

AL PARASHAT D'RAKHMIM: THE NEGOTIATED CROSSROADS AS A RABBINIC METAPHOR

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The most important way that walking on a trail through a forest is different from living out the days of your life has to do with the ability to stop: you can stop to rest under a shady tree if you tire on your way through the woods and then start your journey anew later on, whereas you cannot put your life on pause and then resume living at a more convenient or appealing moment no matter how weary or frustrated you may feel. Another has to do with the concept of coming to a crossroads, but not always. Coming to a fork in the road in the forest and thus being able to move forward solely by choosing to go off in one direction or the other happens in life all the time. Which of us cannot recall many specific moments at which we were obliged to choose which of two paths to follow into the future? But rabbinic literature also describes a different kind of crossroads experience we encounter in the course of our lives: not one at which we must choose between two plausible paths into the future because the path we have been following is now splitting in two, but one at which we encounter the precise spot where two oppositional (or at least not easily reconcilable) concepts meet and we then grow into the next part of our lives by embracing them both and (somehow) making them fit together. It is this latter version of the crossroads experience, the one that has no specific parallel in the forest, that I wish to discuss in this essay.¹

There are lots of regular forks in the road in ancient Jewish literature. The situation is untenable because the herds of Abraham

¹ The phrase *al parashat d'rakhim* in the title of this essay comes from a talmudic passage preserved in the Bavli, Sotah 21a, which I will discuss in detail below. It appears elsewhere in the Talmud as well, and also in a few other places in the rabbinic corpus.

and Lot are too large for their sheep to pasture on the same stretch of grassland and so, when they come to a fork in the road, Abraham sees a potential solution to their problem: "If you go to the left," Abraham says in a friendly, non-coercive way, "then I'll take the path to the right." But the reverse decision will work too: "And, if you go right," he adds, "then I'll just move off to the left."² Clearly, Lot and Abraham *could* conceivably choose to move forward together on the same path, on *either* of the paths now before them. But, traveling together wasn't working out well, and each choosing instead to travel forward on his own seems clearly to constitute the better option for them both.

Sometimes, however, the image evoked does not suggest the possibility of making no choice at all. "Behold," Moses quotes the Almighty as saying, "I have set before you on this day [a path of] life and goodness [and an alternate one as well, the path of] death and wickedness."³ The text cited resumes an earlier oracle that evokes a similar image, but here the Torah pauses to make explicit how precisely one might go about choosing the path of life—by choosing to be obedient to the commandments of the Torah—and also to note *en passant* that the wrong choice will lead not merely to perdition but actually to the eventual embrace of alien gods and their contemptuous worship.⁴ Still later, Jeremiah uses this very imagery to characterize

² Genesis 13:9. In his comment *ad locum* (s.v. *im has'mol v'eimina*), Rashi kindly imagines Abraham speaking simply about right and left (*i.e.*, rather than mentioning the specific destinations to which left and right would lead) to imply that their holdings will remain contiguous regardless of Lot's choice and that Abraham will therefore always be effectively nearby enough to watch over his nephew.

³ Deuteronomy 30:15.

⁴ The earlier passage is at Deuteronomy 11:26–28. Note that the point here is not that the embrace of idolatry will lead to abandoning the *mitzvot*, but precisely the opposite: rejecting fealty to God's commandments will lead eventually to rejecting faith in the uniqueness of God and thus to the embrace of polytheism. For a discussion of the rabbinic *midrash* on this earlier passage preserved at Sifrei D'varim §53 (ed. Finkelstein [1940; rpt. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1969], p. 120) and an interesting comparison of the image evoked there with the famous fork in the road presented by Robert Frost in his "The Road Not Taken" (published first in the poet's *Mountain Interval* [New York: Harry Holt & Company, 1916], p. 9, and

the geopolitical choices facing the Kingdom of Judah as the hordes of Babylon were already gathering to the east, which literary development I have written about at length in my essay, “Choosing the Path of Life in Old Jerusalem and Today.”⁵ None of these images suggests the possibility of making no choice being an option: the path of dull-witted complacency has ended, each is saying, and there now exist only two options forward: obedience to the laws of the covenant or disobedience, life or death, blessing or curse.

