

INTRODUCING *HUMASH KOL HA-TOR* AND *M'GILLOT KOL HA-TOR*: SOME PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

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My forthcoming *Kol Ha-tor* commentary on the Torah and the five *m'gillot* includes a fresh translation of all six works. I hope that the books will stand well on their own, yet I find myself eager to explain in advance some of the principles that guided me while working and to which I have attempted to remain faithful in the course of the *twenty-odd* years I have been laboring away, one way or the other, on this project. This is more challenging than it sounds however – and for the simple reason that those principles have had to be updated many times in the course of all those years to reflect new directions in my thinking on various pertinent matters. Nor have the same principles governed the translation and the commentary, both of which I nevertheless hope will be perceived as fully reflective of the same level of commitment to the level of intellectual, literary, and spiritual integrity I have endeavored to bring to them both. Also worth mentioning is that it has not been solely those principles that have been in flux throughout these last years: as I myself have continued to evolve as an author both of non-fiction and fiction, my sense of what it means to undertake any sort of translation at all has also morphed forward into new and (I hope) improved iterations of the set of ideas I brought to the project originally.¹

I believe *Kol Ha-tor* to be the first Torah commentary based on the ancient Palestinian triennial cycle to be composed since ancient times.² (And since, no, there is no limit to the hubris I bring to my own

¹ A survey of the writing I've undertaken in the course of the years I've also been working on *Humash Kol Ha-tor* and *M'gillot Kol Ha-tor* is available at www.martinscohen.net.

² I have based my work on the division of the text into sections intended to be read as part of a triennial lectionary cycle in the Leningrad

work, let me observe too that no such actual commentary from antiquity exists either.³) Fully devotional in nature and thus intended primarily for contemplative study, the commentary starts from the assumption that the Torah was meant all along to be a kind of founda-

Codex, written in 1008 or 1009 C.E. and standardly considered the oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible. The triennial cycle in use in some Conservative synagogues today is not at all like its ancient triennial predecessors, all of which moved forward, section by section, through the Torah from beginning to end. For a very comprehensive survey in English of the various scholarly and practical issues relating to the use of a triennial cycle, see Lionel E. Moses' "Is There an Authentic Triennial Cycle of Torah Readings?" a responsum composed for the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly that was approved by that body in 1987 and which is—as of June 16, 2019—available to the public on the website of the Rabbinical Assembly at https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/19861990/moses_triennial.pdf.

Hebrew readers will want to compare the material in Rabbi Moses' responsum to the one penned by the late Rabbi Simchah Roth and published by the Rabbinical Assembly and the Masorti Movement in Israel in the sixth volume of responsa of the *Va-ad Ha-halakhah* (ועד ההלכה) (Jerusalem, 5758–5759 [1997/1998–1998/1999]), pp. 98–188. And readers with fluent Hebrew will surely want also to compare what they think they know about the ancient triennial cycle with the groundbreaking essay by Shlomo Naeh, "Sidrei K'ri-at Ha-torah B'erezt-Yisra-el: Iyyun M'huddash" (סדרי קריאת התורה בארץ ישראל: (עיון מחודש" תרב"ץ סז:ב), published in *Tarbiz* 67:2 (5758 [1997/1998]) (תשנ"ח), pp. 167–187. With respect to my own work, what Naeh has to say about the larger significance of a triennial cycle featuring specifically 167 *s'darim*, the number presented in my own work, is both fascinating and remarkably validating.

- ³ It certainly seems self-evident that preachers in ancient Israel pegged their homilies to the weekly Torah reading and some of those sermons certainly survive in the various extant collections of homiletical *mid-rashim* from ancient times, but those sermons almost invariably focus on the opening verses of the weekly reading. What there is no evidence of having existed in ancient times is a section-by-section commentary on the entire Torah based on the triennial lectionary cycle.

tional spiritual document “to them who hold fast unto it” and so attempts to suggest on a *seder* by *seder* basis what each section of the Torah can be reasonably imagined to have to teach to people embracing it in that specific way.⁴ Imagining in that vein why the *Akeidah* (i.e., the Binding of Isaac story, Genesis 22) was included in the text is one thing, however. And writing about the passage that discusses at length the contaminative potential of dead *sh’ratzim*,⁵ a different kind of task entirely... and particularly if the point is not solely to learn something informative or interesting about the laws of purity but cogently and rationally to say in what specific sense that section of the text was intended to be of value to readers seeking spiritual advancement through the contemplation of Scripture centuries after the bulk of laws related to purity and impurity were permitted to fall into lamented or unlamented desuetude.

I suppose I should begin by explaining the name I’ve given both works, *Kol Ha-tor*. The phrase means “voice of the turtledove” and comes from the Song of Songs, where it alludes to the advent of springtime: “For the winter is over and the rains are ended. The buds are visible again in the land. The gardeners’ day has come and the voice of the turtledove (*kol ha-tor*) can again be heard in our land.”⁶ It’s a very nice verse! But the detail that makes the name work in this context is a personal one: before my people were Cohens, we were Turkeltaubs. (The possibly true story is that my great-grandfather, arriving at Ellis Island and thinking it wise to start off life in America with a less Jewish name than Turkeltaub, chose Cohen instead.) And since Turkeltaub is the Yiddish for “turtledove,” the *tor* in *Kol Ha-tor* serves to link me to my own work. Plus, of course, there’s also the possibility of taking *tor* as the masculine word of which *torah* is the feminine form,

⁴ “To them who hold fast to it.” Proverbs 3:18.

⁵ The Hebrew term *sh’ratzim* denotes the class of reptiles deemed in death to constitute sources of impurity at Leviticus 11:29-30; cf. the elaboration of the law by Maimonides in his *Mishneh Torah* in the fourth chapter of the section labelled *Hilkhot Avot Ha-tumah*. Rambam (i.e., Maimonides), of course, merely takes the passage in the Torah at face value as a source of information about one specific aspect of the laws of purity and impurity.

⁶ Song of Songs 2:11-12. The words *kol ha-tor* are in verse 12.

thus rendering it a suitable term to qualify a male author attempting to serve as the voice of the Torah to his readers.⁷

Some of the principles I set in place as I wrote have to do with the nature of the works at hand. Others, with the specific nature of the Hebrew language. And still others with the concept of translation itself. Some are reflective of well-known issues over which scholars continue to fuss. Some are broad enough to constitute the literary version of the axioms that undergird scientific or mathematical research without themselves being demonstrable in any truly cogent way. And some are seriously idiosyncratic notions, ideas that have taken root in me over all these many years and which seem to me to constitute inarguable truths—somewhat in the way I feel certain that the sky is blue even though I understand perfectly well that what I see when I train my gaze upwards is far more a function of the way my brain interprets the electronic signals that my optic nerve sends into its inner neurological matrices than of anything I could reasonably qualify as absolute reality unrelated to my own perceptive consciousness. I would like to mention some of those principles here and explain why they seem so fundamental to my understanding of the nature of the biblical text.

The first principle that has guided my work is the conviction that the Torah is a unified work, a principle out of sync neither with a text-critical approach to the biblical text nor with a more traditionalist approach. To the layperson, this will sound as an obvious truth: what else could the Torah be if not a unified work with a famous beginning, a long middle, and a melancholic end? But the reality is far more complex than that makes it sound.

The well-known Documentary Hypothesis, first proposed in a recognizable version well over two centuries ago, supposes that behind the text of the Torah as it has come down to us is a library of anterior texts that later editors redacted to create the current work, and that the version that has come down to us as the *textus receptus* reached its current state only in Second Temple times.⁸ The theory founders,

⁷ This is a whimsical observation. The word *torah* is a common noun in Hebrew meaning “teaching” and has no masculine form.

