JOSEPH AND THE IMAGERY OF CLOTHING

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A significant portion of the latter part of the Book of Genesis focuses on the life of Joseph, briefly describing his life as a teenager in his father’s home in the Land of Canaan and tracing the many challenges he faces until his eventual rise to power in Egypt. Throughout the storyline, clothing plays a pivotal role and appears at each critical stage of the narrative. In particular, the imagery of clothing is used in a range of different ways to develop and highlight various themes of the story. The narrative’s repeated use of clothing invites the reader to consider the interplay between the imagery of clothing in the Joseph story and the account at the beginning of Genesis when God provides clothing to the first man and woman after they sinned by eating from the Tree of Knowledge (see 3:21). In particular, the narrative invites us to consider the extent to which the actors in the Joseph narrative – and by extension we – recognize clothing as a gift from God and use it in a manner consistent with the ideals demanded of us.

Clothing appears at the very beginning of the Joseph narrative. Having finally returned to the Land of Canaan, and intending to settle down peacefully with his family, Joseph’s father, Jacob (also known as Israel), presents him with a coat (37:3-5):

Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat with long sleeves (Heb. ‘ketonet passim’). And when his brethren saw that their father loved

\[1\] All references are to the Book of Genesis unless indicated otherwise.

\[2\] Some commentators understand the ketonet passim as referring to a striped coat, possibly one of many colors.
him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

According to the text, Joseph holds a special place in his father’s heart “because he was the son of his [Jacob’s] old age.” In this context, the coat, the ketonet passim, is a symbol of fatherly love and represents the special relationship Jacob enjoys with Joseph. Although the description of being “the son of his old age” is equally, if not even more, applicable to Joseph’s younger brother, Benjamin, it may be that Benjamin was too young at this time to have developed such a special relationship with his father. Further, Joseph was the firstborn of his mother, Rachel, whom Jacob loved more than his other wives (see 29:30). For this reason as well, Jacob may have expressed greater love for Joseph than for all the other brothers, including Benjamin.

The text need not be read, however, to imply that Jacob did not love his other children. To the contrary, by stating that “Israel loved Joseph more than all his children,” the text implies that Jacob loved his other sons as well, albeit to a lesser degree. Nevertheless, the greater love displayed toward Joseph, as expressed through the gift of the ketonet passim, engenders jealousy and animosity on the part of his brothers. On the one hand, the brothers’ feelings may be nothing more than expressions of the expected sibling rivalry that occurs when one child is favored over others. But why, then, such an intense hatred toward Joseph?

From the brothers’ perspective, Jacob’s gift of the ketonet passim to Joseph may have represented much more than simply an ordinary gift. Instead, as far as the brothers were concerned, it symbolized Jacob’s passing the mantle of leadership to Joseph. The earlier chapters in the Book of Genesis describe an ongoing selection process in which, following God’s selection of Abraham, only one son in each generation is chosen to continue the special covenantal relationship with God. That is, Isaac is chosen over Ishmael, and Jacob is chosen over Esau. As far as Jacob’s sons are aware, the selection process is not complete, and only one of the brothers will be chosen to continue the covenantal relationship. The brothers may have viewed the gift of the ketonet passim, coupled with Jacob’s love for Joseph, as confirmation that Joseph will be the chosen one of their generation, whereas they will be rejected as outcasts from the family. It is no surprise, then, that the ketonet passim gives rise to hatred on the part of Joseph’s brothers.³

The story continues with Joseph’s two dreams, one about his brothers’ sheaves of grain bowing down to his, and the other about the sun, moon, and stars bowing down to him. While the text does not expressly indicate what triggered Joseph’s dreams, it suggests that the gift from his father, i.e., the ketonet passim, engenders jealousy and animosity on the part of his brothers.

³ Regarding whether Jacob himself intended to pass the mantle of leadership in the service of God to Joseph, see, e.g., Rabbi E. Lunshitz in his Kli Yakarto Genesis 37:3 (explaining that Jacob handed over the position of the firstborn to Joseph and gave him the ketonet passim as a symbol of his service to God, which was originally the responsibility of the firstborn); see also Abravanel, commentary to parashat va-yeishev ch. 37 (Bnei Arbael edition, p. 364, left column) (Jerusalem 5724).
passim, served as the catalyst for those dreams. That is, the text suggests a direct link between Jacob’s giving the coat to Joseph, and Joseph’s dreams about becoming a leader and ruler. These two dreams only serve to confirm what the brothers already believe, that Joseph will be receiving the mantle of leadership. But not only did Joseph’s brothers interpret the coat as a symbol of royalty, apparently Joseph himself did as well.

Jacob subsequently sends Joseph in search of his brothers, who are tending their sheep near Dotan. Still jealous of their younger brother because of the ketonet passim and his dreams, the brothers confront Joseph, strip him of his kutonet, and throw him into a pit: “And it came to pass, when Joseph came to his brethren, that they stripped Joseph of his coat, the long sleeved coat that was on him. And they took him, and cast him into a pit” (37:23-24).

In Dotan, a good distance from their father’s home, the brothers need not worry about how their father might react to their actions against Joseph. Thus, as quickly as Joseph received the special garment from his father, it is taken from him by his brothers in the blink of an eye. When the brothers strip Joseph of the ketonet passim, he loses not only a piece of clothing, but the respect that the kutonet represents and the leadership that it symbolizes. Joseph’s loss of power – if indeed he ever had any – occurs in an instant.

An interesting question is how to interpret “his coat, the long sleeved coat that was on him.” The plain meaning would appear to be that the phrase “the long sleeved coat that was on him” elaborates on the phrase “his coat,” to emphasize that the brothers did not simply strip Joseph of just any garment, but that they stripped him precisely of the special garment their father had given Joseph and that was the cause of their jealousy and hatred.

Nevertheless, some commentators, apparently understanding the verse as if it read “his coat and the long sleeved coat that was on him,” interpret the verse as indicating that the brothers removed Joseph’s ordinary kutonet, which served as his basic clothing, as well as the special ketonet passim. That is, Joseph was thrown into the pit naked. In this view, the brothers stripped Joseph not only of the leadership role represented by the special kutonet given to him by their father, but they also stripped him of the fundamental human dignity represented by his ordinary kutonet.

In an attempt to conceal their misdeeds, the

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4 See Rashi and Ibn Ezra; compare to Abravanel who disagrees, positing that they stripped Joseph only of the ketonet ha-passim.

5 According to a midrash, not only did Joseph lose his clothing at this juncture, but his brothers gained clothing (i.e., shoes) by selling their brother. See Daat Mikra to Amos 2:6, footnote 39. Cf. the piyyut Eleh Ezkerah in Mussaf Yom ha-Kippurim, p. 586 in the ArtScroll Hebrew-English Mahzor) (“Then what of your ancestors who sold their brother, to a caravan of Ishmaelites, they peddled him, and gave him away for shoes.”). On the one hand, the point of the midrash seems to be that the brothers received something of little value (i.e., shoes) in exchange for their brother. Yet from the brothers’ perspective, given their relationship with Joseph, clothing was everything. For them, even shoes represented something significant.
brothers dip Joseph’s kutonet in animal blood and deceive their father Jacob into thinking that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal (37:31-35):

And they took Joseph’s coat, and killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the coat in the blood; and they sent the coat with long sleeves, and they brought it to their father; and said, This we have found: know now whether it be thy son’s coat or no. And he knew it, and said, It is my son’s coat; an evil beast has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn in pieces. And Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days . . . but he refused to be comforted.

