

THE SHEPHERD'S VEIL

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The heat is blistering, but he is no stranger to the flame. As he brings down the hammer, it occurs to him exactly how good it feels to be working with his hands again. The task will not be an easy one. With every swing, the untamed metal curves only slightly closer to the shape he envisions. Still, he plans to see the job through, to hide the wonder that now garbs his face. He recalls how he was once seduced by a similar marvel of light. Wonders, he has found, need observers—people with lives so crushingly bland as to make every little miracle glorious. He was like that, once, long ago. Without pausing his work, he allows himself to remember.

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He had been tending to the flock, but a single lamb had run away and gotten itself lost. He had followed after it, refusing to give up on even a single sheep.

Naive as he was, it is no surprise that he turned to stare at the miracle that appeared before him: a bush, ablaze in the desert, and yet never consumed by its own fire. The bush had found an observer, and it called out.

“Moses, Moses!” it tempted him.

“Here I am!” he answered, reaching out to feel the fire, to test its heat.

“Come no closer!” the bush commanded. “A miracle to observe is not a miracle to feel. I am no mere bush, but your God, and the God of your forefathers, and the God of your people. I have heard their suffering, and so now I am sending you to lead them. Free them from Pharaoh and lead them to the Promised Land. The way will be hard, but I will grant you victory over those who will oppose you. You will be My speaker, My vessel, My chosen, and the greatest among My people for now and for all time to come.”

Moses covered his face, although back then it was himself whom he considered unworthy. “You must

want someone else. I am unremarkable.”

“Then I will give you wonders of your own: staff into snake, health into affliction, and water into blood.”

“But why me? I can hardly even speak.”

“I’ll send your brother; he will speak for you.”

“Even still, I don’t even know Your name.”

At this, the bush flared up, as if in anger. “You want to know My name? You want a word with which to pin down the divine? Know this: I will be what I will be. That is enough, for now.”

“For now?”

“One day, Moses, you will know My names, you will know them all, you will know Me better than any mortal ever has or ever will. And on that day, you will regret this conversation. But now, enough delay. Go!”

* * *

And so began Moses’s quest, all those years ago. Now, as he hammers his metal into shape to cover his face once more, he notices how little he had appreciated the three answers he had received, the three gifts he had been given—miracles to dazzle and not destroy; Aaron, a born orator when given something to say; and his ignorance of the holy names, the inability to articulate the divine into what he wished. In time, all of these gifts would be

lost, or at least superseded; he knows he will miss this last one the most. To be promised something only to be forbidden from using it can be a curse. Though it has yet to happen, he is the greatest prophet who ever lived. Past, present, and future have become one to him, and so he calls up the end of his journey as easily as he had its beginning.

* * *

“God, I have only begun to see Your wonders,” Moses will say. “Let me cross the Jordan, walk the land. God, oh God, mighty, merciful, favoring, slow to—”

“Enough, Moses, enough.” God will respond. “If I let you continue, I’ll be compelled by what you ask. That simply can’t happen. Don’t bring this up again. You will see the land, but only Joshua may enter it, may conquer it. I’m sorry, Moses, but I taught you long ago: a miracle to observe is not a miracle to feel.”

“Why? You keep telling me I can’t, but You won’t tell me why! All these years, all these trials, haven’t I served You faithfully? One small mistake, and now You refuse me both entrance and explanation?”

“You have answered your own question, Moses. You made a mistake. You hit the rock I explicitly told you to speak to. You disobeyed Me. That’s why.”

“I don’t believe You, not fully. That can’t be it. You know, Joshua has his own theory. He believes it was a test: You wanted to see if I could lead by

convincing the people to act on their own. When I hit the rock, You decided I was only capable of commanding from afar, that I had become distant from the people, too close to the divine, incapable of leading from amongst them.”

“He’s not far off. You have taught him well, you know. You should take comfort in that. He deserves a chance at leading the people, too.”

“Joshua has more than earned his succession. That’s not the question here. It’s a matter of when. Let me finish the job You gave me when I was first called. Didn’t You Yourself tell me I would free them and deliver them?”

“You have freed. Joshua will deliver.”

“It’s a cruel thing, You know: to force a man to watch his mantle slip from him, in his lifetime. What You did in the end to Aaron—he deserved better than that.”

“And what is it that I did to him?”

“You made him climb that mountain in front of everyone. Once we were on top, You made me strip him of the priesthood, everything he had worked for, so he could watch me hand it to Eleazar before he died. That’s not a fit way to treat a human being.”

