

## LOVE AS STRONG AS DEATH: EROS AND THANATOS IN THE SINAI THEOPHANY<sup>1</sup>

Rachel Adelman

Franz Rosenzweig (Germany, 1886–1929), philosopher of Jewish thought, opens the second section of his opus, *The Star of Redemption*, with the evocative quote from Song of Songs, “Love is as strong as death [*’azzah kha-mavet ’ahavah*]”<sup>2</sup>—and asks: “Strong in the same way as death? But, against whom does death display its strength?” Rosenzweig then answers: against the beloved (that is, the woman), whom love seizes. In making this gendered distinction, he adopts the classic analogy in rabbinic literature of a male lover *possessing* the female beloved as a model for God’s love of Israel—with the Sinai theophany likened to the consummation of a marriage.<sup>3</sup> Yet that marriage

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally delivered at the World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, August 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Song of Songs 8:6, Franz Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 2005), p. 169; for an alternative, see trans. William W. Hallo, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 156.

<sup>3</sup> As in the allegorical reading of Song of Songs (see, for example, the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael *Ba-hodesh* 3 and Song of Songs Rabbah 1). This metaphor or allegory originates in Biblical prophecy, where God is represented as a man who marries a woman—Israel, the nation—and then rejects her when she goes astray in worshipping foreign gods (see Hosea 1–3, Jeremiah 2–3, and Ezekiel 16 and 23). The relationship mirrors the unilateral and exclusive nature of marriage in the Bible—as the man “takes” a woman just as God “took” Israel out of Egypt and betrothed Israel to Him through the covenant at Sinai. For a critique of the patriarchal values underlying this metaphor, see Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); Gerlinde Baumann, *Love and Violence: Marriage as Metaphor for the Relationship between YHWH and Israel*

is fraught with danger—Eros and Thanatos, love and death personified, engaged in a dance between mortality and transcendence, as dramatized in the medieval hymn *Dies Irae* and in musical compositions such as Franz Liszt's *Totentanz*.

In this paper, I engage with what emotionally and existentially undergirds the nature of that experience of “love and death at Sinai.” In what way does Israel, the beloved seized by death, “survive” the theophany at Revelation? While Emmanuel Levinas, the French philosopher so strongly influenced by Rosenzweig's work, comments directly on the Talmud,<sup>4</sup> Rosenzweig's sources are more covert. In an attempt to understand his phenomenological reading of Revelation, I turn to the midrashic corpus—comparing the rabbinic interpretation of the Sinai encounter with the modern philosophical reading. Based on the description of the Israelites trembling at the foot of Sinai in the biblical text, the Mekhilta (a tannaitic exegetical midrash, circa 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) and the narrative 8<sup>th</sup> century midrash *Pirqe deRabbi Eliezer* (henceforth, PRE)<sup>5</sup> dramatize the experience of Revelation as a close encounter with death, or even a death and resurrection. While—in order to elucidate the experience of Eros and Thanatos at Sinai—Rosenzweig relied on Greek myth (a corpus with which his own readership might have been more familiar), I turn to rabbinic commentary. As traditional sources may enlighten the philosopher's reading of Revelation, Rosenzweig may enhance our understanding of the midrash. It is this mutual dance between classical texts and a modern reading that this essay sets out to choreograph.

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*in the Prophetic Books* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), and Amy Kalmanofsky, *Dangerous Sisters in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2014), pp. 53–68.

- <sup>4</sup> See, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, “The Temptation of Temptation,” on the famous rabbinic understanding of נעשה ונשמע (*na'aseh venish-ma'*, “we will do, and then we will hear”) in the Babylonian Talmud (henceforth b.), Shabbat 88b, in *Nine Talmudic Readings* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press 1990), pp. 30–50.
- <sup>5</sup> PRE is an aggadic, *i.e.* narrative, midrash, most likely composed in Palestine under Islamic rule. On the genre and provenance, See Rachel Adelman, *The Return of the Repressed: Pirqe deRabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha* (Leiden: Brill 2008), pp. 3–23 and 35–41.

## Love and Death—Lover and Beloved

For the model of the transcendence of death at Sinai, Rosenzweig draws on the Greek myth of Alcestis (dramatized circa 438 BCE by Euripides).<sup>6</sup> Betrothed to King Admetus, she willingly gives up her own life to save her husband's:

Against whom does death display its strength? Against the one whom it seizes. And love, of course, it seizes both, the lover as well as the beloved. But the beloved differently from the lover. It is in the lover that it originates. The beloved is seized: her love is already a response to the being-seized... Moreover, nature has given only the woman, and not the man, the capacity to die for love... Thanatos can approach her, too, in the sweet name of Eros, and most often the most feminine of woman... Her heart has already become firm in the tremors of love; it no longer needs the tremor of death. A young woman can be as ready for eternity, as a man only becomes when his threshold is crossed by Thanatos... Once touched by Eros, a woman is what man only becomes at the Faustian age of a hundred: ready for the final encounter—strong as death.<sup>7</sup>

“By nature,” according to Rosenzweig, a woman is ready for death, for eternity, at the moment she is seized by love—which fortifies her to cross the boundary between life and death *earlier* than a man, within her own life-time.

In mapping this “earthly analogy” onto Sinai, Rosenzweig suggests that Israel, at the Revelation of the Torah, moves beyond death, which

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<sup>6</sup> For a summary of the story, see “Alcestis” in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, as accessed at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Alcestis-Greek-mythology> on October 11, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> *The Star*, translation based on Hallo, p. 156 (modified in relation to Galili, p. 169).

imprints everything created with the indelible stamp of its condition of creature, with the words 'has been...' [Whereas] Love knows only the present, it lives only out of the present, aspires only to the present... For the soul, Revelation is the lived experience of a present that, though resting on the existence of the past, does not dwell in it; on the contrary this present walks in the light of the divine countenance.<sup>8</sup>

That is, the experience of receiving the Torah (through love) enables the mortal being in some way to transcend death by abiding in an eternal present.