This image underlies many biblical passages. For example, when the author of the octuple alphabetical acrostic that is the 119th psalm writes about the way he hopes to embrace as *derekh pikkudekha* (“the way of Your ordinances”), *derekh emunah* (“the way of faith”), and *derekh mitzvotekha* (“the way of Your commandments”)—and contrasts those paths with the *derekh sheker* (“the way of falsehood”)—he seems clearly to have in mind that same notion of the pious individual choosing to travel forward in life on one path as opposed to its alternative.⁶ And some passages so clearly presume the image that they only mention the path being recommended and leave unnoted that any alternate path forward exists at all.⁷

innumerable times since), see Richard Claman, “Mishnah as the Model for an Overlapping Consensus,” *Conservative Judaism* 63:2 (Winter 2011), pp. 65–66.

5 Martin S. Cohen, “Choosing the Path of Life in Old Jerusalem and Today,” in David Birnbaum and Martin S. Cohen (eds.), *U-vacharta Bachayyim* (New York: New Paradigm Matrix, 2019), pp. 87–101.

6 *Derekh pikkudekha*: Psalm 119: 27; *derekh emunah*: Psalm 119:30; *derekh mitzvotekha*: Psalm 119:32; *derekh sheker*: Psalm 119:29.

7 Examples of Scripture recommending the one path forward without noting an alternative: Psalm 101:2 or 143:8, or Proverbs 2:20 or 4:11, among many other examples. For the interesting notion of taking the biblical text *itself* as a path to be followed and its liminal moments of transition as crossroads to be negotiated by readers eager to grow spiritually and intellectually through the experience, see Nanette Stahl, *Law and Liminality in the Bible* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995 [=Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 202]). For an extended effort to discuss the traditions connected with a single biblical personality as a liminal crossroads to be negotiated by readers moving forward through the scriptural text, see Gregory Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero in the*

When Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai was on his deathbed, his disciples gathered around him.⁸ Looking past them across the looming chasm, however, Rabbi Yoḥanan saw two roads opening up before him. One, he intuitively understood, would lead to Paradise, whereas the other would take him straight to Gehenna, to Hell. Readers used to venerating Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai as one of the greatest rabbis of his or any day will wonder how such a saintly sage could possibly have been worried about possibly going to Hell. But the rabbi's reputation rested—at least fundamentally—on a decision that at the moment must have been morally challenging in the extreme: here was a man who allowed himself to abandon his friends and neighbors to their dismal fates in Jerusalem when the Roman siege of the city was at its harshest in order to make a separate peace with the Roman leadership—in talmudic legend, with Vespasian himself—in exchange for the apparently trifling favor of being allowed to open up a school in Yavneh.⁹ Things worked out well in the end, and his actions allowed the Jewish leadership to regroup after Jerusalem and its Temple were destroyed. But one way to read the story of Rabbi Yoḥanan on his deathbed is to suppose that he never felt entirely certain that he had behaved well, that his decision was not at least in some minor way self-serving and thus morally questionable. And so, at the very end of his life, he saw not the road to paradise opening up for him to travel, but a crossroads... and, at that, the very one spoken of by Moses and Jeremiah, the fork in the road that leads either to blessing or to curse, to Heaven or to Hell, to life everlasting or to death eternal. It is easy to imagine how upsetting this final reckoning must have been for Rabbi Yoḥanan. But, when he looked up again and saw the ghost of saintly King Hezekiah coming forward personally to escort him from the world—that same Hezekiah who in his day negotiated a fretful peace with Assyria instead of going to war against a foe he knew he could not defeat, Rabbi Yoḥanan knew that the specific way he had been personally transformed by negotiating

Ancient Near East (New York and London: T. and T. Clark, 2006 [=Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 453]).

⁸ The source for this story is in the Bavli at Berakhot 28b.

⁹ The story is told in the Bavli at Gittin 56a-56b. What specifically Rabbi Yoḥanan meant by asking for "Yavneh and its sages" is a matter of scholarly debate. He also is quoted as having asked for some other favors as well.

the intersection of Separate-Peace Street and Secure-the-Future Road had been adjudicated positively in the heavenly tribunal.

