

HAYEI SARAH

This week's Lehrhaus Over Shabbos is sponsored in commemoration of the *yahrzeit* of **Dr. Shmuel Gedwiser, Shmuel Meir ben Yehoshua Zelig ve-Chaya Ita,** by **Miriam Gedwiser and Oren Bassik**

A RIPE OLD AGE: ABRAHAM, GIDEON, AND DAVID

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And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin. ([Genesis 25:8](#))

Gideon son of Joash died at a ripe old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash at Ophrah of the Abiezrites. ([Judges 8:32](#))

He [David] died at a ripe old age, having enjoyed long life, riches and honor, and his son Solomon reigned in his stead. ([I Chronicles 29:28](#))

Reish Lakish said, "It was said of three people 'ripe age': Abraham, and it was fitting for him; David, and it was fitting for him; Gideon, and it was not fitting for him. Why? 'And Gideon made it into an ephod' for idolatry." ([Genesis Rabbah 62:1](#))

Abraham, Gideon and David seem like an odd trio. The Bible describes their deaths with the word *seivah*/ripe age to contrast the ambiguous Gideon with the unequivocally heroic Abraham and David. But of all biblical heroes, why these two in particular? A careful reading of the three narratives may provide an answer.

Abraham and Gideon

Many ([R' Amnon Bazak](#), [R' Yaakov Medan](#), [R' Nathaniel Helfgot](#), et al.) have noted the connections between Abraham and Gideon. Beyond the semantic link identified by Reish Lakish, there are several remarkable parallels between the two narratives, clearly seen on the chart below:

| <u>Abraham</u> | <u>Gideon</u> |
|---|--|
| <u>Narrative Similarities</u> | |
| Fights a coalition of armies whose leaders are identified by name (Genesis 14:1) | Fights a coalition of armies whose leaders are identified by name (Judges 7:12, 7:25, 8:5) |
| Takes three hundred eighteen soldiers with him (14:14) | Takes three hundred soldiers with him (7:8) |
| Attacks at night and divides his forces (14:15) | Attacks at night and divides his forces (7:16-19) |
| Angels appear to him under a tree and he provides them food (18:2-8) | Angel appears to him under a tree and he provides him food (6:11-19) |
| <u>Semantic Similarities</u> | |
| <i>ba-ma eda</i> (how can I know) (15:8) | <i>ba-mah oshi'a</i> (how can I deliver) (6:15) |
| <i>al na yihar la-Adonai, va-adabra akh ha-pa'am</i> (let not my Lord be angry if I speak just once more) (18:32) | <i>al yihar apekha bi, va-adabra akh ha-pa'am</i> (Do not be angry with me if I speak just once more) (6:39) |

Such extensive textual links between the two figures cannot be coincidental, but the conceptual connection is not apparent. Abraham is a paragon of faith and generosity; Gideon is not particularly distinguished in either of these areas. Abraham is the founder of the chosen nation; Gideon becomes a historical footnote. The thematic relation between them becomes clearer when we look beyond the biblical text and in one of the most well-known midrashim about Abraham.

[Genesis Rabbah 38:13](#) tells us that that Terah, Abraham's father, operates an idol shop. He travels out of town one day and leaves his son to mind the store. Abraham, who has already recognized the folly of idolatry, begins his iconoclasm gently, by discouraging his father's customers from purchasing the merchandise. Eventually, he smashes all but the largest statue, into whose hand he places a hammer. When his father returns and inquires about the damage, Abraham explains that the idols had had an argument and the largest idol destroyed the others. Terah takes the bait, rejecting the story as impossible - "Do idols know anything?" - and Abraham springs his trap: "Let your ears hear what your mouth is saying!" Abraham is

then put on trial for heresy, thrown into a fiery furnace, and miraculously survives due to his faith in God.

This midrash fills in a crucial gap in the narrative of the Book of Genesis, which begins Abraham's story *in medias res*. God tells a man named Abram to leave his homeland, and promises him a great future, but we have no idea why He selected this particular man. The tale of Terah's idols provides the needed backstory, revealing Abraham's faith and courage. The scholars mentioned above posit that this story **does** in fact appear in the Bible itself, only it appears in Judges, not Genesis. The Sages, they argue, understood the textual parallels as an indication that Abraham's backstory was similar:

| Abraham | Gideon |
|---|--|
| Smashes his father's idols | Destroys the altar of Ba'al and the Ashera of his father (6:25-27) |
| Townsppeople want to kill the iconoclast | Townsppeople want to kill the iconoclast (6:30) |
| Abraham mocks the impotence of idols who cannot defend themselves | Gideon's father mocks the impotence of idols who cannot defend themselves (6:31) |

In the words of R' Bazak, "The nature of the explicit choice of Gideon is, according to the midrash, the same as the nature of the mysterious choice of Abraham."

