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PARSHAT TZAV

KORBAN ASHAM: THE SACRIFICE OF SACRILEGE (AND OTHER SINS)

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The opening chapters of Vayikra detail the specificities and circumstances of the various sacrifices—primarily, which animals are to be sacrificed under what conditions. These different animals and circumstances are even given different titles, so that categories of sacrifices emerge as different types: "thus are the procedures for the *olah*, the *minha*, the *hatat*, the *asham*…" (Vayikra 7:37).

Among these types, the *asham* ram sacrifice appears to be particularly mysterious in that the circumstances necessitating its offering appear to be uniquely eclectic.[1] For those of us who recite the fifth chapter of *Mishnah Zevahim* as part of the daily morning prayers, which delineates the six instances which obligate a *korban asham*, this seemingly haphazard list is particularly striking. The six "*ashamot,"* as described by the Mishnah, are offered:

1. *Asham Meilah*: by one who unintentionally commits sacrilege, i.e., misuse of the sanctuary's or sanctified property (Vayikra 5:14-16, 22:14-16)
2. *Asham Taluy*: by one who 'sins without knowing,' which is interpreted by rabbinic tradition as referring to someone who is unsure whether or not he or she is obligated to bring a *korban hatat* (Vayikra 5:17-19)
3. *Asham Gezeilah*: by one who stole his fellow's property by denying having it in his possession (Vayikra 5:20-26, Bamidbar 5:5-8)
4. *Asham Metzora*: as part of the purification process of the *metzora* (Vayikra 14:10-32)
5. *Asham Shifha Harufah*: by one who has slept with a betrothed bondswoman (Vayikra 19:20-22)
6. *Asham Nazir*: by a *nazir* who has been defiled and must restart his term of *nezirut* (Bamidbar 6:9-12)

The precise conditions for almost all of these cases are subject to significant disputes. Relevant details will be discussed later but, suffice it to say, nothing on this list of sins and circumstances appears common to all six. Of course, there need not be one distinct factor underlying each of these cases, but one imagines that there must be some explanation for why they warrant a category of sacrifice separate from the general sin-offering, the *hatat*.

At first glance, there seems to be no conceptual distinction between the cases necessitating an *asham* from those obligating a *hatat* sacrifice, such as inadvertently eating forbidden fats or violating the Shabbat. Although the *asham* must be a male ram and the *hatat* is a ewe (or, in certain instances, a male goat or bull), the circumstances requiring either sacrifice appear nearly identical, to the point where both the *metzora* purification process a the *nazir*'s rededication ceremony require both a *hatat* and an *asham.* The Torah itself testifies to the procedural similarities between these two forms of sacrifice (Vayikra 7:7). What, then, does the *asham* accomplish that the *hatat* does not?

Although this is not meant to be a lexicographical essay, the meaning of the word *asham* as used in the sacrificial context is obviously highly relevant to understanding this sacrifice. Most traditional English translations, following the precedent of the Aramaic *targumim*,[2] translate the word *asham* as "guilt." Perhaps most illustrative is this word's first appearance in the Bible, where Avimelekh complains that by not revealing Rivkah's identity as a married woman, Isaac was bringing about Avimelekh's "*asham,"* his guilt (Bereishit 26:10). Although such a translation does appear to be most consistently appropriate for the several dozen biblical instances of the word "*asham"* or its variants, it does little in helping to understand the nature of the sacrifice in question. Presumably, guilt is incurred by sin, so the difference between sin offerings and guilt offerings remains obscure.

Ramban (to Vayikra 5:15) insists that the *asham* is categorically different from the *hatat*, and it would be a mistake to think that one is merely associated with more serious sins than the other. He believes that the word *asham* does not mean guilt (which would be closely related to the concept sin), but is related to the word "*shamem*," desolate, and thus means something relating to annihilation. In the context of the *korban asham*, the word refers not to the sins themselves but rather the punishment that those sins warrant. It is merely by association that the word can also refer to the punishment itself, such as when Joseph's brothers presume that "we are being punished [*asheimim*] for[3] [what we did to] our brother"

[1] A methodological note: this essay will attempt to adhere as closely as possible to understanding the laws of the *asham* sacrifices according to rabbinic tradition and Halakhah, even though biblical commentators often interpret the verses' details differently (such as Ibn Ezra to Vayikra 5:22).

[2] Although there are significant variations of the correct text and reading of *Targum Onkelos* to Vayikra 5:19 specifically, the implication is clear (there and in many other instances) that the word *asham* is understood as guilt. See R. Posen, *Parshegen Vayikra* p. 94-95.

