his innate desire for “truth” to an attitude that is more sustainable in this world.

Moses’ next transformative experience is when God displays His long-suffering nature by appearing in the thorn bush, symbolizing the fact that God Himself suffers with His people. Finally, Moses encounters his brother Aaron, a man who embodies loving-kindness, patience, and tolerance.

Moses’ encounter with Aaron is an edifying and transformative moment for Moses:

At first there was opposition; “truth” and “loving-kindness” were embattled. But then when Moses’ heart became harmonized [*nishtaveh be-lev Moshe*] after encountering *hesed*, he resolved to redeem Israel. (*Mei ha-Shiloah*, Exodus, s.v. *Va-yelekh*)

Transitions occur gradually. Similar to God in the midrash on creation, Moses’ initial reaction to Aaron, who embodies *hesed*, is one of resistance. But little by little, Moses’ truth is tempered by his encounter with Aaron.

Yet we may take this one step further. For while *Mei ha-Shiloah* points out the experiences in the narrative that wrought this transformation within Moses, he leaves it up to us to envision and describe them more fully.

To be in the presence of Aaron, a man of loving-kindness, makes an impression on Moses. Loving-kindness is the counterforce to “truth.” *Hesed* is rooted in the desire to give altruistically and indiscriminately. *Hesed* does not differentiate between who is worthy of the receiving of the kindness and who is not. Rooted in the emotion of love, it feels connected to all living things and desires to facilitate connections with others. The source of that love is rooted in and sustained by the love of God. Like all human traits, *hesed*, is a reflection of God’s *middot*. Realizing this propels us beyond the experiential realm to a theological truth as well.

When Moses encounters Aaron, he encounters a different way to appreciate and value God’s creation. In Aaron, Moses experiences the infinite value that exists in even a single moment of kindness. That single moment of *hesed* reflects a divergent way of being. It is Aaron’s way. It does not explain or resolve the evil in the world. Although Moses does not let go of who he is and become Aaron, the encounter leaves a lasting impression upon him. He undergoes a transformation from personifying uncompromising truth to one who can appreciate human compassion and limitation. Truth, when tempered by patience and loving-kindness, becomes a striving for justice that is realistic and attainable. This is what the *Mei ha’Shiloah* calls righteousness. *Mei ha-Shiloah* uses the unusual word *hishtavut*-harmonization to show that this transition is internal, integral, and an organic process which unfolds over time. At this point in Moses’ development the integration has just begun; it is not fully realized until later in his life.

Just how monumental this transformation is becomes evident only in a later episode: the sin of the Golden Calf. Here, God and Moses effectively switch roles! God is intolerant and wants to immediately wipe out the sinning people (Exodus 32:10). Moses, on the other hand, takes on the role of the long-suffering and tolerant one, beseeching God to overlook the people’s sins, let go of His divine passion for absolute justice, and maintain His covenant with His nation (Exodus 32:32). This is not the same Moses who refused to go down to Egypt on behalf of the people. This is no longer the reluctant uncompromising representative of absolute truth. Moses now symbolizes righteousness, the product of his encounter with his brother, with forbearance and compassion.

Process of Refinement – *Tahalikh ha-Berur*

What emerges from this reading is a dynamic internal process within Moses, the transformation from truth to righteousness. In the teachings of Ishbitz-Radzyn, this is referred to as the process of refinement or *tahalikh ha-berur*, a spiritual and moral directive which strives for *tikkun ha-middot*, a primary aim of religious life.²

Read this way, Moses’ character elucidates our own desire for perfection and passion for justice. We are called upon to recognize our own reluctance to “create” or our own

² *Tikkun ha-middot* is not the final aim of religious life. Rather, it is the condition by which a person can become a vehicle to reveal the divine presence in this mundane world. This discussion requires independent attention and is beyond the scope of this article.

inclination to disengage when faced with considerable challenges and the likelihood of imperfection. Moreover, we are directed to be deeply attentive to the Aarons in our lives, and the alternative voices of Aaron within ourselves. Read and experienced in this way, the Torah becomes a road map which can guide us as we journey towards personal refinement and growth.