This approach compellingly explains where the Sages got the story of Abraham smashing the idols. (Depending on one's preferred understanding of midrash, this can be expressed in two different ways. Either the textual parallels are an allusion to a pre-existing tradition about Abraham, or they inspired the Sages to suggest what his origin story might be.) What remains to be explained is how David fits into the puzzle.

David

There are quite a few obvious parallels between Gideon and David. They are both mighty warriors who protect their people from powerful enemies (the Midianites and Philistines respectively.) The Bible uses similar language to describe them:

Gideon:

The angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, "**The LORD is with you, valiant warrior!**" ([Judges 6:12](#))

David:

One of the attendants spoke up, "I have observed a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skilled in music; **he is a valiant warrior** and a man of war, sensible in speech, and handsome in appearance, and **the LORD is with him.**" ([I Samuel 16:18](#))

They couple their martial exploits with religious faith, attributing their success not to their own power, but to God:

Gideon:

Returning to the camp of Israel, he shouted, "Come on! The LORD has delivered the Midianite camp into your hands!" ([7:15](#))

David:

David replied to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come against you in the name of the LORD of Hosts, the God of the ranks of Israel, whom you have defied." ([17:45](#))

Both leaders win great victories that usher in years of peace.

They are also unlikely heroes. When given his mission by God, Gideon demurs: "My clan is the humblest in Menashe and I am the youngest in my family" ([Judges 6:15](#)). Likewise, David is the youngest of his brothers, and Jesse does not even bother to invite him to the feast with Samuel and the rest of the family ([I Samuel 16:10-11](#)).

In another parallel, both men are offered the kingship:

Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us—you, your son, and your grandson as well; for you have saved us from the Midianites." ([Judges 8:22](#))

All the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, "We are your own flesh and blood. Long before now, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led Israel in war; and the LORD said to you: You shall shepherd My people Israel; you shall be ruler of Israel." ([II Samuel 5:1-2](#))

A big difference is that David accepts the offer whereas Gideon does not:

But Gideon replied, "I will not rule over you myself, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD alone shall rule over you." ([8:23](#))

All the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron, and King David made a pact with them in Hebron before the LORD. And they anointed David king over Israel. ([5:3](#))

In short, Gideon can be seen as a "proto-David," a young man plucked from obscurity due to his courage in standing up to Israel's enemies in the name of God. A grateful nation offers him the throne. However, unlike David, who had been anointed as king by the prophet Samuel, Gideon lacks a divine imprimatur and therefore correctly refuses the crown.¹

Turning to the connection between David and Abraham, we find some clear clues in chapter thirty of Samuel I. Once again, the parallels are striking:

¹ Interestingly, the Sages describe a similar incident in Abraham's career. After he defeats the Mesopotamian kings, he is met by the local nobility in a place called "the Vale of Kings" (Genesis 14:17). Genesis Rabbah (43:5) explains that the Canaanite tribes built him a throne and offered to make him their king, but Abraham refused.

| Abraham | David |
|--|--|
| Relative (Lot) is taken as prisoner of war and property is looted (Genesis 14:11-12) | Relatives (wives) are taken as prisoners of war and property is looted (I Samuel 30:5) |
| Sets out with a small band of soldiers (14:14) | Sets out with a small band of soldiers (30:9) |
| Defeats the enemy, rescues the captives and the spoils (14:15-16) | Defeats the enemy, rescues the captives and the spoils (30:17-19) |
| Insists that the non-combat soldiers should share in the spoils as well (14:24) | Insists that the non-combat soldiers should share in the spoils as well (30:24) |

[Genesis Rabbah \(43:9\)](#) explicitly connects these last two verses. After David's victory, some of his men suggest that only the combat troops get a share in the booty. David rejects the idea out of hand. The midrash questions the source of his strong conviction here: "From whom did he learn [this principle]? From his forefather Abraham."