[3] Ramban's reading of this verse differs from the traditional *Targum*, which renders *asheimim* as "guilty," but perhaps has the advantage that it allows for a more conventional use of the preposition *al*.

(Bereishit 42:21), when they are treated harshly by the Egyptian viceroy.

Armed with this insight, Ramban is able to better explain the difference between *asham* and *hatat*: while both are indirectly responses to sinfulness, the *hatat,* which Ramban here explains as referring to "straying," is brought for an infinitely milder offense than one for which the sinner forfeits his very right to exist. Ramban therefore concludes that the sins incurring the *asham* must be especially serious. To support this thesis he notes that, unlike the *hatat,* the *asham* sacrifice is to be offered by one who commits these sins intentionally, not only inadvertently. Ramban acknowledges that this is not true regarding the *asham* for sacrilege, which is only brought for an inadvertent misuse of sanctified property, but the severity of even unintentional sacrilege—which bespeaks a cavalier attitude towards God's sanctuary—is readily understandable.

As for the *asham taluy*, the sacrifice for someone unsure if he or she has committed a violation requiring a *hatat*, Ramban proposes that the severity of the sacrifice is meant to be a countermeasure to the flippancy with which the offender is likely to treat a sin he or she only possibly committed. (This idea will be analyzed more closely below, as it may be particularly instructive in understanding the concept of *asham* in general.) Ramban grants that the *asham* brought as part of the *metzora*'s purification is indeed anomalous, and is not a sacrifice for any sin, but rather relates more directly to the meaning of the word *asham*: the afflicted *metzora* is himself emerging from an existence of desolation.

While Ramban does not want to see the *asham* as a more severe form of the *hatat*, there are some commentators who do appear to propose such a view. Thus, R. Joseph Bekhor Shor and other Tosafists (such as the *Hadar Zekeinim, Moshav Zekeinim*, and *Hizkuni*) stress the severity of the sin necessitating an *asham gezeilah* by noting that Halakhah requires a *korban asham* only for someone who not only denied a debt owed to a fellow man, but also swore falsely, compounding the egregiousness of his thievery. This position, too, will have to account for the counterintuitive fact that a doubtful sin is dealt with more seriously than a known, definitive one.

Whether we assume that the *asham* is a "guilt-offering," or that it is in recognition of the punishment due to the sinner, or that it is on a continuum with the *hatat* but of greater severity, several questions remain. Ramban saw the fact that the *asham* is offered for an intentional as well as unintentional transgression as a sign of the gravity of those sins, but why couldn't the Torah have simply required a different sacrifice for sinning unintentionally, instead of lumping those circumstances together? More crucially, all of these interpretations further beg the question: why do these specific sins elicit this particular sacrifice? Is the *nazir* who inadvertently defiles himself more 'deserving of annihilation' (to use Ramban's explanation) that one who accidentally ate on Yom Kippur?

An entirely different approach, which has gained wide acceptance in academic scholarship, is offered by Jacob Milgrom.[4] Although Milgrom's assumptions and theological framework are surely anathema to the religious reader of Tanakh, his extensive scholarship on the book of Vayikra especially can often help one better appreciate the logic and integrity underlying the sacrificial system and its myriad details. In an analysis that spans almost a hundred pages, Milgrom argues that the *korban asham* should not be thought of as primarily relating to guilt, sin, or the latter's associated consequences, but rather as compensation or reparations. His view is based primarily on his translation of Bamidbar 5:7-8.[5] There, a person guilty of having withheld his fellow's property is obligated to return it along with a fifth of its value and, in those two verses, the principle stolen property is referred to four times as the *asham*. Milgrom recognizes that many, if not most, of the other biblical instances of this term do connote some form of guilt, but this guilt is meant to refer to the feeling that one owes recompense to God; the word can mean "guilt," but only by association.

For Milgrom, the paradigmatic instance of the *asham* sacrifice is the Torah's first case, that of sacrilege. A person who has misused or misappropriated God's property must make amends by offering a ram as reparation. Similarly, one who has misappropriated his fellow's property can make good by returning it and the additional fifth as penalty, but the offense towards God requires an accompanying *asham* sacrifice.

Milgrom's connections between the concept of reparations and the remaining instances necessitating an *asham* are unfortunately much looser, and depend upon returning to the concept of guilt: a person plagued by the religious guilt of having potentially, but unknowingly, violated the law is offered a way to repair this wrong. A man who lays with a bondswoman has not committed adultery; he has offended God alone, and so must bring an offering of restitution. Although Milgrom's arguments regarding the *asham* for sacrilege and stealing are somewhat convincing, his approach seems to suffer from the same question-begging as the earlier approaches. Even if we are to grant the *asham* as being a reparation-offering, why should these six instances be singled out from the many other sins that would be "offensive to God," so to speak?

