Wisdom and Human Pretention: The Riddle of Shlomo and its Resolution

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Much ink has been spilt in the attempt to reconcile the description of King Shlomo that appears in the Book of Melakhim with the description of Divrei Hayamim. It emerges even from a cursory reading that Shlomo of Divrei Hayamim is the paradigmatic king of the yearned-for kingdom. A prophecy proclaims the main features of his reign even before his birth:

But you will have a son who will be a man of rest; I will give him rest from his enemies on all sides, for Shlomo will be his name, and I will confer peace (“shalom”) and quiet on Israel in his time. He will build a house for My name; he shall be a son to Me and I to him a father, and I will establish his throne of kingship over Israel forever. (1 Divrei Hayamim 22:9-10)

This is what Shlomo was supposed to become, and this is what his reign should have been like. The author of Divrei Hayamim then chronicles numerous episodes to tell us that indeed it was so; every detail of the prophecy was fulfilled, albeit in reverse order. “I will establish his throne of kingship over Israel forever” is fulfilled with: “Shlomo, son of David, took firm hold of his kingdom, for the Lord his God was with him and made him exceedingly great” (2 Divrei Hayamim 1:1). “I to him a father”: God appears to Shlomo as a loving father: “Ask, what shall I grant you?” (ibid. 7). “He shall be a son to Me”: like an intelligent son who brings joy to his father, Shlomo asks: “Grant me wisdom and knowledge” (ibid. 10). “He will build a house for My name”: Shlomo immediately undertakes the massive task of building the Temple: “Then Shlomo resolved to build a house for the name of the Lord” (ibid. 18). He did not let up until he saw that “the glory of the Lord filled the house of God… Then Shlomo declared: ‘I have built for You a stately house, and a place where You may dwell forever’” (ibid. 5:14-6:2). “I will confer peace and quiet on Israel in his time”: not only did peace and quiet prevail in Israel in his day, but all were “rejoicing and in good spirits” (ibid. 7:10). “I will give him rest from his enemies on all sides”: not only did he have a respite from all his enemies, but “King Shlomo surpassed all the kings of the earth… All the kings of the earth came to pay homage…in the amount due each year (ibid. 9:22-24). And ultimately he became king over kings: “He ruled over all the kings from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt” (ibid. 26).

Yet this is not the entire chronicle of Shlomo. More than is written here is written in the Book of Melakhim. There, other facets of Shlomo and his reign are revealed—facets that are more shadow than light.

By comparing the descriptions of Divrei Hayamim with those of Melakhim, we find that with regard to everything relating to the realization of the prophecy, Divrei Hayamim repeats what was already stated in Melakhim, and even embellishes it—often with one exception. In Divrei Hayamim, as in Melakhim, it is recounted that “knowledge and wisdom are granted to you” (ibid. 1:12; compare to 1 Melakhim 3:12), to the extent that “All the kings of the earth came to pay homage to Shlomo and to listen to the wisdom with which God had endowed him” (2 Divrei Hayamim 9:23; compare to 1 Melakhim 10:24). However, the amazing tale of how Shlomo’s wisdom was first revealed to Israel, when “they saw that he possessed divine wisdom to execute justice” (ibid. 3:28), does not appear in Divrei Hayamim. The absence of the episode of the two mothers from Divrei Hayamim is perplexing, for there would seem to be no greater exhibition of Shlomo’s extraordinary wisdom.

The Sages have already addressed this puzzle and illuminated a path to understanding that precisely what seems to be the supreme expression of a “wise and discerning mind” (ibid. 12) was not simply a gift from God, and it in fact pushed him into the abyss of destruction. The Sages said: “Kohelet [=Shlomo] sought to pronounce judgement...
based on intuition—without witnesses and without admonition. A heavenly voice issued forth and said to him: ‘and that which He wrote is upright and true’ (Kohelet 12:10)—by the mouth of two witnesses...” (Devarim 17:6). Shlomo wanted to circumvent the Torah’s demands with his wisdom. It was not with divine wisdom that he sought to do so; wisdom has its own dark drives.

The Sages even found fault with the wisdom of Shlomo’s judgment regarding the identity of the mother of the live child: “How did he know? Maybe she was duping him?” The wisest of all men wished to go beyond the boundaries of human intelligence and liberate himself from the shackles of mitzvot, which are merely the tools with which the body confines the soul. But that was not the intent of the prophecy, and so there is no place for the story of Shlomo’s judgment in Divrei Hayamim. We must look to the Book of Melakhim to understand Shlomo’s seemingly split personality.

It is not easy to peer into the soul of a regular person, let alone into the recesses of the soul of King Shlomo. No mind can meet the challenge of absorb the hidden lessons of the story of Shlomo from their plain meaning alone. Therefore, the Sages induced us to follow them into the secrets of his soul by presenting us with scintillating parables and captivating tales. We will attempt to unravel the Sages’ exposition, and we will see where it leads us.

B. A Sin Commensurate with his Greatness

Shlomo’s personality is an undecipherable conundrum. On one hand, Shlomo was Israel’s greatest king. It was to him that God said: “wisdom and knowledge are granted to you, and I grant you also wealth, property, and glory, the like of which no king before you has had, nor shall any after you have” (2 Divrei Hayamim 1:12). That is, Shlomo represents a historical peak; even the greatness of the anticipated king mashi’ah is measured with the yardstick of Shlomo’s accomplishments: “The king that arises will have his royal capital in Zion; his name will become great and will spread to the ends of the earth—even more than Shlomo’s reign did.” Furthermore, the eminence of the mashi’ah will, in essence, be Shlomo’s as well, for the mashi’ah will be a descendant of Shlomo. This is emphasized in the promise of the prophet Natan to King David: “When your days are done and you follow your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingship. He shall build a house for Me, and I will establish his throne forever. I will install him in My house and in My kingship forever, and his throne shall be established forever” (1 Divrei Hayamim 17:11-14).

On the other hand, neither Scripture nor the Sages spare King Shlomo from their criticism:

King Shlomo loved many foreign women...from the nations of which the Lord had said to the Israelites, “None of you shall join them and none of them shall join you.” Such Shlomo clung to and loved... His wives turned his heart away... Shlomo did what was displeasing to the Lord.... The Lord was angry with Shlomo, because his heart turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel.” (1 Melakhim 11:1-9)

Just as his wisdom became a byword, so too did his sins, as Nehemiah reproved his contemporaries: “It was just in such things that King Shlomo of Israel sinned! Among the many nations there was not a king like him, and so well loved was he by his God... yet foreign wives caused even him to sin” (Nehemiah 13:26).

The Sages scrutinized Shlomo and found even more sins:

Shlomo said: Three things with which the attribute of justice makes sport—I desecrated: “He shall not have many wives” (Devarim 17:17), yet Scripture states, “King Shlomo loved many foreign women” (1 Melakhim 11:1). He shall not keep many horses” (Devarim 17:16), yet Scripture states: “Shlomo had 40,000 stalls of horses for his chariots and 12,000 horsemen” (1 Melakhim 5:6).... “nor shall be amass silver and gold to excess” (Devarim 17:17), yet Scripture states: “The king made silver as plentiful in Jerusalem as stones” (1 Melakhim 10:27).

Others explain that Shlomo was punished and deposed because of his sins:

The Holy One said to Shlomo: “What is this crown on your head? Get off of My throne.” R. Yosi b. Hanina said: At that moment, an angel that looked like Shlomo descended, removed him from the throne, and sat down in his stead. [Shlomo] circulated among the synagogues and study halls, saying: “I am Kohelet; I was king over Israel in Jerusalem” (Kohelet 1:12). They would say to him: “The king is sitting on his throne, yet you say ‘I am Kohelet?’ They beat him with a stick and fed him a plate of beans. At that moment, he said: “This was my lot” (Kohelet 2:10).

The idea that Shlomo was dethroned also appears in the Bavli, which tells an extended story of his replacement. In my opinion, this story contains an astonishing theory for understanding Shlomo’s complex personality. It is one of the longest narratives in the entire Talmud (in printed editions, it stretches over almost two full columns), and it seems that it was copied from there into various midrashim. It is worth pointing out two literary features of the Bavli version.

The first pertains to the central idea of a substitute king. As we have seen, the Yerushalmi speaks of an angel, whereas the Bavli speaks of a demon (shed)—more precisely, the king of the demons. This fits nicely with the fact that the Yerushalmi never even mentions demons, whereas the Bavli frequently discusses them. The Talmud itself records a dispute between the Jews of Eretz Yisrael and the Jews of Babylonia about whether to explain a given verse in Kohelet as a reference to demons. As will be explained later, this has major implications. This is no fantasy tale about demons.

The second observation is that Shlomo’s wisdom is characterized by parables and riddles, based on the verses: “He composed three thousand parables.... He spoke about the trees, from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall; and he spoke about beasts, birds, creeping things, and fishes” (1 Melakhim 5:12-13) and “The queen of Sheba heard of Shlomo’s wisdom...and she came to test him with riddles” (Ibid. 10:1). Fittingly, the Talmud’s story of Shlomo is a parable in its entirety, built of layer upon layer of riddles.

1 Rosh Hashana 21b.
2 Makot 23b.
3 Commentary on the Mishna, Introduction to the Tenth Chapter of Sanhedrin (Perek Helek), p. 138.
4 See: Commentary on the Mishna, Introduction to the Tenth Chapter of Sanhedrin (Perek Helek), p. 145; Epistle to Yemen, p. xv.
6 Ibid.
7 Gittin 68a.
It is worthwhile, then, to attempt “to understand proverbs and parables, the words of the wise and their riddles” (Mishlei 1:6).

To understand the meaning of this parable, one must first read the entire narrative and then attempt to understand each detail, until a whole picture emerges. The story is brought in response to a question about the interpretation of a verse in Kohelet—we will cite this as well. To assist the reader, we will present the entire story in English translation, broken up into segments, so as to facilitate the subsequent discussion.

C. The Text of the Aggada

Gittin 68a-b states:

It is written: “I got myself sharim and sharot, and human pleasures, shidda and shiddot” (Kohelet 2:8). “Sharim and sharot”—these are types of musical instruments. “Human pleasures”—these are pools and bathhouses. “Shidda and shiddot”—here [in Babylonia] they translated this as “male demons” (“shidda”) and “female demons” (“shiddetin”). In the West [Eretz Yisrael] they said: carriages [shiddeta]....

The Master said: “here they translated this as ‘male demons’ and ‘female demons.’ What did he need male and female demons for?