Abraham:

For me, nothing but what my servants have used up; as for the share of the men who went with me—Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre—let them take their share. ([Genesis 14:24](#))

David:

How could anyone agree with you in this matter? The share of those who remain with the baggage shall be the same as the share of those who go down to battle; they shall share alike. ([I Samuel 30:24](#))

This blatant link between the two figures illuminates some other connections between them. In many ways, David represents a culmination of God's covenant with Abraham, elevating it from a familial and tribal plane to a truly national level.

Abraham:

I will make you exceedingly fertile and make nations of you; and kings shall come forth from you. I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come. ([Genesis 17:6-7](#))

For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is **just and right**, in order that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him. ([Genesis 18:19](#))

David:

When your days are done and you lie with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own issue, and I will establish his kingship. ([II Samuel 7:12](#))

Your house and your kingship shall ever be secure before you; your throne shall be established forever. ([7:16](#))

David reigned over all Israel, and David did what was **right and just** among all his people. ([II Samuel 8:15](#))

Abraham is promised a dynasty of kings in an everlasting covenant. David is the first king in this eternal line. Abraham is chosen to teach his descendants to act in a righteous and just manner. When David reigns as king, he does just that. These allusions tell us that Abraham, like Gideon, should be viewed as a predecessor to David. Going back to our initial question, it is not arbitrary that the Bible and midrash contrast Gideon to Abraham and David as opposed to any other biblical protagonists; the three share a clear thematic connection.

Haftarat Hayei Sarah

The next question is what this thematic connection comes to teach us. Perhaps we can find an answer if we look at the Torah portion that includes Abraham's death and the haftarah about David's death that goes with it.

In Hayei Sarah, we read:

Abraham willed all that he owned to Isaac; but to Abraham's sons by concubines Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the East.

This was the total span of Abraham's life: one hundred and seventy-five years.

And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin. ([Genesis 25:5-8](#))

Abraham is a man of great wealth and social stature with many children. He is wise enough to realize that without clear guidance, his family would fight over his material and spiritual legacy; thus he is very explicit. The sons of the concubines receive gifts, presumably generous ones, but Isaac is the undisputed heir. To avoid doubt, they are also sent away, leaving Isaac as the only child of Abraham in the land that God had promised him.

Gideon also has many offspring:

Gideon had seventy sons of his own issue, for he had many wives. A son was also born to him by his concubine in Shekhem, and he named him Abimelech. Gideon, son of Joash, died at a ripe old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash at Ophrah of the Abiezrites. ([Judges 8:30-32](#))

However, unlike Abraham, he does not think about succession planning. The result is horrific:

Then he [Abimelech] went to his father's house in Ophrah and killed his brothers, the sons of Jerubbaal [Gideon], seventy men on one stone. Only Jotham, the youngest son of Jerubbaal, survived, because he went into hiding. All the citizens of Shekhem and all Beth-millo convened, and they proclaimed Abimelech king at the terebinth of the pillar at Shechem. ([9:5-6](#))

Gideon dies at a ripe old age, giving him plenty of time to set his affairs in order. His failure to do so leads to fratricide and the extermination of his family. The contrast with Abraham could not be more extreme.

The haftarah for Parshat Hayei Sarah ([I Kings 1:1-31](#)) begins with David an old, tired man. We immediately see a superficial parallel to the parsha: David is "old, advanced in years" just like Abraham in Hayei Sarah ([Genesis 24:1](#)). However, the connection runs deeper

than this single verse. Unlike Abraham, who had made clear who would inherit his legacy, David has not yet announced a successor. His sons start jockeying for advantage, and his oldest surviving son, Adonijah, assembles a group of supporters and proclaims himself the heir apparent. David wants another son, Solomon, to be the next king, but has done nothing to further this objective. The prophet Nathan recognizes that Adonijah wants the throne badly enough to kill for it.

David has two contrasting paths from which to choose. Without decisive action, his family would end up like that of Gideon, with brother killing brother. But there is another option, the path of Abraham. To avoid tragedy, David has to seize control of his legacy. Nathan, with the assistance of Solomon's mother, Bathsheba, steers David onto the right track:

The king said to them, "Take my loyal soldiers, and have my son Solomon ride on my mule and bring him down to Gihon. Let the priest Zadok and the prophet Nathan anoint him there king over Israel, whereupon you shall sound the horn and shout, 'Long live King Solomon!' Then march up after him and let him come in and sit on my throne. For he shall succeed me as king; him I designate to be ruler of Israel and Judah."