The ketonet passim thus changes from a symbol of love, beauty, dignity, and leadership, to a sign of tragedy and death. Although the brothers agreed to sell Joseph rather than kill him or let him die in the pit, dipping Joseph’s kutonet into blood may symbolically have been, for them, Joseph’s death knell. Although the brothers did not murder Joseph, as far as they are concerned, for all intents and purposes he is dead.

The brother’s actions also transform the ketonet passim into an instrument of deceit and mistaken identity. That is, Joseph’s brothers intentionally deceive their father into thinking that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal. Indeed, bringing the blood-soaked coat to Jacob has the desired effect: Jacob assumes Joseph is dead and, upon seeing the blood-soaked garment, he concludes that “an evil beast has devoured him” (37:33), thereby unknowingly tracking the language of the brothers’ original plan: “Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, An evil beast has devoured him: and we shall see what will become of his dreams” (37:20). In an instance of “measure for measure,” Jacob, who years ago had tricked his own father Isaac by wearing the clothing of his brother Esau (27:15-23), is now deceived through the use of the blood-soaked kutonet. Thus, Jacob’s failure to appreciate the true state of affairs based on his son’s blood-soaked clothing mirrors his father Isaac’s mistaking Jacob for Esau years earlier.

After being removed from the pit, Joseph is taken to Egypt and sold as a slave to Potiphar. The story quickly moves to yet another sequence of events in which clothing plays a central role in Joseph’s life. In this case, Potiphar’s wife attempts to seduce Joseph, who is forced to leave behind his garment as he flees the house (39:12-18)

And she caught him his garment, saying, Lie with me: and he left his garment in her hand, and fled, and went outside. And it came to pass, when she saw that he had left his garment in her hand, and was fled outside, that she called to the men of her house, and spoke to them, saying, See, he has brought in a Hebrew to us to mock us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I cried with a loud voice: and it came to pass, when he heard that I lifted up my
voice and cried, that he left his garment with me, and fled, and went outside. And she laid up his garment by her, until his lord came home. And she spoke to him according to these words, saying, The Hebrew servant, whom thou hast brought to us, came in to me to have his sport with me. And it came to pass, as I lifted up my voice and cried, that he left his garment with me, and fled outside.

For the second time, Joseph loses his clothing. In this case, however, it is not Joseph’s brothers who strip him of his clothing; instead, Joseph himself leaves behind his garment in the hands of Potiphar’s wife as he flees from her attempt to seduce him. In the span of just a few short verses, the text describes these events three times, albeit with subtle differences. First, the text describes the events as they actually unfold. Next, Potiphar’s wife tells the events to the “men of her house.” Finally, she informs her husband of what transpired. In each instance, the fact that Joseph left behind his garment appears as a central feature of the story. That is, the clothing serves as evidence of Joseph’s alleged indiscretion and a symbol of his alleged guilt.

Some commentators go so far as to suggest that Joseph ran out of the house naked. Although this interpretation is not required by a straightforward reading of the verses, the vision of Joseph fleeing the house naked makes the story even more dramatic. Such an interpretation also may represent a literary inversion of Joseph’s earlier plight when, according to some opinions, he was thrown naked into the pit by his brothers. Here, however, instead of being thrown into a pit, Joseph flees outside so as to escape from the confines of the house and Potiphar’s wife.

As used in the present story, the word for clothing (‘beged) also may hint at another meaning of the same three-letter root b-g-d, i.e., “betrayal.” In particular, Potiphar’s wife uses the garment to support her implicit allegations against her husband (i.e., that Joseph’s actions indicate a betrayal by her husband, who brought Joseph into his house). Thus, Potiphar’s wife states to the men of the house: “See, he [my husband] has brought in a Hebrew to us to mock us.” Likewise, she says to her husband: “The Hebrew servant, whom thou hast brought to us.” That is, Potiphar’s wife seems to argue that while the Hebrew slave [Joseph] has betrayed his master [Potiphar], her husband [Potiphar], in turn, has betrayed the entire household. The irony, of course, is that through her false accusations, Potiphar’s wife is the one who has betrayed her husband, the members of the household, and especially Joseph.

Potiphar’s wife’s use of Joseph’s garment as a prop to support her allegations represents another instance in the Joseph narrative in which clothing is used to suggest that circumstances are different from reality.6 Importantly, this deception has life-

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6 Another instance (which does not involve Joseph) revolves around the story of Judah and Tamar, in which Tamar changes her clothing so that Judah will not recognize her. See Genesis, chapter 38.
changing implications for Joseph, who, as a result, is thrown into the dungeon by Potiphar.

After serving time as a prisoner in the dungeon, Joseph sees a glimmer of hope, as he learns that Pharaoh has commanded him to appear at the royal court. Before appearing before Pharaoh, however, Joseph shaves and changes his clothing: “Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they brought him hastily out of the dungeon: and he shaved himself, and changed his garments, and came to Pharaoh” (41:14).

The change of clothing serves as a sign of things to come, and, in particular, is an indication of the change in fortune about to occur. Although unbeknownst to Joseph and Pharaoh, as well as the reader, Joseph, upon leaving the dungeon, is on his way to becoming the second most powerful person in Egypt. Joseph’s experience upon leaving the dungeon will be very different from his prior experience when he was lifted from the pit into which he was thrown by his brothers, only to be sold as an Egyptian slave.

The change in clothing also may represent a change in Joseph’s character. From this point on in the story, Joseph no longer appears as the conceited, tale-bearing individual introduced at the beginning of the Joseph narrative.7 In retrospect, it is no surprise, then, that the text should inform the reader of what appears, at first glance, to be such a trivial detail regarding Joseph changing his clothes before going to the royal court.

Shortly after Joseph appears before Pharaoh and successfully interprets Pharaoh’s dreams, he is appointed a ruler over the entire land of Egypt. In addition to receiving the king’s ring, Joseph receives from Pharaoh other items, including garments of fine linen (41:42-43):

And Pharaoh took off his ring from his hand, and put it on Joseph’s hand, and arrayed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck; and he made him ride in the second chariot which he had: and they cried before him, Avrekh (Bow the knee): and made him ruler over all the land of Egypt.

The garments of fine linen that Pharaoh gives to Joseph can, in some measure, be viewed as a replacement for the coat, the ketonet passim, that was stripped from him years ago. That is, the special coat given to Joseph by his father – and all that the coat represented – is now replaced by the clothes of fine linen given to Joseph by Pharaoh. The overall chiastic structure of the storyline highlights this example in which the act of changing clothing reflects a fundamental change in outlook (“Then Jacob said to his household, and to all that were with him, Put away the strange gods that are among you, and make yourselves clean, and change your garments.”).

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7 For example, Joseph apparently never tells his father what his brothers did to him. See, e.g., Nahmanides to 45:27; see also Daat Zekanim to 45:4, who argues that Joseph did not want to mention the sale in the presence of Benjamin lest the latter inform their father about it. Cf. Genesis 35:2 for another
point and illustrates the parallel between Jacob’s giving Joseph the coat and Pharaoh’s giving him the clothing of fine linen:

A. Jacob gives Joseph a special coat, the *ketonet passim*
B. The brothers strip Joseph of his *ketonet passim*
B. Joseph is forced to leave his clothing in the hands of Potiphar’s wife
A. Pharaoh gives Joseph clothing of fine linen

Although the brothers had tried to deny the leadership role for which Joseph was destined, the clothes of fine linen from Pharaoh affirm Joseph’s newly restored splendor and position of leadership.