Now, for Rosenzweig, it must be understood, Revelation is *not* the one-time encounter with God at Sinai upon the giving of the Torah, but the ongoing response to *mitzvah* in the *present*, to being commanded by the Torah, a carry-over of the original commanding presence of the 'Anokhi at Sinai<sup>9</sup>, and the command, "Love me," which is imbedded in the ritual declaration of the *Shema*'.<sup>10</sup> Famously, when Rosenzweig was asked whether he laid *tefillin*, he would answer: "Not

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>9</sup> *I.e.*, the utterance of "'Anokhi ("I am") the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt..." (Exodus 20:2 and Deuteronomy 5:6).

<sup>10</sup> See the discussion on "the Commandment:"

But the 'Love me!' [of the first paragraph of the *Shema*', Deuteronomy 6:5] of the lover—that is wholly perfect expression, wholly pure language of love. It is the imperative commandment, immediate, born of the moment... (*The Star*, trans. Halo, pp. 175–176).

Rosenzweig elaborates further: "The imperative of the commandment makes no provision for the future; it can only conceive of the immediacy of obedience" (p. 177).

On Rosenzweig's concept of ongoing revelation and the centrality of love, see Benjamin Sommer's discussion in *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2015), pp. 104–105, and Jon D. Levenson, *The Love of God* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2016), pp. 188–197.

yet.”<sup>11</sup> The ongoing experience of Revelation in the ideal practice of *halakhah* would enable the “external voice of God” in the Law (*Gesetz*) to be transformed into a personal imperative that proceeded from within, as Commandment (*Gebot*).<sup>12</sup> The sense of being commanded [*metzuveh*], paradoxically, invites the heteronomy, literally “Law of the Other,” *hetero-nomos* of Revelation, into the experience of autonomy, the intimate enclave of the self, *auto-nomos*. This tension between the authority of Sinai—as an external, commanding, historically-bound voice from the past—and the private conscience of the individual constitutes the greatest challenge of Revelation today.

While I am keenly aware that these categories—autonomy and heteronomy—are post-Kantian, they can be mapped onto the aggadic, *i.e.*, narrative, reading of Sinai, with Rosenzweig as our bridge. In turn, the narrative and poetic imagery of the *'aggadah* can help us navigate the modern phenomenological concepts. In the rabbinic corpus, the Sinai theophany may be understood as a passionate consummation, which entails a suspension of individual autonomy, a kind of trance or ecstasy—literally, an “*ek-statis...removal of mind or body from normal function.*”<sup>13</sup> Alternatively, Revelation may be described as being wholly present *in the body*, yet transcending mortality through the experience of the divine presence.

### Theophany: A Breakdance or Passionate Embrace

This experience of “the Present,” the beloved seized by love, is beautifully captured by the midrash on Israel’s wavering to the very

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<sup>11</sup> Alan T. Levenson recounts this story in his essay on Franz Rosenzweig, *An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thinkers: From Spinoza to Soloveitchik*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford, UK: Rowman & Littlefield 2006), p. 93.

<sup>12</sup> This distinction between *Gesetz*, the objective or external source of Law, and *Gebot*, the subjective experience of being commanded by law (as *mitzvah*), is elucidated in Rosenzweig’s essay *Die Bauleute (The Builders, 1923)*, and draws heavily upon the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. See Alan Levenson, *Modern Jewish Thinkers: An Introduction* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc. 2000), p. 112; see also Levenson’s excellent chapter on the impact of Immanuel Kant on modern Jewish thought; *ibid.*, pp. 321–325.

<sup>13</sup> *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed. revised), p. 505.

borders of their being in the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael. In the biblical account, the Israelites react in trembling terror to the *ha-qolot* (הַקּוֹלוֹת) – having literally *seen* “the sounds/voices”):<sup>14</sup>

וְכָל הָעָם רָאִים אֶת הַקּוֹלוֹת וְאֶת הַלְפִידִם וְאֶת קוֹל הַשּׁוֹפָר וְאֶת הַהָר  
עָשָׂן וְיָרָא הָעָם וַיִּנָּעוּ וַיַּעֲמְדוּ מֵרָחֵק;  
And all the people saw the sounds and the light-flashes  
and the sound of the Shofar and the smoking mountain,  
and they were afraid, trembling, and stood far off.<sup>15</sup>

Instead of breaking through the boundary at the base of the mountain, as anticipated by God’s repeated warnings (Exodus 19:12–13, 21, and 24), the Israelites surge back.<sup>16</sup> The exegetical prompt for the Mekhilta is found in the tension between the two verbs, *וַיִּנָּעוּ* (*va-yanu’u*, “they wavered”) and *וַיַּעֲמְדוּ* (*va-ya’amdu*, “they stood”). How could they both “stand” (still) and also “waver?”<sup>17</sup> The midrash comments:

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<sup>14</sup> The term *qolot* (in Exodus 20:15 of the standard Hebrew Masoretic [*i.e.*, traditional] text – MT hereon), “sounds/voices,” is often translated as “thunder” (NJPS – New Jewish Publication Society translation of Tanakh, 1985; NRSV – the New Revised Standard Version, 1989) or “thunderings” (KJV – King James Version, 1611; JPS – first Jewish Publication Society translation of *The Holy Scriptures*, 1917); but the singular *qol* is repeatedly used to refer to the sound of the shofar blast or the voice/sound of God (Exodus 19:19). See the discussion in Benjamin Sommer, “Revelation at Sinai in the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish Theology,” *Journal of Religion* 79:3 (1999), pp. 422–451, esp. p. 428.

<sup>15</sup> Exodus 20:15 MT; author’s translation.

<sup>16</sup> Higher Biblical Criticism ascribes these to different sources. For a pointed reading of the contradictions between the various strands in Exodus chapters 19–20, and 24, see Baruch Schwartz, “What Really Happened at Mount Sinai? Four Biblical Answers to One Question,” *Bible Review* 12, no. 5 (October 1997), 20–46, esp. pp. 23–25. See also Sommer, “Revelation at Sinai,” 426–429.