Other sages are similarly depicted as growing spiritually through the successful negotiation of similar intersections. Abba Taḥnah—an obscure sage mentioned in ancient Jewish literature only once—had a similar experience, for example, when he once arrived in his hometown just as the sun was setting late one Friday afternoon.¹⁰ He was carrying his things in a huge pack on his back when, at an otherwise unnamed crossroads, he found a diseased pauper collapsed on the ground.¹¹ The roads leading into town being mostly deserted that close to Shabbat, the man could not believe his good luck. “Do me a favor,” the man implored Abba Taḥnah, “and help me get home.”¹² And now Abba Taḥnah was facing a huge dilemma: if he set down his own burden to help the man and only returned after Shabbat to retrieve it, it would surely be stolen, which disaster would deprive him of his livelihood. (This was apparently a city of observant Jews *and* non-Sabbath-observing thieves.) But Abba Taḥnah would risk profaning the Shabbat if he were to help the man and then return immediately to retrieve his bundle so close to sunset. That option felt unthinkable—the conscious desecration of Shabbat being a capital offense—yet to refuse to help this pathetic soul at his feet was, at least

¹⁰ Abba Taḥnah’s story is told in Kohelet Rabbah 9:6. Mayer Fialkoff (see below, note 17) first drew my attention to the way this story is part of the larger rabbinic depiction of the crossroads as a place of potential spiritual growth.

¹¹ For “diseased pauper,” the text has *mukkeh sh’hin*, someone afflicted with the skin disease said to have constituted the sixth plague God brought against the Egyptians, as per Exodus 9:8–12. The text doesn’t specifically say he was poor; that is just my interpretation. Note also that the detail that this takes place at a crossroads adds nothing to the simple meaning of the story—it could just as reasonably have been set in any location at all. But my sense is that there was a specific point to introducing the image of the crossroads into the story—and for the specific reason mentioned below.

¹² The text merely says “*hakhniseini la’ir*” (“help me into the city”), but I’m imagining here that he wanted not just to get past the city limits but actually to get home. What else?

in Abba Taḥnah's mind, *also* to be guilty of a capital offense.¹³ What to do? He had a moment to decide and he did decide. Allowing his innate kindness to overwhelm his fear of infringing even slightly on the sanctity of Shabbat, he decently and generously helped the afflicted man home, then returned just as dusk was upon the city to retrieve his parcel. Seeing this behavior, the townsfolk—instead of being moved by the man's intelligent, sensitive negotiation of the complex crossroads where Kindness-to-the-Afflicted Road crosses Obedience-to-the-Covenant Avenue—were unimpressed. "Is *that* the Abba Taḥnah we used to call 'the pious one?'" they asked acidulously. And it was just as Abba Taḥnah's own doubts began to rise within him as well that God suspended the sun in the sky for just as long as Abba Taḥnah needed to retrieve his bundle and make his way home with it.¹⁴ And then, the icing on the cake: as Abba Taḥnah began to obsess about a new worry that suddenly struck him—that this kind of miracle might possibly have constituted the full reward due him from

¹³ The Hebrew has *miḥayyeiv b'nafsho* (literally, "becomes liable for execution")—but without specifying the exact crime involved. Perhaps he feared the man would die in the street and that his death would be, not solely *de facto* but actually *de jure*, his fault. It is also true, however, that the rabbis used the phrase *miḥayyeiv b'nafsho* figuratively as well as literally, cf., e.g., in the Mishnah at Avot 3:5. Regarding the willing desecration of Shabbat being a capital offense, cf. Exodus 35:2 or Numbers 15:32–36.

¹⁴ The city in question presumably had no *eiruv*, so carrying anything at all after sundown on Friday, let alone a huge pack, was going to constitute a profanation of the Sabbath. This notion of God stopping the sun in the sky to grant a worthy soul (or an army of them) some extra time in which to conclude a good deed—or, at any rate, not to profane the Sabbath—is also behind a well-known midrash from Pirkei D'rabbi Eliezer concerning the story in Joshua 10 about Joshua stopping the sun in mid-sky so as to permit the Israelites time to complete their military victory over an alliance of five Canaanite kings. In its biblical set-ting, the miracle has nothing to do with Shabbat (and appears to be merely about the Israelites not being able effectively to fight at night), but the retelling of the story in Pirkei D'rabbi Eliezer (at ch. 52, ed. Venice, 1544, p. 49a) recasts the story as though the imminent onset of Shabbat were the specific problem facing the Israelite army.

heaven for his life of piety and thus leave him unable reasonably to expect the posthumous reward for which he had striven his whole life, a portion in the World to Come—it was then that a voice came forth from heaven to reassure him in the words of King Kohelet—the persona adopted by the author of Ecclesiastes—that he was free to enjoy his Shabbat meal and to drink his Shabbat wine, “for God has already looked with favor on your deeds.”¹⁵ And so we see another story featuring an individual at a precise intersection—in this case the intersection of Kindness-to-the-Afflicted Road and Obedience-to-the-Covenant Avenue—not specifically choosing one over the other, but by negotiating the specific spot at which they meet and then moving forward into his own future transformed positively by the experience.