⁸ The literature regarding the Documentary Hypothesis is immense. Probably the best introduction is still Richard Elliot Friedman’s *Who Wrote the Bible* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987; reprint, 2019), to

and more than just a bit, on the fact that none of the allegedly anterior works actually exists, as also do not any fully unambiguous literary references to them in any surviving ancient work. Traditionalists, of course, understand the Torah to be the work composed by Moses at the end of his life, just as the story in Scripture makes almost clear.⁹ These viewpoints are regularly described as antithetical, but I have chosen nonetheless to work the stable ground between them and presume that the Torah—the Pentateuch—exists in our day (and existed long before the rabbinic period) as a unified work that came into existence at some specific moment in history and that that is so regardless of whether any parts of it preexisted its final redactor's efforts. (For what it's worth, the Torah itself references at least one anterior source, *The Book of the Wars of YHVH*, so the idea *itself* of the Torah being at least in part developed from earlier sources is hardly untraditional.¹⁰)

which may be compared Walter Houston's *The Pentateuch* (London: SCM Press, 2013) or Ernest Wilson Nicholson's *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century: The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen* (Oxford, New York; et al.: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁹ The traditionalist approach understands Deuteronomy 31:9 ("And Moses composed this *torah* and entrusted it to the priests of the tribe of Levi, bearers of the Ark of the Covenant of YHVH, and to the elders") to mean that Moses composed the Torah at the end of his life, drawing on his personal recollections, his knowledge of his people's prehistory, and the documents he himself created in the course of the nation's years in the wilderness. See below, note 6, and *cf.* the theory of the talmudic sage Rabbi Banaah cited in the Talmud in the Babylonian Talmud (at Gittin 60a) to the effect that the Torah was revealed "scroll by scroll," *i.e.*, in a series of discrete oracles revealed to Moses atop the mountain and in the Tent of Meeting, and then, at the end of Moses' life, pasted together into one big scroll that became "the" Torah.

¹⁰ *The Book of the Wars of the YHVH* is referenced at Numbers 21:14-15, to which may be compared the references to a written version of something called the Book of the Covenant at Exodus 24:4 and 7, to the itinerary of the various oases in which the Israelites camped in the wilderness that Moses is said at Numbers 33:2 to have composed in writing, and to the tablets of the law which are themselves described as written documents that clearly antedated the composition of the work that presents two different versions of their text to the reading public.

This was a crucial point for me as I wrote and chose to focus on the fact that, given that the Torah exists in the first place (and that it has come down to us with a remarkably few number of textual variants), the unified nature of the work we know by that name is unassailable. This approach opens many exegetical doors without taking on questions that, in the final analysis, will not be conclusively answered possibly ever—and surely not by myself.¹¹

The quinquepartite nature of the Torah is also an important plank in my platform. As every Religious School child knows, the Torah has come down to us in five parts. More important, though, is that no scholar supposes that the five books of the Torah (*i.e.*, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) *themselves* all had literary pre-histories as single works that were later brought together by an anthologizer who simply pasted them together to create a kind of super-work in five parts. Far more likely is the notion that the Torah, created at a point in history as a unified work, was presented to the reading public in five parts and that that five-part structure was meant to signal to the savvy reader that the book at hand was not a literary creation in the normal sense but an extended prophetic oracle.¹² This notion—that the Torah is a work of prophecy—will also

¹¹ On the other hand, see the papers that are focused on this specific point (and many related points) in Matthias Armgardt, Benjamin Kilchör, and Markus Zehnder (eds.), *Paradigm Change in Pentateuchal Research* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2019), and, particularly, the essays published there by Richard E. Averbeck and Matthias Armgardt on pp. 21–44 and 79–82 respectively.

¹² I discussed the various reasons that the five-part structure can be taken to point to the prophetic nature of the text in my essay, “Who Knows Five?,” printed in *Conservative Judaism* 55:2 (Winter 2003), pp. 63–71, to which may now be compared Elaine Goodfriend’s essay, “Why Is the Torah Divided into Five Books?,” published online at *TheTorah.com: A Historical and Critical Approach* and available at <https://thetorah.com/why-is-the-torah-divided-into-five-books/> (as accessed on May 16, 2019). And *cf.* also the interesting essay by Thomas Römer and Marc Z. Brettler, “Deuteronomy 34 and the Case for a Persian Hexateuch,” in the *Journal of Biblical Studies* 119:3 (2000), pp. 401–419, which analyzes the older theory that the Torah along with the Book of Joshua was originally a unified work, a Hexateuch rather than a Pentateuch,

sound banal, or at least ordinary, to most. But its implications are profound and very far-reaching. And, almost more than anything else, it is the ground on which *Chumash Kol Ha-tor* stands.

One of the most vexing issues for anyone considering the text of the Torah to work through are the inconsistencies in the text. Some, it is true, are subtle and easily missed. But others are so blatant that it seems impossible to imagine anyone *at all* not noticing them, let alone a trained scribe or professional editor. The most commonly proposed explanations for the existence of these blatantcies are, at least in my estimation, profoundly wanting. The argument, for example, that the Torah was simply poorly edited because its final redactor was so little talented as to be unable to notice flagrant discrepancies between passages that occasionally appear in contiguous or almost contiguous passages seems facile.¹³ Indeed, I would say just the opposite, that the Torah presents as a tautly and carefully edited work. As a result (and really to say the very least), it seems hard to imagine that the same editorial hand that was capable of creating a text featuring narratives of uncommon profundity and literary beauty was *also* sufficiently unskilled not to have noticed, say, that the same individual referenced as Elyasaf ben De-u-eil in Numbers 1 is called Elyasaf ben Re-u-eil a few dozen lines later in Numbers 2.¹⁴ The other commonly set forth

but without considering that there may well have been reasons for wanting the final book to be in five rather than six parts. There have also been efforts to understand the Torah as part of a Heptateuch (*i.e.*, a seven-part work including the five books of the Torah plus Joshua and Judges) or as part of an Octateuch (*i.e.*, an eight-part work including the above-mentioned books plus Ruth) or an Enneateuch (*i.e.*, a nine-part work including the five books of the Torah plus Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings), but none of these theories undoes the importance of the fact that the Torah itself was, at least at a certain point in its literary evolution, presented to the public not in six, seven, eight, or nine parts, but in five specifically — a number Professor Goodfriend and I believe to be both fully intentional and profoundly meaningful.

¹³ Cf., e.g., Jean-Louis Ska, *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch*, trans. Pascale Dominique (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), p. 165: "... a work such as the Pentateuch, a work of mediocre literary quality...."

¹⁴ The man is called Elyasaf ben De u eil at Numbers 1:14 (and cf. the repeat references at Numbers 7:42 and 47, and at Numbers 10:20), but Elyasaf ben Re u eil at Numbers 2:14. Cf. the valiant effort of Ramban

explanation of the discrepancies — that the final redactor felt for some reason *unable* to alter any of the anterior sources in play — also sounds exaggerated in that the same text scholars who write encouragingly about this approach *also* seem uniformly to agree that the anterior sources they posit once to have existed were specifically *not* taken *holus-bolus* into the text at all, but were *all* reworked for inclusion in the Pentateuch. And if that is so, then how can we imagine that the final redactor felt unable on literary or spiritual grounds to fix minor incongruities in the text, almost all of them inconsistencies that made the work less — not more — likely to be accepted by the public as sacred writ?

In contrast, taking the Torah as a work of prophecy has much to recommend it. For one thing, that is precisely how the Torah presents itself — as a collection of oracles received at Sinai and the Tent of Meeting by Moses, whom the Torah itself celebrates as the greatest of all Israelite prophets.¹⁵ For another, the nature of prophecy itself makes the issue of discrepancy dramatically less important: since all human language is rooted in human experience, and since God by definition exists outside of and beyond all human experience, the effort to channel the experience of communicative communion with God through the prism of human language is, by definition, an effort to capture in a specific medium something that by its nature exists outside of that medium. That the prophet can intelligibly channel anything of his or her encounter with the divine is itself a kind of a miracle, or at least testimony to the remarkable psychic stamina and linguistic/literary ability of the prophet under consideration. That being the case, that oracular material is not fully congruent in all its parts and subparts feels as though it should mean almost nothing at all. Spending time trying to reconcile discrepancies in the text is not that different, therefore, from pedantic literary critics spending long hours trying to reconcile one reference in some poet's oeuvre to the sea being blue and another to it being green. To say the same thing even more simply: if the poet can present the sea as having two different colors,

(that is, the famous Spanish rabbi Moshe ben Naḥman, also called Naḥmanides, who lived from 1194 to 1270) in his commentary to this latter verse to argue that both names are nonetheless correct.

¹⁵ Cf. Numbers 12:7–8 in light of Deuteronomy 34:10.

why can't the prophet present the prince of Gad as having two different names?

I have thus approached the text of the Torah along both paths mentioned above: as a unified work with outer boundaries and inner divisions *and* as a work of prophecy. (If the Torah reached its final stage in Second Temple times, then those assumptions nicely mirror its parallel work, the Book of Psalms, which is also presented in five parts and which is also best understood as work of latter-day prophecy.¹⁶) But, even more to the point, ignoring the question of anterior sources, foregoing the need to muse endlessly about the identity of the final redactor, taking the Torah seriously as a book of prophecy, and treating the Torah as a unified, organic whole—these literary suppositions open the door to interpreting the text as a book with overt and less overt themes running through it... and also to unpacking the discrepancies that so annoy modern readers neither as accidental errors nor as evidence of slipshod editing, but as features of the text intended to teach subtly what would be less well taught overtly or fully openly.