At this, God seemed to laugh. “Moses, that was no punishment. While he still lived, he saw his son continue his responsibilities. He was glad to see a continuation of his legacy. I don’t see why you refuse

to feel the same way.”

“Legacy? Forty years of herding stubborn and entitled people through a patch of sand is hardly an inheritance. All the times I stood up for them—yet now it’s my turn, and none of them will speak for me.”

“They’ll mourn you, Moses. They’ll remember you, your wonders, your law. Does that bring you no comfort?”

“Perhaps it would have, once, but not anymore,” Moses will say. “I suppose I’m ready. Do what You must.”

Hearing these words, God will utter some secret word, and beyond that even Moses cannot see.

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Moses contemplates how bitter his end will be, and he is not quite surprised. He has and will grow so bitter and aloof, features that stare up at him from the mask he now molds. It was not always this way. He recalls a time of joy and exuberance, when he still reveled in the triumphs of his people. But that all changed, with just one battle. And so, closing his eyes, he lets himself remember once again.

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“Moses, we did it!” Joshua exclaimed. “Did you see me out there, leading the people? Destroying Amalek?”

“I saw you,” Moses said bitterly. “But this was no victory. We let them get away. We were supposed to wipe them out entirely.”

“We will. This time, they got the jump on us. They attacked us from the back and hit the weakest first. When it’s us who has the drop on them, they won’t stand a chance.”

“Don’t you see? That’s exactly it! They hit us where it hurt. They showed the world that even after the Exodus, we can still be killed. They lost, but the damage they did is irreversible. Now, every nation we meet will think they have a chance against us. This was only the beginning.”

“The way was always going to be hard, Moses. But we have God on our side. In the end, we will prevail.”

“You don’t understand! We were meant to be immortal, untouchable, and divine! They saw us as weak, old, and pathetic. They saw us—they saw me—frail, debilitated, useless. I ... I was never supposed to be so old, Joshua.”

For a moment, Joshua was at a loss. “Moses, you... we wouldn’t be anywhere without you. You’ve saved our lives more times than I can count. And now you led us to victory, yet again.”

“No, you led them to victory. I just stood there with my arms up like a doddering fool.”

“You were praying! It was only when your hands were up that we were winning. That was you.”

“All I had to do was hold up my arms, and even that I couldn’t do on my own. My arms were shaking, feeble. I needed Aaron and Hur, and a rock to sit on. Once, I was their infallible leader. Now, I’m just another dead weight for our enemies to prey on.”

“Moses, it’s not weak to rely on those around you occasionally. Remember Jethro? Delegation isn’t all bad.”

“Maybe for you. But I was supposed to be more, to be flawless, the greatest prophet who ever lived. I failed. You couldn’t understand.”

Joshua just stared at Moses, then. “People care about you, Moses. Don’t take that for granted. Keep pushing us away, and eventually we’ll stop coming back.” Receiving no response, Joshua scoffed and walked away.

Moses, busy with self-pity, felt no remorse.

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Recalling Joshua’s words, Moses stops swinging his hammer for a moment. But only a moment. As he brings up his hammer once again, he reminds himself how right he knows he will be. For vindication, he turns in prophecy to the future once more.

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They will decide to replace him. Not all of them, but enough. Korah himself won’t be particularly special. There had always been dissidents; what made them

revolutionaries were the factions that supported them. And this crowd, Moses will know, had been looking for someone to support for some time. They'll feed his ego until he is nothing more than a mouthpiece for their objections, and Moses will be forced to address them.

"Moses!" Korah will accuse, holding out his incense. "You've led these people long enough. When you brought us out of Egypt with all your signs, we believed in you. We trusted you. And yet, since that time, all we have done is wander this desert. We have stumbled from war to war, plague to plague, hardship to hardship. We have been deprived of the necessities and comforts we knew in Egypt. But every time we try to reason with you, you turn around and blame us. You call us unworthy complainers. It seems you cannot or will not take us to the land of milk and honey you promised. Perhaps you once were God's emissary, but clearly you are no longer. It's time for a new leader. Will you give over your power, or will this escalate?"

"Very well," Moses will reply gravely. "You want to know if I still hold God's favor. You want to believe in signs instead of people. I'll show you a new sign, and you can decide what to think of it."