A. As it is written: “For the house, when it was being built, was built of stone made ready at the quarry...” (1 Melakhim 6:7). [Shlomo] said to the sages: How shall I do this? They said to him: There is the shamir, which Moshe used for the stones of the breastplate. He said to them: Where is it found? They said to him: Bring a male demon and a female demon and shacklet them together. Perhaps they know and will reveal it to you.

B. He brought a male demon and a female demon and shackled them together. They said: We do not know; perhaps Ashmedai king of the demons knows. He said to them: Where is Ashmedai? They said to him: He is on such-and-such a mountain.

He has dug himself a cistern, filled it with water, covered it with a rock, and sealed it with his seal. Every day he ascends to heaven and studies in the heavenly yeshiva.

Then he descends to earth and studies in the earthly yeshiva. Then he comes and inspects his seal, opens the cistern, and drinks. Then he covers it, seals it, and leaves.

C. He sent Benayahu b. Yehoyada. He gave him a chain onto which God’s name was engraved, a signet onto which God’s name of God was engraved, fleeces of wool, and wineskins filled with wine. Benayahu went and dug a cistern lower down the mountain from Ashamedai’s cistern, drained the water into it, and plugged it up with the wool fleeces. He then dug a pit higher up the mountain from Ashmedai’s cistern and poured the wine through it into Ashmedai’s cistern. He then sealed the cistern, climbed a tree, and sat in it.

D. When [Ashmedai] arrived, he checked his seal, opened the pit, and found the wine. He said: “It is written: ‘Wine is a mocker, strong drink is riotous; and whosoever wallows in it is not wise’ (Mishlei 20:1); and it is written: ‘Harlotry, old wine, and new wine take away understanding’ (Hoshea 4:11). I will not drink this wine.” When he became thirsty, he could not hold back. He drank, became intoxicated, and fell asleep. [Benayahu] said to him: “The name of your Master is upon you! The name of your Master is upon you!”

E. As [Benayahu] took [Ashmedai] away, he reached a palm tree. [Ashmedai] rubbed up against it and knocked it down. He reached a house and knocked it down. He reached the shack of a certain widow. She emerged and pleaded with him. He inclined his whole height away from her shack, and one of his bones broke. He said: This is the meaning of the verse, “Soft speech can break a bone” (Mishlei 25:15).

F. [Ashmedai] saw a blind man who lost his way; he guided him back on the right path. He saw a drunk who lost his way; he guided him back on the right path.

G. He saw a very joyous wedding ceremony; he cried. He heard a man say to a shoemaker, “Make me shoes that will last for seven years,” and he laughed. He saw a fortune-teller performing divinations, and he laughed.

H. When Ashmedai arrived there [in Jerusalem], they did not bring him before Shlomo for three days. On the first day he said to them: Why is the king not summoning me to him? They said to him: His drink overcame him. [Ashmedai] took a rod, measured four cubits, and threw it before Shlomo. He said to them: He was telling you, “Take his food away from him.” The next day he said to them: Why is the king not summoning me to him? They said to him: His drink overcame him. He took the brick off the other brick and placed it on the ground. They went and told Shlomo. He said to them: He was telling you, “Take his food away from him.”

I. At the end of three days, he came before him. [Ashmedai] took a rod, measured four cubits, and threw it before [Shlomo]. He said to [Shlomo]: Let us see that when you die, he will have nothing in this world except four cubits. Now you have conquered the entire world, yet you are not satisfied until you also conquer me?

He said to him: I need nothing from you. I want to build the Temple, and so I need the shamir.

[Ashmedai] said to him: It was not given to me. It was given to the Prince of the Sea, and he only gives it to the wild rooster, the hoopoe, whose oath he believes.

J. And what does [the hoopoe] do with it? It brings [the shamir] to uninhabitable mountains, places it on the mountain’s crag, and the mountain splits. Then it takes tree seeds, brings them over, and throws them in. And it
becomes civilized. This is why [the hoopoe] is also called [in Aramaic]: mountain-cutter (“negar turva”).

K. They looked around and found a hoopoe’s nest in which there were chicks. They covered the nest with white glass. When [the adult hoopoe] came, it wanted to enter but could not. It went and brought the shamir and placed it on top. [Shlomo’s servant] raised his voice. [The hoopoe] dropped [the shamir]. He took it. It went and strangled itself because of its oath.

L. Benayahu said to [Ashmedai]: Why, when you saw that blind man who lost his way, did you guide him on the right path? He said to him: They proclaim about him in heaven that he is completely righteous, and anyone who brings him comfort earns merit in the next world. He asked: And why, when you saw the drunk who lost his way, did you guide him on the right path? He said: They proclaim about him in heaven that he is a completely wicked man. I gave him some pleasure so that he consumes his reward in this world.

M. Why did you cry when you saw that joyous wedding? He said to him: That man [the groom] will die within thirty days, and [the bride] will have to wait thirteen years for his little brother to become an adult [and perform levirate marriage or divorce.] Why did you laugh when you heard that man say to a shoemaker: “Make me shoes that will last for seven years”? He said to him: That man does not have seven years; he needs shoes that will last for seven years! Why did you laugh when you saw that fortune-teller? He said to him: He was sitting above the royal treasury. Let him divine the fortune that is just beneath him!

N. [Shlomo] detained [Ashmedai] until he built the Temple. One day he stood alone. [Shlomo] said to [Ashmedai]: It is written: “He has the strength of a wild ox” (Bamidbar 24:8), and we interpret this to mean: “the strength” refers to the ministering angels, and the “wild ox” refers to the demons. In what way are you greater than us? [Ashmedai] said to him: Take this chain off me and give me your signet, and I will show you my great strength. He removed the chain and gave him the signet. [Ashmedai] swallowed [Shlomo]. He placed one of his wings in the heaven and the other on earth, and he spewed him four hundred parasangs.

O. Regarding that time, Shlomo said: “What profit is there for a person through all of his toil under the sun?” (Kohelet 1:3). “And this was my portion from all of my toil” (ibid. 2:10). [What is the meaning of, “this”? Rav and Shmuel—one says it refers to his staff, and the other says it refers to his jar.]

P. Shlomo went begging door-to-door, and everywhere he went, he would say: “I am Kohelet; I was king over Israel in Jerusalem” (Kohelet 1:12). When he reached the Sanhedrin, the rabbis said: A fool does not obsess over one thing. What is this? They said to Benayahu: Does the king summon you to him? He said to them: No. They sent word to the queens, asking: Does the king come to be with you? The queens sent word back to them: Yes, he comes. [The rabbis] sent word to them: Check his feet. They sent word back: He comes in his slippers. He also demands [to have sexual relations] with us during our periods. And he also demands it of Bat-Sheva, his mother.

Q. They brought Shlomo and gave him a signet and a chain on which God’s name was engraved. When he entered, [Ashmedai] saw him and flew away. Even so, [Shlomo] was terrified of him, and it is written: “Behold the bed of Shlomo, surrounded by sixty strong men from the warriors of Israel, all of them holding swords and trained in war, each man with his sword on his thigh from fear in the nights” (Shir Hashirim 3:7-8).

D. The Conduct of Ashmedai after his Capture

Let us first try to understand the meaning of Ashmedai’s conduct after Benayahu captured him. We are first told of three incidents that he is not asked to decipher (section E): 1. He comes to a palm tree, scratches himself against it, and knocks it down; 2. he comes to a house and knocks it down; 3. he comes to the widow’s shack, she comes out and pleads with him, and so he inclines his whole stature away from the shack, thus breaking a bone.

After a quick glance at Biblical and Midrashic descriptions of Shlomo, it dawns on the reader that these incidents allude to the first chapter of Shlomo’s reign—the establishment of his rule and the elimination of his rivals.

The stately palm tree symbolizes a grand and boastful person: “Just as the palm and the cedar are the greatest of all trees.” And it is written: “Adoniya ben Hagit boasted, ‘I will reign’” (1 Melakhim 1:5). This episode begins with a confrontation between Shlomo and Adoniya. At the beginning of his travels he brushed up against a tall palm tree and knocked it down, as is written: “King Shlomo dispatched Benayahu ben Yehoyada, who struck [Adoniya] down, and he died” (ibid. 2:25).

Shlomo’s second act, as recorded there, was: “So Shlomo dismissed Evyatar from being the priest of the Lord—thus fulfilling the word that the Lord regarding the house of Eli at Shiloh” (ibid. 27). In the short passage about the prophecy on the house of Eli, the term “house” appears ten times. This house is represented by Evyatar, the scion of the house of Eli. Thus, Shlomo arrives at a house and demolishes it.

The next passages tell of what Shlomo did to Yoav and to Shimi ben Gera, but these actions were not his initiative; he was carrying out his father’s last will. Therefore, they should be addressed separately.

Thus, the third action that Shlomo undertakes on his own, as told by Scripture, is: “Shlomo allied himself through marriage with Pharaoh, king of Egypt. He married Pharaoh’s daughter and brought her to the City of David” (1 Melakhim 3:1). The Sages expounded on the
juxtaposition of this episode with the one immediately preceding it, explaining: “One should always live in the same locale as his teacher, for as long as Shimi ben Gera was alive, Shlomo did not marry Pharaoh’s daughter.”

According to this, at least three years elapsed between Shlomo’s coronation and his marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter (see 1 Melakhim 2:39). According to other midrashim, cited below, Shlomo married at the time of the Temple’s inauguration.

There is no doubt that the purpose of this marriage was to strengthen Shlomo’s international alliances, as the preceding verse states: “Thus the kingdom was secured in Shlomo’s hands.” However, it seems that the marriage had the opposite effect domestically; it caused a new wave of disapproval against Shlomo, or the reawakening of a dormant opposition. Scripture does not specify when Shlomo married Pharaoh’s daughter, but it should be noted that this episode, “Shlomo allied himself through marriage with Pharaoh, king of Egypt,” appears at the end of the process by which Shlomo eliminated opposition, but before the incident at Giv'ôn, wherein, “the Lord appeared to Shlomo in a dream by night” (ibid. 3:5), which marks the beginning of Shlomo’s activities as a leader who shows concern for his people’s needs and who wins the people’s trust. Indeed, after his judgment of the case of the two harlots, it states: “When all Israel heard the decision that the king had rendered, they stood in awe of the king; for they saw that he possessed divine wisdom to execute justice” (ibid. 28). The placement of this episode intimates that Shlomo’s marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter caused some opposition amongst the people and set off a series of rebellions against Shlomo’s rule, as explained in subsequent passages.