With David's will made known, Adonijah's support melts away and Solomon is able to consolidate power. Mass bloodshed is averted. Unfortunately, Adonijah fails to understand the new situation and continues scheming. Solomon eventually is forced to have him executed, but David's line survives. David's delay in acting costs him, but his eventual decision allows him to avoid the catastrophic outcome suffered by Gideon's family and instead achieve the continuity of Abraham.

"Gideon, and it was not fitting for him"

Now that we have shown the connection and contrasts between Abraham, Gideon, and David, we can explain the final section of Genesis Rabbah 62:1 quoted at the beginning of the article. The midrash had concluded that unlike Abraham and David, the phrase "ripe age" was unfitting for Gideon, because of the verse "And Gideon made it into an ephod," which is considered an act of idolatry.

The verse cited by the midrash refers to Gideon's final act. After he turns down the kingship, he requests his soldiers give him the golden earrings they captured as booty. This they gladly do. But the jewelry is not put to good use: "Gideon made an ephod of this gold and set it up in his own town of Ophrah. There all Israel went astray after it, and it became a snare to Gideon and his household" ([Judges 8:27](#)).

The nation had a bit of a history with donating golden earrings. The first incident, and the most obvious association, was the sin of the Golden Calf, wherein the men give their golden earrings to Aaron to make an idol ([Exodus 32:2](#)). The second incident was forty years later, when after the war with Midian, the officers give the gold jewelry they captured as an offering to God ([Numbers 31:50](#)). The intent in these two cases was unambiguous. In Exodus, the people want the gold to make a god; in Numbers they give the gold as an offering to God.

[Exodus 32:1:](#)

Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.

[Numbers 31:50:](#)

So we have brought as an offering to the LORD such articles of gold as each of us came upon: armlets, bracelets, signet rings, earrings, and pendants, that expiation may be made for our persons before the LORD.

Gideon's motivation is much less clear. The Sages understand that he means the ephod as a monument to God's salvation, but there is no evidence in the verse pointing in either direction. Gideon's contemporaries may have known the ephod's purpose, but the ambiguous verse suggests it was unclear to them as well. This monument ends up the object of idol worship, but the Book of Judges does not explain why.

David also wants to build a monument for God in the form of a sanctuary. Unlike Gideon, he makes his intent clear:

Then he summoned his son Solomon and charged him with building the House for the LORD God of Israel. David said to Solomon, "My son, I wanted to build a House for the name of the LORD my God." ([I Chronicles 22:6](#))

Now, my son, may the LORD be with you, and may you succeed in building the House of the LORD your God as He promised you would. ([I Chronicles 22:11](#))

David's son Solomon ends up building the Temple in Jerusalem, which serves as a central house of worship for four centuries. Gideon's project was much less ambitious than David's, yet it still failed. Perhaps it was for the same reason Gideon's line ended in tragedy. Just as Gideon fails to put his family affairs in order, he also sets up his shrine without making its purpose clear. For a leader to be successful, those who follow him must understand the program. Gideon is a competent wartime commander, but when it comes to long-term plans, he does not communicate well, and such an approach results in disaster.

This, then, is the message of the midrash. It puts the career of David into the larger biblical context of two precursors, Abraham and Gideon. Abraham understands that serving God and passing his legacy on to future generations requires a certain amount of managerial skill. It does not happen by itself. Gideon tragically lacks this awareness. David, with some help from the prophet Nathan, is able to follow in the footsteps of Abraham and establish an eternal dynasty of servants of God.

WHY DOESN'T ABRAHAM GET TO ENJOY THE WEEKEND?

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The Torah is important not only because it is the foundation book for Judaism but also because it includes the only contemporary account of the origins of a social institution that governs the rhythms of the entire world: the seven-day week in general, and the weekend in particular.

To put this claim into context, let's quickly review what we know about the seven-day week. First, the seven-day week is completely unrelated to natural cycles, unlike (lunar) months and (solar) years. Second, the seven-day week is a relatively new institution outside the Jewish community. Until relatively recently, historians of the ancient world thought that they would find historical precedents for the seven-day week before the middle of the first millennium BCE, when the week was clearly recognized as an ancient institution in Judea (see Ezekiel 20 and Nehemiah 9). But by now, the consensus is that the week was, in the words of sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel, a "Jewish invention"—one that was adopted and maintained solely by Jews for hundreds of years before it was adapted and diffused through the rise of Christianity, Islam, and then more recently via Westernization of the world.