At this, Moses will stretch out his arm, if only to prove he can. The earth itself will respond, opening to swallow Korah and his supporters before they even manage to scream. Their words will be lost in the sand, just as a solitary Egyptian's had been before them. And, while the divine flame subsumes Korah's incense bearers, Moses will address the now

terrified congregation once again.

"This was not your first transgression, nor will it be your last. It does, however, mark the last time I will stand up to God on your behalf. You thought you'd be better off without me interceding between you and the divine and that our wanderings were my fault. Ridiculous as these claims are, I'll tell you the most absurd thing about this mutiny: the notion that my position is an enviable one. That any one of you would be so stupid as to want to lead this rabble, to know God face to face..." Moses shakes his head. "Appreciate your normality. Some of us are not so lucky."

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Moses, considering this future moment, swings with renewed ferocity, though he is not really surprised. He understands the desire to change one's relationship to God. He, too, longs for the mystery of the divine, the nebulosity of heaven in which true glory resides. For him, it is too late. He has heard God's names; he has seen the back of God's head. Ignoring his empathy, he turns to the recent memory of the first time they tried to replace him.

* * *

This time, it had been his fault. He had stayed too long atop the mountain, forgetting how to be among humans. He knew vaguely what they had done; even still, he was surprised by what he saw.

"Aaron!" Moses called out. "What have you done?"

“Please, don’t be angry. I tried to dissuade them, but they demanded a god. I cast their riches into the fire, and this is what came out.”

“They may have demanded a god, but you shouldn’t have given them one. What have they done to you to warrant this evil you brought upon them?”

“Please, you know these people. You know their capacity for wickedness and stubbornness. I tried, really.”

“Yes, I know them. I know they must be controlled—they can’t be trusted on their own. It’s fitting that they make an idol of cattle. Clearly, you did not try hard enough.”

“They need you, Moses. You left, and they were lost. They needed you, I needed you, but you weren’t here.”

“I was bringing them revelation! Don’t shift this blame. This was your mistake, and you’re going to fix it.”

“How?”

“Go, gather the Levites, anyone who didn’t worship this thing, and have them kill anyone who did.”

“Moses, I can’t ... I can’t kill our own.”

“You already have! You need to do this, Aaron. I’m going back up to the mountain.”

“You’re going back?! Moses, we need you to fix this! We need you here! The answer to the people’s problems is with the people, not on an untouchable mountain with some unknowable and wrathful God.”

“That’s exactly where our salvation is. I’m going to go beg for more mercy, and I’m going to solidify the law.”

“Solidify the law?”

“These people need to be controlled. I won’t be around forever, and clearly you’re not up to the task. And because they seem incapable of serving a God without an emissary two feet in front of them, I’ll distill the faith into a solid, unflinching book that will control them forever.”

“Is that really what God wanted, what all this is about? You led us through this wasteland, left us to our sin, all so you could get some tool of enforcement? That’s not the God I know. My God would want us to cherish the law, to study it and live by it, not begrudgingly accept it as a lesser of two evils.”

Just then, Joshua, who had been trailing behind Moses down the mountain, reached them.

“Listen to that shouting!” he observed. “It sounds like there’s a war.”

“No Joshua, there is no war. But, mark my words,

there will be.”

* * *

Now, as Moses crafts his disguise, he finds it almost funny. They will have their metal face for God after all. It is almost finished now, having taken on the shape Moses had in mind. He pauses to consider if he should really go through with this decision. Maybe they all were right: his Master, his brother, and his heir. Maybe the people just need to see his face, to know that he cares, that God cares. He puts down his hammer and stares mournfully at the reflection of his face on the surface of the face he has fabricated. But then he looks to the future a final time, and he reminds himself of the people’s other looming failure.

* * *

They will demand spies to report on the land before the people settle it. And when they become rebellious after what they hear, it will once again be up to Moses to pick up the pieces. Though it will feel familiar and perhaps even vain, he will push these emotions aside to intercede before God against the wrath they will incur.

“Oh God, God of our ancestors, Abraham Isaac, and Jacob—please have mercy on Your people this day, and spare them from Your vengeance.”

“Spare Me the routine, Moses. Don’t you ever tire of this cycle? The sins, the plagues, the penitence, and the mercy? How long will this go on?”

“As long as You let it, I suppose.”

“A fair point. Maybe I should change course, wipe them out, and make a better nation from only you.”

“If You kill them now, the Egyptians will think You failed to deliver them. You’ll let Egypt win.”