Right at the time of the wedding, a threat against the king emerged:

R. Yoḥanan said: Why did Yeravam merit becoming a king? Because he rebuked Shlomo...as it states: “The circumstances under which he raised his hand against the king were as follows: Shlomo built the Millo and repaired the breach of the city of his father, David.” ['Yeravam'] said to [Shlomo]: Your father David made those breaches so that Israel could make festival pilgrimages. You fenced them in to collect tolls on behalf of Pharaoh’s daughter?14

A midrash states that Yeravam rebuked Shlomo for delaying the daily tamid offering on the morning after his wedding to Pharaoh’s daughter:

That day, Shlomo slept through the fourth hour of the day, and the keys to the Temple were under his head... Yeravam b. Nevat entered and rebuked him.... This is the meaning of the verse: “When Ephraim spoke, there was trembling” (Hoshea 13:1)... when Yeravam spoke, Shlomo trembled.15

In both accounts, Yeravam appears as a righteous man with pure intentions, to the extent that his master, Aḥiya the Shilonite, misjudged his intentions.16

The Sages said:

“Yeravam said to himself” (1 Melakhim 12:26)—“Base silver laid over earthenware are ardent lips with an evil heart” (Mishlei 26:23). This refers to Esav and his ilk. What is he like? An urn, which is gold inlaid with gemstones on the outside, but earthenware on the inside. Thus, Esav—“Esav said to himself” (Bereishit 27:41)... “Yeravam said to himself”... “Though his speech is charming, do not trust him, for seven abominations are in his heart” (Mishlei 26:25).17

Scripture obscures what exactly happened with Yeravam. There may have been an attempt to compromise with him. Perhaps this is why Shlomo “appointed him over all the forced labor of the House of Yosef” (1 Melakhim 11:28), a high office indeed. However, it is also possible that Yeravam “raised his hand against the king” (ibid. 27) only after his appointment. According to the Sages, it is clear that at some point a compromise was offered to him: “R. Abba said: When the Holy One grabbed Yeravam by his clothes and said to him: ‘Repent, and you, I, and the son of Yishai will walk together in the Garden of Eden!’ He replied: ‘Who will be at the head?’ [God answered:] ‘The son of Yishai will be at the head.’ [Yeravam replied:] ‘If so, I do not want it.’”18 However, it is possible that the “son of Yishai” refers here to Reḥavam, not Shlomo.

Accordingly, the third parable—the parable of the widow—should be understood as relating to Shlomo’s rival. Scripture emphasizes Yeravam’s maternal lineage: “Yeravam son of Nevat, an Ephraimite of Tzereda, the son of a widow named Tzeru’ah” (ibid. 26). Of Yeravam it is said: “Though his speech is charming, do not trust him, for seven abominations are in his heart.” Scripture attests that Shlomo sensed Yeravam’s treachery: “Shlomo sought to put Yeravam to death” (ibid. 40), but the Heavens prevented him from doing so. Furthermore, it had already been decreed: “During that time... For thus said the Lord, the God of Israel: I am about to tear the kingdom out of Shlomo’s hands, and I will give you ten tribes. But one tribe shall remain his” (ibid. 29-32).

The meaning of the parable is now clear: when he reached the widow’s shack, she came out and pleaded with him, he inclined his entire stature away from her shack, and he broke a bone.

E. Shlomo’s Proverbs in Ashmedai’s Mouth

More than Shlomo was a man of action, he was a teacher of wisdom to the people. He scrutinized man’s ways and preoccupations, and he responded with wisdom, inspiring people with his astute keen and biting witticisms. Thus, after the first three episodes, the narrator presents two instances in which Ashmedai guides people who have lost their way (section F), and three proverbs that draw focus toward the futility of man and his desires (section G). The narrator clarifies these meanings through Ashmedai’s answers to Benayahu’s questions (sections L-M).

We learn in a midrash:

R. Abba b. Kahana said: This is likened to an old man sitting at a crossroads with two paths before him. One starts on a plain but ends up among brambles, cedars, and bulrushes; the other begins among bulrushes, cedars, and brambles, but ends up on a plain. He would caution passers-by, saying: “This one starts on a plain but ends up among cedars, brambles, and bulrushes, while this one begins among brambles, cedars, and bulrushes, and ends up on a plain. Don’t people need owe him gratitude for warning them for their sake, so they do not exhaust themselves?

13 Berakhot 8a.
14 Sanhedrin 101b.
15 Vayikra Rabba 12:5.
16 Sanhedrin 102a.
17 Yalkut Shimi Melakhim §198.
18 Sanhedrin 102a.
Similarly, don’t people owe Shlomo gratitude, who sits at the gates of wisdom and warns Israel: “[I have further observed under the sun] ‘I have found that all is futile and pursuit of wind’” (Ibid. 1:14), except for repentance and good deeds.19

Thus, Shlomo guides those who have lost their way.

[Benayahu] saw a blind man who lost his way; he guided him back on the right path. He saw a drunk who lost his way; he guided him back on the right path.

Shlomo did not save his wisdom for the righteous alone; he taught and instructed everyone. Scripture says so explicitly three times: “Men of all peoples came to hear Shlomo’s wisdom on behalf of all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom” (1 Melakhim 5:14); “All the earth came to pay homage to Shlomo and to listen to the wisdom with which God had endowed him” (Ibid. 10:24); and “All the kings of the earth came to pay homage to Shlomo and to listen to the wisdom with which God had endowed him” (2 Divrei Hayamim 9:23).

Benayahu said to [Ashmedai]: Why, when you saw that blind man who lost his way, did you guide him on the right path? He said to him: They proclaim about him in heaven that he is completely righteous, and anyone who brings him comfort earns merit in the next world.

This is explicit in Scripture: “Who is so blind as My servant? ... Who is so blind as the one who is whole, so blind as the servant of the Lord? ... The Lord desires his vindication, that he may magnify and glorify the Torah” (Yeshayahu 42:19-21).

And why, when you saw the drunk who lost his way, did you guide him on the right path? He said: They proclaim about him in heaven that he is a completely wicked man. I gave him some pleasure so that he consumes his reward in this world.

This, too, reflects the Sages’ interpretation of a verse in the Torah: “The prophets said to the Holy One: Why do you give benevolently to these kings as well. Frequent those kings who drink wine and get drunk without warning” (Kohelet 9:12). However, it seems that the Sages explained that Shlomo’s mother rebuked him: “Why do you delay the repayment of the completely righteous?” Likewise, the Sages explained that Shlomo’s mother rebuked him: “Why do you frequent those kings who drink wine and get drunk?” Shlomo taught wisdom to these kings as well.

We then read about how Ashmedai cried once and laughed twice:

He saw a very joyous wedding ceremony; he cried. He heard a man say to a shoemaker, “Make me shoes that will last for seven years,” and he laughed. He saw a fortune-teller performing divinations, and he laughed.

Benayahu asked: Why did you cry when you saw that joyous wedding? He said to him: That man [the groom] will die within thirty days, and [the bride] will have to wait thirteen years for his little brother to become an adult [and perform levirate marriage or divorce.]

The Sages expounded:

“His lips are like lilies, dripping with flowing myrrh” (Shir Hashirim 5:13). Scripture should have said “myrrh that stays in one place”? Because when Shlomo built the Temple, the whole world was filled with the scent of fragrance. He saw that ultimately it would be destroyed, and he cried saying, “this fragrance is for naught.”23

Other midrashim described the joy of the building of the Temple in greater detail:

The night that Shlomo completed the construction of the Temple he married Batya, Pharaoh’s daughter. There was the joy of the Temple and the joy of Pharaoh’s daughter, and the joy of Pharaoh’s daughter was greater than the joy of the Temple. At that moment, the thought of destroying Jerusalem arose before the Holy One.24

At the very moment that “Shlomo and all Israel with him...[were] joyful and glad of heart” (1 Melakhim 8:65-66), celebrating the inauguration of the Temple, it was decreed upon Shlomo’s dynasty and on all of Israel that they would have to wait for a long time, like a woman has to wait for a young levir: “I will chastise David’s descendants for that, though not forever” (Ibid. 11:39). For at the end of days, the redeemer will come, “and I will make them a single nation in the land...and one king shall be king of them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms. My servant David shall be king over them; there shall be one shepherd for all of them” (Yehezekel 37:22-24).

Benayahu asked: Why did you laugh when you heard that man say to a shoemaker: “Make me shoes that will last for seven years”? He said to him: That man does not have seven days; he needs shoes that will last for seven years!

This parable, like the one preceding it, is encompassed by the meaning of a verse from Kohelet: “A man cannot even know his time. At the very moment that “Shlomo and all Israel with him...[were] joyful and glad of heart” (1 Melakhim 8:65-66), celebrating the inauguration of the Temple, it was decreed upon Shlomo’s dynasty and on all of Israel that they would have to wait for a long time, like a woman has to wait for a young levir: “I will chastise David’s descendants for that, though not forever” (Ibid. 11:39). For at the end of days, the redeemer will come, “and I will make them a single nation in the land...and one king shall be king of them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms. My servant David shall be king over them; there shall be one shepherd for all of them” (Yehezekel 37:22-24).

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This parable, like the one preceding it, is encompassed by the meaning of a verse from Kohelet: “A man cannot even know his time. As fishes are enmeshed in a fatal net, and as birds are trapped in a snare, so men are caught at the time of calamity, when it comes upon them without warning” (Kohelet 9:12). However, it seems that the shoes allude to a more specific meaning. Shoes are mentioned twice with respect to Yoav ben Tzeruya. It is written in Tehilim: “Yoav returned and struck Edom in the Valley of Salt” (60:2). Of the same battle, it is written: “on Edom I will cast my shoe” (1 Melakhim 2:5). The girdle and the shoe both indicate leadership and strength.

When Adoniyahu boasted, “I will reign,” Yoav sought to ensure himself a position in the upper echelons of the kingdom after David’s death, even though he certainly could have stood aside and not

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19 Kohelet Rabba 1:35.
20 Midrash Tehilim 7:17.
21 Eruvin 22a.
22 Sanhedrin 70b.
23 Pesikta Rabbati 20 (Parshat Matan Torah); p. 96b in the Ish-Shalom edition.
gotten involved: “He conferred with Yoav ben Tzveruya and with the priest Ewyatar, and they supported Adoniya” (ibid. 1:7). That is, Yoav wanted to make sure he had shoes for the long term, unaware that his fate was sealed in David’s last will to Shlomo. This, too, is implicit in a verse from Kohelet (7:3): “Anger is better than laughter.” The Sages expounded: “Shlomo said: Had Father gotten a bit angry at Adoniya, it would have been better for him to attribute of justice laughing at him.”25 The attribute of justice laughed at Yoav, too.

