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HEBREW UNION COLLEGE-JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION

New York School

Report on the Rabbinic Dissertation Submitted by

Andrew N. Bachman

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

Monumental Words:

Midrash to Selected Death Scenes from the Torah

This thesis is a collection and close analysis of a wide variety of midrashic traditions on the death scenes from the Torah. The author's intent through the examination of the midrashic sources was to better understand how the rabbis understood the moment of death, what people say and do before dying and how the rabbis' treatment of these scenes reflects their own very focussed contextual concerns.

The first step in his investigation was a very thorough examination of the biblical death scenes of all the patriarchs and matriarchs, as well as those of Joseph, Miriam, Aaron and Moses. He did so with a focus upon the settings of the scenes, particular words and terms utilized, and the words uttered by those who were dying.

Following the analysis of the primary biblical material, the author then gathered many of the pertinent midrashic texts which were drawn from a wide range of sources. These included the postbiblical works of Philo and Josephus, the range of the early Exegetic Midrashim, many of the classic Homiletic Midrashim and of course the Rabbah texts on the biblical passages. In addition, the author studied several key minor midrashim, such as Mdirash Petirat Moshe and Midrash Petirat Aaron.

In the course of his collecting and analyzing the rabbinic texts, he began to isolate several key foci of the rabbinic treatment of death and dying. These included the rabbis' desire to provide comfort to the Jewish people of a postdestruction era by emphasizing the eventual reward of the righteous, the potential reconciliation between siblings and among family members at the time of the death of a parent, how death and dying fit into the rabbinic mitzvah system and the assurance of continuity from one generation to the next.

The results of the author's analysis of both the biblical and rabbinic material were then arranged into six chapters, in addition to an introduction and a brief but substantive conclusion. Chapter One, entitled General Views of Death, incorporates a wide range of religious notions about death, focussing on normative rabbinic attitudes. These include the idea that death is redemptive, that one can repent till the final moment of one's life, and that one can face death with something other than fear. Chapter Two deals with the Death

Scenes in the Torah, and involves a close examination of narratives surrounding each scene, the pointed vocabulary used in each and the words that the dying speak. The author found a clear distinction between the narrative descriptions of the patriarchal and matriarchal scenes, in which the death of the females are with little fanfare, while the males are "gathered to their people." The author also shows the differences among the various descriptive terms for death and how they are used. Chapter Three continues the treatment of the Narrative Terminology of the Death Scenes, focussing upon the rabbinic understanding of all the key words, phrases and symbols in the biblical material. Terms such as gava, seivah tovah and even sham serve as hooks upon which the rabbis append meaning and an expanded understanding of the significance of the moment of death. The Dying and the Survivors Respond is the topic of Chapter Four, which analyzes how the rabbis interpreted the words of those about to die and the responses of their families to them. The texts studied deal with how the rabbis saw the biblical characters reconciling themselves to their deaths and how their deaths had an impact on those around them. In Chapter Five, entitled Passing the Torch, the author examines rabbinic texts which focus upon how the person dying addresses the next generation or passes on the mantle of leadership. Continuity among generations and the charge to future generations to preserve their religious heritage is emphasized in many of the midrashim analyzed. Finally, Redemption and Resurrection is the subject of Chapter Six, which focusses upon what happens to the deceased after death from a rabbinic point of view. The material deals with notions of individual and corporate redemption associated with death, as well as resurrection in the land of Israel.

Although it is always difficult to gain a clear understanding of such a huge collection of material created at different times, the author has handled it in a highly competent and often creative manner. He not only has presented the reader with many insights regarding the rabbis' understanding of the myriad of details incorporated in the biblical death scenes, but has offered a cogent midrashic picture of the process of dying and how it fits into the rabbinic worldview. In interpreting the biblical death scenes, the rabbis found a vehicle to address their own constituency, while at the same time helping us understand our own struggle with our mortality.

Mr. Bachman is to be highly commended for his research, analysis and insightful comments on the textual material, both biblical and rabbinic. He has demonstrated his ability to analyze texts in a sophisticated manner and to integrate diverse material. In addition, he writes with clarity in a very straightforward style, while synthesizing substantive material. Of course, more could be done to buttress his conclusions, e.g., examination of the deaths of biblical figures from the rest of the canon, a study of the cultural and religious influences of external society and more of a developmental study of the rabbinic material itself. Nevertheless, this thesis provides us with an excellent prism through which to see the rabbis' understanding of death and dying, and how they read biblical material to respond to their own contextual agenda.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Norman J. Cohen
Professor of Midrash

March 30, 1996

MONUMENTAL WORDS:

MIDRASH TO SELECTED DEATH SCENES FROM THE TORAH

ANDREW N. BACHMAN

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinic Program
New York, New York

1996

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work in this thesis is but one result of a series of questions I have been asking most of my life. In that search, I have been blessed with a great number of teachers. My thanks first go to Dr. Norman Cohen. When I left HUC in 1990 (albeit temporarily) Dr. Cohen slowly and persuasively convinced me not to abandon the project of becoming a rabbi. His guidance, scholarship and friendship were all vital factors in my return to the College. During my tenure at the New York school, Dr. Cohen introduced to me midrash as a field of study that I shall never abandon. He encouraged independent study, work with other scholars in the field outside the College, and a way of reading that has allowed me to traverse generations of time and converse with rabbis from long ago. His commitment to teaching, to excellence and to caring for his students have made my life at the New York school a meaningful and enriching one. I aspire to hold the torch of learning with equal passion and integrity. I shall finally and humbly add that while Dr. Cohen's guiding hand is discernible throughout this thesis, any misreadings are entirely my own.

Second, I would like to thank Dr. Lawrence Raphael. His support and friendship--as Dean and as neighbor--have been equally vital to my time at the New York campus. I look forward to our work together in congregational life and to our lasting friendship. Next, I want to thank all the faculty and staff of the College. In particular, I want to thank Dr. Stanley Nash for encouraging a deeper love of Hebrew literature; Dr. S. David Sperling for instilling in me a method of reading the Bible critically; Dr. Eugene Borowitz, for sometimes simply giving a look that made me clarify my words; Dr. Nancy Weiner for her support and encouragement; and Dr. Lawrence Hoffman for pulling me aside one day and daring me to strive for my potential as a rabbi and a student of Torah. I also want to thank Henry Resnick. Henry is one of the College's real treasures, whose brilliant mind and devotion to the jump shot are equally worthy of praise.

Special mention is reserved for Dr. A. Stanley Dreyfus. During my second year of work at the College, Dr. Dreyfus became my rabbi in the truest sense of the word. From his privately recommended readings to his unparalleled wit, from his critical thinking to the deep level of respect for the title of rabbi that he instills in his students, Dr. Dreyfus makes rabbinic learning what it should be. In the last two years, he and his wife Marianne have opened up their home to me each Friday morning for independent study. These sessions have been the closest experience to what life is described to be like in the World to Come--but without the salted fish. I will always cherish the privilege of having studied with one of America's greatest rabbis.

There are people from my life before rabbinic school to whom I feel strongly connected at this important place in time. All come from my years as a student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison: Hillel Executive Director Dr. Irving Saposnik, Dr.

George Mosse, Dr. Michael Berkowitz, Dr. Daniel Pekarsky, and Linda Newman--all are major forces behind my decision to enter the rabbinate. Time and distance have separated some of us, but I live and re-live the lessons they taught me during my years in Madison. I also want to thank Rabbi Hank Skirball of Jerusalem, under whose tutelage I began to believe that I could actually become a rabbi.

My life at the College would have been difficult without a few friends I know I'll keep for the rest of my life. In this regard, my gratitude is to rabbis Joshua Saltzman and Niles Goldstein--two budding theologians whose inquiries into the nature of God and Jewish life are a model of the passionate quest for truth. And thanks to Debra Landsberg, whose keen mind and sharp wit sustained me throughout many a class. Special thanks are in order for my study partner, Daniel Bronstein. Dan's unique sense of humor, intelligence and integrity are the greatest qualities one can ask for in a friend.

I want to thank my immediate and extended family for their support, guidance and encouragement. I see them all in the words of Torah that are represented in this thesis. Their phone calls and letters pushed me along--despite my complaining in the desert. Without the twin pillars of Milwaukee and Baltimore, I'd never have made it to this point in time.

I want to finally acknowledge two people. One is my late father, Monas S. Bachman, who died too soon to mark with me the sacred occasion of becoming a rabbi. His memory *is* a blessing.

The other is my wife, Rachel Altstein. Besides her able hand as an editor, she has been a source of constant love and support since we met. A few short years after my father died, Rachel came into my life bearing a small bit of his soul and of course, so much of her own. You breathed life into me that day; and I pray that you will always sustain me with your devotion. It is to you, my eternal love, and the memory of my father, that I dedicate this work.

Erev Shabbat
Ki Tisa
5756

INTRODUCTION

"No monuments need be put up for the righteous--their words are their monuments."
P.T. *Shekalim* 2:5, 47a

The experience of death brought me into contact with Jewish life. Prior to the death of my grandfather, all links to normative Jewish existence--study, prayer, community--were held at the margins of family life. But when he died just prior to my tenth birthday, all the questions I had about who was who in our family and where everyone came from became a quiet project of self-discovery. At his funeral I heard the language of our people that I had remembered hearing only once before--a few years earlier at a random Friday evening service where he and my father had gone to say the Mourners Kaddish for someone else I was too young to have ever known. Aunts, uncles and cousins began to fall into place in my vision of Jewish family life. It was only as a result of intermittent Jewish family events and gatherings at funerals over the course of many years that my commitment to understanding Jewish life would be solidified.

When my father died during my sophomore year in college, the challenge of this search for a connection to Jewish life reached its most profound manifestation: I could not utter the words of the Kaddish to honor him in his death. And although, thank God, the circumstances of my own birth and upbringing are radically different from the

young boy in the *aggadah* about R. Akiba teaching him to recite the kaddish in order to redeem his father, I have always felt a deep connection to that story.[1] For there are a number of responses one may have to the experience of death: despair, a numbing indifference, or anger and even rage. While it is true that death, with its radical notion of inevitability, is painfully unavoidable, it is also true that the principle way in which we accept death is by drawing lessons from the experience.

The first, fundamental lesson I remember learning about a particularly Jewish response to death took place with my grandmother. I sat with her one afternoon, less than a year after my grandfather's death, in a new apartment she had moved to in order escape the memories of the life she had shared for over fifty years with my grandfather. In what seemed like a comment that was out of the blue, she suddenly gave me a Hebrew name. "You're a Jewish boy," she said, "You should have a Jewish name." And that's all she said. Looking back on that day, I understand her gesture to be her way of tying me into a family and tradition about which I knew very little. Yet what she set out to do was something that Jews have done for generations--since the beginning of our constitution as a people--in the face of death. We have sought to link ourselves in a profound and meaningful way with our past--especially at the time in our lives when

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[1]I refer here to the *aggadah* found in B.T. *Kallah Rabbati* 52a, where R. Akiba discovers a man roaming near a cemetery and crying out in agony. He explains to R. Akiba that he has forced himself upon a woman, made her pregnant, and never bothered to look after her. He then died and was relegated to a purgatory, of sorts. Akiba finds the woman and after she gives birth to a boy, Akiba teaches him to read and eventually to pray. After taking him to synagogue (where presumably he recites *kaddish*) Akiba returns to the cemetery to find that the man's soul had been saved by his son.

that link seems most tenuous: at death. We link ourselves with words of comfort, with blessings, with stories of lineage and origin and family secrets. Woven through each of these aspects of oral tradition is the wisdom that has sustained us as a people, generation after generation.

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In this thesis, I will attempt to examine a wide variety of midrashim to death-scenes from the Torah, in search of the wisdom that the rabbis culled from their own reading of the deaths of Biblical figures. In essence, I want to begin to understand how the rabbis made sense of the trauma of death--particularly through the lens of interpretive reading. Like our own real-life experience with death, the scenes in the Torah occur all too quickly and often with very little detail. Thus, Biblical figures whose character we struggle to understand are gone from the narrative precisely when we begin to gain a certain level of insight into who they were. Of course, that fact, in and of itself, is one reason we go back to the stories year in and year out. But the rabbinic model of reading for detail is not simply to cull more facts for our own sake; the art of reading is bound up with the sacred pursuit of wisdom that characterizes our particularly Jewish understanding of the Bible and our lives. The record of that pursuit is found in the midrash.

Just as *midrash* represents an investigation, a rigorous questioning, and an explanation

for Biblical words, verses, and stories, so, too, can an investigation of the Biblical death-scene yield the special wisdom that comes from examining the sources. I have concentrated my focus on the midrash to the death-scenes of the patriarchs and matriarchs, as well as those of Joseph, Miriam, Aaron and Moses. I have looked at them through the primary lens of post-Biblical works such as Philo and Josephus as well as early midrashic works like *Sifrei Deuteronomy, Sifrei Numbers, Midrash Tannaim* to Deuteronomy, *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon b'Yohai,* and *Seder Olam Rabbah.* In addition, I have also studied some later midrashic compilations such as *Midrash Tanhuma, Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer,* and *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana.* I have also examined the midrash to these scenes in the classic *Rabbah* literature as well as a variety of Talmudic sources. Finally, I looked at minor narrative works such as *Midrash Petirat Moshe* and *Midrash Petirat Aharon.*

Through an examination of these sources, I sought answers to a variety of questions about the death-scenes. What happens when someone dies? Where is the death-scene set? What do people say before dying? And perhaps most importantly, how are their words understood by later generations of readers who are given the task of passing the Bible and the midrash down to subsequent generations? Though far from being a complete survey of these issues, this thesis will attempt to answer these questions with a particular eye toward the way in which the rabbis read the texts and the wisdom they then sought to convey. The following chapter summaries outline the thesis.

Chapter One: General Views of Death

In this chapter we will examine some general views of death as well as the particular early rabbinic view of death. In a variety of religious traditions, including Judaism, death is seen as an experience ranging from a punishment for evil committed to a reward of eternal life in the World to Come. In this chapter we will seek to understand the role of religion in providing if not answers to the questions provoked by the awesome reality of death then at the very least, comfort.

Chapter Two: Death Scenes in the Torah

In this chapter we will examine in detail the particular death-scenes that are the subject of this thesis. We will look at the settings of the death-scenes, particular words and turns of phrase that are evident in the text, and what things were said by those about to die. Particular attention will be drawn to the similarities and differences among the Biblical death scenes. For example, only the male figures are "gathered to their kin," while the women are not (even though they may be buried in the same place as the men.) Finally, we will notice that the Bible, in fact, says very little about the deaths, leaving an obvious gap that the midrash will attempt to fill.

Chapter Three: The Narrative Terminology of Death Scenes

Here we will examine particular letters, words, and phrases used to describe the death-scene that were the impetus for the composition of midrash. One of the unique aspects of midrash is its need to answer the burning questions left in the text by a single letter,

word or phrase. For the early rabbis of the tradition, who are seeking to understand their own lives by looking into the terminology of the Biblical text, there is an immediate need to gain wisdom from not only the revealed text but from the record left by others readers of the ancestors depicted in it. There is a fluidity to their search so that "what happened in Scripture happens again and again...because the Bible is not 'past' at all."[2] We notice in this first level examination that "what happened" in the death-scene is not necessarily what is depicted in the Torah; nonetheless, it is depicted as an equally valid reality by the rabbis.

Chapter Four: The Dying and the Survivors Respond

This chapter will examine some of the imagined responses of those about to die and the mourners' response to death. Do the dying accept their deaths with quiet equanimity or do they fight to their last breath? The rabbis seemed to struggle to understand how the dying reconciled themselves with death. In addition, the midrash reflects traditions which sought reconciliation among the survivors, as well. Isaac and Ishmael, as well as Jacob and Esau, are united at funerals. This occurrence receives little attention in the Bible but much attention in the midrash.

Chapter Five: Passing the Torch

The most common form of comfort one could seek in facing the reality of death is in the knowledge that one's children, followers, or students will live on, carrying the

[2]James Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash," *Prooftexts* 3 (1983), p. 142.

legacy of the dying with them. In the Bible, this is the concern of all, from Abraham, the first Jew, to Moses, who leads Israel to freedom but is prevented from entering the Land of Israel. The midrash reflects this concern as well as the rabbis' own desire to see a newly developing Judaism survive. This chapter will examine the words of strength and encouragement (and chastisement) offered by the dying to the living.