<sup>17</sup> The verb *וַיִּנָּעוּ* (*va-yanu’u*, with the root נ-ו-ע [*nun-vav-ayin*]) – meaning to quake, tremble, or quaver – is a term that describes the wavering of trees (as in Judges 9:9, 11, and 13). The prophet Isaiah uses the verb metaphorically: “וַיִּנָּע לְבָבוֹ וּלְבַב עַמּוֹ כְּנֹעַ עֵצֵי יַעַר מִפְּנֵי רוּחַ” (“their hearts and the hearts of their people trembled as trees of the forest sway be-

”ויעמדו מרחוק...”, חוץ משנים עשר מיל; מגיד שהיו ישראל נרתעים לאחוריהם שנים עשר מיל וחוזרין לפניהם שנים עשר מיל, הרי עשרים וארבעה מיל על כל דיבור ודיבור, נמצאו מהלכים באותו היום מאתים וארבעים מיל. באותה שעה אמר הקב”ה למלאכי השרת דדו וסייעו את אחיכם, ”מִלְכֵי צְבָאוֹת יְדֹדוֹן וְיָדוֹן” (תה’ סח:ג), ידודון בהליכה וידודון בחזרה. ולא מלאכי השרת בלבד, אלא אף הקב”ה, ”שְׂמָאלוֹ תַחַת רֵאשֵׁי וַיְמִינֹ תַחְבֶּקְנֵי” (שה”ש ב: ו).

*And they stood afar off* (Exodus 20:15). Beyond twelve *mil*.<sup>18</sup> This tells that the Israelites were startled and moved backward twelve *mil* and then again, returning, moved forward twelve *mil* – twenty-four *mil* at each *dibbur* (“utterance”), thus covering two hundred and forty *mil* on that day. Then God said to the ministering angels: Go down, and assist your brothers, as it is said: “The kings of the armies they flee, they flee [*yiddodun, yiddodun*]! (Psalms 68:13 MT);<sup>19</sup> [that is, they are in headlong flight, staggering after the Israelites] – they *yiddodun ba-halikhah*

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fore a wind”) (Isaiah 7:2). They are seized with terror in response to attack: “King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah of Israel marched upon Jerusalem to attack it” (Isaiah 7:1).

<sup>18</sup> A *mil* is about 2000 *amot*, about 1 km; 12 *mil* constitutes the outer boundary of the desert encampment; see Rashi on Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88b.

<sup>19</sup> I draw from the NRSV translation: “The kings of the armies they flee, they flee!” (Psalms 68:12). Alternatives read: “did flee apace” (KJV), or “are in headlong flight” (NJPS, v. 13). But this could be, in rabbinic “creative philology,” a play on the words *dod* (“lover”), *dodim* (“love”), or *yedid* (“friend”). On the level of plain meaning, the root נ-ד-ד (*nun-dalet-dalet*) conveys (in the *qal*, here a participle verb form) to flee, retreat, run away as in Isaiah 10:31, 21:15, and 33:3; but also to wander, flutter, or stray. See Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs; *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, 1906), entry 5903, p. 622.

The NRSV and KJV translations are based on the versification in the Christian canon and therefore occasionally differ from the MT.

("hasten after them as they lurch back"), and *yiddodun ba-hazarah* ("hasten them to return"). And not only did the ministering angels assist Israel, but the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself also did,<sup>20</sup> as it is said: "His left hand is under my head and His right hand embraces me" (Song of Songs 2:6).<sup>21</sup>

What is described in the Mekhilta is a kind of shuckling dance, the swaying of worshippers bent in prayer. They are drawn forward and leap back, darting to and fro like a flickering flame, like the *ratzo' vashov* of the heavenly creatures in Ezekiel's vision of the Chariot (Ezekiel 1:14). At first, it is merely the angels, in headlong flight (pursuing the Israelites), who carry them back to Mount Sinai—identified as "מְלָכֵי צְבָאוֹת יִדְּוֹן יִדְּוֹן" ("The kings of the armies they flee, they flee!")<sup>22</sup>. Deploying rabbinic "creative philology," the repeated יִדְּוֹן (*yiddodun*) resonates with the words דוּד (*dod*, "lover"), יָדִיד (*yedid*, "friend"), or even דוּדִים (*dodim*, "erotic love"). But, when the Divine Hosts are exhausted by the marathon, it is God who must intervene, cradling them Himself in His arms, as the quote from Song of Songs suggests: "שְׂמָאלוֹ תַחַת רֵאשִׁי וְיָמִינוֹ תַחְבֵּקֵנִי" ("His left hand is under my head, and His right hand embraces me")<sup>23</sup>. Is it a chase? A loving embrace? Perhaps a breakdance? The image conveys a choreography of ambivalence, desire to hear the word of God, to be privy to prophecy in the direct Revelation at Sinai, and the terror of all that entails. They

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<sup>20</sup> Here I identify God in explicitly male language, following the cue of the midrashic narrative and the analogy to the male lover in Song of Songs.

<sup>21</sup> Mekhilta deRabbi Ishmael Bahodesh *Yitro* 9 (ed. H.S. Horovitz and I. A. Rabin, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Jerusalem 1960), p. 236. The words in square brackets are added for clarification. For an alternative version, see ed. J. Lauterbach, *Mekilta deRabbi Ishmael*, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: JPS 1993), p. 340. For parallel midrashic accounts, see Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88b; Exodus Rabbah *Yitro* 29:4 and 9; Song of Songs Rabbah 5:1 (on Song of Songs 2:6); Tanhuma (ed. Buber) *VaYikra* 1:1; Tanhuma Yelammedenu *VaYikra* 1:1; and Pirque deRabbi Eliezer 41.

<sup>22</sup> Psalms 68:13.