Building off a comment of R. Pinhas Horowitz,[6] I would like to offer a possible explanation for the different types of *asham* sacrifices based on a combination of the above views.[7] Milgrom's observation that the *asham* is related to reparations appears to me to be fundamentally correct, although the *asham* is surely not a "reparation-offering" in that it is meant to be a compensation itself, but rather is the offering that *accompanies* an act of reparation or its equivalent.[8] Again, the archetypal *asham* is its introductory example: the *asham meilah,* which (according to Halakhah)[9] is offered as

[4] Jacob Milgrom, *Anchor Bible Series: Leviticus 1-16 With New Translation and Commentary*, New York, Doubleday: 1991, p. 292-378 (also see p. 466ff among other instances).

[5] Vayikra 5:6 may also be referring to repayment as "*asham,*" but it is more ambiguous.

[6] *Panim Yafot* to Vayikra 5:2.

[7] The view presented here is somewhat similar to analysis of R. David Zvi Hoffman, *Sefer Vayikra* vol. 1 (Mosad ha-Rav Kook: Jerusalem, 1976) pp. 150-152. R. Hoffman more closely associates the *asham* with repairing the relationship with God, and believes that its purification aspect is secondary to its use as a reparative sacrifice, while the *hatat* comes primarily for a purification, and the atonement is secondary.

[8] This modification of Milgrom's view was recently offered by John Nolland, "Does the Cultic *Asham* Make Reparation to God?" *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 92 (2015) , 87-110. However, Nolland is almost exclusively interested in the *ashamot* brought for sacrilege and thievery.

[9] As opposed to the position (quoted but disputed by Milgrom and R. David Zvi Hoffman) that interprets the laws of the *asham meilah* as necessitating a ram

accompanying the fine that the sinner must pay to the sanctuary equal to the value of the property misused plus one fifth. The same is true for the *asham gezeilah*, which is always offered in combination with a restitution of the stolen object (even if the object's owner dies without heirs, as in Bamidbar 5:8). A similar principle, though perhaps more metaphorical, may be at work regarding the *asham* offered by the *nazir*. Like the sinner who will be making financial amends for his thievery or sacrilege, the *nazir* too will be repaying his debt of *nezirut* by restarting the time period that he had originally pledged.

Looking at these three cases, the *asham* sacrifice appears to be required precisely in circumstances in which a sinner might feel that there should be no animal sacrifice at all, because the wrong has been (or will be) corrected, and the damage repaired. From there, it is only a small jump to see the *asham metzora* in the same light. The physical mark afflicating the *metzora* in question is long gone. He has even already brought his birds, shaved and washed, and is presumably nothing more than a "*mehusar kapparah"* (lacking atonement) awaiting his purification offerings (like a woman after childbirth or a person who experiences an impure emission).[10]

Yet, in addition to the *hatat* for purification, the *metzora* is required to bring an *asham* as well. Several commentators apply a similar reasoning to the other two instances obligating an *asham*: one is likely to think that a case of doubtful sin requires no repentance (see below), or that there is nothing wrong with lying with a bondswoman, who is naturally promiscuous (or at least treated as such).[11] Each of these cases, to varying degrees, seem to be instances which would justify one in thinking that no sacrifice (or any additional action) would be required.

Indeed, if restitution is being made, why should there be a need for an additional sacrifice? In explaining the theory behind the *asham* for stolen property, the *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* writes that the *asham* exists as a conceptual deterrent. Lest one think that he can freely steal by denying his neighbor's money and be forgiven upon its return, the Torah educates us that stealing itself is sinful by requiring a sacrifice for such a case. However, if we incorporate the traditional understanding of *asham* as "guilt," a different explanation emerges: the *asham* is brought in recognition that repentance demands more than restitution. Instead, it demands that the sinner address something deeper within himself, a personal guilt beyond the damage done to another party. Repayment or reparations is not sufficient for repentance.

The message of the *asham* appears to be that there are instances in which a person retains some "guilt," but not all who must offer an *asham* are "guilty" of conventional wrongdoing. A *nazir* defiled through no fault of his own is nevertheless required to bring an *asham.* This can be explained as an acknowledgement that even though the *nazir* himself may be morally guiltless, he cannot simply restart his term as if nothing had gone wrong. Perhaps a more encompassing translation of *asham* is not "guilt," but "stain," as if to say that a certain defilement remains to be cleansed for a person to start anew. Similarly, a *metzora* has spent his days of impurity banished from the city (unlike any other impure person), and he cannot so easily be reintroduced to his previous life without an additional sacrificial reckoning.[12]

Out of the six instances of *korban asham*, the most difficult to incorporate into this framework, is that of the man who sleeps with the betrothed bondswoman, though it may be noted that the case in and of itself (according to its rabbinic interpretation) is vexing and somewhat paradoxical.[13] Some of the unique laws governing this case imply that the *asham* is not brought as an atonement for any sin, but for the man having defiled himself in this particular manner.