In a talmudic text preserved in Tractate Sotah, a slightly different image is evoked.¹⁶ The *mishnah* under discussion, Sotah 3:3, is discussing the case of the suspected adulteress and notes that the results of trial-by-ordeal proposed by Scripture in Numbers 5:11–31 can be affected by the woman’s personal merit and that, depending on the measure of her virtue, the results of the test can be deferred for one, two, or three years. Ignoring the obvious strangeness of the woman under discussion being both an adulteress (since falsely accused women would presumably not need any sort of personal virtue at all for the test not to produce any results) and *also* someone possessed of sufficient virtue to be able to alter her own test results through the sheer force of her personal merit, the talmudic passage under consideration appears simply to embrace the notion and merely offers some alternate theories about the specific amount of time the results of the test can be deferred by the personal merit of the suspect.¹⁷ And then the text turns to the far more fascinating question of what kind of merit specifically has that kind of power.

¹⁵ Kohelet 9:7. I am just imagining that the precise reward Abba Taḥnah feared might now not be his was his portion in the World to Come; the text leaves the reward unspecified.

¹⁶ B. Sotah 21a, regarding which text cf. Mayer Fialkoff, “On Fear and Choosing: Traditional Jewish Thinking on Choice Revisited,” published in *Adult Education in Israel* 10 (2007), pp. 25–32.

¹⁷ B. Sotah 20b. The word translated here as “merit” or “virtue” is the Hebrew *z’khut*. The alternate suggestions are three months, nine months, and twelve months. What kind of adulteress would *also* be virtuous enough to defer the results of the test that will prove that she

In its traditional way, the Gemara conducts the discussion with itself. Could we be talking about the merit that accrues to women who study Torah? That seems unlikely given the fact that such women, so the Gemara, are doing so for the spiritual gain and intellectual pleasure such study affords but not in fulfillment of an actual commandment.¹⁸ Could we then be discussing the merit that accrues from the performance of the commandments? That notion too the Gemara rejects, noting that the traditional way to understand Proverbs 6:23 (“For the commandment is a lamp, but the Torah is light...”) is to understand that the power of religious observance is ultimately as temporary as the light of a lamp that cannot burn forever no matter how filled with oil it might be, whereas the salutary effect of Torah study can be permanent. And now we come to the parable I wish to discuss and which I present here in my own translation:

[The situation here can be compared] to an individual who is out walking in the darkness and [impenetrable] gloom of night, and who [naturally] fears brambles, pits, thistles, and wild animals—and human predators as well—while not even being sure if he is on the right path. If he were [somehow] to be provided with a torch, he could stop worrying about the brambles, pits, and thistles but would still have to worry about wild animals and human predators while moving forward—and *still* not knowing that he is on the right path. Once dawn breaks, he can stop worrying about the wild animals and the human predators...but *still* without knowing for sure that he is on the right path. But then, when he comes [finally] to [a known] crossroads, *then* he [can finally feel reasonably certain that he] is safe from all [the above-

has sinned is not explored. Perhaps the idea is that women—in this, just like men—can be virtuous in some ways and sinful in others. When the Gemara goes on to discuss whether a sin can “extinguish” a *mitzvah*, it presumably has something like this in mind.

¹⁸ The passage here presumes that women are exempt from the *mitzvah* of Torah study, cf. Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhhot Talmud Torah 1:1, based on a talmudic passage that appears at Bavli, Eiruvin 27a and Kiddushin 34a. Other opinions abound, particularly among more modern authors.

mentioned terrors that attended his journey up until that point.]¹⁹

The parable, presented as such in the text with the one-word heading *mashal*, presents a man out walking at night but who—either because of his own lack of familiarity with the route he is supposed to be taking or because of the gloomy darkness of the forest at nighttime (or some combination of both)—is unsure even if he is on the right road. But, although he finds it in him to persevere, he is assailed by entirely natural fears. He could fall into a pit. He could rip his clothing to shreds by falling in some brambles. He could cut himself on a thorn bush. He could be eaten by wild wolves or some other carnivorous predators. Or he could be attacked by the kind of cowardly thieves who prey on lonely travelers in the dark of night.²⁰ And then a new thought surfaces as the parabolist now wonders what would happen if the same lonely traveler were somehow to have a torch to carry along and illuminate the path ahead? In that case, such a traveler could naturally stop worrying about falling into pits or tearing his cloak or his skin on bramble bushes, but would still have to worry about wild animals and human predators, neither of which dangers would be lessened—and perhaps even would actually be heightened—by a light source that would illumine not only the way but also the wayfarer. And, of course, such a traveler would *still* have no way to know if he were on the right path.