Put differently, if we consider the week in general and the *weekend* in particular to be a "blessing" for mankind—walk around your anytown in this planet and observe how much [happier](#) people are on the weekend—then its spread to every corner of the world is the clearest demonstration that God's initial promise to Abraham—the climax of the opening statement of this week's Torah portion—"and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you"—has been fulfilled.

This raises an interesting question: Why wasn't Abraham told about the seven-day week? As I have noted [before](#), the seven-day week does not appear in the book of Genesis. In the account of the seventh day of creation (Genesis 2:1-4), the root **ש-ב-ת** appears as a verb describing God's rest. But the noun **שבת**, which means both Sabbath and week in the Hebrew Bible—does not appear in Genesis. The week is not introduced until just after Israel arrives in the raw wilderness, a month after the night of the Exodus from Egypt.

In response to complaints that they are afraid of dying of starvation, God rains *manna* upon them for five straight days. On the sixth day, the people are surprised to discover that they had collected a double portion even though they had previously learned that they couldn't store the *manna* from one day to the next. Moses explains the mysterious double-portion as follows (Exodus 16:23):

This is what God has said: Tomorrow is a day of rest, *Y-H-V-H's* holy Sabbath. Bake what you want to bake, and cook what you want to cook [today]. Whatever you have left over, put aside carefully until morning (all biblical translations rendered from Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *The Living Torah*, with names of God transliterated following traditional convention).

The following day is the first Sabbath, and thereafter the seven-day cycle continues through the duration of Israel's 40-year sojourn in the wilderness.

But why is the week introduced here and not earlier? As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch ([Hirsch Chumash: Shemos](#), 346) put it, "The whole story from Abraham to Moses is nothing but God's creation of a nation to be the bearer of the Sabbath." Yet, this begs the question of why there needs to be such a long build-up. Why not just get on with it and teach Abraham about the Sabbath and week?

This question is reinforced when we consider that Abraham is instructed in a different foundational commandment—circumcision. Moreover, this commandment alludes indirectly to the seven days of creation and is introduced in covenantal language that involves strong intertextual references to a key discussion of the Sabbath: the covenantal passage concerning the Sabbath in Exodus 31, the Covenant of Sabbath.

A Tale of Two Covenants

A close comparison of these covenantal passages provides important clues as to why Abraham is instructed in circumcision but the week/Sabbath is not introduced until the Exodus. Here is the text of the two covenants below.

First, Genesis 17:1-15 (Covenant of Circumcision):

Abram was 99 years old. *Y-H-V-H* appeared to him and said, 'I am *Shakkai*. Walk before Me and be perfect. I will make a covenant between Me and you, and I will increase your numbers very much.' Abram fell on his face. *Elokim* spoke to him [again], saying, 'As far as I am concerned, here is My covenant with you: You shall be the father of a horde of nations. No longer shall you be called Abram. Your name shall become Abraham, for I have set you up as the father of a horde of nations. I will increase your numbers very, very much, and I will make you into nations—kings will be your descendants. I will sustain My covenant between Me and between you and your descendants after you throughout their generations, an eternal covenant; I will be an *Elokim* to you and to your offspring after you. To you and your offspring I will give the land where you are now living as a foreigner. The whole land of Canaan shall be [your] eternal heritage, and I will be an *Elokim* to [your descendants].' *Elokim* [then] said to Abraham, 'As far as you are concerned, you must keep My covenant—you and your offspring throughout their generations. This is My covenant between Me, and between you and your offspring that you must keep: You must circumcise every male. You shall be circumcised through the flesh of your foreskin. This shall be the mark of the covenant between Me and you. Throughout all generations, every male shall be circumcised when he is eight days old. [This shall include] those born in your house, as well as [slaves] bought with cash from an outsider, who is not your descendant. [All slaves,] both houseborn and purchased with your money must be circumcised. This shall be My covenant in your flesh, an eternal covenant. The uncircumcised male whose foreskin has not been circumcised, shall have his soul cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.'