“What do I care what the Egyptians think? I have saved the Israelites, shown them wonders, and disciplined them time and time again. Yet they continue to err, to doubt and disobey. It’s as if they despise Me.”

“Aren’t You above that? You promised Your mercy was eternal, and You are not one to break Your word.”

“Don’t forget, I’m all-knowing. I can tell that you agree with everything I’ve said in this exchange, but you continue to defend them. Why?”

Moses will pause. “You’re right. I can’t honestly disagree with Your conclusions. I have felt all the same grievances with the people that You have. But that’s not all I’ve received from You.”

“Oh?”

“God, oh God—mighty, merciful, favoring, slow to anger, abundant in kindness and truth, favorable to thousands—forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, but not pardoning unto the fourth generation—I call on You with the thirteen attributes. Forgive them.”

“Oh, very well. But I still have one condition.”

“And that is?”

“They don’t want to enter the land. So be it. They will continue to wander until this stubborn generation dies out, and a new, more agreeable one replaces them.”

“You mean ... You mean they’ll die out here? They’ll never reach the Promised Land?”

“Exactly.”

“But then... what was the point of it all? The Exodus, the signs, the journey? When You first called me, it was for a two-part process: redemption and deliverance.”

“The process has changed.”

“You knew this would happen! Everything I’ve gone through has been in vain!”

“Not entirely. The people will enter the land, just not these people.”

“My purpose is void. You’re all-knowing, all-powerful! Why did You let this happen?”

“I answered your question long ago, when we first met. I will be what I will be.”

“That’s all? It truly was for nothing, then.”

“So what will you do now?”

“What can I do? I will continue, as I always have. I’m not sure I know why, but I will do what I must.”

* * *

With this foreknowledge, his mind is finally made up. As he brings the still-scorching mask to his face, the metal burns him. He screams, but only briefly: it is not his first encounter with divine fire. The face he has made himself is locked in perpetual repugnance. The eyes are narrow, slanted. The nostrils are flared, and small horns emerge from the forehead. From now on, the people will only see the back of his true head. Satisfied, he begins down the mountain.

At the base, Joshua and Aaron speak in hushed tones. They look up at the figure who descends.

“Moses?” Aaron calls out. “Come talk to us. We’re worried about you.”

“And the people,” Joshua adds, “the ones who have seen your shining face—they’re afraid of you.”

“Good,” replies Moses. “These people need to remember what it is to be afraid.”

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REVELATION DEFERRED BUT NOT DENIED: THE GOLDEN CALF AS A RABBINIC ORIGIN STORY

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The story of the Golden Calf tells of the shattering and subsequent reconstruction of the three-way relationship between God, Moses, and the Jewish people. In the span of two chapters between when Moses is given the Tablets and when he is given a second set of Tablets, God threatens to destroy the Jewish people, but also offers Moses an intense revelatory experience.

The link between the two major threads of the story—God’s evolving relationship with the Jewish people and revelation to Moses—becomes clearer when reading it through the lens of a well-known Talmudic story about the interaction of Moses, God, and Rabbi Akiba (*Menahot* 29b). I suggest, echoing recent scholarly proposals,¹ that this talmudic passage is a retelling of the Moses-God dialogue within the Golden Calf story. This suggestion is largely absent from traditional and scholarly commentaries, but compelling for reasons of both textual consistency and narrative harmony.

The resulting interpretation not only resolves textual difficulties in the story of the Golden Calf, but resolves questions of the purpose and interpretation of the *Menahot* passage by suggesting that God reacts to the Golden Calf by withholding some of his planned revelation to Moses and deferring its transmission until the time Rabbi Akiba and his rabbinic colleagues some millennia later.

The Golden Calf

While the incident of the Golden Calf is spread over several chapters, a short recap of the key verses will contextualize some of the main questions to be addressed.

In short order, God gives Moses the Tablets (Exodus 31:18), but once the people see that Moses is delayed (32:1), they create the Golden Calf (32:4). In response, God wants to destroy the Jewish People (32:10) but Moses convinces God to reconsider (32:11-14) and then destroys the Tablets (32:19). After disposing of the Golden Calf and its instigators (32:20-29), Moses tells the Jewish People that he will return to God to get forgiveness (32:30) and tells God to “erase me from your book” if he doesn’t forgive the Jewish people (32:32). God responds that an angel will lead the people from here on out (32:34, 33:2). Moses removes himself from the Jewish people (33:7) and experiences “face to face” communication with God (33:11), but asks

¹ Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud* (JHU Press, 2010), 182-202.

for still greater knowledge so that he can be reassured (33:12-13). Moses continues to advocate for greater revelation, with God ultimately planning to show him His back, but not his front (33:20, 33:23). Immediately after this, Moses is instructed to create a new set of man-made Tablets (34:1), but continues to plead with Hashem, who then reveals Himself and teaches Moses the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy (34:6-7).