<sup>23</sup> Song of Songs 2:6.



flee to the limits of the camp,<sup>24</sup> for hearing the word of God moves them to the limits of their very being. In Deuteronomy, the mountain is described, like the burning bush, as being “בְּעַר בָּאֵשׁ עַד לֵב הַשָּׁמַיִם” (“ablaze with flames to the very skies [literally, the *heart* of the Heavens]”), though not consumed, “חֹשֶׁךְ עָנָן וְעֶרְפָּל” (“dark with the densest clouds”).<sup>25</sup> “The LORD spoke to the people out of the fire, but *they perceived no shape – nothing but a voice*” (v. 12). In a deeply existential way, the Israelites were the heart of that flame and, yet, like the burning bush, not consumed.<sup>26</sup>

The Israelites then beseech Moses to intervene:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר־אֵתָהּ עִמָּנוּ וְנִשְׁמָעָה וְאֵל־יְדַבֵּר עִמָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים  
פֶּן־נָמוּת:

And they said to Moses: “Speak you with us, and we will hear/heed, and let God not speak with us lest we die.”<sup>27</sup>

Moses affirms the terror of death that they experience at the base of Sinai as a necessary trial:

אֵל־תִּירָאוּ כִּי לְבַעֲבוֹר נִסּוּת אֶתְכֶם בָּא הָאֱלֹהִים וּבַעֲבוֹר תִּהְיֶה  
יְרֵאתוֹ עַל־פְּנֵיכֶם לְבַלְתִּי תִחְטְאוּ:

Be not afraid; for God has come only in order to test you and in order for the fear of Him to be ever with you – so that you do not go astray.<sup>28</sup>

How much of the Torah or Decalogue was actually heard before the people asked Moses to intervene is a matter of debate – from the maximal: all Five Books of the Torah (and 613 *mitzvot*); to the minimal: only the first two of the Ten Commandments, or just the silent *’alef* of the

<sup>24</sup> See Rashi’s comment on the 12 *mil* (b. Shabbat 88b).

<sup>25</sup> Deuteronomy 4:11.

<sup>26</sup> See the discussion in Avivah Zornberg, *Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (New York: Doubleday 2001), pp. 278–279.

<sup>27</sup> Exodus 20:16; cf. Deuteronomy 5:21–24 MT.

<sup>28</sup> Exodus 20:17.

'Anokhi, (Exodus 20:2).<sup>29</sup> The implication of the latter is that the Israelites request intervention during the Revelation, not after.

In Exodus, but even more so in the Deuteronomistic account, it is this fear of the experience of God's voice (*qol*) that prompts Moses to become the intermediary. Specifically, the Israelites pronounce their terror in response to the fire of the theophany:

וְעַתָּה לָמָּה נָמוּת כִּי תֹאכְלֵנוּ הָאֵשׁ הַגְּדֹלָה הַזֹּאת אִם יִסְפִּים אֲנַחְנוּ  
לִשְׁמֹעַ אֶת קוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ עוֹד וְנִמְתְּנוּ: כִּי מִי כָל בֶּשֶׂר אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַע קוֹל  
אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים מְדַבֵּר מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ כָּמֵנוּ וַיְחִי:

So now why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any longer, we shall die. For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and remained alive?<sup>30</sup>

### Near Death: Too Close to the Flames

It is precisely this proximity to the consuming fire (the *modus vivendi* of God's presence)<sup>31</sup> that prompts the midrash to imagine that God thereupon draws rain and dew from heaven to quench the fire,

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<sup>29</sup> In the minimalist reading, the experience of recoil in Exodus 20:15–16 took place *during* the Revelation not after it, despite the alignment in the Torah. See Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2—in which the range of opinions are debated (discussed by Benjamin Sommer in *Revelation and Authority*, pp. 77–78). See also R. Yosef Qara (France, 1065–1135) quoted in the commentary of *Bekhor Shor* on Exodus 20:1. The Hasidic Rebbe Naftali Tzevi Horowitz of Ropshitz (d. 1827), quoting his teacher, Menachem Mendel of Rymanov (d. 1815), maintained that they only heard the silent 'alef of the 'Anokhi (discussed in Sommer, *Revelation and Authority*, pp. 89–92).

<sup>30</sup> Translation from NRSV; paralleling MT Deuteronomy 5:21–24 MT.

<sup>31</sup> God appears in the mode of fire at the burning bush (Exodus 3:2), at Sinai (Exodus 19:18 and Deuteronomy 5:4), in the consecration of the Tabernacle (Leviticus 9:23–24), with Elijah at Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:38), and at the inauguration of Solomon's Temple (at least according to 2 Chronicles 7:1).

and spare the Israelites – inspired by the Sinai motif in Psalms 68. The Mekhilta continues:

ר' יהודה ברבי אילעאי אומר לפי שהיו ישראל משולהבין מחמת האש של מעלן אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא לענני כבוד, הזילו טל חיים על בני, שני "אֶרֶץ רַעְשָׁה אֶף שָׁמַיִם נָטְפוּ מִפְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים" וגו' (תהילים סח:ח). ואומר "גִּשְׁשׁ נְדָבוֹת תְּגִיף אֱלֹהִים נַחֲלָתְךָ" (תהילים סח: ט-י).  
 R. Judah b. Il'ai says: As the Israelites were scorched by the heat of the fire from above, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to the clouds of glory: Drop the dew of life upon My children, as it is said: "The earth trembled, the sky rained because of God, [this Sinai, because of God, the God of Israel]" (Ps. 68:9; cf. Judg. 5.4),<sup>32</sup> and it also says:

<sup>32</sup> In fuller context:

אֱלֹהִים בְּצִאתְךָ לִפְנֵי עַמְּךָ בְּצִעְדְּךָ בִישִׁימוֹן סֵלָה: אֶרֶץ רַעְשָׁה אֶף שָׁמַיִם נָטְפוּ מִפְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים זֶה סִינַי מִפְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: גִּשְׁשׁ נְדָבוֹת תְּגִיף אֱלֹהִים נַחֲלָתְךָ וְנִלְאָה אֶתְּךָ כּוֹנֵנְתָהּ:

O God, when you went out before your people,  
 when you marched through the wilderness, *Selah*  
 the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain  
 at the presence of God, *zeh Sinai* ("the God of Sinai"),  
 at the presence of God, the God of Israel.  
 Rain in abundance, O God, you showered abroad;  
 you restored your heritage when it languished... (Based on  
 NRSV translation, Psalms 68:7–9; MT, *ibid.* 68:8–10.)

It is the reference to the "God of Sinai," or, rather, "*this Sinai*" [*zeh Sinai*], that seems to undergird the midrash. The same wording appears in Judges 5 (the Song of Deborah, *Shirat Devorah*), though (in that context) with reference to the battle against King Jabin of Canaan and his commander, Sisera. Given that *Shirat Devorah* is characterized as one of the earliest linguistic layers in the Hebrew Bible, it could be that this description originally referred to Sinai and was coopted for the battle description here; the reference to Sinai follows (v. 5):

ה' בְּצִאתְךָ מִשְׁעֵיר בְּצִעְדְּךָ מִשְׁדֵּה אָדוֹם אֶרֶץ רַעְשָׁה גַם שָׁמַיִם נָטְפוּ גַם עֵבִים נָטְפוּ מִיָּם: הָרִים נָלוּ מִפְּנֵי ה' זֶה סִינַי מִפְּנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

“You released a bountiful rain, O God; when Your inheritance [languished, You sustained it]” (Ps. 68:10).