Then, Exodus 31:12-17 (Covenant of Sabbath):

Y-H-V-H told Moses. Speak to the Israelites and say to them: You must still keep My sabbaths. It is a sign between Me and you for all generations, to make you realize that I, *Y-H-V-H*, am making you holy. [Therefore] keep the Sabbath as something sacred to you. Anyone doing work [on the Sabbath] shall be cut off spiritually from his people, and therefore, anyone violating it shall be put to death. Do your work during the six weekdays, but keep Saturday as a Sabbath of sabbaths, holy to *Y-H-V-H*. Whoever does any work on Saturday shall be put to death. The Israelites shall thus keep the Sabbath, making it

a day of rest for all generations, as an eternal covenant. It is a sign between Me and the Israelites that during the six weekdays *Y-H-V-H* made heaven and earth, but on Saturday, He ceased working and withdrew to the spiritual.

There are six intertextual connections between the two covenantal passages:

1. An eternal covenant
2. A sign
3. Observance or safeguarding
4. A pledge to future generations
5. An explicit relationship “Between Me and you”
6. The punishment for non-observance, namely, being cut off from one’s nation.

Clearly, these covenants are playing off one another. We are meant to ponder their similarities and differences.

Of the various important differences, the most important, perhaps, concerns the way God presents Himself in each covenant and the nature of the relationship with God that is achieved via each covenant. In the Covenant of Circumcision, God speaks as “*Elokim*,” the name used in the seven days of creation, and introduces Himself with the enigmatic term *שֶׁל קֵל*—which according to Hirsch and others, means the ‘Power’ [*‘Kel’*] who arrested creation by saying ‘ד’ or ‘enough!’ Most crucially, note how in verses 7 and 8, God promises Abraham that ‘והייתי להם לאלקים,’ ‘I will be for [your descendants] an *elokim*.’

Is not clear what is being promised here. After all, this cannot mean *Elokim* as it is used in the first creation story since God is necessarily the creator of the world; one cannot promise something that is true by definition. But there is one occasion, in Exodus 4:15-16, where the Torah spells out explicitly what it means “to be an *elokim*.” Here, Moses is to be Aaron’s *guide* or *teacher*. This seems to be what God is promising via the Covenant of Circumcision: that He will eventually be a source of direct guidance or instruction for Abraham’s descendants.

In the case of the Covenant of Sabbath, a different relationship is emphasized. The name used throughout is the *Y-H-V-H*—the ineffable Tetragrammaton. In addition, the goals of the Sabbath are distinct from that of the circumcision covenant. In particular, verse 17 describes Sabbath observance as a perpetual sign of God’s creation of the world in seven days while verse 13 describes Sabbath observance as a perpetual proof sign that it is God who is responsible for sanctification of Israel.

While the former idea is an elaboration on the fourth commandment (Exodus 20:11), the latter idea is an innovation. The notion that a commandment can be a proof sign of God’s intervention in history appears nowhere else in the entire Hebrew Bible except in Ezekiel 20 when the prophet essentially quotes from this passage from the Covenant of Sabbath. Neither circumcision nor any other commandment is ever described in such terms.

Development of Relationship between God and Abraham’s Family

These key differences—in the aspect of God that is emphasized and in the distinctive goal that is sought by the commandment (for God to be a guide; knowledge of God’s benefaction)—reflects the overall arc of development of Genesis and Exodus, and it helps us understand the positioning of the two covenantal passages in the history of Abraham’s family.

Beginning in Chapter 12 of Genesis, we have the story of a unique man who somehow comes to recognize and form a relationship with God, and how his family struggles to build on this relationship. This man is remarkable. God speaks to him and somehow he doesn’t question it but simply obeys God’s command. On his own, with little social support, he goes around publicly proclaiming the name of God (Genesis 12:8, 13:4, 21:33), His role as the creator/possessor of the world (see Genesis 14:22). He knows this even without the sign of the Sabbath!

To be sure, Abraham receives signs of a sort: he meets with remarkable military and commercial success that must bolster his faith. But there are no open miracles in Genesis; he could easily have attributed these successes to himself, but he does not. Abraham is even willing to believe it when God asks of him things that seem to go against the values that he thinks God stands for. Not only is the Binding of Isaac a test of Abraham’s faith, but so is circumcision itself.

This is quite a procedure for a 99-yr old, and it is quite a test of faith for aged parents of an 8-day old son to administer on him; indeed, this is the first recorded instance of infant circumcision in world history. Meanwhile, even as Abraham’s faith is tested, the only miraculous event of his life—the birth of a child in his and his wife’s old age—is not recognized as such; it occasions ridicule—*צחוק* (the basis for Isaac’s name *יצחק*)—rather than inspiring belief!