How does the narrative cohere? Particularly, what is the connection between the content of chapters 32 and 34 (where Moses receives two sets of Tablets and the Golden Calf is built and destroyed) and chapter 33, which details Moses's quest for further intimacy with God? The request is out of place, as Moses is asking God for a favor outside of the scope of his main request to advance the cause of the Jewish People (see Ramban on Exodus 33:12).

I suggest that a Talmudic passage in *Menahot* 29b is not only a response to these textual questions, but is, in Rubenstein's words, "a retelling" of these chapters. We turn our attention to Moses's visit to Rabbi Akiba's classroom.

Moses in Rabbi Akiba's classroom

The Talmud (*Menahot* 29b) relates the following story:

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: At the time [lit. hour] that Moses ascended on High, he found the Holy One Blessed is He sitting and fastening crowns to the letters.

He [Moses] said before him [lit. to his face]: "Master of the World, what stays your hand?" He [God] said to him: "There is one man who is destined to exist at the end of many generations, and Akiba the son of Yosef is his name, who will one day expound upon each and every point heaps and heaps of laws." He said before him [lit. to his face]: "Master of the World, show him to me!" He [God] said to him, "Turn around [lit. to your back]!" He [Moses] went and sat at the end of eight rows and he did not know what they were discussing. His strength ebbed. Once they reached a certain matter, his [Akiba's] students said to him "Teacher, from where do you know this?" He responded "It is a law transmitted to Moses at Sinai." His [Moses's] mind was settled. He returned in front of God and said to him [lit. to his face] "Master of the World, You have someone like this, and you give the Torah through me?" He said to him, "Silence. Thus it has arisen in thought before me." He said to him [lit. to his face], "You have showed me his Torah, now show me his reward." He [God] said to him "Turn around [lit. to your back]". He turned around [lit. to his back] and saw that they were weighing his [Akiba's] flesh in the marketplace.

He said to him [lit. to his face]:
“Master of the World! This is his
Torah and this is his reward?” He
[God] said to him: “Silence. Thus it
has arisen in thought before me.”

The story defies easy explanation. Moses walks into Rabbi Akiba’s classroom and does not know what is going on, yet Rabbi Akiba claims that Moses is the source of the teaching! While the narrative seems to be presenting the idea that Rabbi Akiba’s teachings are legitimate, it simultaneously seems to undermine, if not mock, their legitimacy by suggesting that *Halakhah le-Moshe mi-Sinai* (“a law from Moses at Sinai”), which is a frequently used as a trump card in Talmudic debate, taking precedence over [logical or textual considerations](#), is not something actually revealed to Moses. Further, what is the reader to take from the fact that Moses does not understand Rabbi Akiba? How is this action tied to God’s modification of the Torah to include crowns, and what is the significance of the crowns? What do we learn from God’s refusal to explain R. Akiba’s martyrdom?

Approaches to these problems generally break along one of two lines. A broad categorization, if slightly oversimplified, is that contemporary scholars often attempt to identify the ideological message that the

author or editor seeks to communicate with the story. Traditional scholars, on the other hand, generally show more concern with reconciling the story with traditional positions like the supremacy of Mosaic prophecy.

Several modern scholars interpret the passage as tacitly acknowledging a critique of rabbinic interpretation. Gershom Scholem considers this story as “not entirely without tongue in cheek”, as if the authors understood that they are overextending the Rabbinic claim to legitimacy, but nonetheless put it forward to signal the “maturation” of Judaism from revelation as concrete communication to revelation as interpretative act.² Laurence Edwards reads this story as an expression of rabbinic anxiety at the tremendous responsibility inherent in the process of interpretation, with the death of Rabbi Akiba being seen as symbolic of the high price paid for interpretation.³ Likewise, Azzan Yadin-Israel argues that this text is consistent with a broader post-Tannaitic tendency to valorize interpretation over received tradition.⁴ He supports this interpretation by building on Shlomo Naeh’s suggestion that the word for “crowns” in the passage should be translated as “pericopes” (a short section of text), which implies that the passage is explicitly about Rabbi Akiba’s textual interpretative capabilities.⁵ Finally, Daniel Boyarin argues that the

² Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism: And other essays on Jewish Spirituality* (Schocken, 2011), 282-5.