Some of these themes are widely known, while others seem rarely (if ever) to be discussed.

There is, for example, the theme of the unfulfilled promise that runs through the Torah. God specifically tells Adam that he, Adam, will die on the day he ingests the fruit of a specific tree in Eden from

¹⁶ Readers unfamiliar with this way of reading the Psalter can profitably consult Raymond Tourney's great volume, *Voir et Entendre Dieu avec les Psaumes, ou la Liturgie Prophétique du Second Temple à Jérusalem* (=Cahiers de la Revue Biblique no. 24; Paris: Gabalda, 1988), published in English as *Seeing and Hearing God with the Psalms: The Prophetic Liturgy of the Second Temple in Jerusalem* (=Journal of the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, no. 118; Sheffield, United Kingdom: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991.) And cf. also the comments of Mark Leuchter in his *The Book of the Twelve and 'The Great Assembly' in History and Tradition*, published in Rainer Albertz, James Nogalski, and Jakob Wörle (eds.), *Perspectives on the Formation of the Book of the Twelve* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), pp. 337–352, particularly pp. 347–349, to which may be compared that same author's more recent comments towards the end of his essay, "The Aramaic Transition and the Redaction of the Pentateuch," published in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* 136:2 (2017), pp. 249–268.

which he has been forbidden to eat. But then Adam does eat of the fruit of that tree, and he specifically doesn't die.¹⁷ The text does not explain why not, nor does it even nod to the issue.¹⁸ That this passage is part of the larger narrative about Adam and Eve in Eden is obvious, but more interesting is its relation to other instances in the narrative in which God is *also* depicted as making threatening promises that seem later on to be forgotten. The punishment of endless wandering decreed against Cain is an interesting example: it seems wholly to be forgotten almost immediately when the text turns from it to depict Cain *not* as endlessly wandering at all but, rather, as settling in a place called Nod and then founding a city, naming it after his son, and settling in there, presumably for the long run.¹⁹ And there are other examples too, some of which I have discussed in an essay entitled "Forgiveness and Subtlety" and to which I refer readers for further consideration of the issue.²⁰ My point here is that taking the Torah as a unified work allowed me reasonably to interpret these stories (and the others discussed in my essay) in each other's light.

Related to the unfulfilled promise is the forgotten detail, which likewise links the scriptural texts that feature it to each other. Moses, for example, in his final oration time and time again appears to have forgotten that the people to whom he is speaking from the edge of his own life are specifically *not* the people who stood at Sinai, all but two of whom have now died in the wilderness.²¹ It would be tempting—

¹⁷ God forbids Adam to eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil at Genesis 2:17.

¹⁸ Cf. the valiant effort by Ramban in his comment *ad locum* to explain that the punishment is not that Adam shall die on that specific day (although that is exactly what the text says), but that he will become a mortal and not live forever

¹⁹ Cain's punishment: Genesis 4:12. Cain settling into the land of Nod: Genesis 4:16. Cain founding a city and naming it for his son: Genesis 4:17.

²⁰ Martin S. Cohen, "Forgiveness and Subtlety," in *Conservative Judaism* 56:4 (Summer 2004), pp. 43–51.

²¹ Cf., among many examples of Moses appearing to have forgotten that the people to whom he was delivering his final oration were not the people who stood at Sinai, Deuteronomy 4:11–12 ("And thus did you all approach the foot of the mountain and stand there as the mountain

and this is the approach of many scholars – to suppose that those texts were composed by someone unfamiliar with the part of the narrative that depicts the Israelites as being punished for the mistake of listening to the wrong spies with death in the desert. My approach, on the other hand, is to see this as one of many places where a known detail is intentionally ignored, and then to ask myself why that might be or, to say the same thing in more provocative words, what the text is asking its readers to understand by depicting the greatest of all prophets as unable to recall the greatest of all tragedies to have befallen his nascent people to date. And also to wonder how this specific detail feels when considered in light, say, of the fact that Jacob appears utterly to have forgotten that he purchased the birthright from his older brother when he, Jacob, approaches their father and asks for the blessing that goes along with the status of firstborn.²² Or in light of Moses' own apparent inability to remember how many children he has.²³ All these can be waved away as examples of faulty editing or as flaws in the narrative. Or they can be interpreted as manifestations of a common theme intended to link stories that would otherwise appear disparate and invite readers to consider them in each other's light.

was ablaze with fire that rose to the heart of heaven...but *also* with darkness, cloud, and fog. And then did the Lord your God speak to you from the midst of the fire....").

²² Jacob is specifically said to have purchased the birthright at Genesis 25:33, but, when Rebecca tells Jacob that she has overheard Isaac saying that he is planning to give Esau the blessing due him, presumably the blessing of the firstborn son, and concocts her complicated scheme to dupe her husband into giving his younger son that blessing, Jacob is for some reason specifically *not* depicted as simply telling her that he'll take care of the whole thing by informing his father that the birthright has legally and legitimately passed to him.

²³ Admittedly, this is an example of forgetting in advance. The names of Moses' sons are given explicitly at Exodus 18:3-4 as Gershom and Eliezer, and these are presumably the sons referenced earlier in the narrative at Exodus 4:20. But when either Moses or the redactor channeling Moses tells the story of his marriage, and his and Zipporah's reproductive efforts, we read only of one son, Gershom. Eliezer appears to have been forgotten. Or at least passed over.

And related both to the unfulfilled promise and the forgotten detail is their mute sibling, the unmade observation, which theme also runs through the pentateuchal narrative. Adam and Eve have two, then one, then two sons.²⁴ The only woman in the world is their mother. Yet they manage to reproduce...somehow. It feels like the text should nod to the problem and suggest how it was solved without the boys having had to engage with their mother. Yet the problem is left unnoted and thus also unaddressed in the text, as is the problem connected with Jacob spending his wedding night in bed with the sister of the woman he was planning to marry and whom he wished to wed, yet seeming not to notice. It feels like the kind of plot twist that needs to be explained: surely your average man could not spend a whole night in bed with his sister-in-law without noticing that the woman next to him was not his wife, let alone on his wedding night! But Scripture fails even to nod to the issue, let alone to attempt cogently to come up with some plausible explanation.²⁵ Later, Jacob and his sons descend into Egypt in the second year of a seven-year famine. Five years later, the famine ends.²⁶ But neither Jacob nor his sons respond by thanking the Egyptians for their hospitality and going home. This eventually turns out to have been a huge error of judgment, and—at that—one with the most far-reaching implications possible, yet the text fails even to nod in passing to the problem, let alone seriously to attempt to resolve it.

Another example of a theme that runs through the text would be the feature of the dual-aged character. In the story of his and his mother's banishment from Abraham's camp, for example, Ishmael is depicted simultaneously as a baby and as a teenager.²⁷ Nor is he the

²⁴ Two sons: Genesis 4:1-2; one son: Genesis 4:8; two sons again: Genesis 4:25.

²⁵ Later on, a famous midrash preserved in the Babylonian Talmud at B. (=Babylonian Talmud) Megillah 13b would propose *some* sort of explanation (although not a very convincing one), but my point is that the text of Scripture itself simply leaves the matter out there for readers to notice and then presumably to ponder on their own.

²⁶ For the seven-year famine, see Genesis 41:54. For Jacob and sons arriving in year two, see Genesis 45:2.

²⁷ Abraham is said at Genesis 16:16 to have been eighty-six years old when Ishmael was born and ninety-nine when he and Ishmael were

only personality that appears to be two ages at the same time, a technique that has an almost weirdly post-modern feel to it but which links the passages that feature it and suggests that they be read, at least slightly, in each other's light.²⁸ And related to that theme would be the theme of individuals depicted out of sync with their theoretical ages—Moses himself, for example, who is presented as a young married man with a living father-in-law, a pregnant wife, and the agility and physical stamina necessary to walk alone across a desert when he is specifically *also* said to be a man in his eighties.²⁹

Yet another theme that runs through the narrative features the discordant response. Well-known is the story of God's response to Moses slightly disobeying the divine instruction to elicit water from an outcropping of stone by speaking to it.³⁰ And many is the preacher who has easily riffed on the story by comparing it to a similar story earlier on in the Torah that features Moses doing much the same thing—eliciting water from some large stone—by striking it as he had been instructed to do.³¹ But those stories fit easily together: one features Moses pleasing God by doing what he was told and the other features Moses *displeasing* God by *not* doing what he was told to do. The stories complement each other nicely, surely, but far more provoc-

circumcised on the same day (*cf.* Genesis 17:24–25). Ishmael, the text says, was thirteen years old on that day. When Isaac was born the following year, Abraham was one hundred years old (this point is made explicitly at Genesis 21:5,) and Ishmael must have been fourteen. The action then picks up after Isaac was weaned, presumably years later. (Rashi, in his comment on Genesis 21:8, *s. v., va-yiggamal* says that Isaac nursed at his ancient mother's breast for twenty-four months.) That would make Ishmael sixteen years of age when Abraham sent him and his mother into the wilderness. Yet Scripture depicts him as a baby whose mother carries him on her back (21:14), who cries when he is thirsty (verse 17, although the previous verse says it was Hagar who wept aloud—another riddle!), and who can neither crawl nor walk (verse 16).