This mythic account of Sinai, drawing on the poetic imagery of Psalm 68 and Judges 5, where the mountain quakes, the heavens pour forth rain, the clouds drip dew in response to God’s compassionate summons, is more than personification of nature, more than an expression of “*prosopopeia*” (Sir Philip Sidney’s term), a rendering in verbal terms that which cannot be seen by eyes of the flesh.<sup>33</sup> According to Murray Krieger:

The *prosopopeia* is a form of personification which gives a voice to that which does not speak and thereby gives presence to that which is absent. Through this figure, Sidney argues, God enters David’s poem (we are made to “see God coming in his majesty”). It is as if this figure is made to serve the larger objective of *enargeia*, the verbal art of forcing us to see vividly. Through “the eyes of the mind”—an appropriately Platonic notion—we are shown the coming of God and his “unspeakable and everlasting beauty.” Here, then, are words invoking a visible presence, though of course to “the eyes of the mind” alone. Though God’s may be only a figurative entrance, through His personified creatures, the poet makes us, “as

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O LORD, when You came forth from Seir, advanced from the country of Edom, the earth trembled; the heavens dripped, yea, the clouds dripped water. The mountains quaked—before the LORD, *zeh Sinai* (“Him of Sinai”), before the LORD, God of Israel. (Based on NRSV translation, Judges 5:4–5.)

The Rabbinic sources quote either Psalm 68 or Judges 5.

<sup>33</sup> See the discussion in Daniel Boyarin’s essay, “The Sea Resists: Midrash and the (Psycho)Dynamics of Intertextuality,” in *Poetics Today* 10:4 (1989), pp. 661–667.

it were," see this entrance. He is there, in His living creation, and absent no longer.<sup>34</sup>

But the Mekhilta does more; it has *narrativized* the drama of nature in response to the theophany. Nature does not merely mirror human emotion or dress the coming of God's Presence in trembling leaves or quaking earth. It dramatizes God's compassionate response to the near-death encounter at Sinai, when the Israelites (moth-like) came too close to the flames and were scorched: "שהיו ישראל משולהבין" ("the Israelites were enthralled [or enflamed] because of the fire"), or (in the language of the Tosefta), "והיו ישראל משתלחין מפני" ("the Israelites were released [or sent] into the fire").<sup>35</sup> In either case, these tannaitic sources do not imply an actual experience of death but a mere brush with death. When the heavens pour forth rain or the clouds drip cool drops, nature quenches the fire before Israel is

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<sup>34</sup> Murray Krieger, "Poetic Presence and Illusion: Renaissance Theory and the Duplicity of Metaphor," *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1979), pp. 597-619, esp. pp. 601-602.

<sup>35</sup> See Tosefta 'Arakhin (Zuckerman edition) 1:10:

וכן מצינו שהיו ישראל עומדין לפני הר סני נמשכין לאחוריהן שנים עשר מיל באין לפניהם שנים עשר מיל על כל דבור ודבור ארבעה ועשרים מיל היה היום ברור והיו ישראל משתלחין מפני אש אמר להן הקדוש ברוך הוא לענני כבוד רבצו טל לפני בני שני י"י בצאתך משעיר בצעדך משדי אדום והקב"ה מרביץ לפניהם טללים וגשמים שני גשם נדבות תניף אלהים וג':

And so we find that the Israelites stood at Mount Sinai, drawn back 12 mil and advancing forward 12 mil – at every single utterance, 24 mil. Clear as day, the Israelites were sent into the fire. The Holy One, blessed be He, said the Clouds of Glory, "Gather dew for My children," as it says: "LORD, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom," (Judges 5:4 NRSV), the Holy One, blessed be He, caused the dew to gather, as it says, "Rain in abundance, O God, you showered abroad" (Psalm 68:9 NRSV [v. 10, MT]).

consumed. While this divine command essentially saves them, it also dampens their desire for more.

## Death and Resurrection at Sinai

By contrast, later rabbinic work of the Amoraic period (from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century) and beyond<sup>36</sup> conjecture a death and resurrection – not by fire but by exposure to the divine presence. I will analyze the passage in the late *midrash* of PRE, chapter 41, which – while acknowledging its dependence and overlap with earlier rabbinic sources – has the most elaborate account of the near-death encounter at Sinai. This chapter does not align chronologically with the prior one (PRE 40, on the burning bush), or the next (PRE 42, on the Exodus from Egypt), but, rather, chapter 41 follows the list of Ten Descents:<sup>37</sup> in the fourth descent, God promises to go down to Egypt with Jacob (PRE 39, *cf.* Genesis 46:3); in the fifth descent, God descends into the burning bush (PRE 40, *cf.* Exodus 3:8); and, in the sixth, God alights upon Mount Sinai (PRE 41, *cf.* Exodus 19:20). The composition then primes

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<sup>36</sup> As in the Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 88b, Exodus Rabbah (*Yitro* 29:4, 9), Song of Songs Rabbah 5:1 (on Song of Songs 2:6), Tanḥuma (ed. Buber) *VaYiqra* 1:1, Tanḥuma Yelammedenu *VaYiqra* 1:1, and PRE 41.

<sup>37</sup> “The Ten Descents” in PRE refers to the ten occasions when God “descends” to the world in order to intervene in history, either to punish or to save. The list of the ten descents appears in PRE 14 (albeit flawed in the first printed edition). Here is a translation of the list, with corrections from the manuscripts:

God descended to the world in ten descents, as follows: 1) in the Garden of Eden, 2) during the generation of the dispersion [Tower of Babel], 3) in Sodom, 4) in the burning bush, 5) in Egypt, 6) at Mount Sinai, 7) in the cleft of the rock [after the sin of the ‘golden calf’], 8) and 9) twice in the Tabernacle, 10) and in the Future to Come.