Chapter Six: Redemption and Resurrection

For all the comfort one may find in knowing that the words and blessings of the dying will live on in those surviving, there is still the question of what happens in the afterlife to those who die. The early rabbis believed firmly in an afterlife and in resurrection of souls in a World to Come. For the righteous, death represented an opportunity for redemption and this chapter will examine some of the midrashim which have as their focus notions of resurrection and redemption. Finally, we will examine the integral connection between resurrection and the Land of Israel. At the Biblical and rabbinic layers, the centrality of Israel is key to understanding Jewish notions of where one is buried and to where one will be resurrected in a messianic End of Days.

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And so it is appropriate that we commence this project at the beginning. The endless cycle of life and death demands as much. As we will see in this thesis, although each person's life and death were unique, there was a fluidity to events that made the collective lives and deaths of our ancestors quite similar as well. Canonized by the tradition, the Biblical ancestors are, in essence, Jewish heroes, whose words we

scrutinize for guidance and wisdom in the mystery of our own lives. But because of the canon, the art of reading in a Jewish way will yield a certain tension between what most Jews understand to be the "official" stories of the Bible and the record of collective memory that the midrash comes to represent. The midrash, as we shall see, will reflect the rabbis' world perhaps more than the Biblical world of our ancestors. But the malleability of text will also hold the key to the very life of Scripture. Far from their burial site and often unable to visit the Biblical ancestors' graves, the rabbis hung onto their words, reshaped them and reformulated them in their diligent and religious pursuit of truth.

CHAPTER I

GENERAL VIEWS OF DEATH

> "[T]he power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it."[3]

Beset by the powerful forces of life, humans move through their days with varying degrees of concern for one inevitable lesson of life: death. Although it is impossible to ascertain what kind of experience lies beyond the grave, we tend to perceive of the phenomenon of death as an end to life as we know it. Whether death comes suddenly like a heart attack, gradually, as with a terminal disease, or gently as in one's sleep--the dying and their survivors are still left with the arduous task of making sense of death's meaning. There is a finality to the experience which we either live in fear of or learn to accept with equanimity and quiet bravery.[4] And yet, as countless religious and philosophical traditions will attest, humanity's pursuit of wisdom has sought to grab hold of the idea of death, penetrate its depths, and seek to uncover its mystery. This is usually accomplished by claiming, in one form or another, that death itself is indeed

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[3]Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: 1967), p. 51.

[4]In modern times, one cannot confront the fear of death without considering the rubrics of psychology. Whereas religion, philosophy and literature were the sole resources for confronting this fear for generations of human history, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung offered their own formulations for dealing with this profound fear. The late anthropologist Ernest Becker summarizes the views of Freud and Jung in his book *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973) p. 53, "The result is that we now know that the human animal is characterized by two great fears that other animals are protected from: the fear of life and the fear of death."

not an end at all, but rather the beginning of merely another journey in the greater, more cosmic time frame by which our souls are governed.[5] Although we may make the general statement that the majority of the world's religions have as their focus life in the here and now, we can also accurately say that of central concern to these religions is the notion that an afterlife exists and that death's finality is only realized in the physical, non-spiritual sense.[6]

A similar statement could be made about the view of death in Jewish life. From the Biblical record down through the layers of rabbinic interpretation, the varying cultures of our Biblical and rabbinic ancestors struggled with the mystery of death, while at the same time claiming that death's finality could only be apprehended in a physical sense. Central to the Jewish conception of death is the notion that although the physical, corporeal realm of our bodies must suffer decay and expire, our souls--invisible and ephemeral yet every bit as real as flesh and blood--would live on in a sense other than what our bodies know to be life.

In one of our earliest Biblical attempts to grasp the problem of death, we have the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and what we may refer to as their obsession

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[5]For a brief survey of death in the history of religion, see Th. P. Van Baaren, "Death," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 251-259. For the development of the notion of death as a journey into the realm of life beyond the world as we know it, see *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*, John J. Collins and Michael Fishbane, eds. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995.)

[6]Th.P. Van Baaren's "Death," pp. 251-259.

with immortality and knowledge. To be sure, in the context of this narrative tale of humanity's origins, the tree of life is subordinated to the tree of knowledge.[7] Nonetheless, God commands Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for if he did so, he would "surely die."[8] As the story unfolds between Adam, Eve, the serpent and God, the central concern is whether or not the first two humans have attained some semblance of knowledge shared by the Divine. And as a punitive measure, the two are expelled from Eden in order to prevent their taking from the tree of life and presumably, like God, obtaining immortality.[9]

In the Jewish interpretive tradition, represented not only by the Biblical narrative but also by the various legends from the rabbis, the origins of death, like the Biblical tradition, were traced back to the Genesis narrative in the Garden of Eden. Here one confronts a variety of views. The most common view is that the origins of death were attributed to Adam and Eve as a result of their disobeying God and eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Others simply argued that death was purely a necessity, preordained since creation.[10] This latter view was expounded upon by

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[7]Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1970), pp. 26-27.

[8]Genesis 2:17. Unless otherwise cited, all Biblical translations will follow the New JPS translation of the Holy Scriptures, (Philadelphia: JPS, 1917).

[9]Genesis 3:22-23. "And the Lord God said: 'Behold the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever."

[10]See for example, Genesis Rabbah 16.6 and 30.8. See Ben Zion Bokser, "Life and Death" from the *Encyclopedia Judaica* Vol. 11. (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), pp. 235-237. See also Ephraim Urbach's *The Sages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 265.

Maimonides in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, where he explained that death is "good for the permanence of the Universe and the continuation of the order of things, so that one thing departs and the other succeeds."[11] In support of his argument, Maimonides quotes Rabbi Meir, whose Torah scroll, the tradition tells us, contained an alternate rendering of the words from Genesis 1:31 ("and God saw everything that He made and behold it was very good.") According to the tradition, Rabbi Meir's scroll contained the words that death itself was good.[12] Whether Rabbi Meir himself found death to be inherently good is unclear. However, Rabbi Samuel b. Nahman taught in Rabbi Meir's name that death was good because it forced a person to repent.[13]

In any case, death could be viewed as a necessary evil, as a price to pay for disobeying God, or as a good in and of itself--for making way for others or for prompting repentance. In the normative rabbinic tradition, we encounter a variety of views on death and its significance, each struggling to come to terms with the unavoidable view that death is part of the order of the universe. Because of the view that death was

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Summarizing the rabbinic view of death, Urbach writes, "Death is part of the order of the universe, and accordingly measured spans have been allotted to human life, and when the appointed time arrives it cannot be postponed, for new generations wait to take their place."

[11]Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:10. M. Friedlander, trans. (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 267. In a modern rendering of this view, my uncle likes to say, "If people didn't die, we couldn't walk the streets!"

[12]Ibid. See also *Genesis Rabbah* 9:5. "In the copy of R. Meir's Torah was found written 'And behold it was very good' and behold death was good." R. Meir's understanding is based on a play between the words *m'od* (very) and *mot* (dead or death).

[13]*Genesis Rabbah* 9:5.

considered to be a functional necessity of life, there was much wisdom that an older generation could teach the younger generation as it faced its own fears of mortality. One common characteristic of the early rabbinic view is the notion that ancestral merit could save a later generation from an untimely death or the harsh decrees of God's judgement upon dying. Additionally, a younger generation had the ability to redeem an older generation. This particular rabbinic category of theological inquiry is known as *zechut avot* or merit of the ancestors. Solomon Schechter summarized this rabbinic category by subdividing it into three distinct sections of merit: the merit of pious ancestry; the merit of a pious contemporary; and the merit of pious posterity.[14]

For this study, the particular power of *zechut* or merit, is understood in the context of how the dead redeem the living and how the living may redeem the dead. To be sure, all of humanity must eventually die a physical death; the rabbinic tradition however looks beyond the corporeal and into the realm of the soul. Thus, although none can be redeemed from death itself, the living and the dead have the power to redeem one another as each may stand in judgement before God. Although ultimately one must stand upon one's own actions, the rabbinic tradition allows for the possibility that the living and the dead may play a role in the ultimate spiritual redemption of the other.[15]

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[14]Solomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961) p. 171.

[15]Ibid. See the full discussion on the issue of *zechut* in Chapter 12, pp. 170-198.

One of the most powerful examples of the ability of the living to redeem the dead is found in a passage from a minor tractate of the Babylonian Talmud, *Kallah Rabbati*. In the answer to the question of whether or not children can atone for their parents' sins, a story is told about Rabbi Akiba, who discovers a ghost-like figure consigned to suffer on earth for the sins he committed in life. Upon discovering that the man had a son about to be born, Akiba found the boy, raised him, taught him to read, and eventually taught him to join in public worship. This presumably included the obligation to recite the words of the mourners' kaddish. Upon recitation of the son's prayer, the father's soul was released from its bondage.[16]

Yet, as Schechter points out, this doctrine of the living redeeming the dead, although traceable, is not necessarily a normative part of the tradition. Although Schechter argued that original prayers offered on behalf of the dead were not part of the liturgy until the eleventh century,[17] the legend itself offers a glimpse into one aspect of the early belief system.

More relevant to this examination of the midrashic interpretations of Biblical death scenes is Schecter's discussion of the significance of death-bed repentance. As noted above, one aspect of the goodness of death is its function in causing a person to repent. Thus it should come as no surprise to us that the death scene itself will portray, in

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[16]B.T. *Kallah Rabbati* 52a.

[17]Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, p. 198.

some detail, the words offered by those about to die. Of significance to rabbinic theology is the notion that although one may have led a life of wickedness, repentance before death may help an individual atone for his sins.[18] Though death-bed repentance "is not regarded as repentance of the highest order," it remains significant.[19] To be sure, the rabbis' concern was that a person repent "one day before" his death--and here Rabbi Eliezer's proverb from Pirket Avot 2:15 is most helpful--in order not to postpone repentance until it would be too late. Nonetheless, there is a certain drama to the death-bed scene, where one is drawn into a reckoning of one's entire life moments before death. This particular drama will be noted by the rabbis in their midrashic depictions of death-scenes. The words attributed to the dead by the midrash in many cases will comprise one's final penitent bequest to the living.

So great is the concern for death and death related matters in the tradition that one can point to what Michael Fishbane calls "the desire for death" which "torments the God-intoxicated soul."[20] Fishbane attempts to trace a development throughout much of the Jewish mystical tradition in which one "practices" death in an effort to release oneself from the corporeal realm and penetrate the spiritual realm of the Divine. Thus, many elements in the Jewish interpretive tradition, Fishbane argues, perceived of death as a separation between body and soul, resulting in the desired reward of a communion with

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[18]Ibid. p. 340.

[19]Ibid. p. 341.

[20]Michael Fishbane, *Kiss of God* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), p. 20.

the Divine. As Fishbane points out, this phenomenon has its roots in the Hellenistic philosophical tradition and particularly the thought of Plato.[21] In addition, Fishbane argues that from Philo of Alexandria to the Jewish sages and onward into the Middle Ages, one can trace the development of the idea of practicing death "on a mode of ascetical piety that sets itself against this-worldly desires, precisely because these desires stimulate the physical self and turn one away from God and spiritual deliverance."[22]

It has been argued that in modern times, one discerns an erosion in the faith of religion to answer the questions left by such an instinctual fear of death. Indeed, the era known as "modernity" placed particular emphasis on human reason, science, the university, philosophy and psychology as offering solutions to basic human dilemmas. For many, modernity meant a radical departure from the superstitious folkways of religious traditions and represented instead an entryway into secular society.[23] As theologians now argue, this faith in modernity was what Eugene Borowitz calls a "secular messiah,"

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[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid. p. 22.

[23]The greater question of the Jewish move into modernity is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, there are a variety of indispensable surveys of this issue. See Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation 1770-1870* (New York: Schocken, 1978); Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds. *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) and *Ideas of Jewish History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987); George L. Mosse, *German Jews Beyond Judaism* (Cincinnati: HUC Press, 1985); and Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (New York: Schocken, 1976).

indeed a false messiah, that left people of faith searching for a post-modern theological system in which questions of faith could be considered on an equally legitimate plane as anything verifiable by pure reason.[24] Thus, the challenge for the religious leader in this post-modern age is to help those seeking spiritual truths to find, if not comfort, then understanding in the awesome, fearful knowledge of death.

This fear of death was addressed in two different ways in the 1970s by two influential theorists who sought to meld their psychological and philosophical investigations of death with religious undertones. One was Ernest Becker, whose Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Denial of Death,* was recognized for its attempts to reassert the religious model into an understanding of the phenomenon of death. Central to Becker's argument was the notion that all cultures rely upon a mythology of heroism which, on the most basic human level, seeks to confront the issues of how to live with and transcend death. In our own examination of the midrash to Biblical death scenes, we will see the way in which the rabbis made heroes of the Biblical characters' own

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[24]For a particular Jewish view of post-modern theology, see Eugene Borowitz's *Renewing the Covenant* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1991.) See also Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) and *Difficult Freedom*, English translation by Sean Hand, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.) Levinas argued persuasively that the experiment of modernity raised reasoned action to absurdly high levels which did violence to the human spirit. In an essay entitled "The Virtues of Patience" from *Difficult Freedom*, Levinas wrote, "The modern world has forgotten the virtues of patience. The rapid and effective action to which everyone is committed for a single moment has furnished the dark gleam produced by the ability to wait and suffer. But the glorious deployment of energy is murderous. We must recall these virtues of patience not so as to preach a sense of resignation in the face of revolutionary spirit, but so that we can feel the essential link which connects the spirit of patience to true revolution."

equanimity toward death; how the exegete was able to create a religious myth of peculiar Jewish heroism about facing the fearful and awesome reality of death.

A more popular psychological rendering of coming to terms with death is the work of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. Kubler-Ross's pioneering work in counselling terminal patients and their families opened the way for a new understanding of the death experience. More practically oriented than Becker's philosophical inquiry, Kubler-Ross's approach of distilling the death experience to five stages was utilized by hospital practitioners and therapists in an effort to help terminal patients and their families come to terms with death. In her most important work, *On Death and Dying*, Kubler-Ross argued, much like the rabbis might have, that the dying can be our best teachers for facing death.[25] Her own model for the stages of dying--Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance--can be applied to much of the midrash we will examine and in particular to the collected midrash describing Moses' death in *Midrash Petirat Moshe*.[26] There, in almost textbook fashion, Moses moves through the five stages of dying, battling Satan and resisting God and then finally reaching his own sense of equanimity

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[25]Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Collier, 1969), p.28.

[26]*Midrash Petirat Moshe* is a minor narrative work drawing on sources such as the Sifrei, Babylonian Talmud, Deuteronomy Rabbah, Yalkut Shimoni, and Islamic folklore as well as early apocalyptic and pseudoepigraphic works. It dates from the middle period, which M. Herr dates to around 640-900 C.E. in his article, "Midrash," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 11, p. 1513. See also Jeffrey Sirkman, HUC Rabbinic Thesis, 1987.

and acceptance when he dies by the "kiss of God."[27]

One may argue, therefore, that prior to the advent of modern therapeutic techniques, the rabbis offered forms of expression, through the midrash, that served as tools for one to employ when confronting the perplexing and often terrifying question of death. In many ways, the Kubler-Ross approach to counselling the dying is a bridge between the modern and post-modern eras. Through her studies and with acceptance from an empathetic and supportive "team" of doctors, nurses, caregivers, social workers and family members, terminal patients move toward an understanding of their own death that will shed invaluable light on the experience for us all. The experience of dying is no longer described with the cold, medical terminology of modernity. Instead, it is infused with the language of compassion, empathy and understanding. This is what I have come to believe the rabbis intended in composing midrash to the Biblical death scenes.

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Regardless of how the phenomenon of death came to be seen, it was nonetheless an awesome, terrifying reality. And so it remains. One need only ask a cross section of Jews what, in their opinion, is the Jewish prayer with the most powerful impact on their lives. The response is almost invariably the Mourners' Kaddish. Upon recitation of

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[27]In *The Kiss of God*, Michael Fishbane explores in depth the phenomenology of the Divine kiss as a spiritual quest interpreted by the rabbinic, mystical and philosophical traditions in Jewish life.

this ancient prayer, a Jew who for all intents and purposes is removed from Jewish life may find himself suddenly connected to past generations of Jews by appearing in the synagogue to utter the words in prayer.[28]

It is this almost inexplicable connection which this thesis will explore in an attempt to understand how readers and interpreters of the Jewish tradition faced the inevitable reality of death. This examination of the midrash will reveal an array of perspectives--from death-bed blessings and curses to acts of familial reconciliation and personal confrontation with the finality of death. It is my hope that through a careful reading of these *midrashim* we too can move toward an understanding of death and thus gain wisdom for ourselves.