When dawn breaks, he can stop worrying about predatory animals—presumed here to be nocturnal beasts who turn in at sunup—and also about human thugs, here imagined as vagabonds

¹⁹ B. Sotah 21a, with my own bracketed additions and italicized emphasis added. The text in the Talmud is about a male traveler, and my comments reflect that detail even though the same lesson would obviously apply equally reasonably to women as well.

²⁰ Is this why Rabbi Ḥananiah ben Ḥakhinai is cited at M. Avot 3:5 as being opposed to people going out walking alone at night? It could be! But the Gemara here leaves Rabbi Ḥananiah unreferenced, as it does also the incident regarding Rabbi Tarfon recorded at M. Berakhot 1:3 in which the latter is reported to have risked being attacked by hooligans when he literally lay down on the open road to recite the evening Shema in accordance with the teaching of the School of Shammai.

who rest during daylight hours so they can spend the night wandering around in the forest looking for new victims to rob. And then, finally, he comes to a crossroads and can now truly rest: the fears that assailed him have all been allayed, and he knows where he is and where he's going. Why he doesn't need to lie down and rest in the manner of the beasts and thieves he so feared is not explored. Maybe he had a good nap the afternoon before setting out!

But what *is* this crossroads at which the traveler has finally found himself, the one at which he found the courage to face the future fearlessly and without the sense of crippling anxiety that he felt during his nighttime journey through the forest?

Rav Ḥisda, the third-generation Babylonian amora, says that the traveler at dawn finds himself at the intersection of Scholarship and Mortality.²¹ And it is precisely there, so Rav Ḥisda, that our traveler finally finds his peace. Presumably we are to understand that accepting the ephemeral nature of human life against the background of his intellectual training (and the emotional wherewithal that derives directly from it) enables the man in the story to understand that the finite nature of human life is far more opportunity than curse, far more a challenge to stand up *to* than a burden to feel crushed *beneath*. We are supposed to imagine that most find the brevity of life—to say the very least—off-putting and upsetting rather than challenging and stimulating. According to this line of thinking, travelers feel burdened by the various fears the text mentions by name as they make their way forward through the forest in the dark of night. But the true scholars in our midst—not those who merely have spent years at their studies but true scholars possessed of great erudition combined with the kind of supple intellect that enables and inspires real learning as opposed to the mere mastery of other people's lessons—*that* kind of Torah scholar finds in the ephemeral nature of life a platform successfully to stand on and, from the heights it affords, to see the world even more clearly. And that is why he finally feels safe when he arrives at the crossroads—because his learning has deprived death of its sting, thus enabling him to live life without

²¹ This is my own, slightly quirky translation of the original, which reads *zeh talmid ḥakham v'yom mitah*, literally “this [is the intersection of] Scholar and Day of Death.” (The words *talmid ḥakham* appear in the printed text as an abbreviation.) The word *amora* denotes a sage of the talmudic era.

endlessly fearing its natural end. The idea here, therefore, is not that the traveler should veer off his current path to embrace either of the cross streets he has come across, but that such a traveler can find peace by virtue of having negotiated the specific spot at which Fear-of-Death Street crosses Love-of-Learning Road.²²

Rav Naḥman bar Yitzḥak, originally a disciple of Rav Ḥisda but eventually a great scholar in his own right, imagines our wayfarer to have found himself finally at the intersection of Scholarship and the Fear of Sin.²³ In other words, for Rav Naḥman, the ultimate solace available to those who spend their days traveling alone and afraid through the night (which is all of us) is finally to stand at the precise crossroads at which the scholarly discipline that derives from having devoted a lifetime to Torah study meets the ability, still retained even after all that intellectualizing and hair-splitting, to be repulsed by transgression. At such a crossroads, Rav Naḥman teaches that people can finally come to know inner peace. And this too will resonate with moderns burdened by their own inadequacies, by their own inability faithfully to obey the law, by their own endemic need to work at cross-purposes with their own best interests by feeling unable adequately to control the counterproductive—yet mostly irresistible—inclinations that lead them again and again to sin when all they really want (or think they want) is to be virtuous. Rav Naḥman's point, therefore, will be particularly resonant with moderns who relate easily to the notion that the anxieties that make life difficult to negotiate can be set aside the most easily by the scholar able to see the law *not* as a mass of countless rules that no one could possibly ever keep entirely straight, but *rather* as a system of observance that exists as an organic whole and that can be embraced as such. And the deep solace that derives from learning can thus create a context in which the occasional

