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No Rest for the Weary? Ambiguity in Yehudah Halevi's "*Yom Shabbaton*"

Yaakov Jaffe

Each *Shabbat*, many Jews sit around their *Shabbat* tables and happily sing a short song, usually with a fast and graceful tune, that discusses the *Shabbat*, the giving of the Torah, and then culminates with Noah's floodwaters and the story of the dove. Few Jews will ask why Noah's floodwaters and the story of the dove are song-worthy or connected to the themes of *Shabbat* at all. To answer these questions, this essay will unpack the themes and allusions of that song, Yehudah Halevi's "*Yom Shabbaton*," and also consider how a debate about the true text of the song shapes the meaning of the song's central theme, climax, and conclusion.

Few poets of the Hebrew Language match Yehudah Halevi's artistry and his interweaving of complex religious themes with biblical allusions. Yehudah Halevi's poems have formed a critical part of the liturgy for *Shabbat* and holidays, and are still sung and recited widely. The most widely sung of his poems is the song for *Shabbat* entitled "*Yom Shabbaton*," printed in most *siddurim* and in virtually every *birkon*.

The song contains five stanzas of four eight-syllable lines each, for a total of twenty lines, with each stanza beginning with another letter of the poet's first name, Yehudah: *yud*, *hey*, *vav*, *daled*, *hey*. It uses the poetic genre of Belt Song, or *Shir Eizor,* with the first three lines of each stanza rhyming with each other, and the last line rhyming with the refrain (as well as the last two lines of the first stanza).

There are two extant versions of the middle stanzas, and numerous prayer books and *birkonim* have begun printing the two versions of the middle stanza side by side, leaving to the reader to consider which reading he or she prefers. This brief essay will contrast the versions and consider the changes from three perspectives: content, poetic quality, and overall meaning. We will consider how the inclusion of one set of intervening stanzas over the other radically changes the tense, theme, and central message of the song as well, leaving two different songs, and two very different meanings.

Poetry
Before turning to the content of the poem, we will take a quick glance at some of the formal qualities of the poem, and in particular, of the two verses whose origin has come in to question. These two stanzas appear below in their standard form, translated into English, with a few of the Hebrew words that participate in the rhyme in parenthesis, transliterated:

9] And they all came, in a covenant, <u>together</u>
10] "We will do and we will listen," they said as one (ehad)
11] And they opened and answered, "God is one" (ehad)
12] Blessed is He Who gives strength to the weary (ko'ah)

13] He spoke with His holiness from the Mountain of Myrrh,
14] "The seventh day: remember and guard"
15] And all of its rules, <u>together</u> they should be studied,

16] Firm your loins, and strengthen your might!(ameitz ko'ah)

A hallmark of a superior poet is the care taken never to use the same word twice for the same rhyme in the same poem. Rabbi Yehudah Halevi, himself, in his elegy "*Tziyon Ha-Lo Tishali*" uses 35 different rhymes for the ending "*rayih*" without repeating a single rhyme more than once. And indeed, in the unusual, newly printed version of this song, three different endings are used for the ending of the five stanzas (*ru'ah*, Noah, and *ko'ah*). Yet, as illustrated above, the rhyme "*ko'ah*" is overused in the standard version of the poem, acting as the final word of each of the first four stanzas, including these two.

Even more jarring and uncomfortable than the possible overuse of the single word *ko'ah*, is how the second and fourth stanzas end with the nearly identical two word phrase "*amitz* (adj.) *ko'ah*" and "*ameitz* (v.) *ko'ah*," from Yeshayahu 40:26 and Nahum 2:2, whose similarity to, but small difference from each other create an unpleasant feeling for the reader of the song. Rhymes should be different, but end in the same sound, not virtually identical.

Furthermore, and in greater violation of poetic convention, is the rhyme endings for the first three lines of the middle stanza. The three line-rhymes all end with "*had*" but the poet rhymes the same word "*ehad*" twice with itself, in the span of three endings. This violation of poetic standards does not appear anywhere else in the song and is unheard of for a poet of Yehudah Halevi's caliber.