Joseph’s rise to power resulted from his interpreting Pharaoh’s dreams, which symbolized seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of famine. As the famine predicted by Joseph persists, his brothers travel from Canaan to Egypt, where Joseph’s foresight and planning made food available despite the famine. As the plot continues, Joseph eventually reveals himself to his brothers and instructs them to bring their father and the rest of the family to Egypt. However, before the brothers return to Canaan to bring their father to Egypt, Joseph gives each of them gifts: “To all of them he gave each man changes of clothing; but to Benjamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver, and five changes of clothing” (45:22).

Among the gifts Joseph gives to his brothers are clothing. The text emphasizes that Joseph not only gave his brothers clothing, he gave them “changes” of clothing (‘*halifot semalot*’). This is reminiscent of Joseph’s changing his clothing (‘*va-yihalef simlotav*’) before being brought to Pharaoh’s palace. Here too, one can ask: Is the change in clothing meant to represent something more? Does the change in clothing represent a change in the brothers’ characters? In particular, does the change in clothing suggest the brothers have overcome their jealousy and hatred of Joseph?

The first half of the verse (“To all of them he gave each man changes of clothing”) may be understood as a meaningful attempt by Joseph to inform his brothers that clothing no longer holds the same importance to him as was the case years before. Indeed, the narrative has come full circle. Whereas chapter 37 begins with Joseph receiving a special garment (i.e., the *ketonet passim*) from his father, the narrative concludes with Joseph giving clothing to his brothers. Joseph’s role reversal with respect to receiving and giving clothing in the first half of the verse suggests that the conflicts with his brothers have been resolved, at least partially, if not entirely.

As pointed out, however, by R. David Fohrman: “[W]hether the wounds of the past will truly and finally heal, or whether the reconciliation... will prove to be merely a passing truce in a longer war –

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8 See, e.g., Seforo to 43:16, 34 and 44:2, explaining that some of Joseph’s actions were intended to determine whether his brothers would be jealous of Benjamin.
this we do not know yet.”

Indeed, the second half of verse 22 gives the reader pause to consider what the future might hold for Joseph and his brothers. That is because Joseph gives Benjamin more gifts than he gives the other brothers. Specifically, Joseph presents Benjamin with three hundred pieces of silver, and five (!) changes of clothing. On the one hand, the additional gifts simply may reflect the fact that Benjamin is the full brother of Joseph. That is, Joseph and Benjamin share not only the same father but the same mother as well, whereas the other brothers share only a father in common with their younger siblings. It was only natural for Joseph to feel a closer kinship to his younger brother Benjamin, and everyone, including the other brothers, presumably understood that. On the other hand, as the Talmud (Megillah 16a-b) inquires: “Is it possible that in the very thing from which that righteous man [Joseph] had suffered [that is, his father’s show of favoritism toward him aroused the enmity of his brothers] he himself should stumble [by showing favoritism to Benjamin]?”

Joseph surely recognized that his brothers’ jealousy and hatred – and the course of events that followed – had resulted, in large measure, from the gift of clothing (i.e., the ketonet passim) his father had given him. How, then, could Joseph now give Benjamin a greater number of gifts, and in particular, more clothing than he gave to the other brothers? Was Joseph not concerned that his actions would lead to further jealousy among the brothers? And yet, although the brothers subsequently do worry that Joseph will take revenge against them after their father’s death (50:15), the brothers apparently do not question Benjamin’s receipt of the additional gifts. They do not appear to harbor any hatred or jealousy toward Benjamin. Indeed, by this stage, the brothers have already recognized how wrongly they had treated Joseph years earlier (see 38:21).

In the course of the Joseph narrative, clothing plays a significant and varied role. In particular, many of the events surrounding Joseph himself involve clothing: gifts of clothing, losses of clothing, and changes of clothing. The imagery sometimes is one of love, leadership, dignity, splendor, and beauty; at other times, it symbolizes tragedy and death, or sexual indiscretion and alleged guilt. Further, clothing repeatedly is used in the context of mistaken identity. First, Jacob is deceived by the brothers when they bring him Joseph’s blood-soaked kutonet. Subsequently, Potiphar is deceived by his wife’s display of Joseph’s garment, which results in Joseph being thrown into the dungeon as a prisoner. The text also employs changes of clothing to suggest or allude to changes in character. Toward the end of the narrative, the symbolism of clothing is used once again as the story comes full circle. Instead of receiving a gift of clothing, Joseph gives gifts of clothing to his brothers in a hopeful...
display of reconciliation.

The Joseph narrative presents the reader with an opportunity to examine the myriad ways in which we can use, or misuse, a gift – in this case, clothing – that God has bestowed upon us. First and foremost, clothing is a necessity, providing warmth, protection, and a sense of modesty. It also can heighten our sense of dignity and may be used symbolically to indicate our role in a particular community or society, or membership in a particular group. Yet, like other objects, clothing can be misused. It can be used, for example, to conceal or hide one’s identity or, as occurs in the Joseph story, to deceive others and mischaracterize the true state of affairs. Nevertheless, the Joseph narrative holds out hope that, in the end, we properly will use the gifts God has provided us. By giving gifts of clothing to his brothers, Joseph was, in effect, emulating God. The question for us is, will we do the same?

**THE ROLE OF VULNERABILITY IN JEWISH LIFE**

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The centrality of personal growth in Judaism is unquestionable; from *Pirkei Avot*, to *Hilkhot De’ot* of Rambam, to the *musar* movement of the nineteenth century, much ink has been spilled by our teachers in their attempt to craft a system of Torah values through which we may improve ourselves. Rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman Kremer (the Vilna Gaon) is quoted as saying that “the entirety of [one’s] service of God is dependent on the rectification of character traits.” One important but understudied trait in this regard is vulnerability. This article aims to assess this complex trait and its positive role within Judaism.

A surface-level probe of the technical meaning of the word “vulnerable” might provide most with a distaste for the attribute. [Merriam-Webster](https://www.merriam-webster.com) defines the word as “capable of being physically or emotionally wounded,” and its synonyms are “at risk” and “endangered.” This description seems unredeemable; perhaps we would be implored to remove such a trait from ourselves, concealing any remnant of it. However, there are other manifestations of vulnerability which allow aspects of Jewish daily life to actualize themselves in their idealized forms—in ways that wouldn’t have been accessible otherwise. Although most are inclined to hide their shortcomings, one’s willingness to express vulnerability, in one’s relationship with God as well as the community, may unlock more authentic Jewish experiences. These expressions are fundamental to the prayer experience, engender genuine interpersonal connection, and encourage individual growth.

The working definition of vulnerability we may begin with is as follows: the character trait in which a person admits, either to themselves or others, their own incompleteness or weakness.

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1 *Even Shlemah* 1:1.
Vulnerability is not tantamount to one oversharing all their difficulties to the world; rather, it is more directly a person’s willingness to present themselves to others as someone aware of, and comfortable with, the fact that attempts to succeed are often inseparable from failures to get there.

**Humanity and God**

The role of vulnerability in Jewish life comes to the fore particularly when analyzed in the context of one’s personal relationship with God. Prayer, an unequivocal tenet of daily Jewish life, and the most identifiable meeting point between humanity and God, is perhaps the single most common demonstration of the trait in question. The entire institution of prayer is an admission of imperfection; in its most simple, technical sense, prayer is centered around a person requesting that which they do not have, that which is beyond their ability. Prayer is a meditation on humanity’s dependence on God, an admission of the petitioner’s weakness. It is, in some sense, about realizing that what we have comes from God and that what we hope to obtain is possible with the help of God. Expressions of this approach span the wide sea of Jewish thought, from the Kabbalists to Rambam’s *Moreh Nevukhim.* By the same token, many modern figures have emphasized the importance of this notion in one’s encounter with God. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein was fond of quoting Friedrich Schleiermacher, who understood the essence of piety as identifying “the consciousness of our absolute dependence... of our relation to God.” Prayer can thus be understood in this context not as a method to receive something we could not have on our own but as a movement to better understand ourselves and our finitude, especially in the face of God’s infinitude.