²² For a very moving contemporary account of someone who uses the image of a crossroads as a metaphor for personal growth (and, at that, one featuring an encounter with death as one of the roads the author must cross on his way forward), see Bryant Keith Alexander, "Standing at the Crossroads," *Callaloo* 22:2 (Spring 1999), pp. 343–345.

²³ The text reads more literally that the traveler is standing at the intersection of Torah Scholar [Street] and Fear-of-Sin [Road]. The original reads *zeh talmid ḥakham v'yirat ḥeit*, literally "this [is the intersection of] Scholar and Fear-of-Sin." (The phrase *talmid ḥakham* here too appears as an abbreviation.)

instance in which one succumbs to a base desire or acts for a moment in an unprincipled way can be understood—without being rationalized away into unimportance—as part of the human condition, as what happens to even the most virtuous human beings when they live in the real world and spend their days encountering real people of all sorts, some of whom provoke poor behavior even in saints. And that is Rabbi Naḥman bar Yitzḥak's lesson: that inner peace can come from the successful experience of negotiating the *specific* spot at which Love-of-Learning Avenue crosses Fear-of-Sin Road and creates the possibility of virtue suffused not merely with intellectual achievement but also with moral integrity.

And then we come to the opinion of Mar Zutra, a younger contemporary of Rav Naḥman bar Yitzḥak's, who merely observes that the Torah scholar mentioned by the others is not merely one who is knowledgeable and well-trained, but one whose study invariably reflects not only the simple meaning of the words in whatever text is being analyzed but the actual *halakhah* as well. In other words, Mar Zutra is merely specifying that the kind of Torah scholar Rav Naḥman bar Yitzḥak and Rabbi Ḥisda are talking about is one whose obedience to the law flows directly from his studies. In other words, they are discussing neither the genius nor the merely well-behaved, but, rather, the true *homo religiosus* whose faith, learning, and conduct in the world are so tightly interrelated so as to make of such a one not merely an obedient soul with an excellent memory, but the rare individual whose piety is direct function of his or her learning.

In the end, the parable is thus inviting us to imagine our lives as night journeys through a dark, lightless forest. We can see nothing. Occasionally, some one or another of our fears is alleviated by circumstance when some unseen stranger unexpectedly hands us a torch so that, at least for as long as it burns, we can stop worrying about falling into a pit some earlier journeyer thoughtlessly dug in the middle of the path and then forgot to fill *in* or cover *over*. Sometimes the world is bright with daylight and we can stop worrying about nocturnal predators or human ruffians... but only until the sun sets again, which it inevitably does, and our terror of the world is ratcheted back up to its previous level. In the end though, there is a solution for those who find it unpleasant to live their lives in fear. Or, rather, there are two solutions: Rav Ḥisda's and Rabbi Naḥman bar Yitzḥak's.

There are other crossroads of this variety, one of which is told of in the context of a story featuring Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananiah, one of the most famous disciples of Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai. It happened, so the anonymous story in the Talmud, that Rabbi Yehoshua once mused openly that he had only been trounced intellectually three times in his life, once by a woman, once by a girl, and once by a boy.²⁴ Readers interested in knowing how he was bested by the woman and the girl are directed to the source of the story in the Tractate Eiruvim. But the boy's story is the one that feels pertinent here, and so it is his alone that I will retell in detail.

In the story, Rabbi Yehoshua recalls that he was once out walking—on a country path, on a path through a forest, on the path of life...on *some* path—when he suddenly came to a crossroads featuring two alternate paths and was unsure which path to take forward. Pausing for a moment to get his bearing, he noticed a boy seated nearby and so, taking the child to be a local, Rabbi Yehoshua asked him which was the right path to take to the city toward which he was attempting to travel. The boy (I'm embellishing this a bit) looked him over, considered his options, then decided to speak only the truth. "This one," he said cryptically, gesturing towards one of the paths stretching out before the rabbis' feet. "This one is short and long." And then, waving vaguely at the other, he completed his own riddle. "But that one," he added mysteriously, "is long and short."