See the discussion in Adelman, *Return of the Repressed*, p. 23.

us for the juxtaposition of the theophany at the burning bush and theophany at Sinai. From PRE 41 (2<sup>nd</sup> printed ed.<sup>38</sup>):

מה כתיב בתריה? וידבר אלהים את כל הדברים האלה לאמר "אנכי יי' אלהיך אשר הוצאתיך..." (שמות כ: א-ב) יצא קול ראשון והשמים והארץ רעשו ממנו<sup>39</sup> והימים והנהרות ברחו<sup>40</sup> ההרים והגבעות נתמוטטו<sup>41</sup> וכל האילנות כרעו<sup>42</sup> והמתים שבשואל חיו ועמדו על רגליהם שנאמר "כי את אשר ישנו פה עמנו עמד<sup>43</sup> היום"

<sup>38</sup> There is no published critical edition of PRE, so I have selected the text from the Warsaw 1852, second printed edition (as published by Börner-Klein, *Pirke de-Rabbi Elieser*), providing reference to alternative manuscript and printed versions in the footnotes. For details, see Adelman, *Return of the Repressed*, pp. 306-307.

<sup>39</sup> The earthquake and storm are one way God manifests Himself in nature, "ה' בְּסוּפָה וּבְשַׁעֲרָה דָּרְכוּ" ("His way is in the whirlwind and storm") (Nahum 1:3). See Judges 5:4 (which we have already read as a reference to Sinai) and Joel 4:16 and Nahum 1:5.

<sup>40</sup> Based on Psalms 114:3.

<sup>41</sup> See Nahum 1:5 (above), Habakuk 3:6.

<sup>42</sup> As in Psalms 29:5, 9. But because the verbal root of כ-ר-ע (*kaf-reysh-ayin*, "fall prostrate/genuflect") does not collocate with trees, Rav David Luria ("Radal"), in his 19<sup>th</sup> commentary on PRE, suggests "*holel 'eylot*" ("the calving of the hinds/deer"), as in Job 39:1 (though this phenomenon, wholly natural, even mundane, does not resonate with nature's response to theophany in the poetic passages of Psalms and Prophets to which PRE alludes). See Radal on PRE 41, n. 44, repr. Jerusalem 1963.

<sup>43</sup> In the 1<sup>st</sup> printed ed. (Vienna [ויניציאה], 1544): עומד (*omed*, "standing"). Radal comments (PRE 41, n. 45) on the use of the verb *'amad* ("stood") and suggests that the dead are made to stand as in Ezekiel's vision in the Valley of the Dry Bones (Ezekiel 37:10, cf. 2 Kings 13:21 and the end of Daniel [12:2]): "When the *dead* man came in contact with Elisha's bones, he came to life and stood up" (2 Kings 13:21), and in the midrashic paraphrase: "They [at Sinai] stood [but only] on that day [*ha-yom*]" (Deuteronomy 29:14).

The resurrection of the dead is a prominent theme throughout PRE. Isaac sets the precedent in the aftermath of the *'Aqedah* (PRE 31-32), with a whole chapter devoted to the topic (*ibid.*, 34). Most significantly with regard to our topic, the soul "beholds" the *Shekhinah* ("Divine

(דברים כט: יד) וכל העתידים להבראות עד סוף כל הדורות שם עמדו עמהם בהר סיני שנאמר "ואת אשר איננו פה עמנו היום" (דברים כט: יד) וישראל שהם חיים נפלו על פניהם ומתו ויצא קול שני וחיו<sup>44</sup> ועמדו על רגליהם ואמרו למשה משה רבינו אין אנו יכולין לשמוע קולו של הקב"ה ומתנו כשם שמתנו שנאמר "נפשי יצאה בדברו" (שה"ש ה: ו) וכתיב "ויאמרו אל משה דבר אתה עמנו ונשמעה" (שמות כ: יט) הקב"ה [את] קולן של ישראל וערב לו ושלח למיכאל ולגבריאל ואחזו בידיו של משה שלא כרצונו והגישוהו אל הערפל שנאמר "ומשה נגש אל הערפל" (שמות כ: כא).

What is written after that? "And God spoke all these words, saying: "I, the LORD, am your God who took you out..." (Exodus 20:1-2). The voice of the first (utterance) went forth, and the heavens and earth quaked from it, and the waters and rivers fled, and the mountains and hills trembled, and all the trees fell prostrate, and the dead in Sheol were revived and stood on their feet, as it is said, "not only with those who are standing here with us this day..." (Deuteronomy 29:14), and those (also)

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Presence") upon death and says, "No man shall see me and live" (Exodus 33:20), but, upon dying, the human may see God (*ibid.*)! The obverse may also be the case; *because* they behold the *Shekhinah*, they die. The classic midrashic corpus concerned with resurrection limits it to the End of Days (Numbers Rabbah 14:22, Tanḥuma *BeMidbar* 17:17, Midrash Psalms 103:5, and so forth). PRE, however, expounds extensively on the resurrection scenes within the Bible and reads the quickening of the dead into many more biblical episodes. This aligns with the sense of apocalyptic eschatology that runs throughout the work (see Adelman, *Return of the Repressed*, 5–21). So, when the Israelites behold the full revelation of God's self at Sinai—as they see the Divine Presence—they die. Norms would dictate that people fall on their faces (*i.e.*, ויפלו על פניהם, "they fell on their faces") in supplication—or *in order not to see*, as Radal notes (PRE 41, n. 68; *cf.* Leviticus 9:24, 1 Kings 18:39, and Ezekiel 1:28 and 3:23). Only by the grace of the second utterance are they brought back to life as they ask to hear no more. For a list of parallel midrashic sources on Resurrection at Sinai, see footnote 36.