There is one final poetic problem in the added two stanzas, although this problem is more nuanced. The word "*yahad*," "together," appears in both stanzas; the first time to indicate the unity of the Jewish people. Yet, the word is entirely extraneous and virtually without meaning the second time it appears "And all of its rules, <u>together</u> they should be studied." A top tier poet would not include a seemingly unnecessary word, especially not after having used that same word so prominently and with so much meaning in just the previous stanza.

Content of the Middle Stanzas

The song's conventional middle stanzas speak about the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. The second stanza had already invoked the two tablets and the giving of the law, "it is engraved upon two tablets of stone/ from He who is of much power and great strength," so it is fitting that the third and fourth stanzas might also speak of the Decalogue and the giving of the Torah. Yet, the giving of the Torah at Sinai is not a major motif for Shabbat in general, and the Shabbat is but one of Ten Commandments, so the decision to focus three stanzas, or 60% of the song, on the giving of the Torah seems quite curious.

At first glance, these stanzas tells the story of the giving of the Torah rather conventionally, beginning with the nation gathering together ("covenant together [9]" = Shemot 24:7 and *Mekhilta* to Shemot 19:2), moving to the acceptance of the law ("we will do and we will listen [10]" = Shemot 24:7) and the ten commandments ("Remember" and "Guard [14]" Shemot 20:8 & Devarim 5:12). Yet closer inspection reveals that aspects of these stanzas have been misapplied to the giving of the Torah, calling into question the intentions or designs of the author.

First, the song locates the giving of the Torah at the Mountain of Myrrh—literally a mountain of spices (Shir Ha-Shirim 4:6), sometimes taken as another name for Mount Moriah, the Temple Mount (II Divrei Ha-Yamim 3:1). Yet the Torah was given at Sinai, or Horeb, and not anywhere near Mount Moriah or any mountain of Myrrh! Only an obscure and far later comment in the *Yalkut Reuveni* (Shemot, page 93)[1] connects Mount Moriah to the giving of the Torah; the conventional view (*Shabbat* 89a) explicitly decouples the two from each other.[2]

Second, the people are said to have proclaimed that God is one at the moment of the giving of the Torah. Again, though some minor and later *midrashim* (such as *Devarim Rabbah*) connect Moshe's later proclamation of the unity of God (Devarim 6:4) with the giving of the Torah, the bulk of the Midrashic and Talmudic tradition, and the simple reading of the texts, do not.

The stanza ends with the proclamation—"Blessed be he who gives strength to the weary," borrowing from Yeshayahu 40:29, but echoing the blessing "He who gives strength to the weary"—a core part of the morning blessings in prayer books today. This blessing was a later addition to the *Siddur* that would not have become prevalent in Spain until after the time of Yehudah Halevi.[3] This too prompts us to consider alternatives for what the middle stanzas should be.

The alternative stanzas, printed in some *birkonim*, avoid all of the poetic and content problems found in the conventional stanzas. These original stanzas were likely removed because of their rather strong language against the enemies of the Jewish people:

9] And from the thick cloud He lit the darkness
10] And upon a cloud He raised those that dwell low
11] And I will see the tower of my enemies fall
12] Yet I have been filled with strength (ko'ah; Micah 3:8*)*

13] Trample with a shoe[4] the enemies and tormentors
14] And even make stumble the ankles of strangers
15] And then my nation will answer you with songs

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[1] This view is also found as a second, non-favored, language cited by Pseudo-Rashi to *Ta'anit* 16a. See *Keren Orah loc. cit.*, and *Yalkut* 988 as to whether this interpretation even relates to the giving of the Torah, to Moriah, or to Myrrh.

[2] Moreover, Psalm 68, which discusses the moving of the mountains upon the occasion of the giving of the Torah (which later became the inspiration of the story of mountains moving from place to place in order to participate in the honor of the giving of the Torah or to study Torah themselves), never mentions Mount Moriah, only Har Bashan. Also, Yirmiyahu 46:18 (which also provides some inspiration for the same tradition of the mountains moving at the giving of the Torah) mentions Tabor and Karmel only, not Moriah. See *Bereshit Rabbah* 99:1, *Megillah* 29a, and *Sotah* 5a.