³ Laurence L. Edwards, “Rabbi Akiba’s Crowns: Postmodern Discourse and the Cost of Rabbinic Reading,” *Judaism* 49, no. 4 (2000): 417.

⁴ Azzan Yadin-Israel, “Bavli Menahot 29b and the Diminution of the Prophets,” *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 5, no. 1 (2014): 88-105.

⁵ Shlomo Naeh, “The Script of the Torah in Rabbinic Thought (B): Transcriptions and Thorns,” *Leshonenu* 71 (2010): 89-123.

passage advances an apophatic theology (defined through negation), that “God will not or perhaps even... cannot explain... interpretation of his word or his activities.”⁶

A common theme amongst these interpretations is they imagine the story as a rabbinic acknowledgement of independence and divergence from traditional methods. Yet while Rabbinic Judaism does represent a significant evolution from Temple and Biblical Judaism, there is little explanation about why the Talmud would include a legend explicitly identifying this evolution and undermining its legitimacy. Rubenstein argues that the passage bears hallmarks of editing by the Stammaites, the redactors of the Talmud, who lived close to five centuries after Rabbi Akiba. Stammaites would be well aware that the Talmudic form of argumentation and biblical exegesis would not be recognizable to Temple-era Jews, but why would they seek to prominently canonize a story which conveys a message antithetical to the legitimacy of Rabbi Akiba and the Talmud as a whole?

Revelation to Rabbi Akiba

Traditional commentators approaching the *Menahot* passage are animated by the question of how to square it with Judaism’s basic creed of the primacy of Mosaic prophecy. Rashi (*Menahot* 29b) resolves the problem of Rabbi Akiba’s superiority by positing that Akiba’s teaching would eventually be

received by Moses, but just hadn’t been received yet at the time of Moses’s visit. Moses’s mind was settled “since it was said from his name, even though he did not *yet* receive” what Akiba was covering in his lesson.

While this interpretation narrowly addresses the problem, it undermines most plausible interpretations of the passage as well as the basic consistency of the narrative. Specifically, why would Moses think that Rabbi Akiba was greater than him and more deserving of receiving the Torah if Moses was indeed the ultimate source of Rabbi Akiba’s teaching? After all, Moses is going to eventually learn and become the source of Rabbi Akiba’s teaching, so why would Rabbi Akiba’s teaching impress him so deeply? Further, Rashi’s interpretation seems to rob the passage of much of its rich symbolism: what now is the connection between Rabbi Akiba’s teaching, his martyrdom, and the crowns that God affixes on the Torah?

Maharal (Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, Prague, 16th century) develops a nuanced framework to explain why Rabbi Akiba can understand what Moses cannot but is still not superior. In his work *Hiddushei Aggadot* on *Menahot* 29b, Maharal explains how the nature of Moses’s knowledge differs from Rabbi Akiba’s understanding. In this system, Moses is attuned to understanding God’s word when communicated through one particular mode of communication - the body of the Torah. The crowns, on the other hand, represent

⁶ Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 165-7.

communications that are external to the body of the Torah, and Rabbi Akiba is more attuned to teachings of this nature. In the words of Maharal, when Moses sees that God is affixing crowns to the letters, he recognizes that the crowns are something subtle and beyond his understanding, and presumably all human comprehension as well:

And he says, “Who stays your hand?” as if to say that these subtle realizations that the crowns come to teach us are distant from any individual who is in the material world, which lacks access to the [necessary] intellectual faculties. And because these [crowns] are distant from human comprehension, they are on top of the letters [as opposed to an integral part of the letter]...

Maharal insists that although Moses is greater than Rabbi Akiba, Akiba is specifically attuned to the information that is contained in the crowns but not in the body of the Torah:

And you should not wonder about the fact that Moses our Teacher, may peace be upon him, did not understand what [the crowns] said, and say in response that Akiba is greater. Heaven forbid! Rather, we have explained that Moses had no particular connection to the crowns [like Rabbi Akiba did].

Moses, understandably, wishes to see the individual who will be able to comprehend the subtleties of the crowns, and is impressed by Rabbi Akiba. Moses’s query as to why God does not give the Torah to Rabbi Akiba can then be seen, not about the persona of Rabbi Akiba, but about the form of revelation (e.g. the choice to give Moses the body of the Torah rather than the information in the crowns to Rabbi Akiba). When God responds with the uninformative “So it has risen in thought before me,” he is responding that God chooses, for reasons only known to him, to bring the Torah into this world using Moses and the body of the Torah he understands.