For example, a man is only obligated to bring this sacrifice in an instance in which the woman sinned intentionally and is punished with lashes—but he himself brings the sacrifice whether he sinned knowingly or not (*Keritut* 11a). A person who has intercourse with a single bondswoman multiple times in multiple lapses of knowledge is obligated in only a single sacrifice, a law unique to this case (*ibid.* 9a). Additionally, this is the only instance of illicit relations whose punishment is incurred only if intercourse is completed (*ibid.* 10b). Taken together, it is possible that the *asham* sacrifice obligated here is not due to the violation of a transgression,[14] but rather to impress upon the man that, although he may have no damage to repay,[15] he has still defiled himself in a manner requiring repentance.

Among the *asham* sacrifices, it is the logic behind the *asham taluy* that has probably received the most attention in Jewish literature. Many[16] have interpreted the seriousness with which the Torah treats the situation of possible sin as a deterrent, intended to ensure that we not permit ourselves to potentially sin, similar to how the *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* understands the *asham gezeilah* as referenced above. Rabbeinu Yonah of Geroni[17] is quoted as saying that a doubtful sin is even more severe than a sin of which one is certain, because when certain that he has sinned, one will feel the resulting guilt and worry, which is integral to repentance. Neither explanation fits very well with the theory proposed here that the *asham* exists to cleanse a person who is otherwise making amends, and we may be forced to admit that a different concept underlies this particular *asham* than the others.[18]

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that is equal in value to the sanctified property which the sinner has misappropriated.

[10] See Vayikra 12:6-8, 15:14-15, and 15:29-30.

[11] See Ramban to Vayikra 19:20 and *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* no. 129.

[12] Additional commentators who attempt to uncover a theme unifying all the instance of the *korban asham* include R. Avraham Yitzhak Kook, *Olat Reayah* pp. 173-174, who sees the *asham* as a response to specific forms of deviance, and Prof. Yonatan Grossman's series on korban asham, who connects all the instances of *asham* to forms of stealing from God. A similar, but not identical approach is taken by Rabbi Eitan Meir.

[13] See *She'eilot u-Teshuvot R. Akiva Eiger*, no. 141, 171.

[14] It is not entirely clear what sin the man would have violated in the first place. Rambam (*Hil. Issurei Biah* 12:11) implies that it is a violation of a positive command, and the rabbis would have him lashed.

[15] Biblically, intercourse would only be considered as "damaging" to a virgin, and the *asham* is only brought in the case of lying with non-virgin bondswoman (*Keritut* 11a).

[16] *Sheiltot* of *Rav Ahai Gaon*, no. 68, and R. Yosef Bechor Shor to Vayikra 5:17, among others.

[17] *Talmidei Rabbeinu Yonah* to *Rif, Berakhot* 1b. A similar comment is made by Rabbeinu Bahayei to Vayikra 5:17. This sentiment has made it into the laws of Rosh Hashanah; see *Rama, Orah Hayyim* 603:1.

[18] It is worth noting that Rambam, in his listing of the commandments, counts the *asham taluy* as a separate *mitzvah* from the other cases which necessitate an *asham* (*Sefer ha-Mitzvot, Aseh* 70-71).

Ramban, however, sees the severity of the *asham taluy* as being specifically related to the punishment one would incur for having transgressed God's laws—if a transgression did occur. Because one who is unsure whether or not he has sinned is likely to be lax in bringing a sacrifice for that sin, the Torah obligates such a person to offer an *asham*, the "deserving-of-annihilation offering" (in Ramban's translation), a brutal reminder of precisely what is at stake. Such an interpretation more closely adheres with how we have been understanding the concept of *asham*: the sacrifice is not brought as an atonement for a particularly grievous sin, but rather is meant to inculcate the message that sin corrupts and stains, leaving it marked for destruction.

A discussion in the Talmud (*Keritut* 25a-26a) regarding the atonement effected by the *korban asham* may also shed some light on its function. The Mishnah records a dispute concerning the voluntary offering of an *asham taluy*—although R. Eliezer allows anyone who wishes to offer such a sacrifice, the "rabbis"[19] holds that one may only offer the *asham talui* if he genuinely knows himself to be in a state of doubt regarding his guilt. Several commentators appear to emphasizethe personal worry and guilty feeling that is associated with the "guilt offering," but if we adopt the Tannaic consensus[20] that the *korban asham* is only obligated in objective cases, it seems more likely that the *asham* has nothing to do with the potential sinner's psychological state, but rather the actual state of being guilty of sin.