And then the succeeding three generations run into significant problems in building on the foundation that Abraham erected. While Abraham is promised that his descendants will be a great nation—even many nations—they are a troubled [if tenuously reunited] clan in exile by the end of Genesis.

But if Genesis is the story of a family’s struggle to build on the legacy of a remarkable founder who built a relationship with God in the absence of miracles, Exodus is the story of how a relationship with God was established with a *nation of regular—even downtrodden and subjugated—people*, based on God’s miraculous intervention in the natural world. Note a key contrast: whereas Abraham follows God’s direction unquestionably, Moses drags his feet even though God appears in a miraculous way via a burning bush and provides him with the capacity to do wondrous tricks (Exodus 3-4:15)!

Moreover, there is a direct contrast that pertains to circumcising their sons: Abraham does it immediately while Moses dallies (Genesis 21:8; Exodus 4:24-26). And while the elders believe Moses when he and Aaron show them the miracles of the rod/snake and the leprous hand, they immediately lose faith as soon as they run into Pharaoh’s opposition—and Moses does too (Exodus 5:22-23)!

Intertextual Turning Point

At this important turning point, there is a crucial revelation that maps out the plan and purpose of the redemption process. This revelation is key because it serves as an intertextual bridge between the two covenants we discussed earlier and suggests how they build on each other:

Elokim spoke to Moses and said to him, ‘I am *Y-H-V-H*. I revealed Myself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as *Kel Shakkai*, and did not allow them to know Me by My name *Y-H-V-H*. I also made My covenant with them, [promising] to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their pilgrimage, where they lived as foreigners. I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves, and I have remembered My covenant. ‘Therefore say to the Israelites

[in My name], 'I am *Y-H-V-H*. I will take you away from your forced labor in Egypt and free you from their slavery. I will liberate you with a demonstration of My power, and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to Myself as a nation, and I will be to you as an *elokim*. You will know that I am God your Lord, the One who is bringing you out from under the Egyptian subjugation. I will bring you to the land regarding which I raised My hand, [swearing] that I would give it to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I will give it to you as an inheritance. I am God' (Exodus 6:2-8).

God begins by introducing himself just as in the Covenant of Circumcision—as *Elokim*—and He notes that He had revealed Himself to the patriarchs as *Kel Shakkai*. He also emphasizes that He is now redeeming Israel because he is recalling the covenant with the patriarchs. Indeed, this statement is the very first explicit invocation of the covenant between God and the patriarchs since the Covenant of Circumcision. This is also where God tells Moses that the purpose of the Exodus process is that Israel acquire knowledge of God under the Tetragrammaton. God says here that He is *making himself known* in this way for the first time.

This statement has long raised questions because the patriarchs and especially Abraham did seem to know God under this name, as discussed above. But note well: the use of this name becomes progressively rare as the story of Genesis unfolds, perhaps due to the family struggles. When Moses is addressed at the burning bush, it is the first time God dialogues with human beings since He reassured Jacob on his journey to Egypt that his descendants would eventually be redeemed and returned to Canaan (Genesis 46:2-4) and the first time He spoke to human beings with the Tetragrammaton since He told Jacob to leave Laban's house (Genesis 31:3).

The intermediate period had been a very long break from God's active involvement in helping the family of Abraham. Moreover, if one follows Nahmanides and other commentators to understand the Tetragrammaton as referring to *the God who supernaturally intervenes in history to act as a parent to mankind (in contrast with the God who said "enough" to intervening)*, this enigmatic statement makes sense. Whereas Genesis from chapter 12 onwards is bereft of open miracles, Exodus is all about miracles.

Note how verses 7 and 8 of the above passage from Exodus 6 describes two objectives of the Exodus. The second objective is a reaffirmation of the promise from the Covenant of the Parts (Genesis 15) and elaborated upon in the Covenant of Circumcision: that God will grant Canaan to their descendants. But the first objective, which follows after an outline of the "four stages of redemption" made famous by the Passover *Haggadah*, is remarkable because it fuses the two ways of relating to God emphasized in the two covenantal passages we are analyzing: to be an *elokim* or guide and to acquire knowledge of God as *Y-H-V-H*.