Maharal’s framework suggests that Rabbi Akiba and his colleagues bring new knowledge into the world, not because they are greater than Moses, but because they can legitimately reveal divine truths unknown to him. This framework is complemented and further extended by an unlikely source - Rabbi Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik (sometimes known as the Brisker Rav or *GRIZ*; 1886-1959). Like other traditional commentators, he is concerned about the consistency of the *Menahot* passage with other parts of rabbinic literature. Specifically, he notes that the crowns on letters in the Torah are only present in the Assyrian script of the Hebrew alphabet, and yet, according to the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 21b), the Torah given to Moses was written

in the Paleo-Hebrew script - which has no crowns! Since the Assyrian script only came into use in the time of Ezra, why would God be attaching crowns to the Torah at the time of Moses?

Soloveitchik solves this problem by suggesting that Moses physically wrote a copy of the Torah in Assyrian script on stones on the banks of the Jordan river (as referred to in Deuteronomy 27:2-3 and associated rabbinic interpretations), but that the Paleo-Hebrew script remained canonical for the Torah until the time of Ezra. He then connects the switch from the Paleo-Hebrew script (sans crowns) to the Assyrian script (with crowns) to an interpretation of the *Menahot* passage:

With this idea, we can resolve the aforementioned Talmudic passage [*Menahot* 29b]... God was sitting and tying crowns to letters- Assyrian script letters that is. But the Torah was only given in the Levant [Paleo-Hebrew] script without crowns and Moses said to God: “Who stays your hand?” meaning why don’t you give the Torah immediately in the Assyrian script and let us perform exegesis on the crowns. God responds... “He [Akiba] will perform the exegesis and not you.” Moses said before God, “...Give the Torah immediately to Rabbi Akiba in the Assyrian script with the crowns so he can interpret them.” God responds, “... the Torah

will be given in Assyrian script in the future and the end of many generations and not now.”

According to Soloveitchik, the canonical Torah was originally the version in Paleo-Hebrew script, which does not include the crowns. To the extent that crowns existed in a copy of the Torah on the banks of the Jordan, they are not canon and are meaningless. Yet, at the time of Ezra, when the canonical Torah switches to the Assyrian script, the crowns and their associated teaching now become accessible to human interpretation.

Putting together the ideas of Soloveitchik and Maharal, Moses and Rabbi Akiba represent two sides of God’s revelation to mankind, both thematically and historically. In Maharal’s framework, Moses and Rabbi Akiba understand the Torah in fundamentally different ways. According to Soloveitchik, this reflects God’s decision to give some elements of the Torah to Moses at Sinai and hold other elements back to be “activated” at the time of Ezra (when the canonical Torah is switched to the Assyrian script) and then interpreted by Rabbi Akiba. Thus, the Torah is given progressively; some is given to Moses and the rest is left for later interpretation, specifically by Rabbi Akiba.

Armed with this understanding of *Menahot*, let’s return to the Golden Calf. Rubenstein points out that there are textual parallels between Exodus and *Menahot*, specifically a recurring dialectic between the words “front” and “back” in both passages. Therefore, Rubenstein argues, when the story

recounts Moses asking God to “show me his [Rabbi Akiba’s] reward,” it is restating the dialogue in Exodus 33:12-23.

Indeed, there is compelling evidence that the two passages are deeply connected. Parallel Talmudic passages suggest that *Menahot* 29b is one of several connected late rabbinic passages relating to the Golden Calf. The opening phrase, “At the time that Moses ascended to Heaven” or a close variant is also used in *Shabbat* 89a, *Sanhedrin* 111a-b, and *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 4:7-8. Each of those texts discusses a topic connected to the story of the Golden Calf. The talmudic passages in *Sanhedrin* and *Shabbat* link to the Thirteen Attributes (introduced during the incident of the Golden Calf); additionally, the *Shabbat* passage explicitly interprets the meaning of a word (*boshesh*) used in Exodus 32:1 regarding Moses’ delay in descending from the mountain. The *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* passage, which has significant thematic overlap with the *Menahot* passage, suggests that God was learning about the Red Heifer as an atonement for the Golden Calf when Moses ascended. I argue that, more than the thematic connection Rubenstein identifies, the entirety of the *Menahot* passage should be seen as a rabbinic discussion of the meaning and consequences of the Golden Calf.