<sup>44</sup> See the parallel in the Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88b, to be discussed later.



who in the future will be created – until the end of all the generations – stood there with them at Mount Sinai, as it is said, “but also with those who are not here with us today” (*ibid.*), and the Israelites who were alive (then) fell upon their faces and died. The voice of the second (utterance) went forth, and they were revived, and they stood upon their feet and said to Moses, “Moses, our teacher, we cannot hear the voice of the Holy One, blessed be He, for we shall die as we died (just now), as it is said, ‘My soul failed me when he spoke’ (Song of Songs 5:6), and ‘And they said to Moses: ‘Speak you with us, and we will hear, [and let God not speak with us lest we die]’ (Exodus 20:16).” The Holy One, blessed be He, heard the voice of Israel, and it was pleasing to Him, and He sent for Michael and Gabriel, and they took hold of the two hands of Moses against his will, and they brought him near unto the thick darkness, as it is said, “And Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was” (*ibid.*, v. 21).

The extraordinary response of nature to the Sinai theophany is nearly ubiquitous in the rabbinic corpus, based on intimations in the biblical text (Exodus 19:16), and poetic elaborations in Psalms and Prophets (Deuteronomy 33:2, Micah 1:3–4, Psalms 97:4, and so forth). Those metaphors, or (in Heinemann’s term) “condensed myths”<sup>45</sup>, are re-enlivened here: trembling mountains and skies, quaking of the earth, rushing waters, and fallen trees. But what makes this midrashic vignette unique is the explicit introduction of the Resurrection motif, not just for those standing at Sinai, but for *all* the dead. Drawing upon a homiletical interpretation on *Parashat Nitzavim*, Moses’ last exhortation to all of Israel, the author applies the verse as referring to the participants in the renewal of the covenant in the Plains of Moab to Sinai, and extends it not only beyond the present generation to the future, but to the dead (from the past), as it says: “וְיָאֵת אִשָּׁר אֵינָנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם” (“but also with those who are not here with us today”) (Deuteronomy

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<sup>45</sup> My translation of his term; Isaac Heinemann, *Darkhei Ha-'Aggadah* (“The Methods of Aggadah”) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press 1970), p. 19 and p. 203, n. 45.

29:14).<sup>46</sup> Resurrection is wholly inclusive: *all* the dead stood on their feet and heard the opening of the Decalogue – so that the Sinai experience is pictured as an absolute encounter with Thanatos, a reversal of direction from that “undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns” (Hamlet 3.1).<sup>47</sup> While those who had died were quickened at the first utterance, those alive and present fell on their faces and died. The prooftext, quoted in PRE, draws from the passionate near-encounter between the beloved and her *dod*, the male lover in the Song of Songs – “נפשי יצאה בדברו” (“My soul failed me [literally, left me] when he spoke.”)<sup>48</sup> The Israelites, then, were only resurrected with the second utterance. And they beg to hear no more. The author of PRE then explains why they heard only the first two of the *dibberot*

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<sup>46</sup> This is a classic homiletical midrash on *Parashat Nitzavim* (see, for example Tanḥuma Yelammedenu, *Nitzavim* 3; Tanḥuma [ed. Buber] *Nitzavim* 8:8). In the biblical context, the scene concerns the renewal of the covenant in the plains of Moab (*‘arvot Mo’av*), as a “supplement” to the Revelation at Sinai:

כִּי אֶת אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁנֻן פֹּה עִמָּנוּ עִמָּד הַיּוֹם לִפְנֵי ה': אֶל־הֵינּוּ וְאֶת אֲשֶׁר אֵינְנוּ  
פֹּה עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם:

I am making this covenant, sworn by an oath, not only with you who stand here with us today before the LORD our God, but also with those who are not here with us today. (NRSV translation, Deuteronomy 29:14–15.)

In context, the renewal of the covenant refers to the present generation and all future generations. But, in this homiletical interpretation (PRE 41), it refers to all the past generations (the dead, who are made to stand – which is quickened by the voice of God), as well as to future generations.

The parallel midrashic literature only intimates that “those who are not here with us today” (Deuteronomy 29:14), refers to the Jewish souls that have not yet been born (Exodus Rabbah, *Yitro* 28:6) or to those who have already died (Tanḥuma [ed. Buber] *Nitzavim* 8:8).

<sup>47</sup> The ‘Abode of the Dead’ is referred to in Akkadian Ancient Near Eastern sources as “the land of no return” (*māt la târi*); see T. J. Lewis, “The Abode of the Dead,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 101–111.

<sup>48</sup> Song of Songs 5:6.

[commandments]—one knocked them dead, presumably “אנכי ה'” (“I am the LORD your God”) (Exodus 20:2), while the next brought them back to the land of the living, “לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים” (“You shall have no other gods before me”)⁴⁹. God then hears the pleas of Israel to withdraw from the experience of theophany, and Moses is *forcibly* drawn into the crucible, by God’s dynamic duo, Michael and Gabriel, presumably against his will.

The same idea is conveyed in the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 88b), combining the motifs of resurrection and the breakdance motion into the outer-limits of the camp (both homilies here attributed to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi):

ואמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: כל דיבור ודיבור שיצא מפי הקדוש ברוך הוא יצתה נשמתן של ישראל, שנאמר “נפשי יצאה בדברו” (שיר השירים ה: ו). ומאחר שמדיבור ראשון יצתה נשמתן, דיבור שני היאך קיבלו? – הוריד טל שעתידי להחיות בו מתים, והחיה אותם. שנאמר “גָּשָׁם נִדְבַּוּת תִּגְיֵף אֱלֹהִים נִחְלָתָךְ [וְנִלְאָה אֶתְּהָ כּוֹנֵנְתָה]” (תהלים סח: ט – י).

ואמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: כל דיבור ודיבור שיצא מפי הקדוש ברוך הוא חזרו ישראל לאחוריהן שנים עשר מיל, והיו מלאכי השרת מדין אותן, שנאמר “מַלְכֵי צְבָאוֹת יִדְדוּן יִדְדוּן” (תה' סח: ג). Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: at every single utterance that left the mouth of the Holy One blessed be He, the soul of Israelites left them, as it says: “נפשי יצאה בדברו” (“My soul failed me [literally, left me] when he spoke”) (Song of Songs 5:6), for, from the first utterance, their souls left them. [With regard to] the second utterance—how did they receive it? [God caused] dew to drop, which would, in the future, quicken the dead, and resurrected them, as it says, “The sky rained because of God, [this Sinai, because of God, the God of Israel when Your inheritance [languished, You sustained it]” (Psalms 68:9–10).