[28]See the collection of essays entitled "Personal Encounters" in Jack Reimer's *Jewish Reflections on Death* (New York: Schocken, 1974), pp. 151-182.

CHAPTER II

DEATH SCENES IN THE TORAH

To begin this examination of the midrash to selected biblical death scenes, it will be of benefit to first explore the general biblical conception of death. Many questions should be addressed in this regard. What happens when someone dies in the Bible? Where is a particular death scene set? What is the reason given for their death? Are they given an opportunity to speak before they die? If so, what do they say? And finally, how are their words and their deaths understood by those who remain alive, in this world? After all, in an oral and written tradition, the repetition of words or phrases, particularly in a scene as singular as a death scene, will likely lead to certain conclusions drawn by the reader.[29] At this preliminary level, there are several characteristics common to all the biblical death scenes as well as many distinguishing features to these scenes in the biblical narrative. Therefore, by looking closely at the narrative structure of these stories, one may begin to understand the impact these stories had on generations of readers. If the Biblical figures were mythic heroes to generations in the chain of tradition, what is revealed or not revealed about their death would naturally be cause for another midrashic level of commentary about their deaths.[30]

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[29]Robert Alter, *The Art of the Biblical Narrative*, (New York: Basic Books, 1981) p. 179. Alter's discussion of key words or phrases (Leitworts) is helpful in understanding the effect such repetitions may have had on a reader.

[30]Ibid. p. 60. Alter places the death scene into a general category he labels "type-scene." According to Alter, the "type-scene is not merely a way of formally recognizing a particular kind of narrative moment; it is also a means of attaching that moment to a larger pattern of historical and theological meaning."

A. Categories of Death Scenes

In this particular category of biblical narrative known as the *death scene*, one can discern, along with a variety of words that are unique to the experience of dying in the Hebrew Bible, at least two distinct sub-categories. In one category, a death occurs and it is duly noted in the narrative. Consider the death of Abraham. In four succinct verses his life is summarized, he dies, and he is buried by his sons Isaac and Ishmael beside his wife Sarah at the Cave of Machpelah.[31] In fact, to our surprise, Abraham's death is rather undramatic--not what one would ordinarily expect for the first Patriarch, and one who, even in the Biblical account, has an exalted status as an heroic founding father who regularly confers with God. Other death scenes, singular for the brevity of their account are those depicting Sarah, Rachel and Miriam.[32] Rebecca and Leah are missing entirely from the narrative concern for a death scene *per se* and are mentioned in passing as having been buried along with the other patriarchs and matriarchs at the Cave of Machpelah.[33]

In another category, the death is preceded by a longer narrative structure that announces the impending death and allows the character to impart words in the form of

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[31]Genesis 25:7-10.

[32]For Sarah's death scene, see Genesis 23:1. For Rachel, see Genesis 35:16-20. For Miriam, see Numbers 20:1.

[33]See Genesis 49:31, where, in the midst of Jacob's final words before his death, he charges his children to bury him in the family plot at Machpelah. There Jacob explains and the reader learns for the first time that Rebecca and Leah have not only died but that they have been buried in Machpelah.

death-bed wisdom or a set of blessings to one's children. For example, we find a more elaborate telling of the death scenes of Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Aaron and Moses.[34] Here the common thread seems to be the concern for the passing of tradition from one generation to the next or the passing of responsibility from one generation to the next. For example, in the case of Isaac, Jacob and Moses, these three figures prepare for death by exhorting, blessing and cursing the surviving members of the Israelites. In Jacob and Joseph's case in particular, promises and pledges are extracted from their brethren to ensure proper burial in the Land of Israel. In Aaron's case, careful steps must be taken to ensure that the priesthood--from the priestly lines to the donning of priestly vestments--is safeguarded.

Upon closer examination, we find a distinction in the narrative's description of patriarchal and matriarchal death scenes. When a woman dies--and here we mean Sarah, Rachel and Miriam--only one word is used to describe their deaths: the Hebrew *mot*. In the accounts of the Patriarchs as well as Joseph, Aaron and Moses, a variety of terms are employed to describe these deaths. Most common among these phrases is *v'ye'asef el amav*--"and he was gathered unto his kin." This term is applied to Abraham (Gen. 25:8), Isaac (Gen. 35:27), Jacob (Gen. 49:33), Aaron (Num. 20:24 and Deut. 32:50), and Moses (Deut. 32:50), where Moses is told directly by God that he will be gathered to his kin.

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[34]For Isaac's death scene, see Genesis 25 and Genesis 35:29. For Jacob, see Genesis 49:33. For Joseph, see Genesis 50:24-26. For Aaron, see Numbers 20:20-29. For Moses, see Deuteronomy 34:4-7.

On the surface, one is struck by a decided shift in the narrative between male and female death tales where the female simply dies but the male is reunited in death with the ancestral beyond. The fact that the women are buried with the men (or in Rachel's case, nearby) is incidental to the narrative. The notion of one's burial allowing for a fortuitous gathering of ancestral figures is left to the realm of men.

B. Terms Related to the Death Scenes

The terms of death employed by the narrative are linked quite closely to the biblical conception of death in general. For the most part, the Hebrew Bible commonly refers to death by making use of the terms *Mot*, *Sheol* as more descriptive terms related to "being gathered to one's kin." The terms *Mot* and *Sheol* refer to what Biblical critics call the realm of the dead as well as the personified power behind death.[35] The etymological origins of the words themselves lend insight into the mindset of the Biblical character as he or she confronted the reality of death. Of the two terms, *Sheol* is the more difficult to trace. According to Theodore Lewis, the most plausible explanation for the term *Sheol* is one which roots the word in the Hebrew verb connoting "to ask, inquire." Here *Sheol* becomes a place where one either goes to consult the dead for judgement or be judged by the dead. As Lewis points out, the idea of *Sheol* as a place of inquiry has Biblical links to what scholars argue was the

[35]Theodore Lewis, "The Abode of the Dead," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 101-105.

practice of necromancy--using oracles to consult the dead.[36] Despite the Bible's marked prohibition against such practices, Lewis further makes the etymological claim that the term is semantic, indicative of an "underlying imagery," and not necessarily rooted in practice.[37] *Sheol* as a place in the context of Biblical narrative comes to symbolize the lowest of the low places in which one can reside, deep in the earth and often compared to a well. In keeping with this sense of *Sheol* as a term related to water, Lewis argues that "the crossing of water as part of one's travel to the underworld is too persistent in the Ancient Near East not to be underlying the imagery of biblical *Sheol* to some degree."[38]

Biblical scholars have also asked what happens at *Sheol.* Here the prevailing opinion is that *Sheol* comes to represent either a place where the wicked will be judged or, regarding the righteous, a place for an untimely death. Where *Sheol* is a place for the wicked, we have mention of the rebellious Korah and his followers being swallowed by the earth and falling into *Sheol* (Numbers 16:30-33.) Differently, we have Jacob lamenting first Joseph's supposed death and then the prospect of giving up Benjamin with the concern that he would go down to his grave (*Sheol*) in mourning over these

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[36]Ibid.

[37]Ibid. Although as Lewis points out, merely because a practice such as necromancy was forbidden does not mean it was not observed to some degree. Afterall, why would the prohibition exist? For example in I Samuel 28, Saul seeks to consult with the already dead Samuel and through the agency of a divining woman, succeeds in bringing Samuel back to prophecy. Although the result is Saul's further chastisement, the Bible, at this juncture, takes such efforts to reach the dead at face value. I thank Dr. S. David Sperling for this insight.

[38]Ibid.

losses.[39] And yet, when Jacob actually does die in Genesis 49:33, the word *Sheol* is absent from any description and like his ancestors before him, Jacob is described as "breathing his last" and "being gathered to his kin."

Another term used in the Biblical death scene is the word *Mot*, usually defined as relating directly to death, like the Hebrew word *mavet*. Unlike the term *Sheol*, *Mot* is actually traceable to other cognate languages and is used most prominently as a term to describe a Canaanite deity of the underworld who also goes by the name *Mot*.[40] In Cannanite religious mythology, *Mot* is god of the underworld and is described oppostionally to Baal, the god of life. *Mot* is described in Cannanite culture as a ravenous god consuming the life force, thus making *Mot* an enemy of Baal. Regarding the character of *Mot* in the Hebrew Bible there is considerable debate. Scholarship divides over the degree to which *Mot* is personified as a deity of death, whose appetite for consuming life is insatiable.[41] Thus in a variety of places in the Hebrew Bible, the word *mavet* becomes a personified representation of *Mot*, described as having an insatiable appetite, usually in the form of a consuming grave, whose mouth is open

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[39]Genesis 37:35, 42:38, 44:29 and 44:31. In the first instance, Jacob bemoans his fate over the presumed loss of Joseph. In the latter citations, Jacob expresses his concern over the potential loss of Benjamin.

[40]Lewis, "The Abode of the Dead," p. 104. See also Lewis' entry in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume IV, entitled "MOT," pp. 922-924.

[41]Lewis, "MOT," p. 923.

wide and ready to eat the living.[42] And in these instances as well as ones depicting people making covenants with this deity, Lewis argues, *Mot* is "best understood against the backdrop of the Cannanite god *Mot*."[43]

And yet the Bible has to be very clear in its effort to discourage the belief in other deities. Therefore, there are instances of the Yahweh God of the ancient Israelites swallowing up Mot in what is effectively a battle of the Gods. In Isaiah 25:8, for example, God will "swallow up death forever and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all the faces."[44] On the basic level of the Biblical narrative, we are confronted with a certain prevailing belief system in the Ancient Near East regarding the place of death and the personified deity who brings it about by swallowing his victims. The Biblical narrator must confront these myths with an end toward eventually establishing God's preeminence in these matters. Nonetheless, the language of the area is incorporated into the Biblical narrative, reflecting a terminology rich in allusion to alternate and unacceptable practices in nascent Hebrew and Israelite culture. Words or concepts may be "censored in" to the narrative, but will ultimately be subordinated to

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[42]See in this regard, Habukuk 2:5: "He who enlarges his desire as the netherworld and is as death, and cannot be satisfied;" Isaiah 5:14: "Therefore the netherworld has enlarged her desire and opened her mouth without measure;" Proverbs 1:12: "Let us swallow them up alive as the grave, and whole, as those that go down into the pit;" Psalm 141:7 "Our bones are scattered at the grave's mouth."

[43]Lewis, "MOT," p. 923.

[44]Other examples from the Bible in which God is personified as swallowing up death or actually doing the consuming of life that the Canaanite god Mot would have done, can be found in Psalm 21:10: "The Lord shall swallow them up in His wrath" and Isaiah 19:3 in reference to the Egyptians.

the will of the Israelite Deity.

Another of these terms related to death is the above mentioned phrase *v'ye'asef el amav,* meaning "to be gathered to one's kin." In many ways, this phrase is formulaic and necessarily precedes burial in a family plot.[45] The first mention of family plots in the Biblical narrative is found when Sarah dies and Abraham sets out to secure a burial place in the Cave of Machpelah by purchasing the land around the cave from Ephron the Hittite. With the exception of Rachel (who is buried outside Bethlehem) and Joseph (who is buried in Shechem), the Cave of Machpelah becomes a symbolic resting place on earth where the Patriarchs and Matriarchs are literally gathered to their kin. And as we will later see in the midrash, Moses, though not buried in the Land of Israel, will have miraculously made for himself a tunnel leading from his burial place east of the Jordan to the Cave of Machpelah.[46] The concern for making sure that one's father was gathered to his kin was one key element in carrying out the duty of burial.[47]

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[45]Nicholas J. Trump, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Netherworld in the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), pp. 211-212. The sense that one would be gathered to one's kin was a source of great comfort in the face of the finality of death. Unlike the all-consuming powers of MOT in the realm of Canaanite mythology, the Bible's focus, Trump argued, was not on "total ruin and the radical end of life" but is rather "occupied with a personal being and post-mortal condition."

[46]See, for example, *Midrash Tannaim* to Deuteronomy 34:5. D. Hoffmann, ed. (Berlin: 1908).

[47]E.A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 115. Speiser writes that "in ancient Near Eastern societies it was left to a son to ensure a restful afterlife for his father through proper interment and rites."

C. Biblical Death Scenes

What follows is a detailed examination of the Biblical death scenes that will later be explored in the midrash. The scenes are examined as they occur in their chronological order in the Torah.

1. Sarah Sarah's death occurs suddenly and with very little explanation in Genesis 23:1-2. This suddenness will not be missed by the midrashic commentators who will attempt to fill in the gap in the narrative with their own explanations for her death. Ironically, her death is introduced by the text's noting the total number of years of her life--one hundred and twenty-seven--before we are told that she died. Unlike those who will die after her--and here we refer specifically to the men who will die after her--Sarah does not *breathe her last* (gva) nor is she "gathered to her kin." She simply dies. The narrative itself picks up from there and begins to lay out for the reader all of the preparations that Abraham made in order to ensure Sarah a proper burial. It is interesting to remember that in the context of the Ancient Near East, a son was obligated to bury his father. In this case--with Sarah being the *mother* of Isaac and Ishmael--neither son attends to the duty of her burial. It is her husband Abraham who buries her. The text explains that Abraham "came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her," before rising up and going about the business of securing a burial plot in which to place her body. Unlike Abraham's burial, which Isaac and Ishmael attended, both sons are absent from the burial of their mother.

2. **Abraham** Abraham's death is described in Genesis 25:5-11. It is foreshadowed briefly in Genesis 15:15 where God appears to Abraham in a vision and explains that not only will he be promised offspring, but that they will be enslaved and eventually redeemed. Abraham is assured by God, however, that he will be gathered to his fathers in peace and "buried in a good old age." As to the more specific details of Abraham's death, we note that it does not occur until Abraham has secured a wife for his son Isaac and given him "all that he had" (Genesis 25:5), while giving "gifts" to the sons of his concubines. He then sends these marginal family members away from his son and only then are his years recorded: "And these are the days of the years of Abraham's life which he lived, a hundred, threescore and fifteen years. And Abraham expired in a good old age, an old man, and full of years; and was gathered to his people."[48] Fulfilling the promise given him by God in Genesis 15, Abraham dies in a "good old age." And although Sarah is the first to be buried in a plot which thereafter will represent the physical place where one is *gathered to one's kin*, it is Abraham for whom the term is first employed. Absent from the burial of their mother, Isaac and Ishmael--the former rivals--appear together and carry out the duty of proper burial for their father. After Abraham's death, the narrative relates that "God blessed Isaac, his son," a significant point that will not go unnoticed by the rabbis. Afterward, the narrative resumes with an enumerated list of Ishmael's offspring and then Ishmael himself dies. Interestingly enough, he, too, is "gathered to his kin," but the text does not relate for us

[48]Genesis 25:7-8.

where it is that Ishmael is buried.[49]

3. Rebecca Rebecca is technically the next to die, although the Bible does not record her death explicitly until long after it has occurred--in Genesis 49:31 where Jacob notes moments before dying that Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca and Leah were all buried in the Cave at Machpelah. As we will see in the examination of the midrashic material, Rebecca's death notice, as it were, will be derived from a clever reading of Genesis 35:8. In that verse it is noted that Deborah, Rebecca's nurse, has died. "She was buried below Beth-el under the oak," the text explains, "and the name of it was called Allon-bacuth." Because the word *bacuth* (crying or weeping) can be read in the plural, the rabbis deduced that Rebecca must have died at that time as well.

4. Rachel Rachel's death comes suddenly and tragically. There is a sense to the description of her death in Genesis 35:16-17 that her death was painful, that she suffered before dying and this sense is only heightened by the fact that Rachel dies in childbirth.[50] Similar to the two matriarchal figures that came before her, Rachel had

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[49]God blesses Isaac in Genesis 25:11, while Ishmael's death is recorded in Genesis 25:17.