²⁸ I discuss many of these passages in my essay, "Ishmael at Sixteen," published in *Conservative Judaism* 53:4 (Summer 2001), pp. 36–43.

²⁹ Even his death notice only notes that he retained his good eyesight and the natural moistness of his limbs until the end of his days.

³⁰ Numbers 20:1–12.

³¹ Exodus 17:1–7. I myself have given this sermon many times.

ative would be to compare the story in Numbers that features Moses being punished almost incredibly severely for striking the rock when he was told to speak to it and the story in Exodus of the first plague that features Aaron doing almost *precisely* what Moses is depicted in the Numbers story as doing—being told in this case to initiate the first plague by extending his staff over the Nile but then using his staff to strike the river instead—and yet not being punished at all. Indeed, the fact that the incident passes in the narrative without comment is sufficiently discordant with God's dramatic response to Moses in the Numbers passage to make it reasonable to ask what readers might reasonably learn by comparing the two passages.³²

By taking the book as a whole—but without using that approach as an excuse for ignoring discrepancies in the text—the door opens to treating the Torah both as a literary work and as a sacred book, as a work of prophecy.³³ The unified nature of the book—regardless of who its final redactor may or may not have been—makes reasonable the assumption that passages in which the same underlying themes appear are meant to be read in each other's light. The prophetic nature of the text makes literary discrepancies both meaningful—because they can be presumed to be pointing to lessons that Scripture prefers to teach subtly—and literarily acceptable because the nature of prophecy itself precludes absolute consistency in the transcription of oracles. I have, therefore, approached these discrepancies

³² Moses being told to instruct Aaron to turn the Nile to blood by extending his staff over it: Exodus 7:19. Aaron striking the water instead: Exodus 7:20. How to deal with the fact that the text itself not only does not pause to note the discordance but *itself* notes that Moses and Aaron did as they were instructed—which is precisely the opposite of the story as told—is yet another example of inner-textual discordance that it feels impossible a redactor doing the normal work of an editor could possibly have failed to notice.

³³ For a poetic sense of just how far this way of reading the Torah as a prophetic oracle can be taken, I recommend two chapters from Heschel's *The Prophets*, "Prophecy and Ecstasy" and "Prophecy and Poetic Inspiration" (1962; rpts. New York, Evanston, San Francisco and London: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 104–114 and 147–169, respectively. And, *cf.* also Mark Leuchter's essay on the "Book of the Twelve" referenced above in note 14.

not by waving them away as evidence of some inconsonant anterior version of the story or legal passage at hand but as proof that they come to us as *bona fide* oracles, the flaws and discrepancies in which can far more reasonably be mined for meaning than derided as evidence of some unnamed ancient redactor's lack of editorial skill.

As an example of the style of the commentary included in *Humash Kol Ha-tor*, I will present a *seder* from the larger work with translation and commentary as an appendix to this essay.

Turning to the translations that will appear in *Humash Kol Ha-tor*, I wish to begin by noting that they are completely fresh but not quite as literal as readers might at first blush expect them to be.

As anyone who has tried will attest, translating from Hebrew to any other language, and particularly to a non-Semitic one, is a complex undertaking. I wouldn't go as far as Rabbi Judah bar Ilai, the second century *tanna*, went in his day when he taught that, while it is so that anyone who undertakes to translate a verse from Scripture literally is to be considered a liar, it is *also* so that the would-be translator who adds anything to the verse, presumably even for the sake of not lying about it by translating it literally, is rightfully to be condemned both as a blasphemer and as a calumniator.³⁴ The Italians say *traddutore traditore* ("to translate is to traduce"), which comes to the same thing: that precise translation is an impossibility, that translators are by definition dishonest in their work because things said in one language can *never* been captured exactly (or ultimately perhaps even at all) in another, and that the only way to read anything honestly is

³⁴ Rabbi Judah's remark is preserved at B. Kiddushin 49a. The original reads *ha-m'targeim pasuk k'tzurato harei zeh bada i v'ha-mosif alav harei zeh m'hareif u-m'gaddeif*. What exactly *k'tzurato* means in his context is not entirely clear to me, but cf. Rashi's *ad locum* comment, *s.v. ha-m'targeim pasuk k'tzurato*, which may be compared the comments of Rabbenu Hananel (*i.e.*, Hananel ben Hushiel of 11th century Kairouan in Tunisia) cited on that same page of Talmud in the comment of the Tosafot, *s.v. ha-m'targeim pasuk k'tzurato*. As a boy in Hebrew School, I first came across Rabbi Judah's comment (or at least its first half) in the preface to Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser's edition of the traditional prayer-book, *Ha-siddur: The Prayer Book* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1957), p. xii. Why it then stayed with me for all these years is a good question.

in the language in which it was first written.³⁵ I get the point. But, as a lifelong translator, I have a lot to say about it.

I begin by asking simply if it is really the case that *all* efforts at translation are by definition failures. Are they really? Languages are, after all, just artificial codes made up by smaller or larger groups within the human family to reference with sound things that exist either physically or not physically.³⁶ And there is surely neither falsehood nor calumny—and surely also not blasphemy—in saying that the Swedish word for “cherry” is the precise translation of the Finnish word for that same fruit. Assuming the speaker got the words right, how could such a statement not be true? Surely fruit eaters on both sides of the Gulf of Bothnia mean the same thing when they reference the same fruit of the same tree in their respective languages! Still, there is also some truth to Rabbi Judah’s observation, one tied to the specific detail that Hebrew words fall easily into families linked to each other by virtue of the common three-letter roots that generate them, a feature mostly absent from Indo-European languages in any sort of way easily discernible to non-linguists. Yet the fact that it is impossible to translate from Hebrew without losing at least most of the allusive feel to the vocabulary in the original does not mean to me that any exercise in translation is by definition wasted, let alone sinful, effort.

It is surely true, by way of example, that Hebrew *mizbei ah* can be reasonably translated with the English word “altar.” Behind the Hebrew word, however, the sacrificial beast, the *zevah*, is hiding in plain sight and lending its own imagery to the structure upon which its innards are to be immolated and against the walls of which its blood is to be dashed: the English word suggests a kind of pristine

³⁵ The Italian apothegm first appeared in a collection of Tuscan proverbs published by nineteenth-century author Giuseppe Giusti called, aptly enough, *Proverbi toscani* (Florence: Gino Capponi, 1873). The English word “traduce” means “to betray.”

³⁶ The literature regarding the reasonability and practice of translation is immense. For an introduction, I recommend Lawrence Venuti’s *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017) or Umberto Eco’s *Mouse or Rat: Translation as Negotiation* (London: Phoenix, 2004).

worship-table, the Hebrew, a bloody mess of blood, bones, and pre-immolated entrails.³⁷

Yes, you can sometimes find a way to suggest some of a word's ideational understructure, but it's rarely (if ever) *quite* right: hiding behind the Hebrew *mallah* ("sailor") is the salt (*melah*) in the sea upon which the sailor sails—and there is the English expression "old salt," once in common usage to reference sailors. To translate that Hebrew word invariably with that English phrase, however, would lend an exceptionally peculiar feel to the English, whereas the Hebrew sounds straightforward and not at all stilted or old-fashioned. And because so many Hebrew words are built on trilateral roots that expand into all sorts of other words whereas almost no English words have easily discernible roots at all, translating Hebrew into English invariably requires coming to terms with the awful truth that the best you can realistically hope to accomplish when undertaking to translate from Hebrew into a Western language is to convey accurately the simple meaning of the Hebrew, but almost always to have to do so without bringing to bear the allusive suggestiveness that inheres in a language in which dozens of words built on the same root are deemed part of the same morphological family.³⁸ And all that being the case, it is thus the case that, while, *pace* Rabbi Judah, it surely is possible to say in English something that was originally said in Hebrew—or at least adequately to convey the same meaning—it is also so that the allusive universe of suggested meaning that lurks behind most Hebrew words

³⁷ This is slightly more apparent in Hebrew, where the *mi-* prefix regularly denotes the place in which the action suggested by the verbal root takes place, e.g. *mishkan* ("dwelling place") from *shakhan* ("to dwell").