Rabbi Yehoshua, apparently in too much of a hurry to realize that he was being offered a puzzle instead of an answer, took the path that the boy had said would be "short and long." What does that even mean? But Rabbi Yehoshua, perhaps not realizing that this was one of "those" children that are always popping up in this kind of story, merely heard the word "short" and, having stopped listening, went off on what he took to be the shorter path. (And what reader will not easily recall having stopped listening in mid-sentence when an asked question had really only partially been answered?) In the end, though, Rabbi Yehoshua must have also thought that it hardly mattered what path he took since they both apparently led (at least eventually) to his desired destination! And, so, he sets off, only to find out what the boy meant exactly: that the path he qualified as "short and long" was shorter than the other path in the literal sense, but also longer in that

²⁴ Bavli, Eiruvim 53b.

it led directly into the vast orchards and huge formal gardens that surrounded the city and which had to be circumnavigated entirely rather than simply traversed by itinerants who wanted to enter the city.

Irritated by his own discovery (as happens so often in life, and to so many of us), Rabbi Yehoshua returned to the crossroads to give the boy a piece of his mind. "Didn't you say that was the shorter way?" he asked the boy, inadvertently revealing the degree to which he himself hadn't been listening carefully. But the lad was a cooler cucumber than his illustrious interlocutor. "Really?" the lad asked. "Because I remember saying it was the longer way too!"²⁵ And now we get to the good part. Most of us would explode at being sassed like that by a child. But, like any *true* sage would be, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananiah was delighted to learn something *even* at the expense of his own dignity. And so, chastened, he kissed the lad on the head and then, turning to address us, his audience over all these countless centuries of engagement with Tractate Eiruvin, exclaimed aloud, "Happy are you, O Israel, for you are all great sages... and not only your elderly scholars either but even your young children."²⁶

It's a good story. (It is actually part of a terrific page of Talmud, one filled with clever riddles and good stories.) But what does it mean exactly—and, more to the point, what did Rabbi Yehoshua learn at this particular crossroads that prompted him to kiss the boy in the story and flatter him so deeply? Was the lesson not to stop listening when people answering our questions are still speaking? That would surely be one approach, but there could also be another: what if the story is meant to illustrate what it means to traverse one of "those" crossroads—the kind that offer, not merely a choice about how to

²⁵ In my usual way, I have embellished the details of this sparse story. But the basic plot is as told in the Talmud and the dialogue is translated precisely (or almost precisely).

²⁶ The rhetorical flourish featuring a rabbinic storyteller stepping out of his own story to address some final words to the audience is a feature of ancient Jewish preaching and makes stories like this something of the Jewish version of the kind of pithy anecdote told to make a specific point known in the Greco-Roman world by the Greek term *chreia*. For the use of this specific genre in rabbinic circles, see Burton L. Visotzky's *Aphrodite and the Rabbis* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016), pp. 91–96.

proceed, but a transformational experience to be had by traversing the intersection of two roads and then continuing on, altered for the good, by having done so?

In my interpretation, the storyteller is suggesting what the correct way to approach religion should be. According to this model, the longer way is the way of exhausting ruminative contemplation of everything, the kind of approach to religion that promotes the endless consideration of everything so that nothing at all—even something as basic to Jewish life as lighting Shabbat candles or strapping on one’s *t’fillin*—is merely done, but is always subjected to endless scrutiny, to thoughtful consideration and reconsideration. This will invariably take a very long time! But, since the proponents of this approach believe—not unreasonably—that the ritual-by-rote style of religious observance that is the alternative to theirs is just a cut or two above mere superstition and leads not to spiritual growth but to unwarranted complacency and unearned pride, it is also the shorter approach because the alternate leads nowhere at all.