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THE LIFE AND DEATH OF MOSES' STAFF

YOSEF LINDELL

The Quest for the Staff

When [Graham Phillips arrived](#) at the ancient Nabatean city of Petra in modern-day Jordan, he believed he was on the verge of another monumental discovery. The self-proclaimed [finder](#) of the Holy Grail and the tomb of the Virgin Mary now had a lead on the location of the grave of Moses. And Phillips was convinced that inside Moses' tomb, untouched and undisturbed, lay yet another ancient treasure: Moses' staff.

It isn't hard to understand why Phillips was excited about the staff of Moses, which he called "the most powerful artifact in history." In the Torah's account, staffs belonging to Moses and Aaron were involved in several of the plagues and wonders in Egypt. Moses and Aaron threw their staffs to the ground, and the staffs became snakes. God told Moses to raise his staff at the sea. Moses carried it with him when the Israelites battled the Amalekites. Twice, he hit a rock with it, and water came forth. In short, Moses' staff was no ordinary staff. It performed miracles.

At Petra, Phillips located a rock outcropping that he believed was *beit peor*—one of the Torah's hints to the location of Moses' grave in [Deuteronomy 34:6](#)—and saw a cave nearby. But Jordanian authorities refused his request to excavate. Disappointed, he returned to his native Birmingham, England to do archival research. He discovered that the cave had already been excavated by two British explorers in the nineteenth century, and that lo and behold, they claimed to have found there a black wooden rod inscribed with ancient hieroglyphics. Phillips needed no further convincing. This was *the* staff, and he had to find it. He doggedly pursued his quest for several years, tracing the staff's ownership from antiquities dealers to private owners to museums. At last, success. The staff was [on display](#)—of all places—in the Egyptian gallery of the Birmingham Museum, minutes away from Phillips' home. It had been under his nose the entire time. He confronted the museum's curators and others with his findings, but they were [unimpressed](#).

Needless to say, I too am skeptical of [Phillips' claims](#). The staff he uncovered may be a Victorian forgery, and in any event, there is no evidence linking it to Moses aside from some dubious linguistic and historical claims made by Phillips. Yet it is undeniable that Moses' staff holds a certain allure and mystique. And the Torah's account of it leaves much unsaid. What was it? What purpose did it serve? Why did God command its use?

This article's quest for the staff differs from that of Phillips; it doesn't require digging through dirt or reading ancient hieroglyphics, and I hope it is more methodologically sound in its approach. Here I explore the rich and remarkable history of some of the ways the staff has been interpreted by commentators. *Midrashim* often describe the staff as an object of power

and legend. They expand its role and tell fantastic stories about it, conjuring images of witches and wizards with their wands or staffs. But the midrashic approach was not the only one. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in particular, some interpreters—driven by an aversion to magic—considered the staff nothing more than an ordinary stick. These diametrically opposed views of the nature and role of the staff present an interesting case study in different modes of biblical interpretation.

The Legendary Staff of the Midrash

1. The Staff's Divine Origin and Power

Any analysis of the staff must begin with the Torah itself. In the Torah's initial account, Moses' staff appears to be nothing more than a shepherd's rod. "What is that in your hand?" God asks Moses. He replies: "a staff" ([Exodus 4:2](#)). When God tells Moses to throw it to the ground and it becomes a snake, Moses runs away. He appears genuinely surprised. In this episode, the staff appears to be an ordinary object acted upon by God.

But the staff's role grows and changes as the narrative progresses. God tells Moses to take the staff with him to Egypt, where he is to use it to perform the signs ([Exodus 4:17](#)). Up until now, the staff had only been associated with one sign—its transformation into a snake—but this verse foreshadows its expanded role in several of the plagues. When Moses and Aaron use their staffs to bring the plagues of blood, frogs, lice, hail, and locust, it is no longer a passive object acted upon by God, but an active tool used to bring about God's will.

A few verses later ([Exodus 4:20](#)), the Torah refers to the staff as *matteh ha-Elokim*. This phrase simply means the "staff of God," which is consistent with the staff's prior transformation and its upcoming role in the plagues. However, it could also be translated, as it is in the Septuagint, as "the staff *from* God," perhaps hinting to a divine origin.