In fact, this may not merely be a facet of the meaning and importance of prayer but an essential element, a *sine qua non* for employing authentic prayer. Rabbi Zadok Ha-kohen of Lublin enthusiastically espoused this idea, claiming that “fundamental prayer from the depth of the heart [is born] from the power of recognizing lack.” According to R. Zadok, in order to pray from the depth of one’s heart, one must first understand that they are at risk, that they contain voids which they long to fill, and any subsequent prayer must flow from that understanding. Rabbi Menachem Froman, in one of his many tongue-in-cheek sayings, echoes this thought, expanding it to include even physical

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2 *Zohar 1:31a:* In kabbalistic thought, earthly reality is the manifestation of God known as *malkhut.* This level has “nothing of its own,” and all of its vitality comes from above. This reflects the way in which prayer is depicted, as the one who prays comes to recognize that they have nothing of their own.

3 *Guide for the Perplexed* III:44.


5 *Resisei Laylah* 86. See further *Tzidkat Ha-Tzadik* §211 where R. Zadok emphasizes the importance of a Jew engaging in both Torah and prayer. He says that this is because the Torah on its own can make a person feel as if they are complete and whole. The problem is, however, that the Torah was only given to those who lack (see *Shabbat* 88b-89a). Thus, through prayer—whose whole concern is recognizing lack and requesting from God that it be fulfilled—one is able to balance out this contradictory sense of wholeness that the Torah offers.
manifestations of prayer:

They once asked one of the Hasidic rebbes: Why do your Hasidim wave their hands and shake their bodies during prayer, in such unflattering movements? He answered: When a person is drowning and wants to be saved, he doesn’t take care to make sure that his swimming is particularly graceful. He wants to be saved.⁶

Rabbi Froman’s comment is jarring. He associates prayer with the desperate struggle one would undergo while drowning, fighting for their life, gasping for breath. One who prays realizes that they cannot live without the help of God, and that their abilities are not sourced in “their strength and the power of their own hand” (Deut. 8:17). This impassioned prayer is a person’s most intimate expression of pain and discomfort, and to experience this fervor, one must first be aware that they are “drowning.” In a similar vein, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik presented an understanding of the highest level of prayer as a petition of the vulnerable and needy:

Prayer as a personal experience, as a creative gesture, is possible only if and when man discovers himself in crisis or in need... Since prayer flows from a personality which finds itself in need, despondent and hopeless, its main theme is not praise or adoration, but rather request, demand, supplication. True prayer comes to expression in the act of begging and interceding.⁷

To participate and engage in prayer is of deep importance in daily Jewish life arguably in part because it is the most direct confrontation many have with their own imperfection and vulnerability. The significance attributed to prayer may flow from the profound necessity of recognizing our own humanity and understanding that we are not God, and that, as humans, we often fall short. To enter the covenant with God, one must pray, and to pray, one must first recognize that they are not whole. This is not negative or disparaging; it is to describe what it means to be human, to be a finite being striving to connect to that which is infinite.

In Our Communities

It is perhaps more challenging to determine the benefit of vulnerability when it comes to our relationships with families and communities. However, as I will argue, vulnerability can serve as a means to connect with others, may encourage individual betterment and communal contribution, and has inherent value from a halakhic standpoint.

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⁶ Hasidim Tzohakim Mi-Zeh §59. Thanks to Rav Levi Morrow for the translation.
An overarching potential role for vulnerability in our communal discourse stems directly from the above discussion regarding one’s relationship with God: it can impact the way we talk about the human-divine relationship amongst each other, specifically in the narrative surrounding our responsibility and capacity to serve God.

Judaism is a religion of commandment, brimming with expectation and idealism; individuals are called upon to put their best effort forward on a daily basis to better themselves and their surrounding environment. However, these objectives may run the risk of individuals becoming ashamed of themselves when high standards are not met. Accordingly, when we perpetuate the myth that every person is expected to be perfect in their precise fulfillment of every detail of Jewish life, it may devastate those who struggle with some of these details. Creating such a culture—where struggle and failure are intolerable—is grossly negligent in our ethical duty.

It is, however, difficult to admit that we fall short with the precise fulfillment of certain aspects of halakhic life; are we willing to expose ourselves as being vulnerable in this way? Rabbi Isaac Hutner understood the importance of this very tension, and he depicted his attitude toward it strongly in a celebrated letter to one of his students:

In responding to a student distressed by his spiritual shortcomings, Rabbi Hutner does not guarantee that if the student simply works harder things will turn out well, nor does he merely encourage the student to keep trying. Rather, R. Hutner instills within him the comfort that his trial and error will be worthwhile. He ensures the student that his

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8 Pahad Yitzhak, Igrot U-Ketavim §128. Thanks to R. Shlomo Katz for the translation.
struggles are normal and that authentic achievement does not come without failure along the way. In such an instance, vulnerability is thus not only the modality of being a struggling person but also the courage to expose oneself to others as being as such, allowing oneself to be seen as imperfect in an effort to affirm the normalcy of life’s difficulties and comfort those around us.

The truth is, however, that R. Hutner was not the first Jewish figure to illustrate such a conviction. Those as early as the psalmists, and King David in particular, publicly portrayed their deeply personal struggle with their relationship with God and the world around them. Themes of distress, anguish, and despair fill the pages of the Book of Psalms, a work which has become a place of refuge for many throughout history. This may be because its readers feel as if they can find themselves within the text, they can empathize with King David who was grappling with the same issues as they are. Why must the psalmists simply be role models of our past? We may have room to learn from their approach to admitting their vulnerabilities.

This level of vulnerability ultimately opens the possibility of more genuine interpersonal relationships with those around us. It turns out to be a psychological truth that this is often best accomplished through first exposing oneself as vulnerable. Professor Brené Brown explains that what hinders connection is actually the fear that one is not worthy of connection, of being cared for. People believe that they deserve to be lonely because of their imperfections, she explains, and thus they feel the need to hide them. On the flip side, we are intimidated by those who disguise themselves with the appearance of perfection; we cannot relate to or develop a true emotional connection with them. This vulnerability to admit personal struggle closes the boundless gap and reveals common ground; it opens the gates for mutual sensitivity. This posture makes people feel less alone, and that they are worthy of human connection. Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef Leiner beautifully illustrates the redemptive quality of this vulnerability:

...those individuals whose hearts are worried within them, murmuring, yearning for God to heal the blemishes of their heart...When they meet each other, they will say to one another with great joy: "My friend, you wouldn't believe the lack I struggled with, that I was forced to burden, and now I am finally finding redemption." And their friend will respond to them: "I also experienced redemption from the particular lack that I struggled with, that I was forced to burden in this world." Then together they shall sing..."
Rabbi Leiner sees a messianic quality to a society in which individuals will be able to admit to others that they have stumbled through life, that things have not been easy for them, that they have fallen and made mistakes. Once they feel comfortable exposing a level of vulnerability, setting the stage for empathy and authentic connection, then “together they shall sing.” Without the ability to feel vulnerable, we’d find ourselves alone, stationed in darkened corners of our own withdrawn, imperceptible world.