The Talmud's ensuing discussion is perhaps more closely aligned with Ramban's thesis than that of R. Yonah: the continuation of the Mishnah states that, although anyone obligated in bringing a sacrifice is still obligated to do so after Yom Kippur has passed, an *asham talui* does not need to be brought for a 'possible sin' which was committed before (or even on the day of) Yom Kippur. This law is somewhat perplexing: if a person was unsure if he had accidentally eaten *heilev*, forbidden animal fat, and sacrificed a *korban asham,* but later discovered that he indeed ate what was forbidden, he must then sacrifice a *hatat*, even if Yom Kippur had passed. How, then, could Yom Kippur help someone who is still unsure if he is obligated in a *hatat*? If Rabbeinu Yonah is correct in thinking that the sinner-in-doubt is especially in need of repentance because he will not experience the worry and anguish appropriate for repentance, affording such a person this leniency seems preposterous; he is precisely the kind of sinner who is least likely to be inspired by Yom Kippur, and yet Halakhah acknowledges him as the only one who is no longer obligated in his sacrificial atonement.

This Yom Kippur dispensation that is unique to the *korban asham* appears to be best explained by recognizing that, although it is related to sin, the *asham* sacrifice in general is related more closely to the metaphysical *effect* that sin has on a person. Commenting on that Mishnah, the ensuing talmudic dialogue suggests that the *asham* exists to protect the Israelite from potential punishment he might suffer, because "the Torah takes pity on the bodies of Israel."[21]

This coheres nicely with Ramban's view, that the *asham* is so named as a reminder that sins—even inadvertent, unknown ones—have drastic consequences if not treated by the appropriate sacrifice. The *asham taluy*, then, like the *asham* brought by one who is returning his fellow's unlawfully withheld object or making reparations for sacrilege, is focused primarily not on the act of repentance itself or its psychology, but on protecting the sinner from the "stain" on his person.

In contemporary politics, "reparations" has taken on a very specific connotation wherein certain national bodies give payments to historically victimized communities.[22] There are several instances of governments paying out reparations in recent history: Germany has paid millions of dollars to the State of Israel and victims of Nazi atrocities,[23] and Ronald Reagan signed a law providing a sum of money to citizens who were forced into Japanese internment camps during World War II. In the United States, political candidates are increasingly speaking of "reparations" for one of the country's most serious historic wrongs: the multi-generational enslavement of Africans and their American descendants. This specific example has a long history, even if it enters the news only by mention of recent presidential candidates.

Regardless of how this debate plays out (and I personally have no opinion on the matter), it is worth noting that the concept hinges on a certain innovation regarding the term "reparation:" the monies paid are not meant to be compensation for monies owed, but a symbolic act of apology. Like the concept of a *korban asham*, the offer in question is separate from any legal restitution or monetary loss incurred by the victim; it is instead an attempt to sacrifice something in acknowledgement that a wrong has been done which continues to stain the national spirit.

A recent convert to the cause of American slavery reparations, New York Times columnist Arthur Brooks, has written that he was convinced by Ta Nehisi-Coates' argument in favor of reparations because of the need to reckon with the guilt-stain which remains in the national soil (an assuredly biblical idea, inspired by a sentence in Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address). As Nahisi-Coates describes:

> What I'm talking about is more than recompense for past injustices—more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or a reluctant bribe. What I'm talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal.

Although I am not necessarily advocating such a proposal in the United States, the conceptual transition from monetary reimbursement to using such monies as a physical expression of the

[19] While this generally connotes the majority or accepted opinion in the Mishnah, this instance is not so clear. See R. Elhanan Samet, *Iyyunim be-Parashat ha-Shavua*, "*Parashat Vayikra: Bein Korbanot Nedava le-Korbenot Hovah*," available online at daat.ac.il.

[20] As does Rambam, *Hil. Shegagot* 8:1 and *Hil. Maaseh ha-Korbanot* 14:8. However, R. David Zvi Hoffman (*ibid.* p. 149) notes that the author of the *Arba'ah Turim* disagrees, and the Halakhah should be considered as having been decided in favor of R. Eliezer, who allows for voluntary *asham* sacrifices.