[3] See *Berakhot* 60b, Rambam, *Laws of Prayer* 7:4. Though the blessing does appear in *Mahzor Vitry*; see *Tur Orah Hayim* 46 and *Arukh Ha-Shulhan loc. cit.*

[4] Shoe is the tool used for the verb "to trample or tread" and not the part of the enemy which is trampled, as others have translated this line. See also Yeshayahu 11:15, cited in Yehudah Halevi's *piyut* for the seventh day of *Pesah*, "*Yom Le-Yabashah.*"

16] God who travels on the wings of wind[5] *(ru'ah;* Tehilim 104:3*)*

These lines make allusion to the numerous biblical verses which speak of a redemptive era at the end of exile, when the people finally rest from persecution. Line 11 is based on Yeshayahu 30:25-26 "And it shall be on every high mountain and on every raised hill…on the day of much slaughter, when the towers fall…on the day when God heals his nation's wounds." Lines 9-10 are based on Yeshayahu 60:2-8 "For the darkness will cover the land, and the thick cloud the nations, but God will rise upon you, and His glory will be seen upon you…. Who are these that float like clouds, and like doves to their dovecote?"

This version solidly focuses the song on the Jewish people and their present situation: their celebration of *Shabbat*, and their rest from the challenges of exile. Each verse addresses and speaks to the Jew of the present day, and of the *Shabbat* in particular. In contrast, the temporal setting of the song shifts abruptly in the conventionally published version. There, the first, second, and final stanzas focus the song on the Jewish people in the present, but the third and fourth focus on the nation in the past, at the giving of the Torah. Moreover, the conventional fourth stanza focuses on God and not the people, sticking out as the only stanza with this shifted focus!

In addition to resolving the problems of content, poetics, and song tense, the new version also uses beautiful poetic imagery. The vivid imagery of the thick cloud contrasting darkness and light; the detail of ankles and shoes, and the ironic contrast between the lowly now riding-on-the-cloud while the tall towers fall-to-the-Earth are evidence of elevated poetry, fitting for the poet and the occasion of the song.

What is the Song's Central Message?

In the conventional version, the song serves as a historical description of the *Shabbat* and the giving of the Torah (ending with a hopeful plea for a better *Shabbat* in the future). Yet, replacing the conventional middle paragraphs serves to radically shift the focus and core of the song. Instead of being a simple song about the *Shabbat*, the poem now becomes a deeper song about the experiences of Diaspora Jewry and the role *Shabbat* plays as a vital respite for the nation in difficult times, the only resting time from the pain and agony that surround them.

The central message is reflected in the most critical word of the song, the "dove" of the repeated refrain, who found rest on the *Shabbat* day. A reader used to the *conventional* text of the middle stanzas would position the song as a retrospective on *Shabbat* of the biblical period or the more general past. In that view, the dove that rested on the *Shabbat* day is instantly identifiable as Noah's dove, which found rest on the dry land after the flood (Bereishit 8:12) seven days after she was first sent.[6] In fact, the reader has almost no choice but to read this dove as referring to the dove of Noah because of the last two lines of the poem "That no bad occurrence should pass upon them/ As you swore upon the waters of Noah," and the second

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[5] For more on this phrase, see Yaakov Jaffe, "'Upon the Wings of Eagles' and 'Under the Wings of the Shekhinah': Poetry, Conversion, and the Memorial Prayer," *Hakirah* 17 (Summer 2014): 191-204.

[6] Although, the precise wording of the poem is based on a reversal of the phrase in Bereishit 8:9, which described the occasion two weeks earlier, when the dove had not yet found rest.

line invoking the sweet smell of sacrifice (Bereishit 8:21). The reader would begin the song as it ends, with the story of the flood.

However, a reader used to the *unusual* text of the middle stanzas, which focuses the song on the present-day struggles of Diaspora Jewry, would be drawn towards a different understanding of the "dove" in the refrain. In this reading, the dove refers not to the historical dove, but to the present-day Jewish people, who are often symbolized by the dove (three times in Shir Ha-Shirim and once in Yeshayahu). Thus, the refrain's true argument is not that the seven days of the the flood parallel the seven days of *Shabbat*; it is that the *Shabbat* day is a time that the Jewish people, the dove, find rest. The song speaks less about the historical *Shabbat*, and more about the experiences of weary, Diaspora, dove-like Jewry, wandering from place to place, facing cruelty and oppression, desperately waiting for the next *Shabbat*.