In addition to developing more meaningful empathetic relationships with others, vulnerability can encourage the individual effort to grow in both personal and communal settings. Judaism is a religion in which the aggregate ethos is one of “Be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 19:2), and in which, as Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg has remarked, “Even though aspiration takes one beyond the bounds of the legal requirement—lifnim mi-shurat ha-din—the extra-legal is itself commanded.”12 It is therefore imperative that we work to create communities in which aspiration is encouraged, and that any person who attempts to improve themselves within the framework of Judaism not be disheartened in the slightest.

It is helpful to utilize the definition popularized by the aforementioned professor Brown: she describes vulnerability as the “courage to be imperfect.” We must be cultivating a culture where vulnerability is not laughable, but rather it allows a person to be at ease with the possibility of failure—a culture which avoids that which is described by Alexei Karamazov: “Nowadays, almost all capable people are terribly afraid of being ridiculous, and are miserable because of it.”13 If we expect leaders and aspirational thinkers to emerge from among us, we must first instill within them the understanding that struggles and mistakes are not indicative of incapacity and that only those who first fail may eventually succeed.14 That is to say, this culture must be one that acknowledges that we specifically become great through our willingness to attempt to be great.

This goal leaves the burden not only on the individual in their everyday interactions with others but on the collective community as well, especially in the hands of its leaders. If a young boy is concerned that if he gets up to be the shaliach tzibbur for prayer and mispronounces a word, he might be seen as less than impressive, what are the chances that he would be willing to do so? Similarly, a young girl too worried to answer a question in class because of how she’d be seen if she responds incorrectly is more likely to eventually stop paying attention in class entirely. How willing might this student be to share her ideas in the future? Here

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14 On vulnerability and leadership, see Brené Brown, Dare To Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts. (New York: Random House, 2018).
again, R. Hutner’s previously mentioned letter becomes all the more relevant and powerful. Vulnerability thus does not only provide us with a method for connecting to others, but it also in a very practical sense encourages individual growth, creativity, and leadership within our communities.

All of the themes which have been explored thus far may even be inherent in the very institution of law which animates Jewish daily life. Halakhah itself values humanity even more so than perfection, and one of the strongest expressions of this can be found in a Talmudic dictum. On several occasions, when the Sages are tasked with understanding unrealistic demands that Halakhah seems to impose, they proclaim that “the Torah was not given to the ministering angels.”15 Fascinatingly, this is not just an admittance of limitation, but it is accompanied by a change in the Halakhah. In doing this, the Talmud is teaching us that a prerequisite for the halakhic system to function properly is to first recognize the limits of humanity; even though some supernal standards might seem to indicate the law be one way, Hazal had an acute awareness of that it is simply inconceivable for the Divine mandate to be beyond human capability.

For the Sages, our humanity in relation to law is not a bediavad situation. Masekhet Shabbat offers a riveting discussion which occurred as Moses arose to receive the Torah:

The ministering angels said before God: “Master of the Universe, what is one born of a woman doing here among us?” [God] said to them: “He came to receive the Torah.” The angels said before Him: “The Torah is a hidden treasure... and you seek to give it to flesh and blood?”... Moses said before Him: “Master of the Universe, the Torah that You are giving me—what is written in it?” God said to him: “I am the Lord your God, Who brought you out of Egypt.” Moses said to the angels: “Did you descend to Egypt? Were you enslaved to Pharaoh? Why should the Torah be yours?”... Again, Moses asked: “What else is written in it?” God said to him: “You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal.” Moses asked the angels: “Is there jealousy among you, or is there an evil inclination within you (that would render these commandments relevant)?” Immediately they agreed with the Holy One, Blessed be He.16

This entire discussion between Moses, God, and the angels serves as an irrefutable testament to the intended ideal of the Torah being given to humans, with following precise measurements. The Gemara suggests that even though one may not succeed, they are nonetheless expected to make their best effort, and this too finds favor in God’s eyes.

15 See Yoma 30a, Meilah 14b, Berakhot 25b.
16 Shabbat 88b-89a. See further Bekhorot 17b where there is a fascinating discussion regarding whether we can be tasked
not only despite our fundamental fallibility and imperfections but perhaps precisely because of them. In light of this, the statement that “the Torah was not given to the ministering angels” is by no means one of disdain or embarrassment but rather a sentiment of unflinching self-awareness and a fact necessary for crafting the consummate halakhic system.

Against this background, we can see that Torah and Halakhah, in their ideal forms, are open to expressing a sort of vulnerability. Another midrash states that the concept of teshuvah, repentance, was created before the universe itself; the possibility of failure and sin was always already embedded into creation, rather than being symptomatic of a human mistake which caused sin. Most importantly, what we can take from here is that donning counterfeit masks of perfection, refusing to come to terms with our shortcomings, or simply being invulnerable is not only antithetical to the spirit of Halakhah and our unique connection to Torah itself, but it also effectively removes us from humanity, to whom the Torah was exclusively given.

Conclusion
When we are comfortable exposing ourselves as being at risk, as being sensitive, as being human, we broaden our purposeful existence as Jews. Vulnerability enables us to engage more meaningfully with prayer, cultivate growth-oriented communities, and perhaps most effectively, create deeper connections with those around us.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to point out that vulnerability, like most traits, has its hazards as well. Firstly, one might be vulnerable simply with the hope that others should resolve his problems on his behalf—with the assumption that the pity he receives from others might exempt him from contributing to his own efforts to overcome his difficulty. This must be avoided for vulnerability to remain a healthy trait. While Judaism does not expect each individual “to finish the work” without the help of others, we are “neither free to desist from it.” Vulnerability should create compassionate symbiotic relationships which reinforce effort; however, ultimately it should be understood that, as Milton remarked, each of us are created “sufficient to have stood, though free to fall,” and individual responsibility remains of paramount importance.

Furthermore, the argument that has been made here is not that we should be vulnerable in order that we become complacent with our difficulties and collectively give up on them. There lies a tremendous distinction between being comfortable failing and being satisfied with failure; the former encourages effort in the face of potential creative act of God, rather than an accidental occurrence which humanity ideally should have avoided.

17 Bereshit Rabbah 1:4; see also Eccl. 7:20.
18 Similarly, many—especially the Hasidic masters of Ishbitz—have pointed out that the Talmud regularly depicts the “sin” at the Garden of Eden as occurring on day six of creation, implying that the episode was just that: an intended
19 Pirkei Avot 2:16.
shortcoming, while the latter removes the possibility of success and progress entirely.

Lastly, embracing vulnerability should be done with the value of tzniut in mind. Sharing personal, emotional experiences must be done in a context which is comfortable for all parties; artificially attempting to accelerate a relationship by leaping immediately to sensitive information can wind up doing more harm than good. An appropriate level of transparency should inspire mutual personal growth and not sensationalize or romanticize shortcomings.

The discussion of character traits can be a volatile, sensitive one, so it seems fitting to close with a relevant Talmudic teaching. While discussing the possible influences that the constellations at the time of one’s birth may play on that person’s eventual character traits, the Gemara mentions that one born under the influence of Mars will be a spiller of blood. Rav Ashi swiftly qualifies this statement, noting that this person can either be a blood-letter, or a mohel, one who performs circumcisions. Rav Ashi has done something significant here: he ensures that traits originate inherently neutral, and whether they manifest as beneficial or destructive will depend on how we choose to employ them. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Ha-Kohen Kook, perhaps influenced by this very Gemara, spells this point out:

Every positive trait has inherent deficiencies that come along with it.

And this is the complete service [of God]: to extract these positive traits to the light of the world, cleansed of all of their deficiencies.