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: at every utterance that left the mouth of the Holy One blessed be He, the Israelites

⁴⁹ Exodus 20:3.

moved backward twelve *mil*, and the ministering angels led them back: “The kings of the armies they flee, they flee [*yiddodun, yiddodun*]!” (Psalms 68:13, MT).<sup>50</sup>

While the Talmud, drawing from Song of Songs 5:6 and Psalms 68:9–10 (like the Mekhilta), suggests that there was a death and resurrection of sorts, not all the dead of *the past* were quickened with the first *dibbur* (“commandment”) as the author of PRE 41 suggests. That is, the word of God has the power to slay, but more importantly to enliven in the latter midrash. While the first *dibbur* awakens all the dead, “those who are not here with us today” (Deuteronomy 29:14), the second enlivens only those who could not withstand the first. “My soul failed me [literally: left me] when he spoke” (Song 5:6). According to PRE, it is not the rains or dew that quickens them, that sends their blood again pulsing through their arteries, but the word of God itself, as Hannah intoned in her prayer of thanksgiving: “The LORD deals death and gives life, / Casts down into Sheol and raises up” (1 Samuel 2:6, NJPS). In PRE 10, these words are attributed to Jonah in his prayer within the belly of the Great Fish, before he was vomited onto dry ground.<sup>51</sup> The reluctant prophet also experienced a three-day death (evading the word of God) and a return to life when he relents, resuming his mission.

## Conclusion: Into Life

What then brings Israel back to a sense of life, to groundedness, following the ecstatic, and near-death, or perhaps even real death, encounter at Sinai? The tannaitic sources emphasize the people’s terror, a breakdance response to the very boundary of being—somewhere between near-death and ecstasy. The later midrash takes this further: where the Israelites actually expire and need to be revived and Moses’ takes up the role of intermediary, and allows them to continue a relationship with God, albeit indirectly.

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<sup>50</sup> B. Shabbat 88b.

<sup>51</sup> For an expanded discussion of Jonah in relation to the resurrection motif in PRE 10, see Adelman, “Jonah’s Sojourn through the Netherworld,” in *Return of the Repressed*, pp. 211–258.

How do we map this back onto the contemporary tension, as depicted by Rosenzweig, between heteronomy and autonomy, between God's Law and individual conscience? Between the authority of Sinai and the ongoing experience of Revelation in one's present encounter with Torah? To answer this, I'd like to return to the question of Love, through the story of Alcestis who serves as Rosenzweig's feminine model for Israel. According to the Greek legend, she willingly relinquishes her life on her wedding night to save her husband from death (who had been cursed by the Fates to a bed of snakes, when he failed to make any sacrifice to the goddess Artemis for his success in the hunt by which he had won Alcestis' hand). For her, Eros overcomes Thanatos or, at least, the fear of death. Their names speak to this very dynamic: Alcestis [Ἀλκηστis] from the Greek, *alke* [ἀλκή] meaning "valiant, brave, strong", and Admetus [Ἄδμητος], meaning "untamed," "untameable," or perhaps impervious and invincible, like the adamantine stone.

In Rainier Maria Rilke's rendition of the myth, Alcestis addresses the god who comes to claim her as the sacrificial stand-in for her husband:

No other can be a substitute for him. I *am*.  
I am his ransom. For no one else is finished,  
as I am. What remains to me then of that  
which I was, here? That *is* it, yes, that I'm dying.  
Didn't she tell you, Artemis, when she commanded this,  
that the bed, that one which waits inside,  
belongs to the other world below? I'm really taking leave.  
Parting upon parting.  
No one who dies takes more. I truly depart,  
so that all this, buried beneath him  
who is now my husband, melts and dissolves itself -  
So take me there: I die indeed for him.<sup>52</sup>

The reason Alcestis is ready for death, willing to sacrifice her life in love for Admetus (echoing the Hebrew *'ad mavet*, "unto death,"

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<sup>52</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, "Alcestis", translated by A. S. Kline (2001); [https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/MoreRilke.php#anchor\\_Toc527606965](https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/MoreRilke.php#anchor_Toc527606965) (accessed Oct., 2018).

with an inter-linguistic pun), is precisely because she already belongs to that other world; she, like no one else, is “finished,” or, rather, completed. Love satiates the soul to the brim, completes the sense of being. Likewise, the word of God filled the Israelites to the brim such that they leapt to the borders of their collective being (12 *mil*, the boundary of the camp); or, in the other midrashic image, their souls left their bodies. As death or dying, it is not an ecstatic experience, in the sense of “out-of-body,” but a total presence that fills the body to the limits of the skin with another Presence in love, manifest in the word of God. Only in this paradoxical way – Rosenzweig’s “not yet” – can the individual meet the commanding voice of Law.

However, Alcestis returns from the Land of the Dead – rescued by Heracles from Hades. So Rosenzweig ends *The Star*, with the words *Into Life*, the promise of *Eternal Life*.<sup>53</sup> Seized by love *unto death*, *‘azzah kha-mavet ‘ahavah*, the beloved returns to herself, dissolved in the relation of love with the Other, when Revelation finally culminates in the final Redemption. Both Rosenzweig, writing during the Weimar Republic in Germany after the “war to end all wars,” and PRE, composed after the Islamic conquest of Palestine in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, offer us a way to navigate the paradox of revelation through a myth of romantic love, in which one can live through the overwhelming encounter with the ultimate Other while holding onto the embodied, boundaried self.

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Rachel Adelman (Ph.D. Hebrew University of Jerusalem), is currently an assistant professor of Hebrew Bible in the rabbinical program at Hebrew College in Boston. Her first book, *The Return of the Repressed: Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha* (Brill, 2009), was based on her doctoral dissertation; her second major book, *The Female Ruse: Women’s Deception and Divine Sanction in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield-Phoenix Press, 2015), resulted from her work as a research associate in the Women’s Studies in Religion Program at Harvard Divinity School. When not writing books, articles, or *divrei torah*, it is poetry that flows from her pen.

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<sup>53</sup> See the discussion in Zachary Braiterman on Rosenzweig’s persistent obsession with death: “‘Into Life’?! Franz Rosenzweig and the Figure of Death,” *AJS Review*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (1998), pp. 203–221.