Indeed, [several midrashim](#) see the phrase *matteh ha-Elokim* as indicating that Moses' staff was never an ordinary shepherd's crook, but was God's scepter that He granted to Moses. According to other [midrashim](#), it weighed forty *seah* (of water; making it very large), was made of sapphire, and was inscribed with either [the name of God](#) or the acronym for the ten plagues known from the Haggadah—*detza"kh, ada"sh, be-aha"v*. The staff was not only divine, but also powerful; [Midrash Tanhuma](#) writes that God told Moses that he would be able to perform any miracle he desired with it. The [Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai](#) surprisingly gives the staff a role in bringing the quail the Israelites ate in the desert and the manna from heaven, even though no textual support for such a notion exists. [Deuteronomy Rabbah](#) says that Moses used his staff to kill the kings Sihon and Og and to fend off the Angel of Death at the end of his life. This is particularly intriguing because it suggests that Moses could not only wield the staff for his own purposes, but could even use it against God's own designs—in an effort to thwart God's command to the Angel of Death to take his soul.

2. The Staff's Remarkable History: From Creation to Redemption

The midrashic approach posits that the staff was not only powerful, but also had a storied past. The Mishnah in *Avot* (5:6) counts the staff among ten miraculous objects that were created at twilight on the sixth day of creation.³ But the Mishnah's assertion of the staff's antiquity raises a question: where had it been until Moses received it, and how did he get it?

Perhaps in response, *midrashim* fill in the gaps in the staff's past. *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* traces the staff's transmission from Adam to the patriarchs to Joseph. After Joseph's death, his house was plundered and the staff was taken to Pharaoh's palace. Then it was removed by Jethro, who planted it in his garden, where no one was able to approach it. Moses, however, was able to pull it from the ground after reading the letters of the plagues inscribed on it. Jethro acknowledged that Moses was to redeem the Israelites, and he gave him his daughter Zipporah's hand in marriage.

Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer's expansive history of the staff is not atypical for midrash. *Midrashim* often link disparate biblical narratives and characters, adding color and flavor to the text. The staff's importance and age dictate that it should have an illustrious pedigree—that it be known to the patriarchs and kept safe for Moses. However, the midrash's addition of the staff's time in Pharaoh's palace and its time with Jethro is remarkable. The staff's experience parallels that of the Israelites; it too was in Egypt and was redeemed by Moses—not through ten plagues, but by Moses' recitation of the ten plagues inscribed on it. Perhaps this parallel was not lost on Jethro, who declares after Moses liberates the staff that he will go on to liberate the Israelites.

Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer's history also foreshadows Moses' journey to leadership. Like Moses, the staff spent time in Pharaoh's palace and traveled to Jethro's house in Midian. And Jethro recognized that Moses was destined for leadership because only he could dislodge the staff. In this sense, the staff was not only a tool that brought God's miracles, but a symbol of Moses' divine appointment. In fact, according to *Midrash Vayosha*, Jethro tested his daughter's suitors by challenging them to pull the staff from the ground, and only Moses was successful. This further cements Moses' first encounter with the staff as a story about his chosenness. Also, there is an unmistakable parallel between this story and the legend of Excalibur, in which the future King Arthur is alone able to pull a sword from a stone. Although there is no conclusive evidence that one story was based on the other, both tales feature the origins of a

³ The Mishnah's likening of the staff to items such as the mouth of Balaam's talking donkey and God's miraculous script on the two tablets received at Sinai further paints a picture of the staff as an object with supernatural qualities.

leader whose chosenness is evidenced by performance of a heroic feat of which he is uniquely capable.⁴

According to some *midrashim*, just like the staff's history did not begin with Moses, it did not end with him either. [Numbers 20:9](#) refers to Moses taking the staff from “before God” when using it to hit a rock to provide water for the people, which suggests that the staff was kept in the Tabernacle with the Ark and other holy vessels. [Yalkut Shimoni](#) states that just like the Ark was hidden but will return in Messianic times, so too the staff was secreted away and will return, when the Messiah will use it to “subjugate the nations of the world.”

To sum up: the midrashic staff is a far cry from the shepherd's rod introduced in Exodus 4:2. It was an object of legend; it gave its bearer supernatural abilities and had a role spanning history—from creation to the messianic age.⁵

The Minimized Staff

1. The Staff in *Peshat* Interpretation

Needless to say, the midrashic approach goes far beyond what's written in the Torah. And while it continues to play an important role in the interpretation of the staff, other perspectives exist as well.