[21] While one might argue that this suggestion is offered by the Talmud only to explain Rabbi Eliezer's view, this view of the *asham*'s sacrificial function appears to be shared by the Talmud in *Yoma* 85b. See also *Zevahim* 10b and the comment of *Tosafot* there, s.v. *Mah le-haTzad*.

[22] For a nice set of examples and a clear, concise presentation of the issues of national reparations, see Michael Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), p. 288ff.

[23] See Ronald Zweig, *German Reparations and the Jewish World: A History of the Claims Conference* (Psychology Press: London, 2004).

"reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal" is deeply tied to *korban asham*: even where no living person can be held personally liable for this and related historic crimes,[24] the nation is still burdened by its stain.

In a sense, the *korban asham* accomplishes what many commentators see as the reasoning behind the entire sacrificial system: sometimes, words do not suffice.[25] Returning to God after sin, or even a *metzora*'s return to purity after having been shunned, cannot be accomplished merely with a thought and word. Israel today has no temple and has not offered sacrifices in millenia, and so these rituals seem foreign to us. Especially as we read and study the book of Vayikra, we might remember that the sacrifices truly do fill an aching religious need. In a time when it can seem so difficult to recognize God as a real, material presence in our lives, and mere words fail to move us, the visceral, even carnal rituals of slaughtering and burning an animal sometimes seem deeply needed.

Rahab, Jeremiah, and the Story of Purim

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The sages were well known for their ability to encode hidden messages in seemingly innocuous statements. A prime example appears in *Megillah* 14b. In the middle of a discussion of the book of Esther, the Talmud states:

> Eight prophets of priestly origin were descendants of Rahab the harlot: Neriah, Barukh, Seraiah, Mahseiah, Jeremiah, Hilkiah, Hanamel, and Shallum.

Three sets of questions immediately arise from this statement. First, what, if anything, is the common denominator among these eight prophets? Were they all listed just because they appear to belong to the same family? What is their relation to Rahab, and how is that relevant to their prophecies? Second, why is this statement important at all? It seems to be a completely trivial assertion devoid of any meaning or message. Why do we need to know that this family of prophets shares a common ancestry emanating from Rahab? What message are the Sages trying to convey?

Third, what is the connection between this statement and its context in Tractate Megillah, which explores Purim and the book of Esther?

Answering these questions uncovers a surprising but profound message that goes to the very heart of the Purim story.

One common denominator between all of these eight prophets is that they appear in the book of Jeremiah. Looking at the themes of Jeremiah as a whole, one of the main messages that the prophet tries to convey is not to give up hope. Even in extremely difficult and trying times, we must place our complete trust and hope in God. God is Israel's refuge and he will not forsake us.

The theme of not giving up hope clearly reverberates throughout Jeremiah. The foremost example is the famous prophecy in Jeremiah 17:

> Blessed is he who trusts in the Lord, Whose trust is the Lord alone.
>
> O Hope of Israel! O Lord! All who forsake You shall be put to shame, Those in the land who turn from You Shall be doomed men, For they have forsaken the Lord, The Fount of living waters. Heal me, O Lord, and let me be healed; Save me, and let me be saved; For You are my glory. See, they say to me: "Where is the prediction of the Lord? Let it come to pass!" But I have not evaded Being a shepherd in your service, Nor have I longed for the fatal day. You know the utterances of my lips, They were ever before You. Do not be a cause of dismay to me; You are my refuge in a day of calamity. (17:7; 13-17)

Another classic example appears in Jeremiah 31:

> And there is hope for your future—declares the LORD: Your children shall return to their country. (31:16)

Many of our eight prophets are also mentioned in the context of hope. One is Seraiah, who is charged by Jeremiah to relate his prophecy (regarding the ultimate downfall of Babylon) to the Jews as they are exiled:

> The instructions that the prophet Jeremiah gave to Seraiah son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, when the latter went with King Zedekiah of Judah to Babylonia, in the fourth year of [Zedekiah's] reign. Seraiah was quartermaster. Jeremiah wrote down in one scroll all the disaster that would come upon Babylon, all these things that are written concerning Babylon. And Jeremiah said to Seraiah, "When you get to Babylon, see that you read out all these words. And say, 'O Lord, You Yourself have declared concerning this place that it shall be cut off, without inhabitant, man or beast; that it shall be a desolation for all time.' And when you finish reading this scroll, tie a stone to it and hurl it into the Euphrates." (Jeremiah 51:59-63)

This is not the only time in the book of Jeremiah where we find a daring prophecy sealed and hidden away to resurface sometime in the future. The most striking example is known as the prophecy of the Court of the Guard (Jeremiah 32). Here Jeremiah is commanded to perform the symbolic act of purchasing a plot of land from his cousin Hanamel the son of Shallum, despite the fact the city is about to be conquered by the Chaldeans. The whole episode is meant as a

[24] Obviously, the sins of the majority American people against their Black American neighbors are not limited to slavery, and several civil rights leaders (such as Bryan Stevenson) emphasize more recent "sins," not slavery, that should be forefront in considerations for reparations.