The Sages said: “Every verse that Shlomo prophesied has two or three meanings.”26 As such, this parable, too, has an alternate interpretation, according to which it is about Shlomo himself. Shlomo requested of King Hiram of Tyre: “Now send me a craftsman to work in gold and silver...and send me cedars, cypress, and algum wood from Lebanon” (2 Divrei Hayamim 2:6-7). He prefaced his request with an explanation, in which he emphasized that the building materials must be of exceedingly high quality: “I am about to build a house for the name of the Lord my God; dedicating it to Him...forever” (ibid. 3). Shlomo repeated that expectation when he inaugurated the Temple: “Then Shlomo said, ‘...I have now built for You a stately house, a place where You may dwell forever’” (1 Melakhim 8:12). Here are the shoes meant to last for seven years! It was not long before God informed him: “I will tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your servants” (ibid. 11:11). “I will reject the house which I have consecrated to My name; and Israel shall become a proverb and a byword among all peoples” (ibid. 9:7).

Benayahu asked: Why did you laugh when you saw that fortune-teller? He said to him: He was sitting above the royal treasury. Let him divine the fortune that is just beneath him!

This question is essentially the same question that the Gemara asks: “What did he need male and female demons for?” Shlomo sat atop the royal treasury. He was king of the world: “Wisdom and knowledge are granted to you.” He was initiated into the secrets of the Torah and the mysteries of science, the wisdom of creation and of God’s chariot! And he needs male and female demons?! It is laughable!

Thus, everything that Ashmedai did and said, from the moment that Benayahu captured him until he entered Jerusalem with him, is nothing but a synopsis of Scriptural and rabbinic stories about Shlomo himself. Everything that happened to Shlomo happened to Ashmedai, and everything that Shlomo taught, Ashmedai taught.

This being the case, it behooves us to examine the tales about Ashmedai before his capture and after he arrives at the royal palace.

F. The Conduct of Ashmedai before his Capture

Let us return to the beginning of the story (section B):

He has dug himself a cistern, filled it with water, covered it with a rock, and sealed it with his seal. Every day he ascends to heaven and studies in the heavenly yeshiva. Then he descends to earth and studies in the earthly yeshiva. Then he comes and inspects his seal, opens the cistern, and drinks. Then he covers it, seals it, and leaves.

Does this description not apply to the wisest of all men, to whom the reasons for the Torah were revealed? “There is no water but Torah, as it is stated: ‘Ho, all who are thirst, come for water’ (Yeshayahu 55:1).”27 And he drinks from these living waters and protects them so that they always remain pure and holy, free of any foreign admixtures. And just as he knows the ways of the earthly yeshiva, so too he knows the ways of the heavenly yeshiva.

How did Benayahu capture Ashmedai? The latter was particularly careful about wine. When he returned, inspected his seal, and found the cistern filled with wine, he held himself back and did not drink. However, when thirst overcame him, he drank, became drunk, and fell asleep. He was then bound in a chain from which he could not break free.

R. Yudan said: Throughout the seven years that Shlomo was building the Temple, he drank no wine. Once he built the Temple and married Pharaoh’s daughter—that night he drank wine.... That day, Shlomo slept through the fourth hour of the day.28

The words of the Sages are indeed implied by the verses. The first time that Shlomo’s table is mentioned, it says: “Shlomo’s daily provisions consisted of thirty kors of fine flour, sixty kors of [ordinary] flour, 310 fattened cattle, twenty pasture-fed cattle, and a hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fattened geese” (1 Melakhim 5:2-3). There is no mention of drink. However, when the queen of Sheba comes to visit, she is impressed not only by “the fare beneath him!”

The Gemara addresses this:

“Wine is not for kings, O Lemuel, not for kings to drink” (Mishlei 31:4). “Not for kings”—[his mother] said to him: “Why do you frequent those kings who drink wine, get drunk, and say ‘Why do we need God? Or for rulers (roznim) to crave strong drink’” (ibid.)—shall the one to whom all the secrets (razei) of the world are revealed drink wine and get drunk?!29

Once again, we have the same astonishing parallels between Shlomo and Ashmedai!

Let us now turn to what happened after Ashmedai reached the royal palace (section H):

On the first day he said to them: Why is the king not summoning me to him? They said to him: His drink overcame him. [Ashmedai] took a brick and placed it atop another brick. They went and told Shlomo. He said to them: He was telling you, “Give him more to drink.” The next day he said to them: Why is the king not summoning me to him? They said to him: His food overcame him. He took the brick off the other brick and placed it on the ground. They went and told Shlomo. He said to them: He was telling you, “Take his food away from him.”

25 Kohelet Rabba 7:10.
26 Ibid. 7:46.

27 Bava Kama 17a.
28 Vayikra Rabba 12:5.
29 See 1 Melakhim 10:5.
30 “Lamah Iantu Ef” — a play on the name “Lemuel”.
31 Sanhedrin 70b.
Two points are especially conspicuous here: first, only one who is aware of the description of the vastness of “the fare of [Shlomo’s] table...and his wines,” which left the queen of Sheba “breathless” (1 Melakhim 10:5), can understand how it is possible for Shlomo to be overcome by eating and drinking. Second, in contrast to the abstemiousness that characterized him earlier, we now hear: “His drink overcame him—give him more to drink!” This is explicit in Scripture as well: “I ventured to tempt my flesh with wine” (Kohelet 2:3).

Then: “Take his food away from him!” Does this not echo Shlomo’s own misgivings in response to his mother’s rebuke? As the Gemara states: “R. Yitzḥak said: How do we know that Shlomo changed his mind and agreed with his mother? As Scripture states: ‘I am more of a fool than any man (lit. ‘than a man’). I do not have human understanding’ (Mishlei 30:2). ‘I am more of a fool than a man’—more [foolish] than Noah, as Scripture states: ‘Noah began to be a man of the soil […and he drank from the wine and became drunk’ (Bereishit 9:20-21).”

At the end of three days, he came before him. [Ashmedai] took a rod, measured four cubits, and threw it before [Shlomo]. He said to [Shlomo]: Let us see that when you die, he will have nothing in this world except four cubits. Now you have conquered the entire world, yet you are not satisfied until you also conquer me? (section I)

Is this not the basic idea of the entire book of Kohelet slapping Shlomo in the face? “All is futile and the pursuit of wind; there is nothing worthwhile under the sun” (Kohelet 2:11). “Even if a man should beget a hundred children and live many years—no matter how many the days of his years may come to, if he is not sated through his wealth, and he has no burial—he departs into darkness, and his very name is covered with darkness” (ibid. 6:3-4). A midrash explained:

Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-Nasi] made a banquet in honor of his son…. [Bar Kappara] went and wrote on the door: “After all your rejoicing is death; so what is the point of your joy?” .... Did not Shlomo say: “What profit is there for a person through all of his toil under the sun?” (Kohelet 1:3) 13

The mention of the “Prince of the Sea” from whom the elusive shamir must be obtained seems to be linked to Shlomo’s attempt to increase his maritime power: “King Shlomo built a fleet of ships at Etzion Gever, which is near Eloth on the shore of the Red Sea” (1 Melakhim 9:26). This, too, was because he was not satisfied with the riches he had already hoarded, to the extent that, “All King Shlomo’s drinking cups were gold.” (ibid. 10:21).

With regard to the story of the hoopoe and its conduct (section J), it seems that it is from a different aggada and was embedded here, because it is not related to the present passage. The Gemara states: “It was taught… [it is called] dukhifat because its glory is subservient (“hodo kafut”); it brought the shamir to the Temple.” 14 The hoopoe ends up strangling itself—which recalls the story of Ahitophel’s end. 15

Once the shamir was found, the situation did not improve; there is not even any mention of the shamir being used for its designated purpose. On the contrary, things began to deteriorate precipitously. There is a secret confrontation between Shlomo and Ashmedai (section N), during which Shlomo conceded to Ashmedai the means by which he controlled him—the signet and the chain on which God’s name was engraved. Ashmedai then swallowed Shlomo. At that point, Shlomo was no longer recognized, except as a beggar, wandering from door to door, “obsessing over one thing” (section O). And now, free from the constraints imposed by the signet and chain bearing God’s name, the king could break all boundaries of behavior in the palace, even demanding sex with his wives during their periods (section O).

Yet the Sages attributed the same severe transgression to Shlomo himself. Commenting on the verse, “King Shlomo loved many foreign women,” the Yerushalmi cites R. Shimon b. Yohai: “he literally loved them—for lewd purposes.” 16 R. Eliezer b. R. Yosi Ha-Gelili goes further in a midrash: “It is written: ‘yet foreign wives caused even him to sin’ (Neḥemiah 13:26)—this teaches that he would have sex with them during their periods, and they would not inform him.” 17

G. The Meaning of the Aggada

What, then, is the meaning of this aggada, which equates Shlomo with Ashmedai in all respects? A close reading of this aggada has led us to the conclusion that it is a parable that illustrates King Shlomo’s uniquely complex character. There was a deep split, a duality, in his soul. This was not the normal dichotomy of the good impulse and evil impulse (yetzer), which characterize all human beings. Everyone is constantly in conflict with his yetzer and must do battle against it. However, in this story, Ashmedai does not just symbolize the evil impulse, as Shlomo’s benevolence and even his abstemiousness are attributed to Ashmedai as well; on the other side of the ledger, all of the evil perpetrated by Ashmedai has been attributed by the Sages to Shlomo.

The Sages said: “One who is greater than another also has a stronger yetzer.” 18 Shlomo was greater than other men, not just quantitatively, in that he had more wisdom, insight, and knowledge, but qualitatively, in his essence. Consequently, it was as though two powerful souls were struggling within him, and it was impossible to tell which one was good mixed with evil, and which one was evil mixed with good.