Rabbi Kook believes that it is our responsibility to identify the latent good within all traits and to utilize them in their proper time. It follows that it is incumbent upon us to do the same for our ability to be vulnerable, for when done appropriately, the sensitivity it creates can immeasurably impact lives—and communities—for the better.

**Hesed, Gevurah, and Emet: Do These Attributes Actually Describe Our Forefathers?**  
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In kabbalistic and Hasidic thought, each of the forefathers is associated with a defining characteristic. Avraham is associated with the attribute of kindness (hesed), Yitzhak with that of strength (gevurah), and Yaakov with truth (emet). For example, Zohar Hadash §33b states:

Each and every one of our Avot knew the Holy Blessed One through his own aspalkariah (looking glass). Avraham knew Him through hesed ... Yitzhak knew Him by the level of gevurah ... Yaakov knew Him through the level of tiferet ... which

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21 *Shabbat 156a.*

22 *Middot Ha-Rayah, El Ha-Middot §2.*
is called emet, and which unites [the previous two middot], as it is written: “You will give emet to Yaakov” (*Micah* 7:20).

This threefold association has entered the pantheon of popular English-language Torah knowledge. A simple search finds it referenced at length on websites such as Chabad, Torah In Motion, Aish HaTorah, Torah.org, Mishpacha Magazine, as well as throughout the Artscroll Humash—all without a citation to any specific source.

But these associations seem false! In the actual biblical narratives, Yaakov is deceptive, Yitzhak is weak, and even Avraham’s kindness begins to collapse after light analysis. How then should we understand this kabbalistic association? This essay argues that the *Zohar Hadash* understood these three attributes not as virtues which our forefathers mastered but as qualities with which they each wrestled. In fact, the very use of the term hesed—a rather loaded phrase in Avraham’s life—may indicate that the *Zohar Hadash* intends to highlight not strengths but struggles of our ancestors.

The Discrepancy

Let us begin with Yaakov, whose attribute of “truth” is the most difficult to understand. His very name means trickery (*Bereshit* 27:36); he seemingly swindles Esav into selling his primogeniture (25:29-34); he deceives his blind father, by thieving Esav’s identity, in an act that Yitzhak himself describes as mirmah, guile (27:35); he offers to work with Lavan for only the rare speckled, spotted, and black sheep, before intentionally manipulating the flock’s procreation to profit himself (30:31-43); he absconds from the Haran clan in the middle of the night, which the Torah describes as “stealing Lavan’s heart … by not telling him that he was fleeing” (31:20). Back in Canaan, he tells Esav to travel ahead, because he will follow close behind and the two brothers will soon meet up again in Seir. Instead, Yaakov takes his family to Sukkot (33:14-17).

Further, Yaakov is himself the victim of immense lies. He wakes up beside not his promised wife, Rachel, but her sister, Leah (29:25). His own children sell his favored son, Yosef, down to Egypt and then invent an elaborate and bloody cover story (37:32-34). Finally, he remains silent as his two children, Shimon and Levi, deceive the city of Shechem into a defenseless massacre, themselves acting with mirmah (34:13). In sum: Yaakov’s blessing and initial wealth are the product of two deceits; his frustration and grief, the product of two more; his silence, the background to the killing of a deceived town.

Yitzhak’s supposed “strength” offers a similarly weak match to the actual Yitzhak we know. The reader witnesses a tragic impotence in Yitzhak’s latter years, when he sits blind and befuddled (27:1): when he is unable to distinguish between hunted game (supposedly his favorite food, 27:4) and a goat.

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1 The verse continues, “[and You will give] hesed to Avraham,” which would itself be a fitting proof text for the first association.
meat substitute (27:25); between hairy skin and wooly coats (27:22); between his sons Esav and Yaakov (27:23); when he is powerless to decide the direction of his own legacy and blessing (27:33, 27:37); when the only wife he has ever loved connives against him (27:8-10). These verses paint the Torah’s single most vivid portrait of, well, weakness.

Yitzhak’s earlier life only adds to the portrait. When Avraham passes away and Yitzhak is left in control of the family water wells, competing clans move in and obstruct them. Two new streams that Yitzhak bores are immediately contested. It is a triumph when a single well obtains (Bereshit 26:18-22). Similarly, Yitzhak’s attempts to pass Rivkah off as a sister rather than his wife fail dramatically, as Avimelekh catches the couple sporting; he righteously scolds a silent Yitzhak, and he later sends Yitzhak out of town (26:7-11, 26:16). But we are bound to mention one more moment of debility: Akedat Yitzhak. Constrained on the altar, Yitzhak lays with his neck bare, awaiting the fatal stroke (22:9, 22:10). His most iconic biblical moment is one of perfect passivity.

Even Avraham’s claim to hesed falls apart after some inspection. True, his generous reception of the three angelic strangers offers the reader a showcase moment of clear hesed. But, Avraham’s full story is not at all defined by “kindness” and often runs directly counter to it. How is Avraham the epitome of hesed in raising the blade over his bound son? Where is the hesed in allowing Sarah to torment the lowly maidservant Hagar (Bereshit 16:6) or in exiling Hagar and her young child Yishmael into the blazing desert (Bereshit 21:14)? When Avraham argues on behalf of Sodom, his claims are explicitly rooted in mishpat (justice) and not in empathy, mercy, or kindness (Bereshit 18:23-25). If anything, Avraham’s exploits unite around the theme of gevurah! With courage he leaves his homeland and journeys to a land that God will eventually show him; with brute force and clear valor he raises an army that successfully rescues Lot from captivity; with exceptional willpower he circumcises himself at the age of 99 (Bereshit 17:24). The Avraham we know from the actual Torah exemplifies any number of virtues, but hesed is not particularly high on that list.

Yaakov’s story is one of guile and deception, not emet; Yitzhak’s persona is one of frailty and relative impotence, not gevurah; Avraham’s character shows moments of profound hesed, amongst ample narratives that are simply unrelated to kindness if not directly counter to it. How then to make sense of these kabbalistic attributions?

**Two Unsatisfying Strategies**

The first strategy is the “selective” one, in which one waves away the various discrepancies and elevates only those few moments when each patriarch’s story actually matches their attribution. This strategy is most commonly applied to Avraham, whose treatment of the three angelic guests is quite easy to “select” as representative of his hesed. The selective strategy can be used with Yaakov as well: Yaakov displays emet in his remarkably frank dialogue with Pharoah (47:9); makes oath-commitments that he presumably fulfills in full (28:20-22); and recounts to Lavan his years of workplace integrity (31:38-41).
Even with Yitzhak, a brief spotlight on *gevurah* can be made. Yitzhak faces open hostility over his wells, yet he manages to outmaneuver the competition and establish “ample space to increase in the land” (26:22). Highlight a few choice narratives, and the trifecta is complete. However, the selective strategy is ultimately weak and unpersuasive. It is difficult to accept that a patriarch epitomizes a particular attribute, when in so many narrative moments, those attributes are betrayed. What honor does it give a biblical character, to declare them the embodiment of a particular trait on the basis of one narrative and then watch as they fail to live up to that trait in other narratives?

(A cousin to the “selective” strategy is the “revisionist” reading, in which challenging verses are reread as innocent. For example, when Yaakov falsely tells his father, “It is I, Esav, your firstborn” [27:19], Rashi plays with the commas, producing the more accurate phrase, “It is I. Also, Esav is your firstborn.” As one might imagine, extending this to every detail of Jacobian dishonesty quickly becomes a rather forced and difficult project.)