[25] See especially *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*, no. 95.

public demonstration of trust and hope in God's promise. As part of the act Jeremiah is commanded to place the deed of purchase in the hands of Barukh for safeguarding:

> I took the deed of purchase, the sealed text and the open one according to rule and law, and gave the deed to Barukh son of Neriah son of Mahseiah in the presence of my kinsman Hanamel, of the witnesses who were named in the deed, and all the Judeans who were sitting in the prison compound. In their presence I charged Barukh as follows: Thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: "Take these documents, this deed of purchase, the sealed text and the open one, and put them into an earthen jar, so that they may last a long time." (Jeremiah 32: 11-14)

Seven out of eight of the prophets mentioned (all except Jeremiah's father Hilkiah) appear by name in these two stories alone. There is clearly a theme of patience and perseverance through difficult times, and safeguarding a prophesy of hope for a distant, better future.

Despite the fact that we do not know anything about the content of the prophecies of Hilkiah, Mahseiah, and Neriah,we can learn much about their character just by looking at their names. Names signify essence, and all three of these names conform to the same theme of trust and hope in God:

- Hilkiah – God is my portion. This connects directly to the theme as clearly expressed in the words of Jeremiah himself, whom *Hazal* credit with authorship of Eikhah:

  > But this do I call to mind, Therefore I have hope.
  >
  > "The Lord is my portion," I say with full heart; Therefore will I hope in Him. The Lord is good to those who trust in Him, To the one who seeks Him; It is good to wait patiently Till rescue comes from the Lord.
  >
  > Let him sit alone and be patient, When He has laid it upon him. Let him put his mouth to the dust— There may yet be hope. (Lamentations 3:21, 24-6, 28-9)

- Mahseiah – God is my refuge. In many of the cases where hope and trust in God is mentioned, we also find the theme of God being a source of refuge. This was mentioned above (Jeremiah 17:17) and appears often in Psalms. Take, among others, Psalms 91 (verses 2 and 9), as well as Psalms 18 verses 3 and 31:

  > I will say of the Lord, my refuge and stronghold, my God, in whom I trust.
  >
  > Because you took the Lord—my refuge, the Most High—as your haven.
  >
  > O LORD, my crag, my fortress, my rescuer, my God, my rock in whom I seek refuge, my shield, my mighty champion, my haven.
  >
  > The way of God is perfect; the word of the LORD is pure; He is a shield to all who seek refuge in Him.

- Neriah – God is my candle - the one who provides light in dark times. This expression also appears in Psalms 18 referring to one who puts their trust in God:

  > For Thou dost light my lamp; the Lord my God doth lighten my darkness. (18:29)

Even the name Jeremiah evokes images of hope and trust in God. The literal meaning of the name Jeremiah is "God will lift me up." This calls to mind the first verse in Hannah's prayer of thanks:

> And Hannah prayed: My heart exults in the Lord; I have triumphed [*ramah karni*] through the Lord. I gloat over my enemies; I rejoice in Your deliverance. (I Samuel 2:1)

Additionally, it echoes verses of trust and hope from Psalms:

> From the end of the earth I call to You; when my heart is faint, You lead me to a rock that is high above me [*yarum*]. For You have been my refuge, a tower of strength against the enemy. (61:3-4)

Finally, as mentioned above the name Barukh also comes up in these contexts. This name, which means "blessed," brings to mind the verse, "Blessed is he who trusts in the Lord, Whose trust is the Lord alone."

The combination of all three meanings, lifting up-blessing–protecting, also appears in the very same chapter of Psalms mentioned above.

> The Lord lives! Blessed is my rock! Exalted [*yarum*] be God, my deliverer. (18:50)

All eight prophets thus connect to prophecies relating to the central theme of hope, be it through the direct content of their prophecies (Jeremiah), the active part which they take in the two stories of safeguarded prophecies (Barukh, Seraiah, Hanamel), their names being mentioned in these stories (Neriah, Mahseiah, Shallum), or just through the meaning of their names themselves (Jeremiah, Hilkiah, Neriah, Barukh, Mahseiah).

The final incontrovertible proof that hope is indeed the common denominator comes from the continuation of the very same Gemara in *Megillah* 14b:

> Rabbi Judah says, Huldah the prophetess was also a descendant of Rahab. It says here (in the book of Kings) "the son of Tikvah," and it says there (in the book of Joshua), "thou shalt bind this line

(*tikvah*) of scarlet thread."