There are also three other, slightly more technical reasons to prefer this reading of the refrain and the central message of the song:

1. *Shabbat* is never explicitly connected to the flood in the biblical text, and no major Midrashic source connects the *Shabbat* day to the story of the dove. It would be odd, then, to celebrate the dove finding rest on *Shabbat* if in reality it found rest on a different day of the week.
2. The second half of the chorus, "And on this day, the *weary* may rest" is a quote from Iyov 3:17, which describes death as a final resting place for the weary. This allusion fits well with the darker tone of a song of weary Jewry finding a brief respite on the *Shabbat*; but is jarring and unpleasant when connected to the more upbeat historical moment of Noah's dove.
3. Moreover, as we shall see below, the flood covenant given to Noah (Bereishit 9:11-17), later called an oath by Yeshayahu (54:9) was a *universalistic* oath not to destroy the world, with no connection to either *Shabbat* or the Jewish people. Thus, we should be reluctant to see the great deluge as being central to the *particularistic* themes of *Shabbat* and the Jewish people.

Translating the Final Stanza

Typically, the final stanza is translated as follows:

> *17] The nation that* ***moved around****; like livestock she (the nation,* Yeshayahu 53:2*) strayed*
> *18] He will remember to count for them the Covenant and Oath (*Tehilim 105:8-9*)*
> *19] That no bad occurrence should pass upon them*
> *20] As you swore upon the waters of* ***Noah***

This stanza clearly fits as the climax of the song: *Shabbat* is the day of rest for the nation that wandered like livestock, and there is a further hope for a time when the oath to our ancestors is remembered and we are saved from any bad occurrence. It is the perfect conclusion for a song about the Jews in exile, while it is an unnatural climax were the song about the giving of the Torah.

Particularly apropos is the inclusion of the motif of remembrance or recollection in the second line, which fittingly parallels the start of the song "The day of rest cannot be

forgotten/ recalling it is like the sweet smell (of a sacrifice).” If Israel remembers and recalls the *Shabbat* day, as they were commanded in the Decalogue, and does not forget it (much as they were instructed to remember and not forget Amalek or how they angered God in the desert)[7]—then God will in turn remember the covenant and oath.

What role does Noah play? As we have noted, the oath upon the waters of Noah seems oddly out of place; it was issued to all of humanity, not just to the Jewish people, the focus of the song. Also, the oath after the flood was specifically limited to the non-destruction of the world and never included a promise that nothing bad would affect the Jewish people.

Closer inspection of the final stanza, however, indicates that the poet likely had intended the final word “Noah” as a pun—*secondarily* as a proper noun, the name of the biblical figure, but primarily as a common noun, translated literally as “rest.” In general, the two verbs/nouns “*lanu’ah*” and “*lanu’a*`,” to rest and to move/shake, are taken as parallel opposites: evidenced both in grammatical terminology (the *sheva* ***nah*** and *sheva* ***na***`) and liturgically (in *U-netaneh Tokef*, *yanu’ah* is contrasted with *yanu’a*`). Since the word “to move” has been invoked in the initial line of the stanza, bolded above, a better reading would take the final word as “to rest,” its parallel opposite.

Under this alternative translation, the final lines would read

> *17] The nation that* ***moved around****; like livestock she strayed*
> 18] *He will remember to count for them the Covenant and Oath,*
> *19] that no bad occurrence should pass upon them,*
> *20] as you swore. [Allow them to reside] upon the waters of* ***rest***

now ending with the reversal for the nation that moved around (*na*`): living upon waters of rest (*no’ah*). Noah and his bird are entirely absent from the song; in their place is the new location of rest by which the weary the nation might live.