The second interpretative strategy is the “counterintuitive” approach, which works best in recasting Yitzhak’s attribute of *gevurah*. This strategy acknowledges that Yitzhak seems weak but asks us to reconsider our notion of strength. Is there not a strength in self-sacrifice and self-restraint? Is it not the supposedly weak ones who, in their very survival and gritty self-regard, reveal true power? When the *Zohar* attributes *gevurah* to Yitzhak, we are meant to pause for a moment, in surprise, before realizing the counterintuitive force of this kabbalistic claim. *True strength* is an internal capacity, not an external display. Recall Ben Zoma’s well-known code in *Pirkei Avot* 4:1: “Who is strong? He who conquers his own desires.” The “counterintuitive” read of the *Zohar* affords a similar moral message.

But the counterintuitive read fails when applied to Yaakov and Avraham. “Who is truthful? He who has a questionable relationship to the truth” is a mantra thankfully omitted from *Pirkei Avot*; we would be remiss to impose this “moral” teaching upon our forefather Yaakov. Is there justification for Yaakov’s cunning decisions? Is there a certain hardball realism that even the righteous must engage in? Quite possibly. But let’s call that “wisdom” or “politik” or *netzah*—the kabbalistic attribute associated with survival, victory, and endurance. Calling deception truth does not broaden our understanding of truth; rather, it violates it. Further, applying the counterintuitive read to Avraham adds little bite. What kind of newfound understanding of *hesed* would the *Zohar* point us toward? The mind struggles to capture a meaningful “true *hesed*”—meant to deepen our commitment and understanding of kindness—when reviewing stories of attempted child sacrifice and successful child banishment. The counterintuitive strategy comes up blank before Avraham and reads as forced, if not downright amoral, before Yaakov.

The straightforward read—Yaakov is in fact truthful—fails the evidence test. The counterintuitive read—truth ought to be redefined in light of Yaakov’s untruth—is equally problematic. What then is the *Zohar* thinking when
it connects Yaakov to truth, Yitzhak to strength, and Avraham to hased?  

Theory #1: Attributes They Confront  
The Zohar is not offering us the trait that each forefather masters; rather, it offers us the trait that they each confront. In effect, the Zohar offers a theme word that ties together their respective biblical careers. Understood this way, the Zohar is brilliant. Looking for one single thread that knits together almost all of Yaakov’s diverse stories? Emet: its challenges, its lack, its necessity. Many of his narratives revolve around one character knowing a certain truth, another left in the dark, and the ramifications that emerge. Will Yaakov choose truth? What was gained and lost in each of those choices? Will his uncle, his wives, and his sons be truthful to him? What will emerge when the truth is eventually uncovered? Yaakov is not the epitome of truth, but his stories do consistently revolve around that theme.

Likewise, Yitzhak is by no means the embodiment of strength. But his narratives turn on the realities of strength: its absence, its varieties, and its challenges. We meet Yitzhak as a defenseless infant, the first-ever subject to the cut of circumcision; the Torah then alludes that Yitzhak is bullied by an older brother who toys with him (Bereshit 21:9, cf. Rashi); next, his arms and legs are bound, as he lays under Avraham’s sharp blade and God’s powerful command; he prefers his strong and aggressive son Esav, who is able to brandish weapons and bring home game; he maneuvers (not always gracefully) to maintain his family’s safety amongst dangerous and strong clans; he navigates his own growing power, making strategic treaties and ultimately choosing to distance himself from rivals; he sits impotent at the end of his life, endowed with the titular power to decide his successor yet lacking the de facto ability.

Avraham’s stories likewise orient around hased: with moments of granting kindness, withholding kindness, overcoming kindness. We know Avraham is capable of immense hased to strangers (Bereshit 18:1) and of modeling hased shel emet in his burying of Sarah (23:2, 23:19). But it is this same Avraham who must “conquer his compassion” (cf. Rosh Hashanah Mussaf, Yalkut Shimoni Bereshit 101:7) in order to sacrifice his blameless son, and the same Avraham who, in the face of apparent need, gives up Sarah into the hands of two powerful men (Bereshit 12:11-13; 20:2). Likewise, Avraham clearly holds such overwhelming devotion to family that he drops everything, puts his own life at risk, and rescues Lot (Bereshit 14:14); but it is the same Avraham who is earlier tasked with leaving his father and brothers behind (12:1, 12:4), and later, with exiling his own son (21:14). In each episode, Avraham confronts the call to hased, sometimes manifesting that trait and at other times withholding himself from it.

Indeed, a simple rereading of the initial Zohar Hadash passage affirms this approach: “Our Avot knew the Holy Blessed One through their own aspaklariah… Avraham knew Him through hased… Yitzhak knew Him by the level of gevurah… Yaakov knew Him through … emet.” It never states that each forefather mastered, epitomized, or championed these attributes. Rather, it asserts that these virtues were the aspaklariah—the looking glass, or
windowpane—through which each forefather came to know God. To say that emet was the lens through which Yaakov experienced the Creator is not to claim that he mastered the attribute of “truth,” but that his sacred life story keeps returning to that theme.

Theory #2: Attributes of Struggle

But a more radical read of the Zohar's claim is also available: these attributes are those with which each forefather struggled and even failed. By pairing Yaakov with emet, the Zohar calls attention to the fact that Yaakov is rarely truthful; by connecting Yitzhak with gevurah, the Zohar highlights how he almost never displays power. After all, saying that Yaakov experienced God through the lens of emet is to identify God—and not necessarily Yaakov—as a beacon of Truth; it is Yaakov who finds himself in need of that beacon. Perhaps Yaakov understood God through emet precisely because that was the realm in which he was constantly struggling.

In fact, this more critical reading best fits the Zohar's choice of biblical proof text: “As it says, ‘titen emet le-Yaakov, You [God] will give truth to Jacob’ (Micah 7:20).” Give truth to him, because he is in need of it! The verse makes no claim that Yaakov possesses emet but instead implies a present lacking. Indeed, the fuller context of that Micah passage makes clear that the prophet speaks of sin and failure, and the wish for eventual change:

Who is a God like you, forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression
... He [God] will turn again and have compassion on us, He will subdue our iniquities; You will hurl into the depths of the sea all our sins. You will give emet to Yaakov and hesed to Avraham.... (Mikhah 7:18-20)

The prophet hopes that our present-day iniquities will be subdued and that with it, emet and hesed will one day be manifested in Yaakov and Avraham. Only a forced and out of context read of “titen emet le-Yaakov” would hear in it a call to attribute the virtue of truth to Yaakov. Rather, in the Zohar's choice to employ this verse, it offers a subtle critique of our ancestors. Turn to Yaakov not to see a victor in the battle for Truth, but one who struggled mightily with that challenge. Indeed, associations rooted in opposites are a running theme in kabbalistic symbolism, where the sefirah of gevurah is commonly associated with the left/weaker hand, and the sefirah of malkhut (monarchy) is commonly associated with women, not men. That the Zohar might go out of its way to connect our patriarchs with an attribute they each lack ought not surprise.

Further, the very use of the Hebrew word “hesed” for Avraham may be part of the Zohar’s critique. It is easy to forget that the biblical term hesed is a homonym, with two egregiously different denotations. We tend to be more familiar with hesed as related to kindness, love, grace, favor, and goodness. Yet that is clearly not the meaning in Vayikra 20:17:

If a man shall take his sister, his father's daughter, or his mother's
daughter, and see her nakedness, and she see his nakedness: it is a \textit{HESED}; and they shall be cut off in the sight of the children of their people: he has uncovered his sister's nakedness; he shall bear his iniquity.