[50]For an interesting reading of this event, see Robert Alter, *Art of the Biblical Narrative,* pp. 185-189. There Alter connects Rachel's death to the way in which death in general haunts Jacob and leaves the reader with countless theological questions about the meaning of the covenant between God and Israel, as well as the complexity of the human relationships portrayed in the Bible. Alter points out that it is Esau who cries to his brother about relinquishing the birthright for food in Genesis 26:32, "Behold, I am at the point to die; and what profit shall the birthright do to me?" Later in Genesis 30:1, it is the barren Rachel who cries to Jacob, "Give me children or else I die." This unique aspect of Biblical literary interpretation, where various sections of the text hint at one another, is part of what Alter

difficulty conceiving. Therefore the fact that she died in childbirth only exacerbates the sense of tragedy one imagines when reading the account of Rachel's death. In addition, Rachel's death is colored by the fact that although she only gave birth to two of the twelve tribes of Israel, by virtue of her being Jacob's beloved and the mother of the chosen sons Joseph and Benjamin, Rachel is, in the mind of the reader, the mother of all Israel. One can hardly read of her death without noting the significance of her passing.

The sequence describing Rachel's death begins at Genesis 35:17 with the notice that her delivery of Benjamin is difficult. At her side is a midwife who seeks to comfort Rachel with the words, "Fear not; for this also is a son for thee." And then quickly, forcefully, Rachel dies in Genesis 35:18-20: "And it came to pass, as her soul was in departing--for she died--that she called his name Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. And Rachel died and was buried in the way to Ephrath--the same is Bethlehem. And Jacob set up a pillar upon her grave; the same is the pillar of Rachel's grave unto this day." Although the midrash to Rachel's death is not vast, there is enough in the few short verses describing her death that prompted the rabbis to explain this sequence more fully. One exegetical concern is the form of the verb *meitah*--for she died. This verb can be read as a present or past tense expression of the Hebrew root *mvt* and will thus provide an opportunity for the exegete to explain the sequence of events with an argument derived from Hebrew grammar.

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calls "imaginative play...deeply interfused with a sense of great spiritual urgency."

Another element in the sequence that will prompt a midrashic explanation is the variation in names for Benjamin. By his dying mother, he is called Ben-oni, or "son of my affliction." By his surviving father, he is called Benjamin, that is "son of my right hand or son of my days." This difference will be used by the rabbis to explain other hidden details of the story. Importantly, Rachel's burial takes place outside of Hebron and the Cave of Machpelah. This will serve as a marker in Genesis for a later Jewish connection to Rachel and Rachel's grave as a comfort to the Israelites after their exile from the land. The notion of Rachel as the mother of all Israel and a comfort to exiles will thus be picked up in Jeremiah 31:15, "Thus saith the Lord, a voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children, she refuses to be comforted for her children because they are not." These connections will allow the rabbis in the midrash to explain to the reader the functional necessity of Rachel's burial outside the family plot of Machpelah and instead on the road near Bethlehem.

And finally, there is the matter of the pillar or *matzevah*. It is a *matzevah* that Jacob also erects after his vision at Beth El and the connection between these two words has caused Biblical commentators to speculate on the meaning of this stone. Once seen as a legitimate expression of worship among Hebrews in the midst of Canannite culture, the erection of such stones for purposes of worship becomes expressly forbidden.[51] In Canaanite culture, the ghosts of the dead were thought to reside in such stones and

[51]Julian Morgenstern, *Rites of Birth, Marriage, Death and Kindred Occasions Among the Semites* (Cincinnati: HUC Press, 1966), pp. 146-147.

although the Torah would ultimately forbid such beliefs, this may help explain the eventual superstitions that surround Rachel's grave.[52]

5. Leah Leah's death, like Rebecca's, is not mentioned in the Bible. Her burial in Machpelah, however, is noted by Jacob moments before his own death.[53] In a comparison similar to her sister Rachel, Leah is appropriated into the bridal blessing given to Boaz and Ruth in Ruth 4:11. Here Rachel and Leah are credited with building the house of Israel with the prayer that they will "do worthily in Ephrath and be famous in Bethlehem." And so it seems that across scriptural lines, a passage from Genesis can address a passage from Jeremiah and Ruth, and provide comfort to the reader who is puzzled and pained over the deaths of both Rachel and Leah, mothers of Israel.

6. Isaac Isaac's death occurs next in the chronology and is preceded by a long drama upon his death bed.[54] This scene is set with the knowledge of an existing rivalry between Jacob and Esau for their father's blessing, Jacob having already wrested the birthright from his brother. Embittered by the rivalry with his brother, Esau had gone to marry Judith, the Hittite, something the text notes was gravely upsetting to both Isaac and Rebecca. We next confront Isaac old, nearly blind and, although the text

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[52]Ibid.

[53]Genesis 49:31.

[54]Genesis 27:1-28:9. Isaac will finally die in Genesis 35:27-29.

does not explicitly say so, bed-ridden. He calls his elder son Esau to his side and explains that because he is old and does not know the day he is to die, he is requesting a final meal of sorts that Esau is to hunt so that he may eat it and bless his son before he dies. Hearing this, Rebecca finds Jacob, whom she encourages to act as Esau in order to secure the blessing from his father. Heightening the drama regarding the necessity of the blessing, Rebecca changes Isaac's words which he had uttered to Esau in relating them to Jacob. "[M]ake me savoury food, such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat; *that my soul may bless thee before I die*" is what Isaac says to Esau in Genesis 27:4. But in retelling his father's words to Jacob, Rebecca claims in Genesis 27:7 that he said, "[M]ake me savoury food, that I may eat, and bless thee *before the Lord* before my death." With one small but significant addition, the clever Jacob learns from his discerning mother that there is more at stake than a simple blessing. The blessing takes on the added importance of being a divinely inspired action carried out in order to secure the covenant.

Served food and wine on his death-bed by his son Jacob, Isaac is able to enjoy the practice quite common in the Ancient Near East. Like Abraham bestowing gifts upon his sons before his death and Isaac enjoying the benefits of filial responsibility before dying, these practices are what Theodore Lewis categorized as the "Duties of an Ideal Son."[55] And as one may imagine, these duties are re-contextualized by the rabbis and

[55]Theodore J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), pp. 53-71.

brought under the umbrella of the normative *mitzvah* system. Hence the midrash to these scenes will explore in depth the duties carried out by children toward their parents in the moments leading to death. What were once commonly shared traits among Semitic peoples are reconfigured into a sacrificial worship system that recognizes duty to parents and the Divine in the expression of good deeds and acts of lovingkindness.

Isaac will finally die in Genesis 35:27. His days will be enumerated, he'll breathe his last, die, and be gathered to his kin, "old and full of days." The narrative sequence will end with Isaac being buried by Jacob and Esau, who parted ways after their brief encounter at Peniel near the Jabok River. Despite deep and bitter differences, the brothers find themselves carrying out the obligation of burial together.

7. **Jacob** Jacob's death begins, like Abraham's and Isaac's before him, with the expressed need to bring reconciliation to his life and find a certain peace before dying. With Abraham, we read of the need to find a wife for Isaac and the division of the estate between Isaac and Ishmael. In Isaac's case there was the stated need to bless his son. With Jacob, there is a need to travel down into Egypt in order to see Joseph. Once on his death-bed, Jacob will commence dying either by bestowing harsh words on his children or by blessing them with comforting words.

As we will recall, Jacob's later years were wrought with the pained knowledge of what

his sons had done to their brother Joseph. Terrified that he had abandoned his duties as a father in not protecting Joseph, Jacob expresses his fear of an early death no less than four times in the narrative by lamenting that he may go down to Sheol.[56] Upon hearing the news that Joseph is alive, Jacob agrees to his sons' request that he travel to Egypt. And then, in a night vision similar to the one experienced by Abraham in Genesis 15, God speaks to Jacob of his death with reassurance and comfort, informing him that although he will die in Egypt, his people will there be made into a great nation and restored to their own land.[57] After some details about the way in which Joseph managed the famine, the Bible notes that Jacob lived in Egypt for seventeen years--ironically the age at which his son Joseph began his fantastic dream divinations.

After enumerating the years of Jacob's life in Genesis 47:29, the text employs a new phrase that was not used to describe prior deaths in the Torah: *"And the time drew near* that Israel must die--*va'yikra'vu y'mei Yisrael la'mut.*"[58] In the context of these death scenes in the Torah, only the deaths of Jacob and Moses are described as "drawing near."[59] The phrase itself is also used to describe David's death in I Kings

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[56]Genesis 37:35, 42:38, 44:29 and 44:31.

[57]Genesis 46:2-4: "God spoke to Israel in the visions of the night and said 'Jacob, Jacob.' And he said, 'Here I am.' And He said, 'I am God, the God of thy father; fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of thee a great nation. I will go down with thee into Egypt; and I will also surely bring thee up again; and Joseph shall put his hand upon thine eyes.'"

[58]Genesis 48:29.

[59]In Deuteronomy 31:14, Moses is told, "Behold thy days approach that thou must die." It is at this juncture that God informs Moses to bring Joshua into the tent of meeting so that the transfer of power may begin.

2:1 and will resonate deeply for the rabbis in the midrash. Finally, the wording strangely recalls the curse of Esau upon hearing that his brother had stolen the blessing from their father Isaac. There, in Genesis 27:41, Esau seethes in anger with the words, "Let the days of *mourning* for my father be at hand (*draw near)*; then will I slay my brother Jacob." Esau's vow was not fulfilled and as the text bears out, he accompanied his brother to their father's burial. Yet the notion of death "drawing near" and the words used to describe it are transformed into an eery foreshadowing of Jacob's death.

The scene itself slows down at this point and provides great detail for the activity leading to Jacob's death. The number of years he had been in Egypt are noted and then Jacob calls Joseph into his presence. Despite the assurance from God that the people Israel will be redeemed from Egypt, Jacob exacts a pledge from his son Joseph that he will not be buried in Egypt, but rather will be carried off to the Land of Israel for burial with the others at Machpelah. The vow made, Jacob (here called Israel in the text) "bowed down upon the bed's head." This strange detail will trigger midrashic speculation as to its meaning and serve as one of the rare times that Leah gains recognition in these death-bed myths of the Bible.

Jacob becomes ill and uses the last bit of his energy to bless first his grandsons, Menasseh and Ephraim. Then, before gathering his own children for their final blessings in Genesis 49:1, Jacob says, "Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall befall you in the end of days," causing nary a wink from his sons, but

alarming the rabbis greatly that Jacob was prepared to reveal the time of the messiah's arrival! After blessing each of his sons, he recounts for them the vow he made with Joseph and charges each of them to see that he is indeed buried at Machpelah. In what amounts to a small lesson in family history, Jacob explains not only who is buried in Machpelah, but adds how it was acquired by Abraham in the first place. Absent from this sequence is the recounting of the burial of Rachel; but that rendering is given by Jacob during his earlier charge to Joseph in Genesis 48:7. Having made sure that his children knew they had a right to the cave in which their father was to be buried, Jacob finally dies--in a similar manner to the way in which Abraham and Isaac died, except for one additional detail: "And when Jacob made an end of charging his sons *he gathered up his feet into the bed,* and expired, and was gathered unto his people."[60]

Joseph falls upon his dead father and weeps at his passing. He then commands his Egyptian servants to embalm Jacob so that his body may be preserved for the trip back to Canaan for burial.[61] The text notes that the embalming ritual took forty days and that the Egyptians mourned Joseph for seventy days.[62] Joseph then attends to the burial of his father by requesting the favor of leaving Egypt in order to inter Jacob. Interestingly enough, Joseph takes the liberty to change the words of his father's charge

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[60]Genesis 49:33.

[61]Sarna, *Understanding Genesis,* p. 226. Sarna points out that the mummification of Jacob and Joseph lack any attention to religious detail with which the Egyptians practiced this ritual, calling their embalming a "practical measure."

[62]Speiser, p. 377, notes: "The period of mourning that follows corresponds in round figures to the seventy-two days that were reserved for the pharaohs themselves."

by claiming that Jacob said he had dug a grave for himself in Canaan.[63] Pharaoh grants Joseph's wish and with a detail that will be crucial to the midrashic understanding of these events, the Bible recounts not only who went on the trip to Canaan but the order in which they traveled and returned. Only in the land of Canaan, at the threshing floor of Atad, does Joseph observe the Jewish mourning ritual of seven days--although even this is mistaken by Canaanite observers as an Egyptian funeral. This "error" on behalf of the Canaanites--whether it was because of the way Joseph and his brothers were dressed or because they seem to have been outnumbered by the Egyptians who were also there to honor Joseph--provides an opportunity for the Biblical author to explain the place name Abel-Mizraim as a place of mourning to the Egyptians.[64]

Upon the return to Egypt, Joseph's brothers fall into fear that with their father gone, Joseph will now exact revenge upon them for their earlier deeds. They even put words into the mouth of their deceased father in order to save themselves by claiming that Jacob had asked Joseph to forgive his brothers all that they had done.[65] Moved to tears by the liberal retelling of the tale, Joseph is magnamonious in reconciling with his brothers who ironically refer to themselves as Joseph's bondmen; God, he explains, meant for all that had happened to be for the good. With promises of sustenance and

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[63]Genesis 50:5: "My father made me swear, saying: Lo, I die; in my grave which I have digged for me in the land of Canaan, there shalt thou bury me."

[64]Genesis 50:10-11.

[65]Genesis 50:17: "Forgive, I pray thee now, the transgression of thy brethren, and their sin, for that they did unto thee evil."

comfort for their successful younger brother, Joseph and the family reconciles, ever so briefly, before their enslavement begins.

8. Joseph The relative brevity of Joseph's death scene in Genesis 50: 24-26 brings Genesis to a close and bridges a narrative sequence that moves with equal speed from prosperity to the degradation of servitude at the beginning of Exodus. His life span was one hundred and ten years, considered to be the ideal life span for an Egyptian.[66] Lest Joseph be understood as an *Egyptian* hero, subsequent readings will be concerned with the *Jewish* meaning of his life span. The ever fortunate Joseph sees children of the third generation "upon his knees" before dying and, like his father, charges his brothers with the promise of their own redemption: "I die; but God will surely remember you, and bring you up out of this land which He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."[67] Having established the requisite formula for family lineage, linking himself (and not one of his brothers) with the Patriarchal line, Joseph exacts an oath from his brothers to carry his bones out of Egypt when the time of their liberation arrives.[68] They are words that will be used again by Moses in Exodus 13:19 as the

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[66]Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, p. 226.

[67]Genesis 50:24.

[68]Genesis 50:25: "And Joseph took an oath of the children of Israel, saying, 'God will surely remember you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence." The passage from Exodus 13:19 reads, "And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him; for he had straitly sworn the children of Israel, saying, 'God will surely remember you, and you shall carry up my bones away hence with you." The additional words *with you,* found in Moses' account but not in Joseph's original pledge, become a puzzle to which the rabbis will offer a brilliant solution.

Israelites escape Egypt and prepare to cross the Red Sea. After the pledge has been made, Joseph's years are recounted a second time and the book of Genesis ends with the phrase that Joseph was embalmed and put in a coffin in Egypt. His burial is only slightly less mysterious than the burial of Moses. In Deuteronomy, the text is quite explicit that no one knows the burial place of Moses *to this day*.[69] Joseph's burial place is also not known and in the midrash, it will require a miracle to find his casket in order to fulfill the vow he had exacted from his brothers.

The previous deaths all occurred in the book of Genesis. There, in that first book of the Torah, the formative family myths are laid out in great detail. The reader is able to trace the lives--from birth to death--of most of these as figures and, in spite of the relatively few words used to describe a person's death, one may still discern the effect of the enormity of that event unfolding in the lives of those surviving. The birth and development of the Jewish people, traced throughout Genesis, begins humbly with Abraham and Sarah and ends a definitive stage of their development as a larger, more established clan in the land of Egypt. With the book of Exodus, the patriarchal and matriarchal traditions come to something of an end and a different narrative takes precedence, namely that relating to the Jewish people and their leader Moses. Thus we find great distance between the death of Joseph and the next major figure to die--Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron. Indeed, it is not until Numbers 20--more than two and one half entire books later--that the death of a major Biblical figure is

[69]Deuteronomy 34:6.

mentioned. The benevolence bestowed upon an existing generation because of their ability to remember their ancestral roots is read into the death accounts of Miriam, Aaron and Moses. These three figures, though removed from the Genesis narrative by a considerable span of time, are brought back into the family narrative by clever word plays and a careful reading of each story's setting by subsequent generations of readers.