The shorter way, in the opinion of its proponents, is a life of service in which obedience to the commandments and fealty to their Author is the key element in Jewish life. The unending, byzantine meandering through the various philosophical and aggadic principles imagined to undergird the larger system detracts far more than it enhances the spiritual life of the individual seeking wholeness in God through devotion to the *mitzvot*. These are the people who favor the “how-to” questions over the unanswerable “why’s,” and whose bookshelves are filled with detailed manuals explaining how correctly to behave when Erev Pesah falls on Shabbat or how properly to *daven* when you are on a spacecraft orbiting the earth so quickly that the familiar sun-up and sun-down rules relating to the correct times for daily prayer simply cannot rationally apply.²⁷ For these people, the

²⁷ Readers of a certain age will recall the once well-known joke about the hapless Jewish astronaut who can’t get anything done because each “day” in space is only ninety minutes long and his obligation to *daven* three times each day makes it impossible to find time for anything else. For a more serious analysis of the astronaut’s halakhic situation (including a retelling of the joke), see David Golinkin’s “A Responsum Regarding Space Travel,” poignantly written before the death of Col. Ilan Ramon, Israel’s first astronaut, and available online at www.doron.org.il

shorter way is the path forward to fulfillment and to God. And it is the shorter path forward for pilgrims on their way to their private Jerusalems as well, for, in the end, what matters on a journey far more than the pleasure or opulence of the journey is actually arriving at the destination. So the shorter way actually *is* the longer way as well, for the alternative way – the longer way described above – will only lead to endless discussion and debate without any movement forward ever actually taking place at all. And on a journey, moving forward is what counts!

And so Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananiah faced this crossroads. He chose one, then regretted it and chose the other. But what he learned from the experience is what counts here and that was that—since neither path took him where he was going—in the end he needed to accept both principles in order actually to progress towards the city, in this interpretive context representing the City of God, Jerusalem. He understood that ritual without the deep ruminative substructure that can only result from long hours spent pondering its intricacies and their greater meaning is wasted effort and foolishness. But he also understood that endless contemplative study that never actually concludes—and so from which also no one ever learns anything definitive—absent a willingness to embrace the commandments without feeling crippled by indecision or intellectual inadequacy is also pointless and, finally, an exercise in self-aggrandizement rather than in the worship of God. And so he realized, finally, that both were the same way: the shorter longer way and the longer shorter way... and that the only way to move forward was *not* to travel both at once (which at any rate would be impossible), but to understand that they were the same road, that you can't actually take one and not the other, and that attempting to separate them will never lead anyone to anywhere good at all and least of all to Jerusalem.

In other words, here too we have the concept of a crossroads that leads those who negotiate its challenges on their way forward on their own paths through their own lives. The Greeks sacralized the crossroads they negotiated by imagining Hecate not solely as the goddess of sorcery and pharmacology, but also as Hekate Trioditis (Hekate of the Crossroads); the concept was simply to invoke the

schechter.edu/a-responsum-regarding-space-travel/ (from June 2002, accessed on October 17, 2018).

goddesses' watchful assistance when the road one is traveling suddenly splits in two and one must therefore choose which fork in the road to follow.²⁸ That idea is part of Jewish culture too, but the deeper concept is that the truly profound crossroads we face in life are not choices between one path and another, but opportunities to grow, to learn, and to mature by stepping over and through them... as one walks forward through life to a city surrounded by orchards and gardens, to one's final destination in paradise, to the redemptive moment that will seal the deal for all humankind at some indistinct messianic moment in the future... but which awaits us all in the smaller sense as we finally come to accept that life is a journey with a destination towards which the experience of each crossroads negotiated brings us closer and closer. And that is how the rabbis developed the concept of crossroads and turned it from a symbol for the opportunity life occasionally offers to go off in a different direction into a far more profound metaphor for real spiritual, intellectual, and emotional metamorphosis through the resolution of paradox—here conceptualized as the confluence of two roads that, although they could surely also *not* meet, somehow nonetheless do.²⁹

²⁸ Cf. the reference in Virgil's *Aeneid* (at 4:609; trans. Robert Fagles [New York *et al.*: Viking, 2006], p. 149) to Hekate being "greeted by nightly shrieks at city's crossroads." And cf. also Ovid's line in the *Fasti* (at 1:141, trans. James G. Frazer [London: William Heineman and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959], p. 13) to seeing "Hekate's faces turned in three directions that she may guard the crossroads where they branch three several ways." According to Pausanias in his *Description of Greece* (Book II 30:2, trans. William Henry Samuel Jones [London: William Heineman and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918], p. 409), Hekate was first portrayed as a three-faced deity by the fifth century BCE sculptor, Alkamenes.

²⁹ Others think of these transitional growth moments in life not as crossroads to negotiate but as something more akin to thresholds to step over and, indeed, the Latin word for "threshold" (*limen*) has yielded the modern concept of liminality, regarding which, see the recent book by Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between* (2014; rpt. London and New York: Routledge, 2018) or, coming at the concept from a very different angle, Sang Hyun Lee,

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From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).