The Sages addressed this directly in a midrash, noting that Shlomo had seven names, of which four:

were monikers of Shlomo which can be expounded: Agur—for he amassed (agur) words of Torah; Yakeh—for he would spew (meki) words, like a cup is filled up and then emptied. So too, Shlomo learned Torah at one point and forgot it at another point; Lemuel—for he said to God (nam la-Eli) in his heart: “I can increase [my wives, horses, and money] and not sin”; Itiel—for he said “God is with me (lit Ei) and I am able.” 19

Like a cup is filled up and then emptied, he is sometimes filled up, and then he is God-fearing in his rule. And sometimes he is emptied, and then he is the demon king. This constant struggle stayed with him until the end, until, in his old age, it was impossible to know who

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32 Sanhedrin 70b.
33 Kohelet Rabba 1:4.
34 Hullin 63a.
35 See 2 Shmuel 17:23.
37 Shir Hashirim Rabba 1:10.
38 Sukka 52a.
39 Kohelet Rabba 1:2.
The task of the Sages, and therefore the task of the Jewish people, is to refine and perfect the world created by the Creator, to bring peace to a world that is so full of envy, rivalry, hatred, and strife. Where is the amazing creature that can shape those stones, make them complete, safeguarded it with all access to the wellsprings from the heavens and build a dwelling place for Her in this world. He paved the way for many who followed him throughout history, from early sectarians to contemporary groups, to make the same error. They think that the Torah can be categorized into what is essential and what is unimportant, what is primary and what is ancillary, what is primary and what is ancillary, what is inherent

To bring the world to perfection, to make it a place of peace and harmony, Shlomo wished to conquer Ashmedai because he desired to build a Temple that would last forever. However, he made a terrible error when he thought that he could imprison the evil yetzer by satisfying it. Ashmedai, imprisoned in the vaults of Shlomo’s heart, gained the secret of the shamir. Now the stones of the Temple would really be whole, as though they were created this way at the beginning of time. After all, this is the task of the shamir: to split mountains quietly, pleasantly, so that they become part of civilization.

All Shlomo wanted was to arrive at the truth without troubling himself to penetrate the different layers of human experience, which cloak the truth like a husk conceals its kernel. To what can he be compared? To one who swallows a nut in its shell. Can it work?

Shlomo wished to conquer Ashmedai because he desired to build a Temple that would last forever. However, he made a terrible error when he thought that he could imprison the evil yetzer by satisfying it. Ashmedai, imprisoned in the vaults of Shlomo’s heart, gained control over him and turned him into a laughingstock. He never had the shamir, for peace and perfection—shalom and shlemut—cannot be achieved by loosening restraints. The shamir must be sought from the wild rooster, which symbolizes wisdom. 48 “A man of understanding takes wise counsel” (Mishlei 1:5).

Though he was the wisest of all men, Shlomo paved the way for many who followed him throughout history, from early sectarians to contemporary groups, to make the same error. They think that the Torah can be categorized into what is essential and what is unimportant, what is primary and what is ancillary, what is inherent

40 Gittin 68b.
41 Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishma’el, Yitro, Mesekhta De-bahodesh 11 (on Shemot 20:21; p. 244 in the Horowitz-Rabin edition).
42 Ibid.
43 Bereishit Rabba 44:1.
44 Kohelet Rabba 7:44.
45 Quotes are from Kohelet 2:3-10.
46 See section J of the story.
47 Rosh Hashana 21b. See below, the essay titled: “The Structure of the State According to the Torah—Part I: Principles,” n. 49.
48 Iyov 38:36. See above, n. 9.
and what is an externality, what is the spirit and what is the letter—
and that it is possible to observe the essence while dispensing with
the nonessential. But this is not so!

R. Shimon b. Yohai taught: The Book of Devarim came and
prostrated itself before the Holy One. It said: “Master of the
Universe! You wrote in Your Torah that a contract that is
annulled in part is completely annulled. Yet Shlomo seeks to
annul an iota of my content!” The Holy One said to it:
“Shlomo and a thousand like him will be annulled, and
nothing of you will be annulled.”49

Yet even Shlomo recognized his error when he declared: “The
conclusion, when all has been heard: Fear God and observe His
mitzvot, for this is the whole of man” (Kohelet 12:13). But it was too
late, for the years had arrived “when you will say ‘I find no pleasure in
them’” (ibid. 1).50

Yet that heavenly voice continues to reverberate through the
generations: “that which He wrote is upright and true.”

THE INVERTED HALAKHIC OF SIMHAT TORAH

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More than any other day on the Jewish calendar, Simhat Torah
is a product of minhag. The Gemara says nothing about it
beyond the basic fact that its Torah reading is Ve-Zot ha-
Berakhah, the final section of the Torah.51 The practices of reading
the opening chapter of Joshua as the haftarah and beginning Bereishit
immediately thereafter, which stress the completion and
continuity of the Torah reading cycle, developed later. (The Talmud
selects a different haftarah.) In Talmudic times, it was little more
than yom tov sheni of Shemini Atzeret.

In his indispensable 1964 monograph, Toldot Hag Simhat Torah,
Avraham Ya’ari explains how starting in the era of the Geonim,
the day became a celebration for completing the cycle of Torah reading.
Ya’ari proceeds to document how various minhagim that accreted
over the centuries solidified into the “Simhat Torah” we know today.
An updated volume would surely focus on the ongoing developments
in Israel, where this creation of galut is now folded back into Shemini
Atzeret, as well as recent efforts to include women in the festivities.

In keeping with the minhag-driven nature of the day, halachic
discussions of Simhat Torah are marked by the fact that folk practices
frowned upon year-round are begrudgingly accepted (and in some
cases, eventually lauded) on Simhat Torah. From the time of the
Geonim to the present, the refrain recurring is that while a given practice is generally disfavored, mipnei ha-simnha hititu—it is
permitted owing to the joyous nature of Simhat Torah.

One example: Traditionally dancing was prohibited on yom tov,52 but
the Geonim permitted it due to the joy of celebrating the Torah.53
Later on, dancing became not just permitted but meritorious,54 and
some Hasidic thinkers went so far as to hold that hakofot can
overturn harsh decrees.55 Another case: kohanim are prohibited from
dukhenen while under the influence, which ordinarily mandates that
they forbear from drink until the conclusion of davening. On Simhat
Torah the priorities are inverted, as birkha kohanim is moved to
Shaharat to accommodate the inevitable le-hayim that will be
consumed.56

Much the same is true about many of the practices related to the
Torah and its reading. People are generally supposed to travel to the
Sefer Torah rather than relocate the scroll to the people. Yet on
Simhat Torah, scrolls are carried from one place to another to
enhance the festivities.57 Simhat Torah is the only time we lein at
night. One explanation for this custom is that one may not generally
remove a Torah from the aron for insufficient reason, but since the
Torahs are taken out for dancing, leining was reconned to provide a
halakhic rationale for their removal.58 Other examples include that on
Simhat Torah we read one section many times, allow a person to
have an aliya from two scrolls,59 give aliya to children, and allow
multiple people to come up and recite a berakhah for one aliya.60
None of these practices is otherwise the norm, and though each has
been subject to varying degrees of rabbinic disapproval or
acceptance, rabbis are asked not to protest too much, lest the mood
turn sour and the people curtail in the celebration of the Torah.61

Even Simhat Torah’s peripheral practices have raised concerns. Does
the huppah (canopy) placed over the hatonim’s heads violate the
prohibition of constructing an ohel (shelter) on yom tov?62 Is
perennial crowd favorite ha-Aderet ve-Haemunah so holy that Nusah
Ashkenaz must reserve it for Yom Kippur exclusively?63 And though we
have yet to find those who critique Ashkenazim’s attempts to imitate
Sefardic ululations while reciting the piyut mi-Pi Kel, this should
probably be abolished on grounds of cultural appropriation, or at the
very least because it is annoying.

Further examples include how R. Hai Gaon (d. 1038 Babylonia-Iraq)
yielded to the minhag of the hatan Torah placing on his head the

52 Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim 339:2.
53 See sources cited in R. Shabtai Lifshitz’s (Ukraine, 19th c.) Sha’arei Rahamim, a commentary to Sha’arei Ephraim, at 8:25.
54 See views of R. Meir of Premishlan, cited in Yom Tov Levinsky,
55 Levush, Orah Hayyim 669.
56 See Mishnah Berurah, Orah Hayyim 669-9.
57 See sources cited in R. Shabtai Lifshitz’s (Ukraine, 19th c.) Sha’arei Rahamim, a commentary to Sha’arei Ephraim, at 8:25.
58 See generally, Orah Hayyim 144:4, Mishnah Berurah, Orah Hayyim 669:2.
60 See Mishnah Berurah, Orah Hayyim 669-9.
61 See R. Shabtai Lifshitz’s (Ukraine, 19th c.) Sha’arei Rahamim, a commentary to Sha’arei Ephraim, at 8:25.
63 Magen Avraham Orah Hayyim 565:5.
ornaments that typically adorn the Torah.64 (By contrast, Rashba reports that R. Hai really prohibited the practice, but that it was too widespread to change.)65 Similar practices are recorded in Sefer ha-Manhig (R. Abraham b. Nathan ha-Yarhi; Provence, 12th c.), who expresses reservations that the hatanim will don the feminine scarves used to decorate the Torah, thereby violating beged ishah, and that those who sew and weave the ornamental fabrics violate the laws of yom tov.66 Maharik (R. Joseph Colon; d. 1480; Northern Italy) allowed the community to request the secular authorities to forcibly ban a kohen from attending shul, so that, per accepted custom, the first aliyah could be sold to the highest bidder, who donated the synagogue’s lighting needs for the year. Maharik took the opportunity to pen a lengthy paean to the power of communal minhag, even when it stands on shaky halakhic ground: “יהר ר”ר לא שותפ מגדל המקון אלא עלざ במדת קוסר ומשום מדת כו.”

More generally, Simhat Torah is typified by forms of merriment not otherwise present in synagogue life. We find reports of complex dance moves, daring acrobatic feats, and tests of physical strength reminiscent of the Talmud’s description of simhat bet ha-shoeiveah—which may serve as a precedent for aspects of these celebrations.67 (Though I am told these have mostly faded away, in the shul I grew up in, people would at times climb atop the rafters and drop behind the aron; and following davening, there was an annual chin-up contest featuring the Rabbi and other leaders to raise money for tzedakah.) Hard alcohol freely flows on Simhat Torah, even in shuls that otherwise run dry. It is not unheard of for someone to rise to the bimah, and ostentatiously make a berakhah on a shot of whiskey, an act unthinkable on any other day of the year, including Purim.

To be sure, not all practices were accepted, and Simhat Torah skeptics also have an impressive mesorah to rely upon. The Geonim strongly disapproved burning incense on the holiday, as it contradicts the Talmud’s express prohibition.68 R. Behaya disapproved of throwing fruit (today, candy) for children to collect, though the Talmud’s express prohibition. Moreover, only young children are involved in this, and we are not obligated to prevent them from violating prohibitions, as [the Talmud rules] a court is not required to prevent minors from eating non-kosher. . . But those who are already bar mitzvah may refrain. Further, though it is not for any legitimate purpose —since the second day of Yom Tov is not a Torah-level prohibition for in our time we are proficient in the correct dates of the calendar. Thus, only the first day of Yom Tov is mandated by Torah law, and we continue the practice of second day Yom Tov because the customs of our ancestors are maintained in our hands.