That is, the Exodus will climax in (a) the fulfillment of the promise to be Israel's guide or teacher [the first time that God asserts this relationship since the Covenant of Circumcision], and clearly represented by the theophany at Sinai; and (b) the addition of a new mode of relationship that is then reaffirmed in the Covenant of Sabbath—i.e., the inculcation in them of the knowledge that God intervenes in history on their behalf. God is teaching via experience. This prophecy thus forms an essential bridge between the two covenantal passages.

This method of instruction is crucial because regular people—and certainly slaves—cannot be expected Abraham-like, to come to

recognize and heed God on their own. The Exodus is a story of the emergence of a large community of regular, even downtrodden people, which is forged into nationhood during a unique historical moment when they are collective witnesses to God's intervening in history to aid them.

There is no expectation that the experience of God's intervention will continue in the future, especially not after their sins at the golden calf and with the scouts. But the point of the Exodus is to imprint in Israel's collective consciousness the experience of God's supernatural intervention on their behalf, to inculcate in Israel an understanding of its unique role to play in uplifting mankind. It also represents a path, as first outlined in the Covenant of the Parts between God and Abraham by which Abraham's initial discovery of and service to God can be institutionalized—in a people that is so numerous that kinship is no longer the direct basis for affiliation—a mini-society that is a microcosm of and model for the world.

Conclusion

Two related considerations reinforce the sense that it is particularly fitting to introduce the week/Sabbath in Exodus rather than Genesis.

First, the introduction of the week/Sabbath represents the climax of the process by which Israel comes to know God. If one carefully reviews the narrative of the Exodus from our intertextual bridge above through the first Sabbath in chapter 16, one finds (see 16:6 and 16:12) that the provision of the *manna* is the first and last time a divine action (or any other event) is described in terms of the objective that Israel should come to know God via the Tetragrammaton.

Furthermore, this is the very last time in the entire Torah that this objective is mentioned. While the children of Israel have many occasions to complain after this incident, never again is "knowledge of God (as Tetragrammaton)" mentioned as a problem or an objective for this generation.

It seems that while Israel has difficulties in its relationship with God, they have come to appreciate His role in history and in the Exodus in particular. Moreover, if one reads the story of the provision of the *manna*, we see that the climax of the narrative is the beautifully terse verse 30, "וישבתו העם ביום השביעי," "And the people sabbathed on the seventh day." This is a fitting climax to the Exodus—a process by which a community of regular people experience God's intervention in the world on their behalf, to give them the gift of the Sabbath/week.

Note, too, why a mass circumcision ceremony—as occurred when the next generation entered Canaan (Joshua 5:2-4)—would not be a fitting climax to the Exodus process. Such an event would not have the same effect of demonstrating God's intervening in nature to benefit Israel, and it would involve only one half of the people.

Second, just as the Exodus and the theophany at Sinai transformed Israel from a family into the "[imagined community](#)" of nationhood, the Sabbath has the effect of turning the practice of circumcision into more of a communal, even national, experience. Consider what circumcision would have been like before there was a Sabbath. Prior to the institution of the week, the command to circumcise sons when they are 8 days old would have been experienced as a private/familial experience. Once the son is born, the clock begins ticking.

But it is strictly a clock to which *parents* would be attuned. Just as we are hard-pressed to keep track of the ages of other people's children,

our pre-Exodus forebears could not be expected to count the days of the circumcision period for other people's children. In this regard, consider how difficult it is to keep track of the [Omer](#) unless you go to the evening service every night or you are otherwise interacting with people and institutions that are committed to the Omer.

The Sabbath performs a similar function. Once the week is institutionalized, it is easy—both for parents and those who are less invested in the child—to track when the circumcision will take place—and indeed, to *enforce* the commandment. I am unaware of anyone who actually counts the 8 days, as they would have had to do before there was a seven-day week. Rather, families seem to use the convention of the week to schedule the *brit*. If a baby was born on a Wednesday then the *brit* needs to be on a Wednesday.

And if there is no *brit* that day, inquiring minds will want to know why not: Is the baby—heaven forbid—ill? Are the parents—shudder the thought—breaking the covenant? What reminder/enforcement actions are necessary? The upshot is what was (before the Exodus) a private/familial tradition is transformed into a communal or even national experience, one that marches to the beat of the Sabbath/week.

In short, the two signs of the covenant—circumcision and Sabbath/week—complement each other in a way that marks the maturation of Abraham's family into a nation, rooted in institutions that are forged in the experience of God's providence, and which contain the promise of transmitting blessing to the entire world.

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