From this last sentence it is almost explicit that one of the key words in understanding the connection between the prophets is the word *tikvah* (hope). This keyword also helps us understand why it is that the Talmud traces the origin of these prophets specifically to Rahab. If we look in the story of Rahab one of the striking features that we see is the complete despair i.e. the total absence of all hope, amongst the nations of the land:

> When we heard about it, we lost heart, and no man had any more spirit left because of you; for the Lord your God is the only God in heaven above and on earth below. (Joshua 2:11)

Rahab was saved from this state of despair by turning to help the nation of God. Rahab learned that the source of all hope can only be found in God, and thus merited to bring forth a chain of prophets who would expound this virtue of hope and trust in God.

It is thus clear that we have found a common denominator, connecting these eight prophets to one another, to Huldah, and even to Rahab their ancestress. But why is this passage inserted in the Talmud in the middle of a discussion regarding the story of Esther? What is the connection between this and the story of Purim?

There is one more instance where the prophet Jeremiah mentions hope: the very prophecy that is the backdrop to our story at the outset of Megillat Esther:

> For thus said the Lord: When Babylon's seventy years are over, I will take note of you, and I will fulfill to you My promise of favor—to bring you back to this place. (Jeremiah 29: 10)

This is the prophecy that had King Achashverosh worried (*Megillah* 11b). According to the sages, the very reason behind his party was his calculation that the seventy years had expired, but later on he was concerned about the lack of any indication of its immanent fulfillment.

The centrality of this prophecy of Jeremiah and its connection to Mordekhai is again underscored by yet another statement a few lines later, in the continuation of the same discussion in the Gemara:

> Barukh the son of Neriah, Seraiah the son of Mahseiah, Daniel, Mordekhai, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malakhi all prophesied during the second year of Darius.(*Megillah* 15a)

What is so significant about the "second year of Darius?" Why is it significant that so many prophets were around at the time? Can it be merely of historical interest? And aren't many of these prophets already past their primes? After all, it is long after the previous stories relating to Barukh and Seraiah, and even some years after the conclusion of the story of the *Megillah*.

This "second year of Darius" is precisely the seventieth year in which Jeremiah's original prophecy is to come to complete fulfillment. It is then that the Jews are to resume the building of the Temple as urged by Haggai, Zechariah, and Malakhi. It is therefore extremely significant that Barukh, Seraiah, and Mordekhai are tied to this specific year as well, because, like Jeremiah, they too always had this exact endgame in mind in all of their prophecies, and their hope and trust in the Temples ultimate rebuilding was the impetus behind many of their actions.

Thirteen years earlier, while Ahashveirosh is out celebrating the apparent abandonment of Israel based on his calculation of the seventy years, Mordekhai knows the next verse in the original prophecy which relates to our theme of hope:

> For I am mindful of the plans I have made concerning you—declares the Lord—plans for your welfare, not for disaster, to give you a hopeful future. (Jeremiah 29:11)

In other words, despite whatever you (Israel) may think and the appearance that I (God) am not concerned about your plight, in truth you must never lose hope.

This is the secret to Mordekhai's strength. It is not in vain that he sits every day in front of the gates of the palace, ostensibly doing nothing. He knows for certain that the moment will come when he will be called to rise to action, and he is ready. Mordekhai's royal blue, about which we sing in *Shoshanat Ya'akov*, is the very knowledge that:

"You [God] have been their eternal salvation, their hope in every generation."

It is now clear what the Sages were trying to convey in the simple statement of the Gemara. There are in fact not one but two profound applications conveyed and hidden within.

The first relates to the immediate context of the Gemara. On the previous page (*Megillah* 14a), the Gemara quoted a source counting forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses. When clarifying the criteria necessary to be included in this list, the Gemara implies that only prophets whose prophecies are timeless and relevant for future generations can be counted. Why then were many of the above-mentioned prophets counted (Neriah, Barukh, Seraiah, Mahseiah, and even Huldah), despite the fact that we do not have any record of any prophecy from them which is still relevant to our own times?

The answer to this question is that these eight prophets, together with Huldah, imparted a legacy of hope. Since this legacy is indeed timeless, many of them are counted among the forty-eight plus seven prophets.

The second application of our Gemara relates to the Purim story. The lesson of Purim is to hold on and never lose hope. No matter where we are and what our circumstances indicate, we must, like Mordekhai, know for certain that "relief and salvation will arise for the Jews." It may come "from another place," and it may come in a long time; we may not even merit to see it with our own eyes. Nevertheless, eventually, come it will.

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