9. Miriam Miriam's death is explained in Numbers 20:1 so quickly as to almost be forgotten. But the details in the text itself will reveal far more about her death than the simple statement offered by the Bible itself: "And the children of Israel, even the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month; and the people abode in Kadesh; and Miriam died there, and was buried there." No qualitative words are offered as would indicate how or why Miriam died at that time. At best the reader is left with an account hidden in the very words of the story itself. And so certain quirks of the text become integral to its understanding. The wilderness of Zin and Kadesh will say something to the reader about the circumstances of Miriam's death, as will the doubling of the word "there" or *sham*. Further, the verse following the description of her death in which the congregation discovers that it lacks water will trigger a variety of legends regarding Miriam's particular merit in keeping the children of Israel well hydrated. Her death in the month of Nisan, the first month, will further serve the rabbis in arguing that Miriam's death is in close proximity to the anniversary of Israel's redemption from Egypt. A final contextual aid in understanding this scene will be its proximity to the scene describing an elaborate exercise of ritual purity with

the ashes of the Red Heifer in chapter 19.

Other textual hints that relate to Miriam's death are found in Numbers 12, where Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses and Miriam is punished with leprosy. Leaving aside the question as to why Miriam was punished for speaking against Moses and Aaron was not, Aaron's prayer to Moses and God for healing Miriam leaves some hint as to how the rabbis may understand her death. "Let her not, I pray," cries Aaron in Numbers 12:12, "*be as one dead*, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he cometh out of his mother's womb." God answers Moses' prayer and Miriam is separated from the congregation for seven days, a prescriptive requirement for treating the state of impurity from the leprosy. Only upon her return does the congregation continue their journey. This story is retold again in Deuteronomy 24:8-9 as a warning against the punishment of leprosy, leaving us with some clues as to why Aaron may not have been punished: "Take heed in the plague of leprosy, that thou observe diligently, *and do according to all that the priests, the Levites shall teach you; as I commanded them, so ye shall do.* Remember what the Lord thy God did unto Miriam, by the way as we came forth out of Egypt." It may be possible to conclude that since Aaron fell into the priestly category, he, too, could not have been punished with the leprosy![70] This reading is born out in Rashi's explanation of the verse, "Let her not be as one who is dead." Rashi states that because the leprous fall into the legal category of the dead, a

[70]This rendering conforms with the rabbinic understanding of the verse, where the blind, the leprous and the infertile fall under the technical category of the dead. Priestly contact with them would be forbidden. I thank S. David Sperling for this insight.

priest who is a relative certainly cannot come into contact with Miriam--and at this stage in the people's development, all priests are relatives of Miriam. Another reading suggests the possibility that because the text states *va't'daber Miriam v'Aharon*--that is the verb *t'daber* (in the feminine singular) referring only to Miriam--only Miriam was culpable for punishment. In any case, although Miriam does not die at this point, these verses will provide ample background for the midrashic discussion regarding her death.

10. Aaron Aaron's death, as befits a member of the priestly caste, is suffused with ritual. The end of his life is announced by God to both Moses and Aaron, unlike any of the other deaths we have examined. The sequence occurs in Numbers 20:22-29 with precise, concise detail, Aaron dies. But before he does so, the priestly vestments are conferred upon his son Eleazar. Aaron and Moses are told that Aaron will *be gathered unto his people* and that he will not enter the Land of Israel because of the rebellion against God at the waters of Meribah. Moses, Aaron and Eleazar ascend Mount Hor before the eyes of the people, at God's command, and Aaron is stripped of the priestly garments which are then put onto Eleazer. The power of the priesthood thus transferred, Aaron then "breathes his last," that is, he dies. When Moses and Eleazar descend--with Eleazar dressed in his father's clothing--the people see that Aaron has died. The text then indicates that "all the house of Israel cried for Aaron for thirty days." This will be compared to the people's reaction to Moses' death in Deuteronomy 34:8, where "the children of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days," and stands as proof for how beloved Aaron was to the people. For when Aaron died,

all the house of Israel--the men, women and children--wept; but when Moses died, only *b'nei Yisrael--the men of Israel*--wept.[71]

It is only with a later telling of Aaron's death that the reader obtains more details about his end. Numbers 33:38 explains that Aaron, the priest, ascended Mount Hor and died there *according to the word--or mouth--of God.* This crucial addition will serve, along with a similar statement about Moses' death, as rabbinic proof for the assertion that Moses, Aaron and Miriam all died by the kiss of God. However, at the Biblical level of understanding, the phrase merely means that Aaron had climbed the mount *as God had commanded him*. At the interpretive level in the midrash certain narrative similarities and differences will serve to highlight the sense of sibling rivalry and loving, brotherly care as these two brothers face their certain death.

11. **Moses** Moses is the last figure to be examined in this study. His central place in the Torah combined with the exalted role he plays in the ensuing rabbinic tradition, make Moses' death a worthy study of investigation alone. And yet, the scenes describing his death, when compared to the other figures, are helpful in gaining insight into the Biblical and rabbinic conception of death. But his death does stand out. Unlike all other deaths surveyed, Moses' death and burial are deliberately cast in a mysterious light. Upon dying he receives the name *Ish Elohim*--Man of God--conferring upon Moses a status unmatched by any of his predecessors in the Torah

[71]See, for example, *Avot d'Rabbi Natan*, B, 25.

narrative. And although Joseph's exact burial is also not mentioned, the text in Deuteronomy regarding Moses' burial is explicit in stating, "[A]nd no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day."[72]

Moses, like Jacob, has a keen awareness that he is to die.[73] He thus spends the last section of Deuteronomy in preparation for his death by issuing a series of rebukes and blessings to the people and watching over an orderly transition of power to Joshua. Small hints pervade the early sections of Deuteronomy as well--turns of phrase or significant dates--that will clue the rabbis into Moses' impending departure. The book opens with the note that "in the fortieth year" Moses began to speak to the children of Israel of "all that the Lord had given him commanding unto them."[74] The number forty, signifying a complete Biblical generation, and the phrase "all that the Lord had given," come to serve as hints in the interpretive tradition that Moses himself was aware that the end was near, making much of the entire Book of Deuteronomy something akin to a farewell speech to his people.

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[72]Deuteronomy 34:6 reads fully, "And he was buried in the valley in the land of Moab over against Beth-peor; and no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day." Compare this to Joseph's burial in Genesis 50:26: "So Joseph died, being a hundred and ten years old. And they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt."

[73]See, for example, Numbers 27:12ff, where Moses is told that he will be *gathered to his kin*, like Aaron, for the rebellion in the wilderness of Zin.

[74]Deuteronomy 1:3 On the significance of the use of the number forty at this juncture, Martin Buber wrote that "we can still feel in the polished rhetoric of the book something of the closing period of the wanderings, of the hour of leave-taking after a long journey together." *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1946, 1988.) p. 200.

Exact mention of his own death comes in Deuteronomy 31:2, where Moses tells the people, "'I am a hundred and twenty years old this day; I can no more go out and come in; and the Lord hath said unto me: Thou shalt not go over this Jordan.'" With words of encouragement, Moses seeks to embolden Joshua with the task of leadership. With the responsibilities of the priesthood having been passed on through Aaron's line, the political and legal realm had been passed on through Joshua. It should be noted that no direct heir of Moses received power; his own children are noticeably absent from this transfer of power. After delivering to the people a set of the law, God finally addresses Moses directly on this matter with the words used to describe Jacob's death, "'Behold, thy days approach that thou must die.'"[75] Moses and Joshua go to the tent of meeting and there God addresses Moses about what will befall Israel in the future. Moses himself learns that he will "sleep with his fathers," a certain textual irritant for the reader, since it is known that Moses is *not* buried at Machpelah.[76] Moses then speaks the words of the Biblical song *Ha'azinu* to the people, before being commanded by God in Deuteronomy 32:48-52 to ascend Mount Nebo and die there in a manner similar to the way that his brother Aaron had died. Moses is again reminded by God why neither he nor Aaron were allowed to enter the Land of Israel and thereafter blesses the children of Israel one last time before his actual death. Moses climbs Mount Nebo, surveys the entire land that God promised to his people, and there dies *al pi adonai*--at

[75]Deuteronomy 31:14.

[76]Deuteronomy 31:16.

the word (or mouth) of the Lord.[77] Just as Aaron before him (and by later rabbinic interpretation, Miriam), Moses dies by the mouth, by the kiss of God. The text states explicitly that Moses was buried, but the fact that it is not stated *who* buried him nor does it reveal the exact place of burial, leaves open the opportunity for the classic interpretation that Moses' greatness merited none other than God attending to his burial.[78] Following his death, in the last few verses of the book, the text eulogizes Moses, by counting the years of his life (one hundred and twenty) and characterizing Moses in true, heroic fashion, as one whose "eyes never dimmed and whose natural force never abated." Moses, in the eyes of the Biblical authors, would be the exemplar of heroic force from birth to death. The children of Israel mourn Moses for thirty days and then Joshua officially takes over as the leader, newly ordained with the "spirit of wisdom" he gained as a result of Moses passing the torch to him. With the powers of prophecy passed, the Torah reminds the reader of Moses' singular qualities as a leader, prophet and man of God, that "no prophet arose in Israel like Moses who knew God face to face."[79] The account of Moses' life and the Torah itself closes with an account of him that bespeaks the perception of his near divinity. Moses will be credited with

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[77]Deuteronomy 34:5. See also Martin Buber, *Moses,* p. 201. Buber writes, "But here as ever the Biblical text is far greater than all expansions; greater than the picture of death by the kiss of God is that of the man who has lived by the bidding of this God, and who now also perishes at His bidding."

[78]Buber, *Moses*, p. 201.

[79]Deuteronomy 34:10. See also Buber, *Moses,* p. 200: "Moses is not the first of the prophets of Israel; he stands out from that series as he does from all others; but the Prophets of Israel, who are men of the Spirit in the sense of the Word of the Spirit only, continue his work."

performing "signs and wonders" with the "mighty hand" and "great terror," terms one would ordinarily attribute to the Divine. His powers of prophecy, leadership, and wisdom unabated, even at the very end, Moses dies; but as the midrash will demonstrate, he is elevated to a new life beside God.[80]

[80]Thus, the term "went up from the plains of Moab" from Deuteronomy 34:1 will be taken to mean that Moses went up to God, his life on earth coming to a close but remaining, eternally, alive. As the *Midrash Tannaim* to Deuteronomy 34:1 will show, Moses' going up is understood to mean an elevation to heaven by heavenly angels, unlike all other mortals, who die on earth and are buried in the earth.

CHAPTER III

THE NARRATIVE TERMINOLOGY OF DEATH SCENES

If the Bible represents the first level of literary interpretation of the Jewish experience, then the midrash represents the next multi-faceted level. In the most basic sense, the midrash represents a continual commentary on the Bible. Its function, however, moves far beyond this into a realm where the Bible itself, though canonized, cannot become a static document. This is due to the infinite number of interpretations available to its readers. In the early, classical rabbinic period, these readers were the first generations of rabbis, whose task was to ensure the Bible's continued relevance and vitality by infusing the understanding of it with their *midrashic* expansions. Fulfilling what for the rabbis was the sacred task of drawing meaning from an obscure text or reading into a simple word or phrase, the midrash became a unique Jewish expression of Biblical interpretation. The midrash enlivens the Biblical text with its varied and colorful readings of words, phrases and legends derived from a Biblical prooftext. In so doing, the midrashic writer attempts to bridge the gap between the Biblical text and the questions the midrash seeks to answer. Meaning is woven from the Biblical record into a setting that breathes life into the Bible by resurrecting the canon in a new and inventive ways.[81]

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[81]Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) p. 22. "By absorbing and transforming, the textual system both establishes continuity with the past and renews itself for the future." For the earliest *modern* theory of midrash, see Isaac Heinemann's *Darkhei Aggadah* (Jerusalem: 1959). Heinemann, according to David Stern in *Parables in Midrash* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) was the first modern scholar of midrash to categorize its forms into philology and historiography in a move away from what many thought was rabbinic apologetics (*Parables in Midrash*, pp. 44-45.) For other excellent analyses of Heinemann's work in English, see Max Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind* (New York: 1952), and Boyarin's critique in *Intertextuality and*

Perhaps there is no better metaphoric way of approaching the subject of the midrash to the Torah's death scenes. An exhaustive examination of all midrash to such scenes is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, the selected passages examined will reveal much. One will discern a concerted rabbinic effort to enliven their own sense of scripture by enhancing and embellishing the written record so that imagined conversations, wishes, blessings, curses and formal acts of reconciliation can be read into the lives of the Biblical figures. This enlivening of the legends and personalities of the Biblical characters will give them an added resilience, allowing them to serve the pedagogic purpose of sustaining future generations of readers. No matter to what degree one may prepare for death, its finality leaves survivors with deeper questions as to the meaning of life and death beyond the grave. Religious expression predates more modern forms of therapeutic treatments like bereavement counselling. For the purposes of this thesis, we will examine how the Jewish interpretive tradition--with its rituals, worship and study--played a significant role in Jews' lives by providing comfort and purpose in the face of death's mystery.

One of the ways in which the midrash represents a response to the text is in its exegetical examination of words and phrases which, held under the scrutinizing lens of interpretation, point to a hidden meaning not explicit at the Biblical level. In this

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the Reading of Midrash, pp. 1-21. For other contemporary views, see Michael Fishbane's *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) and *The Garments of Torah* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). See also James Kugel's "Two Introductions to Midrash," in *Prooftexts* 3, (1983) pp. 131-155, and his introduction to *In Potiphar's House* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

chapter, we will explore some of the key terms that provided an opportunity for rabbinic elaboration. Simple descriptive terms, numbers, and even prepositions are expounded upon in great detail, providing far more detail about characters' lives and deaths than the Biblical record seems to reveal.

A. Abraham

Abraham, according to the text in Genesis 25:7-8, lived to the age of one hundred and seventy-five, and "expired (*gva*) and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years."[82] Reading his life span in the context of Psalm 37:18, which lays claim to God granting the whole hearted an eternal inheritance, Abraham is rewarded for being the "whole hearted" man God charged him to be in Genesis 17:1.[83] For example, the rabbis considered Abraham's actions toward Sarah upon her death, rising up with courage and duty in order to attend to her burial,[84] to be a clear indication of his own righteousness. "He that followeth after *righteousness and mercy*," reads Proverbs 21:21, "findeth life, prosperity and honor." The rabbis read this verse as a complement to God's description of Abraham in Genesis 18:19 as one who follows God by doing

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[82]Genesis Rabbah 44.20 notes that the term "good old age" was applied to Abraham, David and Gideon, and that only the latter did not merit such a distinction due to his idol worship in *Judges* 8:27.

[83]Genesis Rabbah 62.1 juxtaposes Psalm 37:18 ("The Lord knows the days of the *whole-hearted*; their inheritance shall be forever") and Genesis 17:1 ("'I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be thou *whole-hearted*.'")

[84]Another reading of Abraham "rising up before his dead" is found in Genesis Rabbah 58.6, where Abraham is depicted as standing in *revolt* against the Angel of Death. One can almost imagine Abraham as a bereaved spouse challenging the Angel of Death and refusing to succumb himself so soon after Sarah's passing.

"righteousness and justice," concluding that because Abraham did what was right, he merited eternal life, prosperity and honor.[85]

One clear sign of his old age, though not necessarily of any ill health, was Abraham's gray hair. This was a mark of great distinction for the Biblical and rabbinic layers of interpretation and generally was held up as another example of Abraham's righteousness.[86] Unlike Isaac and Jacob who fall sick before dying, Abraham's death is accompanied by no obvious physical sign (with the exception of his gray hair) in the text. A further problem is traced to the descriptive terms used to relate his dying--he *expired* or *breathed his last* and then died.[87] Thus, in one rendering, the term *gva* (expired) is taken to indicate some form of illness. *Genesis Rabbah* quotes R. Judah b. R. Ilai in the name of the early hasidim who taught that *gva* was a sign of stomach trouble which cleanses the righteous from sin so that their bodies may be like angels before death.[88] Although one reading may attempt to explain a cleansing illness that

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[85]Genesis Rabbah 58.9.