Further, though it was generally prohibited to set off what seems to be an early version of firecrackers due to hilkhot yom tov,69 it was permissible not to do so indirectly —using a candle set in place before the hag.70

Perhaps the most shocking practice is recorded in the name of R. Jacob Moelin (Germany; d. 1427), known as Maharil, the primary conduit of classical minhag Ashkenaz to contemporary practice (by way of Rema). The passage is worth quoting in full:75

אומר מהר”ל, משלו של משה מרגים תורה זעירה. במגזר אחר מושנט ההנה.

הרי органים בזdateTime נערך במגזר אחר. Maharil approved of it.

The Yekkish community of pre-war Frankfurt held dancing was not befitting the decorum appropriate for shul, and R. Dr. Joseph Breuer is reported to have rebuked youth once caught dancing after davening on Simhat Torah. Not all was gloomy, however: the gabbaim were permitted to wave the scrolls back and forth toward each other after Torah reading—which for Yekkes might constitute dancing.72

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64 Opinion recorded in R. Issac ibn Gihat, Sh’arei Simhah 1:118. Cited in Daniel Sperber, Minhagei Yisrael Vol. 1 at 128.
65 Shut Rashba meyuhasot la-Rambon 260. See also Sperber ibid.
66 Sefer ha-Manhig, Hilkhot Sukkah, p.418.
67 See sources collected by Aharon Arend, Rejoicing on Simhat Torah.
68 Cited in Teshuvot Maharik- Shoresh 9.
69 Sefer ha-Minhagim, Shemini Atzeret sect. 8. See also Eliya Rabbah 669:5.
70 See Sha’arei Ephraim at 8:62 and 10:16; See also Ya’ari, Toldat Hag Simhat Torah at 75-77.
71 Introduction to Orah Hayyim 669.
72 See the story recounted by Aharon Arend, Rejoicing on Simhat Torah, at note 1.

Further, though it was generally prohibited to set off what seems to be an early version of firecrackers due to hilkhot yom tov,73 it was permissible to do so indirectly— using a candle set in place before the hag.74

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encouraged them to steal from those stingy householders who did not give it to them voluntarily.] 76

While the text evinces some tension regarding the precise contours of Maharil’s position, 77 either way this source puts forward some rather shocking halakhic arguments. Children were permitted to burn the sukkah on Simhat Torah because it is only a yom tov sheni, which we keep only because minhag avoteinu be-yadeinu—in continuity of traditional practice. This argument rarely carries weight in other contexts, and typically is deployed only in instances of great need. Yet Maharil adopts it for nothing more than the “shtick” value of Simhat Torah.

Even more surprising is the report in the final paragraph. The writer emphasizes that though the wood was stolen from various householders, Maharil was pleased with these actions and even encouraged the youth. Whereas the Gemara debates whether a sukkah made of stolen materials is prohibited, 78 on Simhat Torah children were taught to steal sukkah materials to build the bonfire. (No word on whether there was an accompanying kumzitz in Maharil’s era, though Simha Assaf reports that the hatanei Torah would sponsor food and drink, and celebrate with the community around a bonfire.) 79

While the case of burning down the sukkot is the most eye-popping example, most of the literature on Simhat Torah raises the same basic question. Why are halakhic arguments and folk practices that are commonly rejected suddenly deemed acceptable?

One potential approach is found in the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1895-1975) analysis of the carnival and its literary analogue, the carnivalesque. Bakhtin pointed to the phenomenon whereby the otherwise tightly ordered medieval societies maintained temporary periods of celebration—carnivals—when the unofficial folk culture turned the regimented official culture upside down. During the carnival, boundaries were dissolved and hierarchies inverted; eccentric behavior was deemed acceptable and revered symbols satirically deployed. In Bakhtin’s understanding, the carnival was not simply a way of releasing social pressure, but the very process of temporarily inverting the dominant social structures simultaneously worked to reinforce them.

To be sure, not all of Bakhtin’s descriptors of the carnival find their analogue in Simhat Torah. There is no parallel to the debauchery, scatology, or sexual licentiousness which prevailed in the medieval analogue in Simhat Torah. There is no parallel to the debauchery, scatology, or sexual licentiousness which prevailed in the medieval analogue in Simhat Torah. There is no parallel to the debauchery, scatology, or sexual licentiousness which prevailed in the medieval analogue in Simhat Torah. Moreover, for all the minhagim developed over the centuries, Torah study was never one of them. Whereas Shavuot commemorates Torah as an idea that is celebrated by scholars engaging in its study, on Simhat Torah the Torah is democratized and treated as a thing—a heftza (in the pre-Brisker sense) that is held, touched, paraded around, danced with, hugged, and kissed, but not learned. The

76 The text in brackets appears in the same form in the Torat Hakhamei Ashkenaz edition of Maharil. The notes explain that it is found in a gloss to several of the earlier manuscripts.

77 See Darkhei Moshe to Orah Hayvim 669 and Bikurei Yaakov 669:5.

78 Sukkah 31a.

79 See Yom Tov Levinsky, Sefer ha-Moadim Vol. 4. at pp. 251.

are even recorded accounts of how in both Vilna and the yeshiva of Volozhin the congregation would fully prostrate themselves during Aleinu of Ma’ariv and Shaharit, in the manner performed on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. 80

Thus while a number of scholars have examined Megilat Esther and Purim through a Bakhtinian lens, 81 Simhat Torah may offer an even more telling case study. Purim has its share of carnival-like folk practices, but these are more grounded in Judaism’s official culture of Tanakh and Talmud. Further, most of the extreme Purim behavior takes place in social spheres outside the shul, whereas Simhat Torah’s celebrations are woven into the framework of davening. Finally, Purim’s most transgressive revelries are traditionally displayed via means unrelated to ordinary religious practice (masks, cross-dressing, and Purim shpiels), whereas Simhat Torah tends to shpiel shul life itself. 82 Simhat Torah thus resembles the Yamim Noraim as seen through a fun-house mirror. The sounds and symbols are similar but the meaning is purposefully distorted, as the motifs of the past month are reclaimed by the people and celebrated as folk custom.

Beginning with the first night of selihot, Jews have been adhering to the Halakhah’s precise and consuming schedule of pre-dawn prayers, fast days, and hours upon hours of davening, framed by intense focus on sin, repentance, and self-analysis. Sukkot, though known as the time of joy, is also regulated by the complex halakhot of the sukkah, lulav, and etrog, and is punctuated by a demanding schedule of prayers. Over the course of the long galut, the ecstatic, boundary-pressing festivities of the ancient beit ha-shoeivah were muted, while the mood of the Yamim Noraim reappeared in form of leining Megilat Kohel as well as the judgment themes associated with Hoshanah Rabbah and tefillat geshem and yizkor on Shemini Atzeret.

Simhat Torah is made up of folk practices that rub against both the somber spirit of the preceding holidays and the halakhic norms of how yom tov is celebrated. Further, following Bakhtin’s analysis, this day of inversion inevitably yields to a democratizing ethos. Simhat Torah is the only day where every male—even children—is called up to the Torah. (I leave to others the issue of whether women may receive aliya, but note only that in some communities that do not otherwise offer aliya to women, it is emerging as a folk practice specifically on Simhat Torah).

Moreover, for all the minhagim developed over the centuries, Torah study was never one of them. Whereas Shavuot commemorates Torah as an idea that is celebrated by scholars engaging in its study, on Simhat Torah the Torah is democratized and treated as a thing—a heftza (in the pre-Brisker sense) that is held, touched, paraded around, danced with, hugged, and kissed, but not learned. The 80 See sources cited in Levinsky, ibid., 321.


82 Many Simhat Torah customs detailed herein are absent from the Israeli landscape, where it is combined with the more somber Shemini Atzeret. Thus in Israel, some traditional Simhat Torah customs have migrated to Purim. Indeed, the avant garde of Israeli Purim parodies look to the mahzor and the shul experience as their primary sources of inspiration.
teachings of the Hasidic masters as well as the Vilna Gaon and R. Soloveitchik add that we dance in a circle to emphasize how every participant is equidistant from the spiritual center, and another ma’amor explains that Torah scrolls remain closed to demonstrate that scholars and am ha-aratzim share equally in the Torah. To the extent formalized learning takes place, it is primarily through the very recent minhag of instituting shiurim by and for women designed to recognize women and offer appropriate programing during the holiday’s largely male-centric activities. The net result is that while men are functionally patur, women are encouraged to learn Torah: an inversion indeed!

In addition to offering a release, Simhat Torah reaffirms the community’s dominant values. The celebrations, whatever their excesses, literally and figuratively revolve around Torah. The day has obtained its character through a millennium of iterative dialogue between popular custom and halakhic sensibilities. Further, some of the most halakhically problematic practices have not survived, while others were transformed as they were absorbed into quasi-official Halakhah. Moreover, the lightheartedness of Simhat Torah is impossible absent its proximity to the awe of Yom Kippur. The symbolic function of the kittel or Yom Kippur nusah can only be meaningfully inverted within a community that assigns them deep normative significance. The day’s halakhic abnormalities stand out specifically against the backdrop of rigorous halakhic compliance.

Finally, Simhat Torah recalls that religious life becomes possible when the unfathomable ein sof of God’s transcendence is manifest in human action and society. The season that began Selihot night centered on the image of the עלה בנהן—God, obscured in mists of clouds, descending on the mountain’s peak to speak with Moshe while the people stand far below—concludes with a day that owes it character to popular imagination. The push-and-pull of popular instinct, rabbinic mediation, and communal acceptance constructs a holiday exemplifying that our ancestors’ customs are in our hands.

Thank you to Tzvi Sinensky, Elli Fischer, Itamar Rosenzweig, and the Lehrhaus editorial team for helpful comments and references, and to my frequent Simhat Torah companion Avery Samet, with whom I’ve discussed these ideas for many years.

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83 Bnei Yisaskhar: Tishrei 13:2; see also R. Hershel Schachter, Nefesh Ha-Rav, p. 221, interpreting the “dance-circle of the righteous” described in Ta’anit 31a.

RABBINIC CREATIVITY AND THE WATERS THAT WOULD CONSUME THE WORLD

LEVI MORROW studied at Yeshivat Orayta, Yeshivat Har Etzion, and received semikha from the Shehebar Sephardic Center in the Old City of Jerusalem.