To demonstrate to the reader that he intended both referents, Yehudah Halevi deftly weaves together two biblical verses as the inspiration for the conclusion, indicating the twin sources for the line, the first from Noah, the biblical figure, the second, related to rest:

ישעיהו נד:ט: אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי מֵעֲבֹר מֵי נֹחַ עוֹד עַל הָאָרֶץ
שיר ריה"ל: לְבַל יֶעֱבָר בּוֹ מִקְרֶה רָעָה/ כַּאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע **עַל מֵי נֹחַ**.
תהילים כג:ב: **עַל-מֵי** מְנֻ**ח**וֹת

Neither of the scriptural texts provide the inspiration for the line without the other. In the context of the wider song, the primary intended reference is to the waters of tranquility and rest, with the parallel to the flood waters a secondary turn of phrase, added merely for the enjoyment of the reader, and not to convey a greater message, idea, or theme.

[7] For more on the connection of remembering and not forgetting, see Yaakov Jaffe, “Considering the Genre and Audience of Deuteronomy 9:7” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 45 (2017): 173-78.

After all, perhaps the best evidence that the poet intends to invoke rest with the final word, and not the biblical figure Noah, comes from the fact that the root "to rest" already appeared twice in the central refrain of the poem, each time clearly referring to rest and not the biblical figure. To be sure, Yehudah Halevi knows the reader will make note of the words "water," "dove," "Noah," and "oath," and associate them with the flood—but the flood narrative is a secondary pun. The song's last word and climax should instead connect with this recurring theme of rest: if the weary Jew remembers and rests on the seventh day, God will remember and grant them the waters of rest from their trials of exile.

Amazingly, a song sung by myriads of Jews has likely been misunderstood for decades if not centuries, owing both to the complexity of the text of the song, but also to the different readings of the balance of the song suggested by the questionable text. A song about history and the *Shabbat* of the past, is perhaps more about the present and the *Shabbat* that provides rest for each weary generation as they proceed through exile and its travails.

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On the Importance of the Twentieth of *Iyar*

Ezra Zuckerman Sivan

This Shabbat marks the twentieth of *Iyar*, an important date in Jewish history. No holiday marks this date and its significance is generally unknown.

What then happened on the twentieth of *Iyar*? Numbers 10:11 notes that after a year and 20 days at Sinai—a period encompassed by the last 22 chapters of the book of Exodus, the entire book of Leviticus, and the first 10 chapters of Numbers—the cloud of glory ascended from upon the tabernacle, signaling that it was time for the Israelites to break camp and travel towards the Land of Canaan.

But it also set the stage for a great failure. Immediately after the two verses describing the movement of the Tabernacle at the center of the camp and the dispersal of Israel's enemies before it (Numbers 10:35-36), we learn of a series of occasions when Israel challenged its human and divine leadership, which peak at the sin of the scouts. This "evil" generation (Numbers 32:13) was then doomed to wander and die in the wilderness over the next 38-plus years. "Plan A" had been for the generation of the Exodus to conquer and settle the Land. In the end, Israel would have to settle for "Plan B"—by which their hopes and dreams could be realized only by their children.

These two biblical verses—the first of which is proclaimed in our liturgy when the Torah's ark is opened—are marked by special Masoretic punctuation marks (the letter "nun" written upside down and backwards) and are described in various traditional sources as constituting a full book of the Torah. Rabbi Menachem Leibtag explains that Numbers effectively constitutes "three books in one:" Book I describes Israel's "technical and spiritual preparation for the journey"; Book II represents the "ideal manner by which [Israel] were to travel"; and Book III describes "the actual journey." Ramban and other commentators cite a *midrash* that describes the problem in a highly resonant way: as soon as the Israelites left Sinai, the people ran away "like children running from school." The moral standards set at Sinai were just too high to bear.

But what is the significance of the twentieth of *Iyar*? Why was it important for the Torah to record this date when so many other dates go unrecorded by the Torah? And, why did Israel break camp and set out for Israel on this date specifically?

Rabbi Bin Nun's Theory

In chapter 4 of his recent book, *Zakhor ve-Shamor: The Meeting of Nature and History in the Sabbath and Festival Calendar*, Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun presents an intriguing theory. His approach links several astute observations about timing and dates that are mentioned in Numbers and Deuteronomy. In particular, Bin-Nun suggests that the significance of the twentieth of *Iyar* becomes clearer when we consider Moses's enigmatic words in the opening of Deuteronomy.