[86]See Genesis Rabbah 59.1 for the comparative uses made of Abraham's gray hair as a marker for righteousness. Thus Proverbs 16:31, "The hoary head is a crown of glory, it is found in the way of righteousness," is proven by Abraham through his own charitable acts. The opposite effect is explained by the accompanying legend in which Rabbi Meir enters Mamla and tells its black-haired denizens to engage in acts of righteousness in order to reach a good, old age.

[87]Genesis 25:8.

[88]In Lamentations 1:19, the term *gva* is paralleled with the hungry, giving some indication of its use as a term connoting an empty stomach.

besets Abraham before his death, another, employing the *mashal* form,[89] uses the term for "full of years" as a sign of contentment one may experience at a king's banquet. Abraham is likened to one invited to a royal banquet who, after eating his fill falls asleep, deeply satisfied.

Through careful examination of word usage, the tradition struggles with the Torah's lack of explanation for Abraham's death. For some, this gap was an opportunity to teach about Abraham's virtue with an application of metaphors--in one he is compared to a lamp which extinguishes itself; in another he is compared to a fig tree whose figs are gathered at the proper time to explain that his death occurred precisely when it should have.[90] Finding symmetry in the life and death of Abraham becomes a concern in the midrash. Thus, in one reading, his one hundred and seventy-five years are compared to Isaac's one hundred and eighty, posing the question as to why the son was able to live longer than the father. Abraham's death, in this instance, has a measure of mercy. He dies at a younger age than Isaac in order not to see his grandson Esau become an idol worshipper. Used partly to prove the sinful ways of Esau's descendents, this reading also holds God to the promise He made to Abraham in Genesis 15:15 ("thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age.") Hence Abraham is spared the indignity of seeing his progeny led astray and is

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[89]For an extensive discussion of the *mashal* form, see David Stern's *Parables in Midrash*.

[90]Genesis Rabbah 62.2. Adding to the sense that Abraham died in his proper season is the employment of the verse, "My beloved is gone down to his garden" (*Song of Songs* 6:2), which highlights the sense of ease and poetic beauty to Abraham's death.

able to die in relative peace.[91] Abraham's merit in being able to die in peace as well as the concern for God's fulfillment of that promise is read in a variant way by an earlier midrashic tradition. In the *Sifrei to Numbers*, we learn that "great is peace for even the dead need it, as it is said, 'and thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace.'"[92] This verse is elaborated upon in Genesis Rabbah, which views the doubled phrase "thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age" as holding a hidden meaning. In this reading, Abraham's going to his *fathers* in peace is an indication from God that his own father obtained a portion in the next world. And the final phrase, "thou shalt be buried in a *good old age"* is read not as *se'vah* (old age, gray headed) but as *shuvah (repentance)*. The variant reading allows for the insertion of the legend that Ishmael returned to his father in repentance and that, before dying, Abraham was able to witness his first son's attempt at making peace.[93]

At times a single letter can lead to a new understanding of the meaning behind Abraham's death.[94] Abraham is informed that he not only will be spared witnessing

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[91]Genesis Rabbah 63.12. Note the final line of the prooftext, where God quotes Psalm 63:4 in fulfilling His promise to Abraham, "For Thy lovingkindness is better than life," rendering Abraham's passing a benevolent and Divine act of mercy.

[92]*Sifrei Bamidbar, Piska* 42.

[93]Genesis Rabbah 30.4 and 38.12.

[94]The use of a *lamed* or a *bet* before the word *shalom* can also be of significance. See B.T. *Brachot* 64a, where the phrase *b'shalom* is employed when taking leave of the dead, but *l'shalom* is used when taking leave of the living. Thus, God's using the term *b'shalom--in peace*--with Abraham in Genesis 15:15 serves as a clear indicator of Abraham's death and proper usage of the term! Parallel passages are found in B.T. *Perek Hashalom* 1, and B.T. *Moed Katan* 29a.

Esau's actions, he will escape bondage. Recall that in Genesis 15:14, God informs Abraham that although Abraham's seed will be enslaved "afterward shall they come out with great substance." The rabbis in this instance provide a meticulous reading of the verse and notice that "afterward" is written *acharei*, with a *yod* at the end. Since *yod* also represents the numerical value of ten, the rabbis here find an illusion to the Ten Plagues which will eventually redeem the Children of Israel from Egypt, providing additional assurance to Abraham of his descendents' ultimate redemption.[95]

B. Sarah

Sarah's death occurs with great suddenness in the text. Her years are counted in the famous passage describing her beauty at one hundred like one who is twenty and her virtue at twenty like one who is seven. And like Abraham, Sarah's righteousness and her eternal reward for it are mentioned, using the same text from Psalms 37:18 as proof.[96] The number one hundred and twenty-seven merits attention in another midrash, where Rabbi Akiba correlates Esther's reign over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces (Esther 9:30) with the years of Sarah's life.[97]

The terminology of the narrative serves as a vehicle for explaining more about Sarah's life and death. *Seder Olam Rabbah* uses her death as an opportunity to prove that

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[95]Genesis Rabbah 44.20.

[96]Genesis Rabbah 58.1. An alternate reading is that at the age of twenty she was at the age of seven in beauty and at the age of one hundred she was at twenty in sin.

[97]Genesis Rabbah 58.3.

Sarah possessed another name--Yiscah. This name appears in Genesis 11:29 and is understood by later commentators such as Rashi and Ibn Ezra as descriptive terms for Sarah, connoting beauty or one skilled in prophecy.[98] A set of terms that is used in order to further explain Sarah's virtuous qualities are found in *Numbers Rabbah*, where the value of Sarah's life (and by implication, the sacrifice of her death) is compared to the offerings made after the establishment of the Tabernacle in Numbers 7:79.[99]

There are two sets of terms which help explain why Sarah died. One depicts the cause of Sarah's death to be Divine judgement, meted out against her for declaring her own sin to be upon her husband Abraham. Using as their pretext the notion that one who invokes the judgement of heaven against his fellow man brings punishment upon himself first, the rabbis draw a connection between Sarah's anguished statement to Abraham in Genesis 16:5 at knowing that Hagar has conceived ("My wrong be upon thee") with Genesis 23:2 ("and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.") A more sympathetic portrayal of Sarah's death hinges upon the same passage from Genesis 23:2 where the textual question is: from where did Abraham come to mourn Sarah? The answer provides an opportunity to explain that Abraham came from

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[98]*Seder Olam Rabbah* 66. Sarah's gift of prophecy is traced back to Genesis 21:12, where God tells Abraham "in all that Sarah saith unto thee, hearken unto her voice" because Isaac will inherit the family line just as Sarah predicted. See also B.T. *Sanhedrin* 69b and Genesis Rabbah 38.14.

[99]Numbers Rabbah 14.11. The dish (*ka'arah*) is compared to Sarah who was barren (*a'karah*) but eventually the first (*ikar*) Matriarch of the Jewish people. The silver dish in Numbers 7:79 weighed 130 shekels, just slightly more than Sarah's 127 years.

Moriah and that Sarah had actually died from the shock of knowing that Abraham had attempted to sacrifice her only child.[100]

C. Isaac

Much of the terminology regarding Isaac's death concerns itself with citing Esau's behavior as its principle cause. Genesis 26:35 attributes to Isaac and Rebecca a "bitterness of spirit" because of Esau's acquisition of Judith, the Hittite, and according to R. Joshua b. Levi, this marriage was cause for the Holy Spirit to depart from Isaac.[101] Perhaps one basis of this midrash can be found in the proximity of circumstances; afterall, in the chapter immediately following this "bitterness of spirit" which had befallen Isaac, we learn that Isaac was old and blind. The Biblical text in Genesis 27, therefore, constitutes Isaac's death-bed scene, a moment filled with meaning in the midrash. Here the rabbis search for answers to the various puzzles in the Biblical layer. Permeating the rabbinic level of interpretation is the Isaac who was placed on the altar by his father as well as the blind Isaac, who strained to see in the last dramatic moments of his life.

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[100]Genesis Rabbah 58.5 and Leviticus Rabbah 20.2. The Theodor-Albeck commentary is helpful in pointing the reader toward variant legends which connect the circumstances of Sarah's death with the sacrifice of Isaac. See Legends of the Palestinian Amoraim II, 300 and 333. Whereas in the earlier midrashim it is Isaac who returns from Moriah to inform his mother of the attempted sacrifice, in later compilations (Midrash *Tanhuma* and *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer*), it is Satan who tells Sarah.

[101]Genesis Rabbah 65.4.

Calling Esau to his side in Genesis 27:2, Isaac explains "Behold now, I am old, I know not the day of my death." With no clear marker of illness, Isaac's sense of death concerned the rabbis. Afterall, the text is quite clear that Isaac was blind but not sick. Thus, with careful calculation, the midrash posits that when a person comes to within five years of his parents age at death, he himself must fear death.[102] With the exception of this tradition, the central focus on key terms in the interpretation of Isaac's death is his blindness.

1. Blindness for Taking Gifts From Esau

One tradition held that Isaac went blind as a punishment for taking gifts from Esau.[103] In the Biblical context, this may not seem to be such an egregious error. But once this idea of Jacob and Esau bringing food to their dying father reaches the rabbinic level, it becomes loaded with allusions to the prohibition of pagan worship patterns of feeding the dead. In place of such a system will be the sacrificial system and later rabbinic extrapolations, namely prayer and good deeds. In *Genesis Rabbah* 65.5, for example, there is the claim that Isaac went blind because he took gifts from Esau (considered an idol worshipper as noted above)[104]. An earlier interpretation, from *Midrash Tannaim*,

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[102]Genesis Rabbah 65.12. In this case, Isaac was within five years of Sarah at the age of her death.

[103]Genesis 27:31. The food Isaac accepts from Esau is understood by the rabbis in the broader sense of accepting gifts from his son.

[104]In this particular reading, Isaiah 5:22-23 is employed to emphasize God's distaste for tainted sacrifices, in this case, excessive use of wine: "Woe unto him that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink; that justify the wicked for a reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him." With Isaiah's condemnation of

juxtaposes the acts of feeding Isaac, feeding God, and the mitzvah of feeding the poor.[105] Thus Isaac blesses Jacob (who is posing as Esau) by invoking God to reward Israel with the abundance of earth, while at the same time being served by the nations who will recognize Israel's exalted position.[106] And how will Israel thank God for their bounty? As long as Israel provides for the poor, God will regard His people as providing Him with the proper sacrifices. In a brilliant doubling of prooftexts, God *proves* the argument by arguing that the verse, "My food which is presented unto Me for offerings made by fire" (Numbers 28:2) is really a reference to the mitzvah of feeding the poor. And the prooftext for *that* claim is the recontextualized understanding of Song of Songs 5:2, where the phrase "my sister, my bride" is understood to mean "my sister, my well-fed one."

We began with Jacob and Esau attempting to feed their father Isaac on his death-bed. Aware of the Biblical prohibition against impure offerings, the rabbis attempt to recontextualize this feeding ritual into their normative mitzvah system where the feeding of Isaac comes to symbolically represent Israel's duty to care for the poor. The midrash on Isaac's death, in this reading, has moved far afield of informing its audience of what happened when Isaac died. However, the feeding ritual provides a unique

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excessive drink, it is possible that the rabbis use Esau, a symbol of Rome, to condemn the bachanalian practices in Greco-Roman culture.

[105]*Midrash Tannaim* to Deuteronomy 15:9, Hoffmann, ed. (Berlin: 1908).

[106]Genesis 27:28-29 reads: "So God give thee of the dew of heaven and of the fat places of the earth and plenty of corn and wine. Let peoples serve thee, and nations bow down to thee. Be lord over thy brethren and let thy mother's sons bow down to thee."

opportunity to channel a practice into what the rabbis considered to be an acceptable worship system.

2. Blindness as a Symbol of Suffering and the Akedah

There are other explanations for Isaac's blindness before death. In a variety of settings, Isaac's blindness is depicted as a necessary form of suffering that either paves the way for Jacob to receive the blessing, protects Isaac from the shame of Esau's actions or demonstrates Isaac's virtue.[107] The most complex, intertextual explanations for the blindness trace it back to the scene of the binding on Mount Moriah. There atop the altar, the tradition holds, Isaac attempted to look directly upon God's presence. Using Exodus 33:20 ("for man shall not see Me and live") as a basis for God's reasoning, the Divine contemplates killing Isaac for this sin, but spares him out of concern for the undue suffering it would cause his father, Abraham. Another reading explains that Isaac went blind on the altar because angels wept at the spectacle of his sacrifice and their tears dripped into his eyes, blinding him.[108]

With the exception of the reading where Isaac's blindness is attributed to his own

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[107]Genesis Rabbah 65.8-9. Just as Abraham introduced old age before death, Isaac introduced the notion of suffering. The midrash continues with the explanation that Jacob introduced illness and that Hezekiah introduced repeated illness that brings on repentance before dying. Philo's reading of Isaac as a model of suffering is seen in his *De Sacrificiis Abelis et Cain, II 5-7.* This position is also cogently explained by Wolfson in *Philo*, Vol. I, pp. 402-404.

[108]Genesis Rabbah 65.10. The angels' tears are derived from Isaiah 33:7, "Behold, their valiant ones cry without; the ambassadors of peace weep bitterly."

actions, there is a great measure of mercy to this aspect of his death scene. The other force driving the terminological exploration of the scene centers upon the competition between Jacob and Esau for their father's blessing. In continuing to read Esau out of the Jewish tradition as the Bible clearly had done, the rabbis transformed him into the evil twin who would at times represent Jacob's worst dimensions, but more often would represent the ancestor of the many evil nations that would rise up against Israel.[109] Despite the portrayals of Esau as an evil man, one set of terms triggered a different response.[110] After hearing from his mother Rebecca what needs to be done in order to pull off the ruse of obtaining the blessing from Isaac, Jacob, in Genesis 27:14, turns to do as his mother said. "And he went, and fetched, and brought them to his mother; and his mother made savory food, such as his father loved." Each of the first three verbs in this series begin with the letters *vav* and *yod*, spelling the Hebrew *oy* or woe. This hint, found in the very grammar of Jacob's actions, led the rabbis to conclude that pangs of conscience were with Jacob as he tricked his brother *for the second time* into giving away the rights of inheritance. It was not with joy that he went about the task of tricking his brother, but it was with constraint, with his head bowed down, and weeping. The pained drama of the death-scene is brought to bear heavily on all those who appear at times to be waiting for Isaac to die.

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[109]As an example of Esau's own representation of evil, see Genesis Rabbah 65.22 which attributes the smell of Eden to Jacob, but the smell of Gehenna to Esau. In Genesis Rabbah 67.8, God examines Esau's heart in saying, "Let the days of mourning for my father be at hand" (Gen. 27:41) and uncovers a plot to have Ishmael kill his own father. In revenge, Esau will kill Ishmael and inherit the family line.

[110]Genesis Rabbah 65.12.

D. Rebecca

Rebecca's death, as discussed above, is not mentioned in the Torah. The first explicit indication of her death is in Genesis 49:31, where the text marks her burial at Machpelah. However, with their creativity and some knowledge of Greek, the rabbis find a way to explain her passing. The key set of terms in this case is found in Genesis 35:8-9--"And Deborah, Rebecca's nurse, died and she was buried below Beth-el under the oak; and the name of it was called Allon-bacuth. And God appeared unto Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him." R. Samuel b. Nahman reads the word *allon* not as Hebrew for oak, but rather in Greek, meaning "another," providing the first hint that Rebecca died along with Deborah.[111] Other readings see the word *bacuth* as a plural form, with the subsequent explanation that while Jacob was crying over Deborah, news reached him that his mother had died. Suddenly the proximity of God blessing Jacob in the next verse is understood in a different context, where God greets Jacob with the blessing for mourners.[112]

E. Rachel

The two terms that serve as impetus for the creation of midrash in the case of Rachel's death are the name she ascribes to Benjamin upon her death (Ben-oni) and the fact that

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[111]Genesis Rabbah 81.5.