What is the purpose of rabbinic law, in all its creativity? What is its relationship to the law of the biblical text? These questions lie at the very heart of contemporary Jewish existence, and they are questions that standard codes of Halakhah do not answer. Instead, answers to these questions, and others like them, are found in the rabbinic non-legal exegeses and narratives known as “aggadah.” One such narrative, recorded in the midst of a discussion of the original context of the fifteen “Song of Ascent” psalms (Sukkah 53a-b), may answer some of our questions:

Rabbi Hisda said to a certain rabbi who was arranging his aggadot before him, ‘Have you heard in regards to what David composed his fifteen Songs of Ascent?’ The other replied, ‘Thus said Rabbi Yohanan: When David dug the Pits (שתין), the Deep (יד הענן) rose up and threatened to submerge the world, and David then uttered the fifteen Songs of Ascent and caused the waves to subside.’ ‘But if so, [asked Rabbi Hisda,] shouldn’t it be ‘Songs of Descent,’ instead of ‘Ascent?’

‘Since you reminded me,’ the other replied, ‘[I may say that] it was stated: When David dug the Pits, the Deep rose and threatened to submerge the world. ‘Is there anyone who knows,’ David asked, ‘if it is permitted to write the [Divine] Name upon a sherd and throw it into the Deep so that its waves will subside?’ No one said anything, so David said, ‘If anyone knows the answer and does not speak, may he be strangled!’ At which point Ahitofel offered an a fortiori argument on his own: ‘If, for the purpose of establishing harmony between man and wife, the Torah said, ‘Let My name that was written in sanctity be blotted out by the water (in the biblical law of the suspected wife or sotah),’ how much more so may it be done in order to establish peace in the world!’ He therefore said to him, ‘It is permitted!’ [David] then wrote the [divine] Name upon a sherd, threw it into the Deep and it subsided sixteen thousand cubits. When he saw that it had subsided to such a great extent, he said, ‘The nearer it is to the earth, the better the earth can be kept watered.’ He uttered the fifteen Songs of Ascent and the Deep rose fifteen thousand cubits and remained one thousand cubits [below the surface].’

Ulla remarked: Learn from there that the thickness of the earth’s surface is one thousand cubits. But do we not see that one only has to dig a little for water to emerge?—Rabbi Mesharsheya answered: That is due to the high level of the Euphrates.
This narrative is a compelling drama in its own right, but understanding the specific ideas it conveys requires grappling with the older traditions with which it is engaged. The Bible has a complex relationship with the Ancient Near Eastern myths that form its cultural background, at times adapting them, at times polemicizing against them, and at times doing some of both. In *Sinai and Zion*, Jon Levenson discusses biblical texts about the establishment of the Temple quelling chaotic waters, such as Psalms 24:1-3:

> The earth is the Lord's and all that it holds, the world and its inhabitants. For he founded it upon the ocean, set it on the nether streams. Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place?

This psalm draws a straight line from the establishing of the world upon the waters to the Temple on Mount Zion. Levenson argues that this passage, and others like it, are an extension of a common mythical theme from Israel’s cultural background. In ancient eastern mythologies, the chief god often takes his place at the head of the gods by virtue of combating and defeating the primordial waters and thereby creating the stable state of the world as man knows it. “Creation, kingship, and temple thus form an indissoluble triad; the containment of the sea is the continuing proof of their eternal validity.” Levenson argues that this myth develops in certain biblical texts into the building of the Temple as the establishment of a more perfect realm, and the establishing of God’s dominion in the world. Levenson quotes a variety of biblical verses to this effect, including the ones quoted above.

Levenson mentions our narrative as a rabbinic manifestation of this theme, showing how it persisted long after the biblical period:

> More fundamentally, in rabbinic cosmology, Mount Zion is the capstone which keeps in place the waters of chaos whose subjugation made creation and hence all civilization possible. Were it not for the Temple on Zion, those angry waters would surge from the abyss in which they are imprisoned, undo the work of creation, and return the world to the primordial chaos which is described in Gen 1:2. In fact, some rabbinic sayings mention moments when precisely such a reversion threatened to become reality.

The waters threaten to destroy the world and when they are quieted a stable world is established. This is what takes place at the end of the narrative in the discussion about where the waters stabilized and the thickness of the Earth; the discussion is about the nature of the newly established state of the world (compare Genesis 8:22, which depicts the establishment of the regular order of nature after the flood in the time of Noah).

At this point, however, I part ways with Levenson. He argues that in the rabbis thought the temple “keeps in place” the waters that would otherwise consume the world. As proof for this he quotes the first few lines of our narrative, wherein it is stated that “David then uttered the fifteen Songs of Ascent and caused the waves to subside.” Ignoring the fact that it is the psalms, not the Temple, that restrains the waters in this quotation, it is critical to note that in the full text of the passage from the Bavli, quoted above, this tradition is rejected as failing to adequately explain the relationship between the chaotic waters and the *Song of Ascent* psalms. In place of this tradition, the Bavli records the lengthier narrative with its emphasis on Ahitofel’s legal argumentation.

In this tradition it is not psalms, nor even the building of the Temple that calms the waters; it is rabbinic-style creativity. The text even emphasizes the creative nature of Ahitofel’s argument by saying that he formulated the argument “on his own.” Ahitofel’s argument takes the form of the *a fortiori* argument, “if X then certainly Y,” so common in rabbinic discourse. Moreover, Ahitofel’s argument overrides the biblical prohibition of erasing God’s name (*Shavu’ot* 35a-b) and leads to the establishment of harmony and calm in the world.

This narrative provides an explanation of the purpose of (or, more radically, a justification for) rabbinic legal creativity. The biblical law prevented David from stopping the waters that were threatening the world until the decisive action of a rabbinic figure, Ahitofel, frees his hands. The picture created is one where the biblical law cannot always properly respond to the chaos of the world in which its adherents live. Responding to this world requires the flexibility and creativity so prevalent throughout much of rabbinic discourse.

Our narrative asserts an answer to our original question about the purpose of rabbinic law. What of our second question, on the relationship between biblical and rabbinic law? A more thorough examination shows that our narrative has something to say on this topic as well. To this end, we will look further at both Levenson’s arguments in *Sinai and Zion* and the biblical texts that serve as the basis for Ahitofel’s argument.

Levenson’s goal in *Sinai and Zion* is to lay out the biblical traditions that surround the two mountains Sinai and Zion in the Hebrew Bible. His primary focus is on the unique covenant tied to each locale, the Sinaitic covenant of Moses and the Davidic covenant at Zion. The Sinaitic covenant is a covenant of law. It binds the entire people of Israel to follow the laws of God, who rules over them directly and cares for them. Fulfillment of the law is a condition of the covenant, and if Israel disobeys then they have broken the covenant and God will abandon them.

The Davidic covenant is between God and the Davidic line, as opposed to the nation of Israel, and is entirely unconditional. God has bound Himself to the Davidic line, promising that a Davidic king will always reign over Israel as God’s representative, without making any demands regarding their behavior. Thus these two covenants, Levenson argues, create a basic tension that persists throughout the biblical corpus.

With that in mind, let’s return to Ahitofel’s argument in our narrative and examine its relationship to the biblical law:
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\textit{a fortiori} argument on his own: “If, for the purpose of establishing harmony between man and wife, the Torah said, Let My name that was written in sanctity be blotted out by the water, how much more so may it be done in order to establish peace in the world!” He, therefore, said to him, “It is permitted!”

The 

\textit{a fortiori} argument is a classical form of rabbinic exegesis that works by using a logical hierarchy between two situations to transfer a rule from one situation to the other. The first situation in Ahitofel’s argument is the biblical law of the suspected wife, wherein God’s name is erased as part of the process of resolving the husband’s suspicions about his wife, indicating that creating interspousal harmony and saving a marriage is important enough to permit violating the biblical law forbidding the erasure of God’s name.

This idea that there is a measure of importance which can permit the erasure of God’s name is identified by Ahitofel as the inner logic of the suspected wife procedure. By whatever measure one determines that marital harmony is important, it is fairly intuitive that saving the world is even more important. The inner logic of the suspected wife procedure would therefore of course permit the erasure of God’s name to save the world. The 

\textit{a fortiori} closely follows the logic of the legal procedures of the \textit{sotah} law, intuitively extending its application to his situation.

Detailing this process is important, as it enables a more nuanced perspective on the role of rabbinic creativity. Rabbinic exegesis of this sort is not an attempt to replace a biblical law that has nothing to say to a world other than the one it was given into. Instead, it is an attempt to bridge the gap that developed between the canonized law and the ever-changing reality. It does not replace the biblical law but extends it, according to its own internal logic, to contexts it had not previously encountered.

The significance of this is in how we perceive rabbinic law. Rabbinic law could be seen as rendering biblical law irrelevant, replaced and abandoned in the dustbins of history. However, rabbinic law could also, and according to this argument, should, be seen as maintaining biblical law’s relevance. By taking the inner logic of the biblical law as its point of origin, rabbinic creativity guarantees the continued relevance of biblical law. When Ahitofel crafts the argument that enables calming of the primordial waters, he is affirming biblical law rather than superseding it.

This understanding of the relationship between biblical law and rabbinic creativity bears great significance for the relationship between the Sinaitic and Davidic covenants. The two covenants exist throughout the Bible as contradictory conceptions of God’s relationship with the nation of Israel, the tension between them minimized only by virtue of their confinement in separate passages. Sometimes there are passages, however, that deal with both the Sinaitic and Davidic covenants, and as such they perforce attempt to resolve the tension between the two.

One method of resolution is what Levenson calls “the subordination of the Davidic covenant to the Sinaitic,” in which “the entitlement of the house of David is no longer indefeasible; it is contingent upon the observance of mitzvot.” These texts side with the Sinaitic covenant over the Davidic one by making the dynastic reign of the Davidic kings dependent on their observance of the laws of Moses. Our rabbinic narrative presents us with a similar but more extreme resolution. The restraint of primordial chaos, a role usually reserved for the king and his temple, has been transferred to a rabbinic figure and to the law. Our text depicts the Davidic covenant of kingship as not just subordinated to but as replaced by the Sinaitic covenant of the law, albeit in its rabbinic extension.

Our narrative therefore presents us with a claim about the purpose of rabbinic legal creativity as well as a vision of the law, both biblical and rabbinic, winning out over the king and temple as the center of the covenant between God and Israel. It utilizes tropes from ancient near eastern mythology to connect the law to the stability of the created world, and in doing so it places the temple that is so central in these mythologies. These themes, the stabilizing effect of the law and the displacement of the temple by the law, appear in other places in the Bavli as well. “God made a condition with the works of creation: ’If Israel accepts the Torah, you will continue to exist, and if not, I will return you to chaos and void” (\textit{Shabbat} 88a). “Since the day the Temple was destroyed, God has no [place] in the world other than the four cubits of the law” (\textit{Berakhot} 8a).