³⁸ It is also worth noting that many Hebrew words do not appear to have three-letter roots at all. And others have roots that seem not to have generated any other words at all. The Hebrew author thus often has an interesting choice to make between using a word with strong allusive value and one with none, a choice talented authors will know how to exploit to their own advantage. As examples of words without recognizable roots, I could mention such basic scriptural vocabulary words as *eretz* ("land"), *shamayim* ("heaven"), *yam* ("sea"), *yom* ("day"), *lailah* ("night"), *rei'a* ("friend"), or *eish* ("fire").

will never adequately be conveyed in any other language. In the end, this is something the translator must learn to accept as a given.³⁹

My translations both in *Humash Kol Ha-tor* and in *M'gillot Kol Ha-tor* are expansive and rest on the foundational idea that speakers of a language often leave at least part of what they mean to say unsaid. Sometimes the unsaid part is signaled in some other way; other times the unspoken part of the narrative will be audible solely to native speakers fully conversant with the specific dialect of the language being spoken or, even, with the speaker's personal speech patterns. The upshot here is that I, a student of Hebrew one way or the other for well over half a century, hear things in the text that aren't actually written out and that one might reasonably argue aren't *really* present at all. This is, of course, shaky ground upon which to stand: writing what I hear requires me to relate tolerantly – or at least to attempt to relate tolerantly – to people who either do not hear what I do or who hear different things. The bottom line, though, is that there are lots of literal or literal-ish translations of the Torah out there. Some are of little value, but many are very worthwhile efforts that I have spent time with and from which I have learned lots.⁴⁰ But my own work is not of that genre, but something far more personal and idiosyncratic.⁴¹

³⁹ This is not to say that valiant attempts to translate Hebrew without losing the allusive layer of meaning suggested by the roots of the words in any given verse haven't been undertaken. Most notable of efforts in this direction would surely be the translation by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig published by Schocken in 1936 under the title *Die Schrift*. Regarding that effort, see the authors' essay *Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung*, now available in English translation by Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox under the title *Scripture and Translation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).

⁴⁰ Among the valuable, I should mention the work of Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken Press, 1994); Richard Elliot Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah with a New English Translation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003); and Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2004) – as well as the Old and New versions produced by the Jewish Publication Society in Philadelphia in 1917 and 1985, respectively.

⁴¹ With respect to the question of whether translations should be dispassionate or personal (even to the point of being idiosyncratic), see

Some examples will suffice to make this all a bit clearer.

At the burning bush theophany, Moses asks God what he should do if the people do not believe that God has truly sent him to bring them forth from Egypt to freedom. Moses formulates his question specifically, however, and asks God what he should say if the people, unimpressed with his vague reference to having been sent by the God of their ancestors, ask him to prove his prophetic *bona fides* by revealing to them God's name. This plot device makes no real sense. If the people don't already know the name Moses reveals to them, then how will they know Moses, whom they already suspect of misrepresenting himself to them, isn't lying about this as well? And if they do know the name, then what will it prove that Moses knows it too? Yet this problem is unnoticed in the text, which translates literally as follows:

And Moses said to God, "Here I am going to the Israelites and saying to them, 'The God of your ancestor sent me to you.' And they will say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I shall be [*ehyeh*] what I shall be." And He then said, "So shall you say to the Israelites, 'Ehyeh sent me to you.'" And then God said to Moses, "So shall you say to the Israelites, 'YHVH, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob sent me to you. That is My name forever, my appellation in every generation.'"⁴²

That translation is literal enough, but it fails to say much of what I hear just behind the text, what I would like to imagine the savvy reader or the informed auditor are *supposed* to sense behind the outer patina of the text, behind its linguistic escutcheon. (Also worth mentioning is that my translation prints the four-letter name of God—the one

the very interesting symposium published in the *Jewish Review of Books* (Winter, 2019) featuring responses by Ronald Hendel, Aviya Kushner, Shai Held, David Bentley Hart, Adele Berlin, and Adam Kirsch to Robert Alter's publication of his 3500-page-long English-language translation of the full Bible. One way or the other, each respondent addresses the question of how much of the translator should be in the translation.

⁴² Exodus 3:13–15.

rendered incomprehensibly above as YHVH—in Hebrew letters, thus offering the English-language reader the same experience that the Hebrew reader has of seeing the four-letter name of God printed without vowels and deciding how to negotiate that spiritually charged moment either by retreating to one of several widely used substitutions—Adonai, Hashem, the Lord, the Eternal, *etc.*—or by attempting to pronounce the name despite Abba Shaul's ancient warning that doing so could cost someone his or her portion in the World to Come.⁴³) And so, listening with my third ear as the text declaims itself to me with all its allusive content packed into its few words, I translated the text as follows:

To this, Moses said, "Let's suppose that I actually do go to the Israelites and say to them that 'the God of your ancestors has sent me to you' and they respond by asking me, 'What is God's name? What shall I tell them then?'" To this too God had an answer. "Tell them," God said to Moses, "that My name is Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh, for I am what I am!" And then God went on usefully to add, "But you can also just say this to the Israelites, 'Ehyeh sent me to you.'" Then, reconsidering, God spoke to Moses yet again, this time saying, "Say more formally to the Israelites, 'יהוה, the God of your fathers—that is, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.' For that is my true name for eternity, the name by which I shall be recalled in every generation."

My translation is more than slightly targumic here, but it addresses the key issues that I hear in the text: the relationship between what are essentially three different answers to the same question, the

⁴³ Abba Shaul's comment is preserved in the Mishnah at M. (=Mishnah,) Sanhedrin 10:1. This was the system I first used in my edition of the Psalter, *Our Strength and Our Haven: The Book of Psalms* (New York: Aviv Press, 2004). This is a latter-day version of the technique used by some of the scribes who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, *i.e.*, those who wrote the four letters of the Tetragrammaton in paleo-Hebrew script so as to discourage too casual readers from inadvertently saying it aloud.

problem of using the heretofore unknown Ehyeh name to prove to the people that God truly sent Moses to free them from bondage, and the confusing relationship between the three divine names brought to bear in the story. (As noted, readers seeking a more literal translation have lots of options!)

Perhaps I should explain in more detail what I mean by “targumic.” The *targumim* are a set of ancient translations of the biblical text into Aramaic, the *lingua franca* of the Jewish world in ancient times.⁴⁴ Undertaken by many different hands in the forms they have come down to us, the various *targumim* differ from each other dramatically. Some are more literal, others more expansively homiletical. But most, perhaps even all, have in common a willingness to say in one language what the translator hears in another. It is that concept of bringing to a translation what I *hear*, as well as what I *see*, that I have taken to designating slightly idiosyncratically as “targumic.” Also worth noting is that there was a custom in ancient times, if not universal then certainly widespread, of having the text of the Torah declaimed in the vernacular (*i.e.*, in the Targum) verse by verse as it was read aloud from the scroll in Hebrew.⁴⁵ I like to think of myself in that light, as a kind of latter-day *m'turgeman* offering a useful elucidation of Scripture to people who want to hear what I do in the text. And that aspect of my translation accords nicely with my presentation of the text of the Torah according to the divisions that pertained in ancient Palestine where the text was read out in the course of three years or slightly more than that.⁴⁶ So, assuming I have done my job correctly

⁴⁴ Readers unfamiliar with the genre would do best to start with Paul V. M. Flesher and Bruce Chilton's *The Targums: A Critical Introduction* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011).

⁴⁵ The best place for an introduction to the concept of the *m'turgeman* is possibly still Solomon Schechter and Caspar Levia's encyclopedia entry “Meturgeman,” in the 1901 *Jewish Encyclopedia*, available online, as accessed at <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10742-meturgeman> on July 31, 2019. The oldest set of rabbinic traditions regarding the *m'turgeman* is in the Mishnah at M. Megillah 4:4–10.

⁴⁶ And *cf.* in this regard the essay by Shlomo Naeh referenced above in note 2, who refines that concept considerably and suggests entirely convincingly that the cycle ran its course in three and a half years, thus bringing auditors through the entire Torah twice per sabbatical-year cycle.

and well, *Ḥumash Kol Ha-tor* will offer its readers the experience both of hearing the Torah declaimed by a latter-day *m'turgeman* and also of hearing it interpreted as someone attending synagogue services in Roman Palestine would also have.