[112]Ibid. See also Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7.2 (3) and *Midrash Tanhuma*, Buber, Parshat Chaye Sarah, 58b. In the version from *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, the particular midrash of God visiting Jacob in mourning comes as one of a whole series of benevolent acts that God performs--from adorning the bride to blessing the bridegroom; from visiting the sick to burying the dead; and in our example, to comforting those in mourning.

she dies in childbirth. Hers is the only death in the Torah that one reads of as occurring in the *present tense*. Philo, whose interpretations represent an early level of exegesis, claims Rachel's name for Benjamin is a symbol of her virtuous suffering. He even credits Rachel with naming her son "most completely in accordance with nature" since Ben-oni, or *son of my sorrow* represents Rachel's inner being. Jacob's name for their second son--Benjamin, or *son of my days* according to Philo--is more indicative of the "outward sense...and vain glory."[113]

Less concerned with Rachel's virtue but more with the grammar of the Biblical description, the *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael* points to the difference between the words dead and dying (in the Hebrew feminine, the term *metah* could be understood in the past or present tense.) Based on their similar form, the exact meaning would have to be determined by literary context.[114] Thus, one concludes that Rachel must have been *dying* while she named Benjamin, an assertion that is proven by the very name she chose for him.[115] The difficulty of Rachel's delivery is taken up in the Genesis Rabbah, where it is explained that two others had difficulty in childbirth.[116] And finally, as an

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[113]Philo, "On the Change of Names," XV 92.

[114]*Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael*, Massekhet d'Vavayehi, p. 113. See also *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai* to Exodus 14:30, p. 69.

[115]Ibid.

[116]Genesis Rabbah 82.7. See I Samuel 4:19-22, where Pinchas' wife has difficulty delivering Ichabod. See also II Samuel 3:5 and 6:23, where the rabbis identify Michal with Eglah and read the verse "And Michal the daughter of Saul had no child *unto* the day of her death" as meaning that she had no child until her death in childbirth. Playing on the word *Eglah* or calf, the R. Judah continued, 'She cried like a calf and then died."

example of the way in which each word is scrutinized for its meaning in the text, the superfluous words *this* and *also* from Genesis 35:17, "Fear not for *this also* is a son for thee," are understood to signify the birth of one or two twin sisters to Benjamin.[117] Thus Rachel's death in childbirth is cast in a new, albeit more sorrowful light, as a result of her giving birth to not only Benjamin, but possibly to a set of twins as well. Knowing all too well of her husband's rivalry with his own twin, one wonders at the trepidation that Rachel briefly must have felt at the thought of mothering twins who had the chance of resembling Jacob and Esau.

F. Jacob

As we have thus far seen, one's death may invoke a seemingly mundane grammatical question that can lead to grander lesson binding generations of readers. The rabbinic concern for the deep meaning of simple terms is found in Jacob's death scenes as well. In the first case, we notice what the rabbis are able to do with a simple conjunctive phrase.

Like Moses after him, Jacob will bless the children of Israel and commence doing so with the narrative introduction to Genesis 49:28 *v'zot asher diber lahem*--"and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them." The *Sifrei Deuteronomy* links Jacob's words *v'zot* and Moses' words *v'zot ha'brachah* (spoken before his death in Deuteronomy 33:1), arguing that Moses finished the work that Jacob had started, thus

[117]Genesis Rabbah 82.8.

fortifying Israel with the blessing of continuity that spanned generations.[118] In another scriptural link between terms, the midrash understands the description of Jacob's death in Genesis 49:33 ("And when Jacob made an end (*va'y'chal*) of charging his sons,") as evoking the language of the creation narrative which employs the same verb (*va'y'chal* in Genesis 2:2) to describe the end of God's work in forming the universe. Jacob's death, with the aid of a single verb and conjunction, is transformed into a primordial moment, resonating backward and forward in time.

G. Miriam

Proximity of texts plays a vital role in determining hidden meaning with Miriam's death. Her death occurs in Numbers 20:1, immediately after the details of the Red Heifer are given. How does the tradition explain this proximity? According to R. Ammi in B.T. *Moed Katan* 28a, "Even as the Red Heifer afforded atonement (by the ritual use of its ashes), so does the death of the righteous afford atonement (for the living they have left behind.) In a related passage in *Moed Katan*, R. Eleazar will argue that Aaron dies so closely to being stripped of the priestly vestments for a similar reason--both Aaron and the priestly vestments afford atonement. In keeping with this paradigm of proximity is the tradition that the miraculous well, which gave Israel water in its journey through the desert, disappeared when Miriam died.[119] There are, in fact,

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[118]*Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piska 342*, Finkelstein, ed. (Berlin: 1939).

[119]This is attested in a variety of sources: Seder Olam Rabbah 9; Numbers Rabbah 1.2; and Song of Songs Rabbah 1.2.

two markers that the rabbis use in advancing this theory. One has already been stated, namely the proximity of Miriam's death to the following section in which the Israelites immediately begin complaining that they lack water.[120] Another marker is the word *sham*--there--"and Miriam died *there* and was buried *there*." Its doubling in Numbers 20:1 serves as an indicator that Miriam died there--*sham*--at the well which existed only on her merit. In yet another reading, the doubled *sham* leads to the inference that because there was a superfluous *there* in the depiction of Moses' death in Deuteronomy 34:5 ("Moses the servant of the Lord died *there* in the land of Moab, according to the word (or mouth) of the Lord,") that just as Moses died by the kiss of God, so, too, did Miriam die by the kiss of God. For matters of propriety, the text omits this detail.[121]

But in *Avot d'Rabbi Natan* we encounter an argument between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua over the desert generation's merit in entering the World to Come. Again, the textual irritant is the seemingly superfluous word "there," in Numbers 20:1. The word itself is brought by Eliezer to prove that the generation which died in the wilderness will not be resurrected; Joshua, however, argues that when the word *sham* is used in connection to the righteous, resurrection will indeed occur--not only for Miriam but for her brothers as well as the Patriarchs and Matriarchs.[122]

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[120]Numbers 20:2, "And there was no water for the congregation and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron."

[121]B.T. *Moed Katan* 28a.

[122]*Avot d'Rabbi Natan*, A, Chapter 36.

H. Aaron

1. Doubled Terms and Proximity

The term *sham* surfaces in the narrative of Aaron and like Miriam's tale, provides additional meaning to what on the surface level is a simple, prepositional detail. Once again, the doubling of the term *sham*--found in Deuteronomy 10:6 ("there Aaron died and there he was buried")--helps solve the puzzle of the placing of Aaron's death and burial. Thus, the Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael teaches that Aaron died on Mount Hor, but was carried back eight stations in the wilderness to be buried in Moserah.[123] It is interesting to note that Rashi's explanation for the appearance of this doubled term in Deuteronomy 10:6, so close to Moses' reproof of Israel over the second set of tablets, is to remind Israel that the death of the righteous is as grievous to God as the day on which the tablets were broken. Proximity figures again in the narrative with the comment that upon Aaron's death, the protective Cloud of Glory departs, exposing Israel to attack from the Canaanites in Numbers 21.[124]

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[123]*Mehkilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Massekhta d'Vayasa, Perek 1.* Here the comparison is made between Deuteronomy 10:6, Numbers 33:31-38, and Aaron's death sequence in Numbers 20:22-29. In Numbers Rabbah *19.16,* Israel's travel from Kadesh (Numbers 20:22) is read as a distancing from *holiness*, and thus the death of Aaron is read in reference to Israel's unholy alliance with Edom (Numbers 20:14ff).

[124]*Seder Olam Rabbah, Chapter Nine.* See also *Numbers Rabbah 19.16*, where it is noted that although the Cloud of Glory would level mountains and raise valleys, making travel easier for the Israelites, it left three mountains standing--Mount Sinai for God's presence, Mount Nebo for Moses' burial, and Mount Hor for Aaron's burial.

2. Mount Hor

Aaron died on Mount Hor (a doubled term of sorts), yielding more response from the tradition. Philo bases his reading on the Septuagint accounts of the text, where Hor is translated as Ur, that is "light." Philo's rendering is founded on the Exodus 17:12 account of the war with Amalek, where Aaron and Hur supported Moses' hands during battle: "For since the actions of the wicked man are like the wind and weightless, those of the wise man, on the other hand, are heavy and immovable and not easily shaken; therefore, his hands are held up by Aaron, who is reason, or by Ur, who is light."[125] Philo then concludes that, "On this account also, when Aaron dies, that is to say, when truth is completely asserted, he ascends up to Ur, that is to say, Light; for the proper end of reason is truth, which is more visible than any light, and to it, reason is always striving to come."[126]

3. All the Congregation

Upon seeing that Aaron had died, Numbers 20:29 relates that "all the congregation" wept for thirty days, "even all the house of Israel." This statement is compared to Israel's reaction to Moses' death in Deuteronomy 34:8, where it is stated that *b'nei yisrael--the sons of Israel*--wept. This comparison becomes an opportunity to extol

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[125]Philo, Legum Allegoriae III, XV. 45.

[126]Ibid.

Aaron's virtues, most notably his peace-making abilities.[127]

I. Moses

As one can well imagine, Moses' death occupies the imagination of the rabbis more than any other Biblical figure. His centrality to the Biblical narrative and his honorific membership in rabbinic society as the prototypical rabbi (Moshe Rabbenu) lend power to the detail one discerns in the midrash surrounding his death.

1. And he was buried there

The word "there" surfaces again in Moses' death-scene.[128] The *Sifrei Deuteronomy* offers at least three explanations. One details the physical distance between Moses and the encampments, noting that because Moses went off to die alone, Israel learned of his death "there" from the voice of God which traveled to the various encampments, informing people of Moses' death.[129] In another instance, the word "there" points to the Cave of Machpelah, proving, in effect, that although Moses' burial place remains a mystery in Deuteronomy, there is a hint of his having joined his ancestors via a tunnel

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[127]*Avot d'Rabbi Natan, Nusach B.* 24-25. In Numbers Rabbah 19.16, the phrase "all the congregation" is taken to indicate a sense of spiritual readiness for entering the land, the generation from Egypt having died off.

[128]Deuteronomy 34:5: "So Moses the servant of the Lord died *there* in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord."

[129]*Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piska 357.* In another tradition credited to Rabbi Ishmael and found in *Sifrei to Numbers* 6:13, the verse "and he shall bring it" from Numbers 6:13 is read as "and he shall bring *oto*--himself." For Rabbi Ishmael, this serves as proof that because of Moses' distance from the camp, he *brought himself* to burial.

to Machpelah.[130] And finally, there is the view that "there" actually points to heaven--that Moses' soul ascended to heaven where he stood beside God, echoing the prooftext from Sinai in Exodus 34:28, "And he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights."[131]

2. <u>You shall not go, you shall not pass through</u>

This midrash plays two verses against one another in an effort to depict Moses as bargaining with God about his death and his right to enter the land. Moses himself notices the difference in verbs, where Deuteronomy 32:52 reads, "For thou shalt see the land afar off; but thou shalt not go thither (*ta'vo)* into the land which I give the children of Israel;" and Deuteronomy 34:4 which reads, "'I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over (*ta'avor)* thither.'" This clever perception on Moses' part leads to a bargaining with the Divine. Moses begs the Almighty that if he is not to enter the Land of Israel as a king, then he should do so as a commoner; and if he is not to enter the Land of Israel as a living man, then at the very least he should be buried there. But the necessities of life for all mortal beings--that death is unavoidable--is Moses' lesson; he is to die in his time and in his place. Thus God's response to

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[130]Ibid. Further proof of a connection to the Cave of Machpelah is the fact that in showing Moses the Land of Israel in Deuteronomy 34:3, God shows Moses the Negev, which for the *Sifrei* is the general territory of Machpelah. In any case, even Moses did not know his burial place according to the *Sifrei*. This reading equates the *ish* (man) in Deuteronomy 34:6 ("and no man knoweth of his sepulchre to this day")with the designation of Moses as *ish* in Numbers 12:3 ("now the man Moses was very meek").

[131]Ibid. This hint is accentuated by the additional detail that during this period on Sinai, Moses neither ate nor drank, making his spiritual, physical proximity to God more acute.

Moses that he too will die also utilizes the different verbs. And here God gives Moses the painful but true reality of his predicament: You will neither enter the land as a king or a living being; neither will you pass through it as a commoner or a corpse.[132]

3. One hundred and twenty years

Just as we saw with the other Biblical figures, the age at which someone dies bears great importance for readers and interpreters. In Deuteronomy 34:7, the Torah notes that Moses died at one hundred and twenty with his eyes undimmed "nor his natural force abated." This prompts a midrashic response which links Moses to Hillel, Yohanan ben Zakkai and Akiba, the great founders of Rabbinic Judaism who also lived to the age one hundred and twenty. Unlike Isaac who went blind before death, Moses' eyes remained sharp even after death and his bodily force remained fresh and vigorous.[133] It appears that Moses was not alone in resisting his death. This final midrashic concern for terms demonstrates an interpretive tradition that extolled Moses' virtues even in death, where unlike most dead bodies, Moses' eyes remained sharp and his body remained fresh.

Thus in this section, we have seen the ways in which key terms in the Biblical narrative can provide opportunities for the rabbis to shed greater light on a particular

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[132]*Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piska* 341.

[133]*Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piska 357.* This particular rendering is brought about in an *al tikrei* reading of the word *le'cho* (natural force) which is re-read as *le'cho achshav*, in the present tense, meaning that even in death, Moses body remained fresh.

death scene. Even though the moment of death could pass barely noticed in the Biblical layer, it served as a vehicle for the rabbis to teach normative Jewish values about the meaning of life, the wisdom of the ancestors, and the varied, subtle reasons why humans must face their own mortality. By breathing life into relatively brief mention of a death, the rabbis confronted the question of mortality head on; by explicating texts and deriving deeper meaning from a simple word or phrase, death itself, to the degree that it is possible, becomes a less frightening and perhaps more easily acceptable reality in the natural course of human events.

CHAPTER IV

THE DYING AND THE SURVIVORS RESPOND

Loss of life creates an absence, a space we struggle to fill with the words, emotions and actions. And that vacant space can breathe relief into our lives or haunt us as we struggle to find meaning in the face of death. Even in our own lives there is an economy of language in the way we describe someone's death--it may garner brief mention or no mention at all. And yet we know that that individual carries within a complex set of emotions and reactions, sometimes mined, but more often than not left alone to quietly exist as part of one's inner being. In that sense, the Torah is like one who rarely speaks of the emotions or reactions to events--especially when the mythic and epic lives of the Biblical figures, as we *read* them, speak so profoundly themselves. There is an economy of words to the events--Sarah died and Abraham buried her; Abraham died and his sons came together to bury him; Aaron climbed a mountain, stripped himself of the priestly garments, and died. In a few short lines a monumental figure in the narrative can die, leaving a gap so glaring as to beg for a bridge that will lead us to a greater understanding. Such is the function of the midrash to Biblical death scenes. In the previous chapter we examined the ways in which words and phrases provided a brief glimpse into the many layered narrative tradition as to *what exactly happened* when someone died. We will now turn our attention to some of the responses to death: that is, ways in which the dying sought to reconcile themselves to their inevitable death and ways that the midrash records the mourners' response to these deaths.

A. Abraham Reacts to Sarah's Death

Abraham's reaction to his wife's death was swift and practical. He "rose up from before his dead," the text tells us, and set out to acquire a family plot.[134] After securing the Cave at Machpelah, Abraham turns his attention to finding a wife for his son Isaac. That action in and of itself is quite ironic, since the two had not spoken since the binding on Mt. Moriah. In fact, the marriage between Isaac and Rebecca is arranged by Abraham without his son knowing. When the text indicates in Genesis 24:67 that Isaac brought Rebecca into Sarah's tent, that she became his wife, and that he loved her, it is only then that the Torah reveals any sense of reaction on Isaac's part to his mother's death: "And Isaac was comforted for his mother." That detail, along with the note in Genesis 23:2 that Abraham wept and mourned for Sarah, remain the only two textual markers of a reaction to Sarah's loss. Thus, when the very next line of text notes that Abraham took Keturah as a wife,[135] but without the emotional detail that is used to describe Isaac's new found comfort, we are faced with a puzzling scenario. And perhaps that is why the midrash sees fit to explain that Keturah is none other than the formerly expelled Hagar, and that Abraham too needed the comfort through the reunion with a familiar mate.

But such a portrait of an Abraham in need of comfort will not be found; instead,

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[134]The issue of Abraham's dead lying before him is addressed in a strictly legal sense by B.T. *Berakhot 18a.*

[135]Genesis 25:1: "And Abraham took another wife, and her name was Keturah."