Re-interpreting *Menahot* 29b: The crowns as a reaction to the Golden Calf

Moses returns to the heavens after the sin of the Golden Calf. He has given God an ultimatum to forgive the Jewish people or to remove him from the Torah. With this background, God modifying

the Torah by adding crowns takes on a new, ominous meaning. Moses asks, “what stays your hand?” and is told that God is waiting for Rabbi Akiba. When Moses does not understand Rabbi Akiba’s teaching, Moses worries (“his strength ebbed”) that God has erased him from his role in revelation and destroyed the Jewish people.

This explains Moses’s relief when Rabbi Akiba cites a law as a “law transmitted from Sinai to Moses”. Rabbi Akiba’s attribution to Moses - even if Moses does not understand it - makes it clear that Moses has not been erased and, consequently, the Jewish people have been saved from God’s wrath.

This context addresses several difficulties left unresolved in most explanations of the *Menahot* passage: Why is Moses so sorely disappointed over not understanding a passage - surely it is not because his ego is bruised? Why is Moses relieved at being the source of a passage that he does not understand? In this interpretation of the passage, Moses’s emotional swing (“his mind was settled”) occurs because he now understands that the Jewish people have survived.

But not everything remained the same in the wake of the Golden Calf. Revelation is restructured and split between Moses and Rabbi Akiba. Moses is relieved by the recognition of his continued role in divine revelation, but he asks, “you have someone like this, and you give the Torah through me?” to understand why God does not just give the entirety of revelation to Rabbi Akiba. In the Maharal/Soloveitchik interpretation, the *Menahot* passage actively captures the moment when God

partially replaces Moses with Rabbi Akiba. God was planning on giving the entirety of revelation to Moses; after the sin of the Golden Calf, God changes the Torah and splits revelation between Moses and Rabbi Akiba and his colleagues.

This is a fitting reaction to the sin of the Golden Calf. There is a strand of rabbinic interpretation positing that the sin of the Golden Calf was a desire for an inappropriately intimate relationship with the divine. Evoking Christian notions of Incarnation, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 45 has the Israelites expressing desire for a physical god who can be carried and seen (a midrashic interpretation of a “god who shall go before us” in Exodus 32:1). It seems appropriate that God reacts by withholding his presence (in the Biblical account) and withholding a part of his revelation for a future generation (in our reading of *Menahot*).

The fact that Moses can no longer experience the intimacy he previously had with God and does not receive answers to all his questions also dovetails with this interpretation. Moses wishes to see God’s face (in the Biblical account) and understand why revelation is being divided and why Rabbi Akiba suffers (in *Menahot*). But due to this restructuring, he can no longer do either. “And my face must not be seen” God says in Exodus 33:23. Nor does he get a full response in *Menahot* to why God divided revelation between him and R. Akiba or why R. Akiba meets such an ignominious end. God instead

tells Moses to be silent.

Conclusion

Copious ink has been spilled to interpret the interaction of Moses and Rabbi Akiba in *Menahot* 29b. Most modern commentators look at this passage and see Rabbinic self-consciousness about their legitimacy and continuity with Biblical and Temple Judaism. In this essay, I suggest the opposite. By demonstrating that the story captures the response of Moses and God to the sin of the Golden Calf, *Menahot* 29b becomes a bold restatement of the assertion that Rabbi Akiba and his colleagues receive revelation that was stripped from Moses. In the worldview advanced by this passage, the Golden Calf caused a rupture in the original plan for revelation, with Rabbi Akiba and his colleagues standing in the breach. Far from the sly nod and implicit recognition of discontinuity, as suggested by Scholem and others, the seemingly absurd construction of the story in *Menahot* legitimizes Rabbinical Judaism as the true heirs of Sinai, all but equal to Moses himself. The power and authority granted to rabbinic interpretation was part of God’s plan from the moment the people sinned with the Golden Calf.

One of the ironies of the passage in *Menahot* 29b is that there is not a single recorded instance in rabbinic literature of anyone, including Rabbi Akiba, who derives laws or other teaching from the

crown of a letter. Perhaps this suggests that the legitimacy of revelation through interpretation lives

on. The crowns have not been interpreted, at least not *yet*. The tantalizing existence of uninterpreted crowns says that there will always be new frontiers for interpretation. The revelation that started at Sinai does not come to a close.

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