A longstanding puzzle is why the narrator's preamble notes (Deuteronomy 1:2) that Israel's encampment on the Plains of Moab (Transjordan) is just "11 days from" "Horeb"—i.e., Sinai.

This statement seems intended to pour salt on Israel's wound: whereas they wandered for more than 38 years, it could have only taken them 11 days. Yet, Bin-Nun suggests that Moses is hinting at something more precise: had the camp started on the twentieth of Iyar and walked for 11 days, it would have arrived at the Land on the first day of the third month, which would have been the anniversary of their arrival at Sinai (Exodus 19:1).

This in turn is significant given that the plan of the Exodus was first laid out by God at the moment of Israel's deepest subjugation in Egypt—i.e., when Pharaoh rebuffed Moses and Aaron's request to "let the people go" and instead instituted a regime that was designed to kill Israel's spirit. God responds (Exodus 6:2-8) by declaring His intention to intervene in history to save the people and He lays out a plan for how the Exodus process will proceed.

This plan has a double climax to it (Exodus 6:7-8) (a) that God would "take [Israel] for [Himself] as a people, while [He] will be a guide for [Israel]; and [Israel] would know that [God] is responsible for taking [Israel] out of Egypt;" and (b) that God would "bring [Israel] to the land that [God] had raised His hand to give it to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and He would give it to [Israel] as an inheritance." In short, the double climax is one of the giving of the Torah at Sinai; and of the provision of a land in which Israel faced the challenge of fulfilling the Torah.

Bin-Nun suggests that each of the two climatic stages was originally meant to follow one another exactly one year apart: just as the arrival at Sinai was on the first day of the third month, the arrival in the land was meant to occur on the one-year anniversary of Sinai, thus providing a powerful symbol of how law and land are the twin foundations of Israel's covenantal project.

Arriving as it does several days after the first of third month, the holiday of *Shavuot* marks this twin climax. While the thematic connection to the land is explicit in the Torah (Exodus 23:16, 34:22; Leviticus 23:9-22; Numbers 28:26; Deuteronomy 16:9-26:1-11), the calendrical connection to the land is not. Conversely, while the thematic connection to Sinai is not explicit in the Torah, the calendrical connection is present in the reference to the third month (if ambiguous as to the specific date). But if we follow Bin-Nun's suggestion and consider that the people were meant to arrive in the land on the anniversary of the arrival at Sinai, thematic and calendrical links would then both be strong.

Bin-Nun supports his thesis in three notable ways. First, he identifies two otherwise puzzling events in year 2 that echo year 1: a reenactment of Passover, both at the anniversary of the Exodus and even in the second month—just six days before the departure on the twentieth of *Iyar* (Numbers 9:1-14); and the departure of a member of Jethro's family at the cusp of the third month (compare Numbers 10:29-32 with Exodus 18:1-27).[8]

Second, Bin-Nun notes two key occasions when the text implies that Israel has become delayed because of its sins: (a) when God declares (Numbers 11:20) that the people's lust for

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[8] One might also consider that the twentieth of the second month might have evoked the twentieth day of the first month, which is arguably the day that the tabernacle was completed a month earlier. This assumes that 8 days of the investiture (*milu'im*) ceremony (Leviticus 9:1) was followed by the 12 days of the princes' sacrifices (Numbers ch. 9). So again we would have echoes on symbolically meaningful dates.

meat would lead them to eat quail for "thirty days, until it comes out of [their] noses;" and (b) when the Torah goes out of its way to tell us that the scouts were sent to assess the land during the period when the first grapes are harvested (Numbers 13:20). The former verse implies that they were delayed by at least a month, whereas the second verse—given that Israel's grape harvest occurs in the fall—suggests a delay of a few months. The implication is that Israel had already fallen off the ideal schedule in the period leading up to the sin of the scouts.

Finally, Bin-Nun notes there are many echoes of Sinai in the events upon their arrival in Israel in the book of Joshua. Several of these are reenactments of key events of the Exodus: Joshua's encounter with an angel that evokes Moses's initial encounter (compare especially Joshua 5:15 with Exodus 3:5); the crossing of the Jordan; and a mass circumcision ceremony, as a prelude to the first celebration of Passover since that of Numbers (cf. Exodus 12:48).