Another example, this one of a text that ended up having far-reaching and seriously upsetting implications for Western theology, would be the story of the curse of Canaan that concludes the Noah story.⁴⁷ Translated literally from the Hebrew, the text reads as follows:

Noah became a farmer and planted a vineyard. And he drank of the wine and became drunk and became exposed in his tent. Ḥam, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers on the outside. Shem and Yefet took the garment and put it on both their backs, then, walking backwards, covered their father's nakedness. Their faces were turned backwards so they did not see their father's nakedness. Noah woke up from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him. He said, "Cursed be Canaan. He shall be his brothers' slave of slaves [*eved avadim*]." He said, "Blessed be YHVH, the God of Shem; may Canaan be his slave. May God make expansive Yefet that he may dwell in the tents of Shem, and Canaan shall be his slave."⁴⁸

This literal translation too raises lots of unanswered questions. Why was Canaan cursed if it was his father who sinned? What does the expression "his brothers' slave of slaves" mean exactly? And how did Noah know what Ḥam had done when he awakened from his drunken stupor? One could make a cogent argument that these issues should specifically *not* be resolved, lest the reader in translation not feel as perplexed as a reader of the original. But not every reader or auditor is the same! And when I read or hear this text, I bring to the experience what I know of the larger scriptural narrative, what I sense hiding

⁴⁷ See, e.g., David M. Goldenberg's *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁴⁸ Genesis 9:20–27, translating *yaft* at 9:27 according to Rashi's comment *ad locum*.

behind the written text, what I know of traditional exegesis, and also what I have learned from the way these verses were both used and abused in Jewish and Christian sermons preached in these United States on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line in the decades leading up to the Civil War. And so my translation reads as follows:

In time, Noah turned to agriculture and planted a vineyard. But when he over-imbibed the wine that vineyard produced, he ended up collapsed in his tent as naked as he was drunk. When Ham (as already noted, the father of Canaan) happened into the tent and saw his father so shamefully exposed, he called out to his brothers outside so that they might get a good look as well. Shem and Yefet, however, responded respectfully, taking a cloak and draping over their own shoulders as they backed into their father's tent, thus managing to cover up their naked father while keeping their faces turned away so that they themselves would not have to gaze on their father's nakedness. Eventually, Noah awoke from his drunken stupor and somehow got wind of the way his young son had behaved while he was inebriated. But then, instead of responding to Ham's disgraceful behavior directly, Noah turned rather to Ham's son and spoke. "Cursed be Canaan," he said, "for he shall surely end up as a slave to his brothers' slaves." And then he blessed his other sons. "Blessed be יהוה, the God of Shem, and let Canaan be Shem's slave. And may God grant that Yefet increase and dwell always in the tents of Shem. In fact, let Canaan be a slave to them both!"

I understand, of course, that my translation offers more than the original, that I offer to the English-language reader more than the Hebrew original offers the Hebrew-language one. That, I truly do get. But I think my translation is accurate nonetheless, that it conveys accurately what I personally see and hear in the Hebrew. And since this is specifically *my* translation, I offer it up to the reading public precisely as such: as what I personally hear in the text, what it says to me personally and that I am able, therefore, to convey honorably (and not misleadingly or deceitfully) to people reading my book.

There's a lot more to say, of course. As noted, I have been working on this on and off for decades in the course of which I have brought out much other material. But there has always been *this* project too, patiently or impatiently waiting to claim some of my time, to draw me into its sphere, to demand some of my attention. Now both projects are finally finished: the full translation of the Torah and the five *m'gillot*, and complete sets of commentaries on all 167 *s'darim* of the Torah as set out in the oldest complete biblical manuscript, the so-called Leningrad Codex, and all thirty-nine chapters of the five *m'gillot*. I feel fortunate to have gotten this far and hope to bring out both works in the course of the next several years. I look forward to seeing how my work is received by readers into whose hands the books find their way. And I feel very fortunate indeed to have this space in *Zeremim* to present my work in advance to the reading public.

APPENDIX:

THE THIRD SEDER OF EXODUS — TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY

III⁴⁹

(Exodus 3:1-4:17)

[*Sh'mot* 4] 3:1-2 And so Moses became the shepherd of the sheep of his father-in-law Jethro, priest of Midian. One day, he was leading the flock in such a way so as to circumvent the desert and there an angel of יהוה appeared to him in a fiery flame from within a bush that

⁴⁹ Note that my translation is presented, in Roman numerals, according to the old triennial cycle but includes both the more "normal" chapter-and-verse designation in rounded parentheses and also, in square brackets, the numbered *aliyot* that go with the annual lectionary cycle in use today.

Moses noticed as he arrived at Horeiv, God's mountain. Indeed, this happened just as he was looking at the bush and taking in the remarkable detail that, for all it was clearly on fire, the bush was somehow nevertheless not being consumed. **3** Moses said, "I will go out of my way a little to see this remarkable sight. How could the bush possibly not be burning up?" **4** And then, when יהוה saw that Moses had turned off his path to take a better look, God called out to him from within the bush. "Moses, Moses," God called out. And Moses answered, "I am here."

5 God then responded, "Come no closer. In fact, take your shoes off your feet altogether, for the place in which you are standing is holy ground." **6** And then God continued to speak. "I am the God of your ancestors—that is to say, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Hearing this, Moses covered his face, for he was afraid to gaze directly at God. **7** But יהוה had more to say. "I have taken careful note of the misery of My people in Egypt," God said, "and I have heard their screams at the hands of their forced-labor gang leaders. Indeed, I know all about their pain. **8** And so am I planning Myself to descend to save them from Egypt and to bring them up from that land to a good and capacious land, to a land aflo with milk and honey, to the territory currently occupied by the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Emorites, the Perizites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. **9** But for now it is the Israelites' screaming that has my attention, for I have also seen the terrible pressure that the Egyptians are exerting upon them. **10** And now go, for am I sending you to Pharaoh to bring My people, the Israelites, out from Egypt."

11 Hearing this, Moses responded, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, that I should bring the Israelites out from Egypt?" **12** God answered, "But I shall be with you! And the sign by means of which you will know with certainty that it was I who sent you on this mission is that, when you finally do bring the people out from Egypt, you shall all worship God on this very mountain." **13** To this, Moses said, "Let's suppose that I actually do go to the Israelites and say to them that 'the God of your ancestors has sent me to you' and they respond by asking me, 'What is God's name?' What shall I tell them then?" **14** And to this too God had an answer. "Tell them," God said to Moses, "that My name is Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh, for I am what I am!" And then God answered more usefully, "You can just say this to the Israelites, 'Ehyeh sent me to you.'" **15** But then, reconsidering, God spoke to Moses

again. "Say this more formally to the Israelites," God said, "'יהוה, the God of your fathers—that is, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.' For that is my true name for eternity, the name by which I shall be recalled in every generation. [Sh'mot 5] 16 Go then and gather the elders of Israel and say to them, 'יהוה, the God of your fathers, appeared to me—and I am referring to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and said, "I have taken deep note of you and that which is being done to you in Egypt. 17 Furthermore, I have decided that I shall personally bring you up out from the misery of Egypt to the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Emorite, the Perizite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite, to a land aflow with milk and honey.'" 18 And they shall listen to you too, whereupon you and the elders of Israel will go to see the king of Egypt and say to him, 'יהוה, the God of the Hebrews, has unexpectedly come to us. And so shall we now, with your leave, travel for three days into the desert and there hold a great sacrifice to יהוה, our God.' 19 Now I know full well that the king of Egypt will not grant you permission to go, not even if I threaten to bring force to bear by bearing a mighty arm. 20 But I shall nonetheless send forth that arm of Mine and smite Egypt with all manner of wonders that I am already planning to do in its midst. And then he *will* send you forth. 21 Furthermore, I shall engender a kind of affection for this people in the eyes of Egypt and so when you leave shall you not leave empty-handed. 22 Instead shall each woman ask her neighbor or a co-dweller in her own home for vessels of silver and vessels of gold, and also for garments in which to dress your sons and your daughters. In that way, you shall spare the general Egyptians from the full force of what is to come."

4:1 To all this Moses answered, "They will neither believe me nor will they obey me, for they will simply say, 'יהוה did not really appear to you.'" 2 The response came in the form of a question. "What's that in your hand?" יהוה asked of Moses. 3 Moses answered, "A staff." God then said, "Throw it to the ground." Hearing this, Moses threw it to the ground, where it promptly turned into a snake, one from the presence of which Moses naturally recoiled.