Taken altogether, the force of our narrative lies behind the idea that rabbinic legal creativity maintains the covenant of the law, carrying it into an exilic world in which a covenant of king and temple had ceased to be relevant. For the contemporary reader, our narrative suggests answers to some of the fundamental questions of Jewish life: rabbinic law is intended as a law that responds to a changing and chaotic world, and it does so not by replacing the biblical law, but by applying the biblical law’s logic to an ever-changing reality.
DON’T FORGET DAVID’S LITERARY TEMPLE!
A REBUTTAL TO LEVI MORROW

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Last year in his article, “Rabbinic Creativity and the Waters that would Consume the World,” Levi Morrow disputes my citing a passage from the Babylonian Talmud (Sukkah 53a–b) as an example of the rabbinic understanding of the Temple as “the capstone which keeps in place the waters of chaos” (Sinai and Zion, 133).

His first objection is that it is “the psalms [that David recites], not the Temple, that restrain the waters in this quotation.” This, however, is a distinction without a difference. A temple is more than a building; it comprises also the rites carried out within the sacred precincts. In David’s time, the Jerusalem Temple, of course, had not yet been built. The “pits” that he dug in this passage, thus releasing the primal waters, were those that were to underlie the future sanctuary; the mishnah that calls forth this discussion in the Gemara, in fact, associates the fifteen psalms that he recited (Psalms 120–134) with a structure of fifteen steps within the Temple complex (m. Sukkah 5:4; b. Sukkah 51b).

Whether literally valid or not, the association makes sense: references to “Jerusalem,” the Temple city, occur five times within those fifteen short poems. Mentions of “Zion,” the Temple mountain, occur fully seven times. One of the fifteen poems, Psalm 122, speaks of a pilgrimage to the Temple; another, Psalm 127, ascribed to Solomon, builder of God’s “House,” speaks of God as the true house/Temple-builder; still another, Psalm 134, seems to derive from the changing of the guard, as it were, in the Temple. All this renders highly unlikely the idea that the efficacy of the psalms David recites to subdue the waters was unconnected to the Temple.

Rather, David is depicted as evoking the Temple liturgically before it existed, just as Jews in the time of the Talmud itself (and into our own day) would evoke it liturgically after it had been destroyed.

Mr. Morrow’s second objection is that “in the full text of the passage from the Bavli… this tradition is rejected as failing to adequately explain the relationship between the chaotic waters and the Song of Ascent psalms.” The “full text” that he quotes, however, includes a statement in the name of Rabbi Yohanan in which the psalms have exactly the effect that Morrow disputes: “When David dug the Pits (חדיון, the Deep (תקוה)), rose up and threatened to submerge the world, and David then uttered the fifteen Songs of Ascent and caused the waves to subside.”

In order to secure his idea that it was actually “rabbinic creativity” that secured the happy outcome, Morrow disallows Rabbi Yohanan’s statement in favor of the ensuing and contrary tradition that attributes the result to David’s inscribing the Divine Name upon a sherd that he then threw into the Deep, having secured permission to do so from the sage Ahitophel. Even if we accept the claim that the appearance of this variant indicates that the first tradition “is rejected,” my original observation in Sinai and Zion about the Temple as the cosmic capstone stands.

Note that even in the variant that Morrow prefers, the drama takes place at the site of the Temple; it is the name of the God of Israel that subdues the chaotic Deep; and it is the recitation of the fifteen Temple-centered “Songs of Ascent” that converts that erstwhile agent of destruction into life-sustaining waters. This version, too, thus exhibits considerable affinity with the old, cosmological-mythological materials to which I referred in the passage in Sinai and Zion with which Morrow took issue.

Were we dealing in b. Sukkah 53a–b solely with what Morrow calls “rabbinic creativity” and not with the traditions to which I drew attention, the upsurge of the Deep could have been parried with an innovative halakhic insight about, say, the observance of the Sabbath, the laws of purchase and sale, or the dimensions of a sukkah. Fortunately, in interpreting texts like these, we need not choose between the cosmological-mythical dimension and “rabbinic creativity.” Both can be at work, as in this text they indeed are.

Finally, although I am honored that Levi Morrow found something of use to him in Sinai and Zion, I would like to note that I have treated the subject at hand at much greater length in Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence, and it is actually in the latter volume that my fullest thoughts on the matter appear.

KOHELET AS INTERTEXT

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Kohelet is not only multivocal and internally contradictory; it also stands in tense dialogue with High Holiday liturgy. The intertextual conversation between Kohelet and this canon offers much in the way of understanding faith and the human experience.

Central to the amidah on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is the third berakah, beginning with the anomalous term, הבן, “and so.” In this berakah, the petitioner makes four related requests of God:

1. That God induce all people fear God and to understand that God is Sovereign:

בעון תמנה על אלוהים על עולם ... ויהוא על עולם ... כיון שלמה

And so, place the fear of You, Lord our God, over all that You have made… and all who were made will stand in awe of You… for we know, Lord our God, that all dominion is laid out before You

2. That the nation of Israel and all who have hoped for God receive the redemption they have been waiting for:

בעון י다가 וליירא אדוני 이상 ... ויהוא על עולם ... ויהוא על עולם

Were we dealing in this berakah solely with what Morrow calls “rabbinic creativity” and not with the traditions to which I drew attention, the upsurge of the Deep could have been parried with an innovative halakhic insight about, say, the observance of the Sabbath, the laws of purchase and sale, or the dimensions of a sukkah. Fortunately, in interpreting texts like these, we need not choose between the cosmological-mythical dimension and “rabbinic creativity.” Both can be at work, as in this text they indeed are.
And so, place honor, Lord, upon Your people, praise on those who fear You...the confidence to speak into all who long for You...the flourishing of pride to David Your servant.

3. That the righteous will be happy with the state of affairs, while the wicked will finally be quieted and lose their power:

And so, righteous people will see and rejoice...and iniquity shall stop up its mouth...when You sweep the evil empire from the earth.

4. That God rule the world by Godself, in justice and righteousness:

The posture assumed in this prayer is a recognition that not all people currently fear God or know that God is Sovereign, (because) those who fear God lay unredeemed, while the wicked are empowered.

Only when the righteous get what they deserve and the wicked get what they deserve will all be able to recognize God as the true Judge. In fact, this passage starting with (because) is a petitionary and reverent reframing of a passage in Kohelet [8:10-14] that engages the very same theme, the suffering of the righteous and the empowerment of the wicked:

A few instances:

I counsel you: keep the sovereign's command, and that in regard of the oath of God.

No human being has authority over the lifebreath—to hold back the lifebreath; there is not authority over the day of death. There is no mustering out from war; wickedness is powerless to save its owner.

All these things I observed; I noted all that went on under the sun, mustering out from war; wickedness is powerless to save its owner.

Who is truly sovereign? The human ruler, who is too powerless to overcome their own mortality? The earthly sovereigns, who use power to harm their subjects, what the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur liturgy might call "כבוד תושב שמה", the evil empire? Or is it God, Who sovereigns abide? The reverent requests we have been making over the High Holidays, for God to show God's Providence over the world, are actually supplicatory reworkings of Kohelet's bold and somewhat irrelevant empirical assertions about life.

Arguably, this difference between Kohelet's frustrated faith and our liturgy's petitionary faith can be summed up in a word: "בהב". It is the key word of the Book of Ecclesiastes, and it shows up again and again in our High Holiday mahzor. However, in our mahzor, "בהב" means "floating and/or emptiness, like vapor":

הלא כל הגבורים כאין לפניך ואנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגליו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגליו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגליו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגליו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגליו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תkerikov בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תkerikov בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תkerikov בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו עליכם ברעלא... תкерיקו בראותיך עריסים ברגלו... אנשי שמרו ע...
In context of Kohelet, however, the more convincing translation of הָבַל is “absurdity,” as Michael V. Fox translates. It is an accusation that there is an absurd disconnect between what should happen and what does happen. This absurdity rears its head in instances of theodicy—when bad things happen to good people, or the reverse—and even in instances of mortality, where a person recognizes that despite all of their achievements, it all comes to nothing. Hevel represents not humility but indignation.

What does this dialogue between liturgical reverence and Kohelet’s complicated and ongoing cycle of observation, outrage, and faith, offer us?

First, it offers validation, for many people do in fact experience both Kohelet’s and the liturgy’s orientation towards faith: both the ambivalence and anger borne by observing or experiencing tragedy and injustice and a desire to appeal directly to God as redeemer, to pray for clearer intervention.

Moreover, these attitudes need not be mutually exclusive: a person might experience these two general orientations at different points along the same path, within the same life, and even within the same challenging experience. Likewise, one orientation might lead to the other. Imagine the person who beseeches God directly for help, only to find herself or himself drowning in anger and clawing for tenacity in their faith when those prayers do not seem to have been answered. And the reverse—certain scenes in the Book of Kohelet depict a narrator shifting from ruminating about God’s working in the world to recognizing God’s Presence, even if Kohelet never actually turns directly to God to pray.

But the conversation between the liturgy and Kohelet offers something additional that is less about the sense and direction that the liturgy makes of Kohelet, or vice versa, and more about what Kohelet adds to the conversation.

What is most radical about Kohelet is not his empirically based understanding of life, though that is radical. It is not his clinging to faith even without full understanding, though that is challenging.

What is most radical about Kohelet is his never-ending oscillation between those two. Kohelet never actually makes peace with human limitation; instead, he comes up with a modus operandi for living a good life: he adjures his reader to fear God, but is simultaneously unwilling to give up his quest for deeper understanding (12:9):

לֹא, לֹא חָכָם קֹהֶלֶת, וְרָאוֹן, וְיֹתֵר, שֶהָיָה קֹהֶלֶת חָכָם, עוֹד, לִמַּד -דַעַת אֶת -הָעָם, וְׁאִזֵן וְׁחִקֵר, תִּקֵן מְשָלִים הַרְׁבֵה.

And besides that Kohelet was wise, he also taught the people knowledge; yea, he pondered, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs.

For Kohelet, the continuous cycle of learning, thinking, observing, clinging to faith, and starting that process over again actually becomes the meaning of life. The medium is the message. Arguably, the liturgy on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is part of that cycle—the clinging-to-faith moment acted out in ritual and in speech directly to God. Kohelet, however, reminds us that an honest and profound life entails navigating this pattern over and over again, continuously reaching for an ultimately unrealizable understanding and returning to the keystone of faith.

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