Moreover, whereas the encounter with the angel comes last and thus seems out of order, it is a fitting prelude to a Sinai-themed event since Moses's encounter was Israel's first visit to Sinai. The Sinai-themed event in question was the conquest of Jericho, whose elements included shofar blasts; limits on approach; seven days, and more.

So while this second half of the double climax is delayed by 39 years and it occurs in Jericho rather than (as Bin-Nun argues based on the mission of the scouts; see Numbers 13:22) in Hebron, some version of the double climax occurs.

Implications: Importance of Theological Counterfactuals

Bin-Nun's approach is compelling for several reasons. First, he resolves several puzzling verses— Why does Moshe go out of his way to tell us how far it is from Horeb? Why should we be concerned that it was the grape harvest?

Bin-Nun's theory also has at least three significant implications, of increasing generality.

First, and building on Leibtag's conception of the three books that comprise Numbers, Bin-Nun helps reconcile a deeper and longstanding puzzle: Why are the events in the first "book" of Numbers dated whereas there are no dates in the third "book," at least not until the very end? This is very odd when you think about it. After all, there is little narrative in the first "book" and so the order of events is relatively unimportant. But because each of the events in the third "book" is modular and undated, we have no clear way of knowing when they occur. Most notably, this means that we have no clear way of knowing when the events of the second year end and the events of the fortieth year begin. There exists a tradition that the fortieth year begins with the people's arrival in the Wilderness of Zin and the death of Miriam (20:1). Still, it begs the question of why the dates are not mentioned explicitly.

In short, temporal order becomes very murky after Israel leaves Sinai, and it is unclear why.

Bin-Nun's approach suggests how we might resolve this puzzle. In short, *after Israel has sinned, the calendar no longer matters.* Because of their failure to live up to the standards of Sinai, Israel falls behind the idealized schedule. And given that, it is no longer so important when the various events occur. The absence of the dates and the temporal confusion more generally is a powerful textual signal of the fact that Israel has fallen short of Sinai ideals.

Note finally that this breakdown in the temporal organization between the first "book" of Numbers (and the preceding book of Leviticus) and the third "book" parallels the breakdown in Israel's social organization: from a well-organized camp and hierarchy, we get increasing contestation and disorganization.

A second lesson is methodological: Bin-Nun is sensitizing us to the fact that we should read the Torah not just for the explicit narrative that is given but for hints of what might be called "theological counterfactuals:" ideal narratives that would have occurred had the protagonists behaved as they should have. One might be skeptical if this were the only case of a hidden theological counterfactual. But recently, Rabbi David Fohrman has made the case for two such counterfactuals: one (based on an observation of Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik) whereby Jacob's sojourn in Laban's house could have fulfilled the prophecy of exile and slavery, thus obviating the descent to Egypt;[9] and one whereby "Plan A" of the Exodus was for Egypt to recognize God as creator of the world, but Pharaoh's vanity in the aftermath of plague 7 necessitated "Plan B."[10]

Finally, it seems important to ponder why such theological counterfactuals are embedded in the text. One possibility is that they impart the lesson that although we may repeatedly fail to realize the ideal relationships with God and with our fellows, they remain our salient aspiration. Otherwise, why tell us about such ideals? Indeed, the set of parallels between Sinai and Jericho identified by Bin-Nun are perhaps the most telling in this regard. The Bible could have hinted at the theological counterfactual merely by including the elements in the second year that echoed the first year, together with the indications that the idealized schedule had slipped. Including the echoes of Exodus and Sinai in Joshua indicate something more: that the loftiest ideals were still salient. We are meant to recognize our failures but be inspired by what we could have achieved.

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[9]Relatedly, I have recently indicated how the series of contrasting parallels by which the Sale of Joseph may be related to the "well scenes" of Isaac-Rebecca, Jacob-Rachel, and Moses-Zipporah hints at a theological counterfactual, whereby sibling rivalry did not lead to exile and slavery Ezra Zuckerman Sivan, "Intergenerational Fumbling: The Sale of Joseph as an Anti-Well Scene," *Me'Orei Ha'eish* I (2017): 29-42.

[10] David Fohrman, *The Exodus You Almost Passed Over* (New York: Aleph Beta Press, 2016).