Unsurprisingly, \textit{hesed} here is rarely translated as kindness or favor. Rather, it appears to mean something like disgrace or shame, with support provided from how \textit{hesed} is used in \textit{Mishlei 14:34} ("righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a \textit{hesed} to any people"), \textit{Mishlei 25:10} ("lest a listener \textit{yehasdekha}—shame you—and your disgrace never be undone"), and in Aramaic (cf. \textit{Rashi ibid.} and \textit{Onkelos to Bereshit 34:14}).\footnote{Cf. \textit{Ramban} for the position that \textit{hesed} means kindness even in this verse.}

With that in mind, let us now turn to the only time in which Avraham himself employs the term \textit{hesed}. \textit{Bereshit 20:12-13}. Avraham had previously told Avimelekh that Sarah was his sister, and now he is forced to explain their relationship:

And Avraham said [to Avimelekh]: "Because I thought: Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake. And moreover she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and so she became my wife. And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said unto her: 'This is your \textit{HESED} which you shall do unto me; at every place where we shall come, say of me: He is my brother.'"

Which \textit{hesed} does Avraham here employ? The straight read is that Avraham speaks of the favor, or the kindness, that Sarah shall do for him. Yet it is possible to read this as Sarah’s disgrace that she shall do for him, in forfeiting her body into the hands of a powerful stranger. Either way, the appearance of this particular word, in this specific context, is remarkable. \textit{Hesed} appears both times in instances of sibling/mate confusion. \textit{Vayikra 20} is about treating a sister as a spouse; \textit{Bereshit 20} is about treating a spouse as a sister.

When the \textit{Zohar} pins Avraham with "\textit{hesed}," it is aware of this moment in Avraham's career—the only time in which Avraham himself uses the term. The \textit{Zohar}’s word choice highlights this episode for us and effectively asks us to consider which "\textit{hesed}" the \textit{Zohar} has in mind: Avraham of loving-kindness, whom we see at various points in his narrative, or Avraham of a few disgraceful episodes, including the very difficult \textit{hesed} choice to treat his spouse as a sister. In effect, it is possible to read this phrase in the \textit{Zohar Hadash} as speaking "tongue in cheek": sure, Avraham’s story is marked by acts of "\textit{hesed}," but not necessarily in the virtuous sense. The very choice of this term by the \textit{Zohar Hadash}
alludes to the possibility that each attribute was not an area of perfect mastery but of substantial struggle, for each of our patriarchs.

**Conclusion**
The attributes which kabbalistic sources associate with our forefathers (truth, strength, and kindness) are at odds with how the patriarchs are actually portrayed in Torah narrative (often dishonest, almost always in a position of weakness, occasionally quite kind but also marked by an essential callousness). If we assume that this kabbalistic thread celebrates the forefathers as champions of each respective trait, the above discrepancy is a substantial problem. We are left with two somewhat forced and unconvincing strategies for resolving that discrepancy. The “selective” strategy asks the reader to ignore those parts of our patriarchs’ lives which do not match the kabbalistic attribution. The “counterintuitive” strategy asks the reader to put aside their own baseline understandings of truth, strength, and even kindness.

However, we need not assume that this kabbalistic thread sees the forefathers as championing these traits. Nothing in the *Zohar Hadash* indicates that the forefathers own, master, or are themselves the source of these virtues. Rather, it asserts that each patriarch “knew God through the looking glass” of these virtues. The virtue is located outside them and is central to their experience, but it is not necessarily something that they themselves embody. As such, it is reasonable to understand this kabbalistic thread as stating that the forefathers repeatedly confront their respective attribute: sometimes exhibiting it, sometimes challenged by it, constantly weighing if and how to bring that virtue into the world.

But a fourth, more critical understanding is also possible. Perhaps to “know God through the looking glass” of a virtue means to struggle with that virtue. It is possible that *Zohar Hadash*’s intention in this passage is to highlight Yaakov’s tendency toward *mirmah*, guile (*Bereshit* 27:35; 34:13) and Yitzhak’s frequent positions of impotence. This “struggle” read is bolstered by the *Zohar Hadash*’s biblical proof text (*Micah* 7:20), a verse that speaks of Yaakov and Avraham lacking their respective attributes and which appears in a passage about Jewish spiritual failure. A more critical reading is also aided by awareness of how the term hezed actually occurs in Avraham’s narratives. It is never used to describe his grand acts of kindness; it instead occurs when he asks Sarah to give herself to Avimelek, a context which eerily echoes the much more negative meaning of the term hezed (“disgrace”) in *Vayikra* 20:17. Ultimately, the discrepancy between these attributes and the patriarch’s biblical portrayal is best resolved by recognizing that the original kabbalistic sources did not claim that these virtues actually describe our forefathers.

Indeed, virtues like Kindness, Strength, and Truth cannot possibly be embodied completely by any mortal being. It is fairly bold of later sources to construe Avraham as the model of kindness, Yitzhak as the champion of strength, or Yaakov as the embodiment of truth, when only God is capable of such uncorrupted virtue. As the Psalmist (*117:2*) tells us—weaving together all three attributes into
testament of praise: “For God's kindness has overpowered us, and true is the Lord forever—Hallelujah!”

LETTER TO THE EDITOR: RESPONSE TO BEN GREENFIELD ON THE FOREFATHERS' ATTRIBUTES

Last week, the Lehrhaus published “Hesed, Gevurah, and Emet: Do These Attributes Actually Describe our Forefathers?” by Ben Greenfield. This essay “argues that the Zohar Hadash understood these three attributes not as virtues which our forefathers mastered but as qualities with which they each wrestled” and concludes that “it is reasonable to understand this kabbalistic thread as stating that the forefathers repeatedly confront their respective attribute.” Review of other medieval material, including the parallel passage in the Sefer ha-Bahir, critically undermines this interpretation. I present three thirteenth-century sources to the editor for comparison:

- Shlomo ibn Adret (Responsa 5:115) writes that “[Of] these three blessings, the first corresponds to Abraham, who was a man of hesed ... the second corresponds to Isaac, a man of pahad, but he was a man of gevurah ... and the third corresponds to Jacob, who was a man of emet.”
- Sefer ha-Bahir 135: “According to the virtue which each practiced, its corresponding [force] was given to him. Abraham did acts of kindness ... and the Holy One, blessed be He, gave him the attribute of kindness...”
- Asher ben David of Posquieres (Perush 13 Middot): “And in the first blessing we recall ‘the god of Abraham, the god of Isaac, and the god of Jacob; these correspond to the three virtues which the patriarchs practiced, and from which they never departed in all their days, and each of the patriarchs wielded one of these virtues in its entirety: ‘Abraham’ corresponds to the virtue of hesed...this is as it says, ‘titen emet l’yaakov, hesed l’avraham’ ... and ‘Isaac’ corresponds to gevurah...”

It would likely be impossible to establish these sources’ exact diachronic sequence, but it suffices to say that they are at least contemporary with the Zoharic texts. The slightly vaguer formulation found in the Zohar Hadash (which still, behind Greenfield’s ellipsis: “[Abraham] grasped [hesed], never released it, and dealt well with others; these acts brought him to [the lens of hesed]”) is simply not representative of “this kabbalistic thread” at its earliest stage. Greenfield may feel that “Kindness, Strength, and Truth cannot possibly be embodied completely by any mortal being” but Asher ben David disagreed, and it can hardly be “fairly bold of later sources to construe Avraham as the model of kindness, Yitzhak as the champion of strength, or Yaakov as the embodiment of truth” when those sources follow exactly in the footsteps of tradition.

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