4 Now יהוה said to Moses, "Reach out your hand and grab it by its tail." Moses reached out his arm and took hold of it, whereupon it became a staff again in his hand. 5 (All this, God assured Moses, was specifically designed so that "the people believe that יהוה, the God of

their fathers—that is, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob—has appeared to you.”) **6** And then יהוה moved on, saying to Moses, “Insert your hand into your bosom.” Moses did just that, placing his hand inside his bosom. But when he removed it he saw that his hand had become as leprous-white as snow.” **7** God told him, “Put your hand back into your bosom.” He did that too, putting his hand back into his bosom and then, when he withdrew it, he saw that his hand had returned to the normal color of the rest of his flesh.

8 And now God spoke again. “I assure you,” God said, “if they do not believe you and heed the implications of the first sign, then they shall surely believe you once they experience the latter one. **9** And if they somehow still do not believe you and insist on declining to obey your instructions even after experiencing both these signs, then take some water from the Nile and pour it out on the dry land and that water, the water that you take from the Nile, shall turn to blood as it hits the dry ground.”

10 Moses now said to יהוה, “Take pity, Lord, for I am not at all eloquent, nor was I such a man yesterday or the day before, or for that matter ever on any day at all since You began to speak to your servant, for I am possessed of a clumsy mouth and a heavy tongue.” **11** To this יהוה responded, “Who is it that first made Adam his mouth? And who is it that is ultimately responsible for any individual being mute or deaf, sighted or blind? Is it not I, יהוה? **12** Now, go, and I shall work your mouth for you and so teach you what to say.” **13** Still resisting, Moses said, “Take pity, Lord. Send someone else, whomever You will.” **14** But now יהוה became angry with Moses and said, “Do I not already know that Aaron, your brother Levite, is more than adequately eloquent? In fact, he’s already travelling towards you so that when you see him your heart can rejoice. **15** Tell him everything, and put My words in his mouth, for I shall guide both your mouth and his, and I shall instruct you both regarding what you must do. **16** You and he can go speak to the people. (You will be running the show, however, and he will merely serve as your mouthpiece.) **17** And take that staff in your hand so that you can perform all the aforementioned wonders....”



The doctrine of divine omnipotence—the dogmatic assertion that God is all-powerful and that nothing may therefore be considered *a priori* beyond God's inherent capability—is so firmly at the core of Jewish theology that even those moderns who have attempted to explain some otherwise inexplicable part of recent history or reality—the suffering of innocents, for example, during the Shoah—have felt constrained to explain any perceived limit on the concept of an all-powerful God as having been self-imposed (or rather Self-imposed) and thus essentially a sign of restraint rather than incapacity. Nor is this notion of an all-powerful Deity a medieval or a modern convention, but rather one that has strong biblical roots as well.

All that being the case, then, it is especially interesting to note how moderns, including pious moderns prepared to subject even the most mundane aspects of their daily lives to divine law, routinely insist that God cannot act in history in a truly meaningful way. Indeed, even in the most observant circles, people who claim, for example, that God came to them to deliver a specific message intended for them to share with the world are supposed to be mentally ill and are subsequently encouraged to see psychiatrists rather than invited to preach the word of God vouchsafed to them alone from the pulpits of their synagogues. More to the point, if the divine message in question actually contains specific instructions—for the individual or for the community with which that individual is affiliated—and especially if those instructions involve previously unknown requirements related to the specific way in which individual or that community is being called to the service of God, then the general response across the board in more or less every Jewish community would be, depending on how radical the message, either to marginalize or to attempt to institutionalize its bearer.

Invariably left unexplained, however, is how exactly anyone knows with anything approaching certainty that the specific message vouchsafed to that specific individual is a sham. Surely, after all, the kind of omnipotent God capable of creating a universe and splitting a sea can be imagined able to speak a few words to a specific human being at a specific moment in history! Nor can moderns reliably fall back on the supposition that, the age of prophecy being past, God simply does not speak to individuals any longer because Scripture is replete to overflowing with stories of God speaking not solely to *bona*

fide prophets but to regular men and women who merit the experience simply because God has something to say to them. Surely even if the age of prophecy were undeniably to be past—a rabbinic doctrine far more related to the preservation of rabbinic authority than to any esoteric knowledge the rabbis of classical antiquity claimed somehow to possess about God’s plans for the world—that could still not logically or reasonably lead to the image of a hamstrung God unable to communicate with the faithful, or for that matter with anyone at all, at will.

And so we come to the third *seder* of Exodus, the famous story of Moses’ commission at the burning bush. One of those stories everybody more or less knows and yet which reads very differently when actually encountered in the context of the actual biblical narrative in which it appears, the story of how Moses came to know (or at least to feel as *though* he knew) that God had sent him on the most unlikely of missions—to demand of the king of Egypt that he allow not thousands but millions of his slaves to go off on a three-day journey into the desert to hold some sort of festival there involving sacrificial worship that for some unspecified reason could not be performed elsewhere—rests on the theological supposition that God absolutely *can* speak at will to individuals.

Readers cannot reasonably wave the issue aside with reference to Moses’ subsequent status as the greatest of all prophets because the story here only makes sense if we take it literally to mean that Moses was neither a professional prophet nor a seer, but merely a shepherd drawn off his path by something specifically created to lure him away from his work in the first place. That he is eighty years old at the time only makes the point clearer, in fact: the tableau against which the third *seder* of Exodus takes place presupposes an elderly shepherd suddenly charged by God with a mission that no rational person would accept easily, let alone automatically. Nor does, in fact, Moses accept his commission docilely or passively. Indeed, the fact that he does *not* accept it without an argument—and also not without demanding proof of the most convincing nature that it is truly God Who is sending him on his mission and that he has therefore not fallen prey to some inner need to self-aggrandize that he himself has merely projected out onto the world—that fact *itself* points to Moses’ lack of professional training as a prophet and makes the point even more clearly that God can speak to individuals regardless of circumstance

and charge them with missions priorly unknown . . . to them and to everyone else in the world as well.

As told, the story itself seems straightforward enough. The years have passed. Moses, who fled to Midian as a young man, is now eighty years of age. He is still a shepherd, however. And he is the still wholly vigorous father of at least one young son and possibly two. So the portrait of Moses that emerges is that of one of Scripture's old-young men, in this case the portrait of a man who must be eighty (because Scripture eventually makes that point explicitly and also because he dies forty years later at 120 years of age) but who is also still in the throes of producing his family and who is still vigorous enough to work daily in the wilderness and guard his father-in-law's sheep.

It's a homey tale. God, the divine Pedagogue, knows perfectly well that no teacher can teach anyone anything without first motivating the designated pupil to wish to learn. And so, instead of just telling Moses what he needs to know (or just magically inspiring him somehow to know it all on his own), God draws Moses in first, subtly getting the latter's attention by drawing his attention to a bush of some sort that has somehow caught fire. Moses notices it, just as any shepherd watching over animals in the open naturally would, but as he looks more closely he sees something unexpected: the bush, for all it is truly ablaze, does not seem actually to be burning up. Not only that, but Moses sees some sort of angelic being within or amidst the flames and so really cannot keep himself from swerving from the traveled path and approaching the wondrous sight he has espied from afar off. And then God, having effectively drawn his target in close, finally speaks. Even here, though, the narrative is more charming in its folksy simplicity than it is stirring because of the magnificence of its detail. Since Moses makes his living walking around after a flock of sheep, his shoes must be presumed filthy and so he is ordered to remove them in the divine presence. And then, perhaps thinking the angel-in-the-flames gambit was possibly just a touch too subtle, God announces formally in Whose presence it is that Moses now finds himself tarrying.

Having artfully set the stage, God now quickly gets to the point. God has taken note of the suffering of the Israelites and has come "down," presumably from heaven, to make things right. However, for reasons left unspecified, God is not going to bring the full force of

divine might to bear in accomplishing this task, or at least not in the way the reader might reasonably expect, but is rather going to send Moses to demand from Pharaoh that he manumit his Israelite slaves. And with this, the dialogue opens for which this *seder* is so justly famous.

Moses is not inclined simply to accept what has happened. He clearly believes in God, but is unprepared to imagine that his personal destiny could be tied to the will of God so closely as to make it reasonable for God to appear to him personally and charge him with its eventual fulfillment. But to counter each reasonable argument Moses puts forward for not doing as God has commanded him, the patient Deity provides an equally rational response.