⁴ *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* is often dated to the eighth century, while the legend of the sword in the stone [does not appear in writing](#) until the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. One scholar [has suggested](#) that although Western readers tend to draw the parallel between Arthur and Moses, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* may have actually borrowed the theme of dislodging a weapon from earlier Islamic “lives of the prophets” literature (7, 104, 294). Regardless of the story's origin, one might expect stories about a leader's divine appointment being evidenced by the performance of a heroic task to appear across religions and genres.

⁵ Parallel Christian and Islamic stories further embellish the staff's role, sometimes relying on midrashic ideas. Some [Islamic legends](#) state that the staff could, among other things, illuminate darkness, dispense milk and honey, destroy mountains, warn Moses, and turn itself into a dragon to fend off enemies. The thirteenth century Christian Syriac text [the Book of the Bee](#) contains one of the most fanciful and extensive treatments of the staff. It notes that the staff was a branch cut from the tree of knowledge in Eden—a point also made in the [Zohar](#). It further states that the staff was used by Abraham to smash his father's idols, and it was the stake to which Moses attached the copper serpent in the desert (see [Numbers 21:8](#)). It was hidden by Phineas at the entrance to Jerusalem, was later found by Jesus, and ultimately, was used as the wood for the cross on which Jesus was crucified. This account makes much of the Torah's linking of staffs and snakes, but it is also suffused with Christian imagery and symbolism. The staff's origin as a branch of the tree of knowledge links it with the doctrine of original sin, and it is therefore fitting that Jesus' crucifixion forgiving original sin should be associated with the staff. Moreover, the affixing of the copper serpent to the staff again associates it with snakes while simultaneously prefiguring the crucifixion—the snake that brings physical salvation to the plague-stricken Israelites is akin to Jesus' salvific role on the cross. Earlier Christian works make a similar point. The Epistle of Barnabas ([12:5-7](#)) states that when the snakes were biting the people, Moses made “a type of Jesus” and that this “serpent which is placed on the tree” saved them. Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho ([112](#)) calls the snake on the pole set up by Moses the “resemblance of the crucified Jesus.”

Medieval Jewish commentators who sought the plain meaning of the text, or *peshat*, quoted midrashic stories about the staff less frequently. For example, the Torah states that Moses brought his staff with him when he ascended a mountain to observe the battle the Israelites fought with Amalek shortly after they departed Egypt ([Exodus 17:8-12](#)), but doesn't explain why he brought it. The [Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai](#) suggests that Moses hoped God would perform a miracle through the staff to defeat Amalek. But contrast the *Mekhilta's* approach with that of [several medieval](#) commentators who observe that Moses never used the staff to miraculously sway the outcome of the battle; rather, it served as an ensign—a flag—that the troops could rally around.⁶

The split between *peshat* and *derash* also crops up in the way commentators address the staff's role in the splitting of the sea. God tells Moses to lift up his staff and stretch out his hand over the sea and split it ([Exodus 14:16](#)). Yet, when Moses stretches out his hand there is no mention of the staff, and the sea does not split immediately. Rather, God drives the wind all night, and then the sea splits ([Exodus 14:21](#)). Did Moses use his staff in the end, and if so, what was its effect?

Some early interpreters feature the staff in their explanations of what occurred. Josephus ([Antiquities II:16:2](#)) leaves out the wind and states that Moses actually struck the water with his staff, similar to the way he struck the rock to provide water for the people or Aaron struck the Nile to turn it to blood. [Pesikta de-Rav Kahana](#) also posits that the sea split either because of the staff's power or because of the divine name inscribed on it. However, [Ibn Ezra](#) downplays the staff's role, noting that the Torah explicitly recounts that it was God's wind—not the staff—that ultimately split the sea.

2. God's Concern for Moses' Reputation (*Exodus Rabbah*)

Those who minimized the staff's role were not concerned with *peshat* alone. [Exodus Rabbah](#), commenting on the same passage in which God tells Moses to raise up the staff, states the following:

The Egyptians were saying: "Moses can't do anything without the staff—with it he hit the Nile, with it he brought all the plagues!" When Israel came to the sea and the Egyptians were right behind them, the Holy One Blessed Be He said to Moses, "Cast away your staff! They should not say, 'if not for the staff, the sea could not be split.'" And that's why the verse says, "lift your staff."

⁶ It is worth noting that the Mishnah ([Rosh Hashanah 3:8](#)) already suggests the Moses' raised hands—in which he may have been holding the staff—had no effect on the battle. Rather, when Moses raised his hands, the Israelites looked heavenward and focused on God.

God's command to "lift your staff" was actually an instruction to cast it away out of fear that the Egyptians would ascribe too much power to it and would not recognize Moses' God-granted power.

Exodus Rabbah pushes back, albeit just a little, against the midrashic tendency to expand the staff's role. Still, the midrash's problem with the staff's use is localized; God was concerned that the repeated use of the staff had led the Egyptians to doubt Moses' ability. This problem would become particularly acute if Moses used the staff in the plain sight of the entire Egyptian army. *Exodus Rabbah* does not say that the staff had no power to make miracles and it does not appear to have any larger qualms about the staff's role.

3. A Powerful Staff Breeds a Lack of Faith

Rabbi Ephraim Luntshitz in his sixteenth century homiletical commentary *Kli Yakar*, goes further. He [adopts](#) *Exodus Rabbah's* notion that God told Moses to cast away the staff, but in explaining why the staff could not be used at the sea, reconceives of its role. He writes that the staff was "an example of everything being done above," or in other words, a symbol. The ten plagues in Egypt were a manifestation of God's finger, and could be symbolized appropriately by the staff, which points like a single finger. At the sea, however, God used His entire hand, so to speak. Therefore, the appropriate symbol at the sea was Moses' hand, not his staff, which is why God told him to cast it away. When the Israelites saw that Moses used his hand instead, they realized that "it was not with the staff's power that Moses did all these great and terrible things . . . 'And they believed in God and Moses his servant,' because they retracted their earlier opinion that all had been done with the staff's power." In *Kli Yakar's* view, the staff never had any power. When Moses discarded it, the people realized that its role all along had been limited and symbolic. In fact, according to *Kli Yakar*, when Moses hit the rock with the staff the second time instead of casting it away and speaking to the rock (see [Numbers 20:1-13](#)), the people "returned to their old opinion," and wrongly attributed power to the staff, "causing a lack of faith." That sin was grave enough that Moses was denied entry into the Promised Land. *Kli Yakar's* concerns with the staff go far beyond those expressed in *Exodus Rabbah*. In his view, the notion of a powerful staff diminished faith by eclipsing God, who is the only real source of power.

4. There Can Be No "Magic Power in the Staff"

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a few commentators further downplayed the staff's role, possibly for new reasons. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) [writes](#) that "[t]here was no special godliness in the stick" (Exodus, 78), "any stick could have served," (ibid.) and there was no "magic power in the staff." (ibid., 233). Rather, "A movement with that staff, a waving, a blow with it before an announced event takes place proclaims that event to be the result of a momentary direct intervening act of God." (Numbers, 367). In other words, the staff did nothing at all. Moses and Aaron used staffs as a way of getting the people's attention so that they would note the act of God to follow.

A very similar approach was taken by the Florentine scholar and rabbi Umberto Cassuto (1883-1951). In reference to the plague of blood, he [writes](#) that the “striking with the rod is not regarded here as a magical act,” but indicates “the commencement of the portent, which thereupon takes place in accordance with God’s will, which Moses has previously announced” (98). A third commentator, the German biblical scholar Benno Jacob (1862-1945), who was not Orthodox in practice or in his views about biblical authorship but fought vigorously against the documentary hypothesis and other aspects of biblical criticism, writes that the “entire concept of a magic staff was foreign to the religion of Israel,” (96), for “it is the essence of magic to force God or cosmic forces into its service” (201). Rather, “God performed the miracles, while man’s role was limited to an introduction or an announcement of their beginning.” (ibid.). The staff therefore “was only a symbol of God’s true power” (ibid.). To Jacob, *midrashim* which ascribe powers to the staff or a legendary history were “folklore which had absorbed foreign notions” (202).⁷