Moses begins by asking how he can even know if this is for real, if he is not self-generating the flattering fantasy that God is calling him to the mission at hand. To this, however, God offers what sounds at first blush to be the disappointing answer that Moses will know he was truly called by God when, after the Israelite nation is free, the people gather to worship God on the very mountain (here called Horeiv but elsewhere, mysteriously, Sinai) at which Moses and God are having this initial conversation. For moderns reading this tale, that response should offer some chilling insight into how this whole business of being called to one's destiny in God actually works. You do not ever get to know you're right until long after the fact. When God speaks and you feel yourself called to divine service, you do not get confirmation by return e-mail in the style of an online hotel booking but only the eventual satisfaction that comes from looking back on your life and seeing it suffused not with self-arrogated importance but with divinely inspired purpose. In other words, you only find out whether you have truly heard God's call or merely convinced yourself that you have after it is far too late to begin again. Moderns will want to pause here to consider this lesson carefully. *We all* want to know upfront that we are not merely willing ourselves to feel called to this or that aspect of service to God, to the Torah, or to the Jewish people. But that is not how it worked in Moses' time and it is certainly not how it works today either.

Moses' next argument is that the Israelites themselves will not believe him when he announces that he has come to effect their liberation from bondage and will want him to prove the legitimacy of his mission by revealing God's personal name. Why this makes sense,

predicated as it appears to be on the assumption that the people will recognize the legitimate name but that that detail does not render Moses' own knowledge of it unimpressive, is not explored in the text. But God does not pause to make that, or any, point, but simply addresses the issue by offering Moses an unfamiliar version of the four-letter name in use elsewhere in Scripture, one that presumably one could only know via divine revelation. And then, presumably reflecting further on the situation, God self-corrects and suggests that probably it would be more practical simply for Moses to speak aloud the name of God already known to his contemporaries and to assure them that the name he has spoken aloud is God's eternal name that will endure through all generations. Neither plan really works: there is no way for the people to know that the unfamiliar name is not just something Moses himself made up, but the familiar one would surely be one Moses himself, like his listeners, already knew. In this, moderns can hear taught a lesson they will probably not particularly enjoy learning: that when called by God to action, none of us can expect that we will be given the secret password that, once uttered, will easily convince the world that we are legitimate, that God truly has sent us to do what we claim we are called upon to do, what we truly *feel* called upon by God to accomplish. We can affirm the traditions already known. We can insist that we come not to alter destiny but to advance the people towards it. We can argue for the legitimacy of our mission as best we can. But the fantasy that God will give us the secret key to the hearts of those we are sent *to*, that, the Torah is teaching, is just so much wishful thinking.

Presumably seeing the intractable problems with Plan A, Moses' next argument is that the mission is doomed to failure, that no one will listen to him, that he will surely do as he has been bidden but that he will nonetheless fail to impress the gravity of his mission on the very people he feels himself sent to save. In other words, the Israelites will listen politely, then dismiss him as a crazy person who hears voices and has delusions of grandeur. This problem, God takes entirely seriously and addresses by providing Moses with three wonders that will "prove" that he has truly been sent by God. And they are indeed excellent tricks: he is bidden to turn a staff into a snake and then return it to its wooden state, to make his hand totally leprous and then restore it to its original healthy appearance, and to pour out some

water from the Nile and watch as it turns to blood upon contact with the dry ground. Moderns who wonder what the modern equivalents of these tricks could possibly be will soon come to the depressing realization that there are none, that God appears for whatever reason unwilling to provide people sent to the world on divinely-inspired missions with anything as persuasive as magic rods and amazing cures with which effectively to demonstrate the legitimacy of their calling. For better or worse, those called by God—to shoulder the burden of an observant life, to settle in the land of Israel, to participate personally in its defense, to devote a life to the teaching of Torah or to its study—such people may be entirely correct as to how things are, but they appear more or less *never* usefully to be provided with the kind of surefire parlor trick that indubitably would “prove” the authenticity of their calling to anyone at all, including (if they are being wholly honest) to themselves. The bottom line to those standing before personal burning bushes is dour. You’re on your own. No one will listen. You have nothing to show, no cards to play. All you have is your inner certainty that God has called you to your personal destiny. But even you yourself cannot be sure that you’re not *just* hearing voices. It’s that kind of world. And it’s not going to change.

The story moves forward as Moses, almost but not entirely convinced, plays his final card by mentioning that he is cursed with a “clumsy” mouth and a heavy tongue. The Hebrew uses the same adjective to describe Moses’ mouth and tongue, but without saying clearly whether he means literally to say that he has some sort of actual speech impediment or is using the language of physical disability to suggest the degree to which he thinks of himself as merely inarticulate. The Hebrew could bear either interpretation, yet the metaphoric explanation is probably the more likely one because nowhere in the subsequent narrative is Moses *actually* depicted as speaking anything but clearly and fluently. (It is true that this is not Moses’ sole reference to his inability to speak clearly. But it is also so that Moses *never* appears to speak anything but fluently and forcefully when subsequently, and repeatedly, delivering God’s words to Pharaoh.) Whatever, the bottom line is that Moses’ final argument has to do neither with the mission itself nor its likelihood of success but with his sense of personal inadequacy, with the degree to which he considers himself unworthy of the greatness he must by this point in the narrative surely feel being thrust upon him. With this, moderns will

identify entirely easily. Which of us, speaking honestly, feels up to his or her own destiny? More to the point, which of us, wracked with self-doubt and ill ease regarding our personal adequacy, could not find an endless list of reasons to step aside from our callings in life, possessed of the near certainty that discretion will always make more sense than valor as a personal course to choose forward in life?

Doctors know that a false diagnosis can kill rather than heal a patient. Lawyers know that a bungled defense can lead to the incarceration, even possibly to the execution, of an innocent defendant. Stockbrokers know that innocent misapprehension regarding the worth of an investment vehicle risks to ruin a client, possibly even permanently. Still, doctors, lawyers, and investment counselors somehow manage to do their work even absent the certainty that they are invariably right. And, at least for the most part, rabbis ascend to the pulpits of their synagogues to preach the Torah to their congregations as they have come to understand its inmost meaning, but without actually being possessed of any tangible (or intangible) assurance that they are actually right about what they think, that they are not misleading the very people they are hoping to inspire. Indeed, like people in every walk of life, any rabbi possessed of true intellectual integrity could argue fully cogently that the safest course of action when attempting to speak in God's name almost *always* would be to say nothing at all, thus also at least to do no damage by misleading listeners into presupposing knowledge on their rabbi's part that he or she does not actually possess. But how could one do any good at all in the world by adopting such a policy? And how could the same not be so with respect to the clergy of all faiths?

God's answer to Moses speaks directly to this set of issues. Speaking in an uncharacteristically poetic style, God points out to Moses that this is not a game he is being invited to play, that God governs the world not by making people do this or that thing in the manner of an imperious puppeteer yanking on a marionette's strings, but by calling individual men and women to their personal destinies... and then challenging them to rise to the occasion if they can and if they will. In this *seder* of the Torah, God can be heard subtly to be saying that there is *never* any real impediment to the fulfillment of destiny that cannot be overcome, that no one is *ever* vouchsafed a sense of divinely-inspired purpose that simply cannot be attained. If

Moses feels inarticulate, his brother can speak for him. If the people mistrust him, he can impress them with a few impressive tricks. If Pharaoh declines to heed him, there will be a way forward nevertheless.

Finding the precise boundary between faith in one's sense of personal destiny and the arrogant assumption that one can attain whatever one imagines oneself capable of attaining merely by deluding oneself into considering oneself divinely called to do that thing is the challenge all God-fearing people must eventually face if they are to meet their own destinies in this world. Although we are all used to Moses' story sounding reasonable, the narrative in this *seder* of Exodus can serve to remind us just how unlikely it must have seemed at the time that an octogenarian fugitive could possibly return after decades in exile to liberate an entire people merely by presenting himself to the king of Egypt and speaking in God's name forcefully and fully possessed of the conviction that he was fulfilling his personal destiny by doing so. The lesson for moderns is that an all-powerful God can surely call each individual on earth to his or her personal destiny . . . and that it is as illogical as it is self-serving to step away from that calling with reference to one's chances of success or one's sense of personal inadequacy. In the end, we cannot all be Moseses. But the narrative here is not expecting any of us to channel the historical Moses as we live our lives and thus to be his latter-day representatives on earth, but simply to accept that we are now, as he was once, possessed of a role to play in the history of the world and that our great task in life is to identify that role and then to respond to its discovery forcefully and faithfully . . . and without allowing ourselves to be paralyzed by the fact that we will probably *never* find out whether the way we perceived ourselves called to our own destinies bore or bears any correspondence to actual reality. Life is not a sucker's game, not really. But it can only be lived the most fully and meaningfully by the spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually brave. And our *seder* calls upon us all to will ourselves into their ranks through the sheer force of our own desire to do God's calling, to be who we are and were meant to be, and to spend our lives listening to God's voice calling to us from even the least likely settings.

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