Hirsch, Cassuto, and Jacob are particularly concerned that onlookers might wrongly consider the staff magical. Their concerns may reflect the intellectual currents of the times. James George Frazer’s (1854-1941) [The Golden Bough](#), a highly influential multi-volume anthropological study published in a dozen volumes between 1890 and 1915, theorized that belief systems developed in a progressive and evolutionary manner. Early belief in magic gave way to belief in religion, which was eventually discarded for belief in science. In Frazer’s hierarchy, magic was on the bottom rung. Belief in magic represented a primitive approach to the natural world, in which humans could propitiate and manipulate divine beings by performing spells and incantations.⁸ To make matters worse, biblical critics such as Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918), who is known for the Documentary Hypothesis, latched on to [similar evolutionary ideas](#). In this view, the biblical text was the composite work of multiple authors, and the final product contained earlier strata of religious ideas that did not reflect refined monotheistic religion. A magical staff could be seen as one of these incongruous holdovers from polytheism that would provide fodder for those who wished to deny the Torah’s divinity. Thus, to Hirsch,⁹ Cassuto, and Jacob—modern commentators immersed in

⁷ Jacob rejects the midrashic approach out of hand. However, one concerned about the magical or less rational aspects of the *midrashim* could conceivably reinterpret them. Rabbi Chaim Hirschenson (1857-1935), for example, reinterpreted the midrashic notion that an acronym for the plagues was inscribed on the staff. In his book *Motzaei Mayyim*, in which he sought to provide rational explanations for certain aggadic sections of the Talmud, Hirschenson [writes](#) that the acronym was not inscribed by any Divine agency; rather, Moses engraved each letter on the staff after the corresponding plague was brought, just as a king might notch a sign of victory on a staff.

⁸ Yehezkel Kaufmann (1889-1963), a professor of Bible at the Hebrew University, was perhaps the most prominent [expositor](#) of the stark contrast between God-centered worship and the magical attempts at divine manipulation practiced by Israel’s neighbors.

⁹ Hirsch wrote before Frazer and Wellhausen, but other comments of his demonstrate that he was aware of similar intellectual currents. For example, unwilling to believe that the Egyptian magicians had any real power,

the intellectual community of their times—a magical staff was fundamentally incompatible with the proper approach to the worship of God.¹⁰

Conclusion

Graham Phillips was wrong about many things, including the identity of a wooden rod in the Birmingham Museum. But he was clearly onto something in his fascination with the nature of Moses' staff. What was the staff? Was it the scepter of God brought down to earth, or an ordinary stick that merely pointed to God? The rich and diverse history of Jewish biblical interpretation has bequeathed us both perspectives.

These differing interpretations of the staff are driven by distinct exegetical and ideological considerations. *Midrashim* are full of imaginative stories with rich symbolic meaning. For midrash, everything found in *Tanakh* and subsequent Jewish history is a single interconnected tapestry. Therefore, in midrashic hands, the staff becomes an object of legend: it came into existence at the dawn of time, was liberated from Pharaoh and Jethro by Moses who would liberate the Israelites, and will have a role in the final redemption. But concerns about plain meaning and a fear of attributing power to things outside of God led some later interpreters to minimize the staff's role. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, concerns about magic in particular—a primitive means of propitiating a deity—led rationalist intellectuals to suggest that the staff pointed to God but did no more. The staff's interpretive history is thus an interesting data point in the age-old tug-of-war between different approaches to biblical interpretation and the weighty theological issues that often underlie them.

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he says that when the Torah appears to say they produced frogs, it really means that no matter what they did, they were unable to stop the frogs' proliferation (Exodus, 88-89). This is a strained reading, but it shows how concerned he was about magic. Most tellingly, Hirsch interprets the sin of the Golden Calf as stemming from an idolatrous belief that Moses could manipulate God. He writes that the Israelites did not want a new god, but mistakenly believed that Moses could propitiate God because of his demigod-like nature, and that the Golden Calf would be able to do the same (ibid., 604-05).

¹⁰ This modern aversion to a magic staff has another interesting component. Like *Kli Yakar*, Jacob and an English scholar, Israel Abrahams (1858-1925), identify Moses' sin in striking the rock with his use of the staff. But they add that Moses was not supposed to use the staff because it was perceived as magical. Jacob, after condemning the notion of a magic staff, writes that Moses' and Aaron's sin "lay in believing in the power of the rod and in having led the people to believe in it rather than in God" (95). Abrahams more explicitly [notes](#) that "whatever purpose the Rod may be assumed to have served in the hands of Moses, similar instruments did also serve his contemporaries as the emblem and medium of magical power" (8). When Moses struck the rock with his staff, it confirmed for the Israelites that he "was only a magician after all," and "could be trusted to lead them no farther and no longer" (9).