Abraham is held up as a paragon of strength. He copes with his loss with only a small hint of emotion and instead remains a man of action--his own sense of mourning is secondary to the practical exigencies of attending to Sarah's burial and finding a wife for his son. And so he is heroicized in the midrash. Taking Keturah as a wife is a sign of his vigor, his heroic resilience. One reading, utilizing Psalm 1:3, compares Abraham to "a tree planted by streams of water that bringeth forth its fruit in its season, and whose leaf does not wither; and in whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."[136] Another makes clever use of Ecclesiastes 11:6 sage advice, "In the morning sow thy seed and in the evening withhold not thy hand." Here the verse is commented upon by several distinguished Tannaim, who offer their own readings of Abraham's uncommonly heroic vigor.[137]

B. <u>Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael</u>

Poor Isaac. We are left with very little sense that he received any comfort at all from his father following Sarah's death. And as valiant an effort as Abraham may have

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[136]Genesis Rabbah 61.1. In this double metaphoric rendering of the Psalm, the streams of water are the Land of Israel; the fruit in its season is Ishmael; the unwithered leaf is Isaac; and the results of his prosperity are the children of Keturah, listed in the original prooftext of Genesis 25:2. Genesis Rabbah 61.2 will make the same claim, but using similar metaphoric language from Job 14:7-9 rather than Psalms.

[137]Genesis Rabbah 61.3. R. Eliezer reads the verse to mean exactly as it says--sow early and sow late. R. Joshua understands Abraham as an example of the need to continue good deeds late into life; R. Ishmael reads the verse as an admonition to always study; with R. Akiba, it's the continued need to raise disciples; and with R. Dostai and R. Jannai in the name of R. Nahman, we face the basic meaning of text--if you had children early in life (and with Abraham, even early was late!) have them late in life.

made in finding him Rebecca, nothing was said between the two of them afterward. We read only that just before Abraham died, he "gave all that he had" to Isaac (which the rabbis see as the birthright and the subsequent right to bless future generations), while giving gifts to Ishmael.[138] But at least at the Biblical level, the blessings that will figure so prominently in both Isaac and Jacob's death scenes are absent from Abraham's. One crucial detail does not escape the interpretive tradition: after Abraham's death, God blessed Isaac.[139] The absence of blessing, according to this reading, is the result of Abraham's own dilemma over how to "divide the estate." Faced with the question of inheritance for his sons from different wives, for once this normally articulate and virtuous man of action was at a loss for words. Abraham, according to the midrash, struggled over how to bless one son without blessing the other and chose, at the very end of his life, to leave this one matter up to God. The rabbis are then able to fill the gap in the text left by Abraham's not having blessed Isaac in an explicit manner. Once again, proximity of texts plays an important role in determining the interpretative reading of the verses surrounding Abraham's own death. And so the rabbis bridge this textual gap by understanding God's blessing of Isaac in Genesis 25:11 as finishing the work that Abraham, because of his divided heart, could not complete.[140]

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[138]Genesis 25:5-6. See Genesis Rabbah 61.6 in this regard.

[139]Genesis 25:11.

[140]Ibid. According to this midrash, Abraham did not exactly possess a favorable view of Ishmael. His dilemma is played out metaphorically, where Abraham is likened to a gardener given two intertwined trees--one life-giving and the other bearing a deadly poison. Killing or sustaining one will, by association, have a like-effect on the other. The dilemma is too much

There are, however, more favorable renderings of the relationship between Abraham and Ishmael. These are triggered by the fact that Ishmael and Isaac appear together to bury their father and that immediately following the account of Abraham's burial, Ishmael's years are recorded by the Torah.[141] One view argues that his years are recorded only in order to teach how old Jacob was when he was blessed by Isaac.[142] In another, the rabbis intercede in the narrative and read into it an act of reconciliation between Abraham and Ishmael as well as between the two brothers, whose rivalry had initially caused Ishmael's expulsion. One reading argues that the reconciliation came about due to Ishmael's willingness to finally show respect to his half-brother Isaac by having Isaac walk before him at Abraham's funeral; another portrays Ishmael as a *tzaddik ba'al teshuvah*--one whose righteous penitence for earlier behavior brought him back into the family fold.[143] Rashi reads this sequence and draws the connection between the description of Abraham in Genesis 25:8 not as *seivah tovah* (a good old age) but with *shivah tovah* (a good return) that is, Ishmael's repentance. Another hint at Ishmael's return is found in the narrative use of the term *gavah* or expire. The merits of associating this term with the death of the righteous is found in B.T. *Baba Batra* 16b. Ultimately, the question of Ishmael's repentance will not be solved by the term *gva* but rather by the honor the elder brother showed the younger in the funeral

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for Abraham, who throws up his arms and leaves Isaac's fate and the privilege of being blessed, to God.

[141]Genesis 25:9-18.

[142]Genesis Rabbah 62.5.

[143]Genesis Rabbah 63.3. See also B.T. *Megillah 17a* and B.T. *Baba Batra 16b.*

procession.[144]

In any case, like many acts of reconciliation, this one remains imperfect. As portrayed by the rabbis, Ishmael showed respect to his father by coming from the farthest limits of the wilderness to pay honor to him. And yet, there remains the sense at the Biblical and midrashic levels that Ishmael never fully returned to the family fold. His offspring were to "fall" against Israel; and when he himself died, he was "gathered to his people," but certainly not buried at Machpelah. In fact, because his offspring would be seen as later attacking Israel, Ishmael was to be denied admission to the World to Come.[145] One wonders at the deeper level of play with the language in this midrash. Key to the word play is the comparison between the words "dwell" and "fall." Since the words *shachan* (related to the word for *shechinah)* and *nafal* are compared, did the rabbis mean to say that God's presence was with Israel as long as Jews remained at peace with themselves? But once there was internal strife, peril would befall them? The midrash leaves no clue as to this particular reading and, in fact, is most likely concerned with its original sense of seeing the descendents of Ishmael as future enemies of Israel.

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[144]In Genesis 25:9, Isaac is mentioned before Ishmael at Abraham's burial. He is thus understood to have allowed his brother to proceed him in the funeral procession.

[145]Genesis Rabbah 62.5. Here the midrash compares the words from Genesis 16:12 "He shall *dwell* (*yishkon*)in the face of all his brethren," to Genesis 25:18: "over against all his brethren he did *fall* (*nafal*). In this reading, Abraham's own life preserved Ishmael's. But after Abraham's death, Ishmael's descendents would attack the Temple and Ishmael's own state would be considered "fallen."

One final note concerns itself with the effect of Abraham's death on the third generation. Here the rabbis read ahead to the next sibling rivalry in the Torah--that between Jacob and Esau. The scene is set with Jacob making his lentil stew, the very meal that will be used to ransom the birthright from Esau. We will recall the rabbis' earlier explanation that Abraham died at one hundred and seventy five so that he would not have to live long enough to see the results of his grandson Esau's behavior. In a clever continuation of this interpretation, the rabbis understand Jacob as preparing lentils in the custom of a mourning meal. Thus, when Esau spurns the blessing by grasping for the meal, it is simply the first in a long series of sins spared his grandfather.[146]

C. Jacob's Death

The question of rivalry permeates much of the midrash related to Jacob's death. Similar to the long series of blessings that Moses would give to the children of Israel, Jacob's death-bed scene centers upon a series of blessings and curses for his sons. The midrash sees such reproofs as necessary before one's death, functioning as a buffer for the pain of dying by granting someone the comfort of knowing that the family is in good hands. In the *Sifrei Deuteronomy,* for example, Jacob's reproof is embellished with the tale of testing his children's ability to pray properly.[147] In this moving scene, Jacob asks his children whether or not they will distance themselves from God and he

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[146]*Midrash Tanhuma,* Buber, ed. Toledot 63.3.

[147]*Sifrei Deuteronomy*, Finkelstein, ed. (Berlin: 1939) *V'ethanan, Piska 31.*

tests their allegiance and knowledge of the ways of Israel by asking them to recite the *Shma*. Upon hearing those words, Jacob "bowed down upon the bed's head."[148] Here, the subtle play of the Biblical words "bow down" are read as a double entendre of Jacob's physical response as well as the hint that he had joined his sons in worship, giving God thanks and praise for his sons' proven piety. In other renderings within the *Sifrei* passage, one argues that the praise Jacob uttered is due to Reuben's penitential return. Another has Jacob's respond to his sons' *Shma* with the words *Baruch Shem Kavod*, providing an antiphonal form of worship between two generations moments before Jacob's death. Even God appreciates the glory of such a moment, as the Divine is depicted as acknowledging to Jacob that throughout his entire life he had yearned for such expression and now could die with the satisfying knowledge of his sons' spiritual allegiance.

Vexed by the rivalries among his own sons, Jacob is again depicted as seeking some sense of comfort from them toward the end of his life. And comfort he needed, since there is a distinct sense that Jacob's life was shortened because of his sons' behavior. The *Avot d'Rabbi Natan* reads his death scene as beginning quite early--while still in Canaan awaiting word on his sons' condition in Egypt.[149] Jacob is scarred from the erroneous knowledge that his son Joseph is dead (in Genesis 37:31-33). As the midrash points out, Jacob had believed his sons' deceit. Thus when they come to him

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[148]Genesis 47:31.

[149]*Avot d'Rabbi Natan, A*, Chapter 30.

again in Genesis 45:26 to announce the great news that Joseph is alive, Jacob's "heart fainted, for he believed them not." The midrash argues that the holy spirit actually withdrew from Jacob at that point and only when "he saw the wagons which Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of Jacob their father revived."[150] After the shock of such a premature death and resurrection, it should come as no surprise that Jacob announces the coming end of his own life in the closing verse of that section: "And Israel said: 'It is enough; Joseph my son is yet alive; I will go and see him before I die."[151]

Even in the Biblical narrative, Jacob does not exactly thank his devious sons for the fact that they finally reported the truth about their brother; rather, he thanks God. Thus Genesis 46 begins with Jacob stopping in Beer-sheba to offer sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac, an action if read against the background of his own suffering at the hands of his sons' deceit, serves as a subtle act of personal reconciliation in its own right--afterall, did not Jacob cause Isaac much grief in his own rivalry with Esau? And in a brilliant reading backward and forward in Jewish time, Jacob is depicted as cutting down the same trees in Beer-sheba that Abraham had planted; trees that would

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[150]Genesis 45:27.

[151]Genesis 45:28. This reading is supported by the rendition in Genesis Rabbah 94.3, where Jacob breathes a sigh of relief and in saying, "It is *enough"* he is expressing the realization that because Joseph is still alive, Jacob is assured a place in the World to Come.

be stored away and used in the construction of the Tabernacle.[152] Even before his death-scene *per se*, Jacob begins an examination of his life that will lead to a reach back in time to his grandfather Abraham and forward in time to the desert generation. And yet as we pointed out, the sacrifices are made to the "God of his father Isaac." And in seeking to reconcile himself to his own death, Jacob will relate his own life to his father's in the midrash. Just as his father went to Egypt for food, so, too, would Jacob. Just as Isaac loved one son more than another, so, too, would Jacob choose a favorite. Jacob recognizes the patterns of his life and seeks peace not only from his children but between himself and his deceased father, and ultimately between himself and God.

Another aspect of Jacob's own need for internal reconciliation is manifest in one reading that describes Jacob's death as a humbling experience. The fighting, wrestling, heroic Jacob is reduced to being a mortal at the end of his life. The humble language he employs in requesting burial from Joseph ("If now I have found favor in thy sight") spurs the rabbis to search for the key, humbling phrases uttered by others before their deaths.[153] Thus Moses begins to assign responsibilities to Pinchas in Numbers 25:8 and

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[152]Genesis Rabbah 94.3. For a further reach across the generational divide, see also Numbers Rabbah 2.8 where Moses is having trouble deciding how to set up the tribes around the Tabernacle and God reassures him to have the Children of Israel array themselves as they did when they carried Jacob out of Egypt for burial, saying, "As they buried their father, so Israel shall camp."

[153]Genesis Rabbah 96.3. Deuteronomy Rabbah 9.4 drags in similar material when expounding upon the drawing near of Moses' death.

David is not referred to as king shortly before his own death in I Kings 11:1. In a similar vein, the very term "drawing near," used to describe the impending moment of Jacob's death, serves to invoke the standard that whenever one's death "draws near," one's life is shorter than one's father.[154]

The last example of reconciliation comes about after Jacob's death, where the remaining sons lie to Joseph one last time. Indeed, this time the lie is in order to save themselves from what they mistakenly thought would be Joseph's wrath. As the Torah relates, they claim that before he died, their father Jacob had requested that Joseph forgive them. Here the rabbis declare such deceit to have been carried out in the name of peace, a small white lie of sorts, made to hold the family together. Like Isaac and Ishmael's reconciliation before hand, this one is imperfect as well.

In one final reading, the rabbis used the very structure of the scribal work in the Torah scroll to drive them toward a deeper understanding of Jacob's death. The portion in which his death occurs is a *closed* portion, meaning that there are few paragraph breaks discernible in the text. The physical space of the scroll is compared to the retraction of Jacob's own life and so the rabbis note that when Jacob dies, Israel's servitude is soon to follow; that upon his death bed, Jacob had wished to reveal the end of days to his children but the words were "closed" to him; and that after a life of struggle and

[154]Genesis Rabbah 96.4. Thus David is younger than Jesse was at his death, Moses is younger than Amram, and Jacob is younger than Isaac.

turmoil, his last seventeen years in Egypt were filled with happiness, "closing off" all troubles in order to enable him to die in peace.[155]

D. Miriam and Aaron

Miriam's death yields little in the way of our search for the mourners' response. However, based on Numbers 20:1, which relates that "Miriam died *there* and was buried *there*" we learn the legal principle that one never sets down a woman's funeral bier in the road "for sake of propriety."[156] The account of Miriam's death found in the works of the early Jewish historian Josephus adds an interesting layer to our understanding. Josephus describes a public funeral made at "great expense" adding to the Biblical layer the idea that Miriam was mourned for thirty days and that afterward Moses purified the people. In Josephus' own chronology of events, he moves from Miriam's death to the cleansing ritual of the Red Heifer, maintaining the proximity of the two stories but simply switching their order.[157]

In the case of Aaron we confront a familiar response to the death of a loved one: disbelief. Extolled for his peacemaking abilities and beloved by the tradition for his talents at averting strife while alive, Aaron's very death is initially doubted. This particular midrash is triggered by the comment in Numbers 20:29 that "when all the

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[155]Genesis Rabbah 96.1.

[156]B.T. *Moed Katan 28a.*

[157]Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews, IV:4.*

congregation *saw* that Aaron was dead, they wept for Aaron thirty days, even all the house of Israel." We will recall the earlier comment that for Moses' death, only *b'nei yisrael* (the men of Israel) wept, but for Aaron, *kol ha'edah* (all the congregation, all the house of Israel) wept.[158] His death had great impact. In this case, the emphasis is on the word *saw*. Espying Moses and Eleazar returning from the mountain where Aaron had died, the congregation of Israel responds to the news of his death in disbelief. In the hearts and minds of Israel, Aaron was one who was able to defy death. After all, had not Aaron defied death in fighting off the plague which came as the result of Korah's rebellion? In the imagination of the midrash, the congregation based their belief in Aaron's special powers on the verse, "and he (Aaron) stood between the dead and the living and the plague was stayed."[159] Because of this, the congregation demanded proof of Aaron's death. In defense of Moses and Eleazar before the angry crowd, God opened the cave where Aaron was buried, showed the congregation Aaron's body and thus they "saw" that indeed, Aaron was dead.[160]

E. <u>Moses</u>

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross may not have been the first to divide the stages of dying into five distinct categories. The rabbinic tradition reveals a similar construct and is found especially in regard to Moses' death. Moses, the man of God, more than any other

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[158]See the section on Aaron in Chapter One. See also Avot d'Rabbi Natan, B, 25.

[159]Numbers 17:13.

[160]Numbers Rabbah 19.20.

Biblical figure, resists his death by taking his plea directly to God. Traces of his bargaining over death are found throughout the midrash--from the early Tannaitic level to the collection of legends about Moses death found in *Midrash Petirat Moshe.* In a variety of sources, Moses approaches his death reluctantly. He is concerned about Israel's survival without his leadership and heartbroken that he will not be able to enter the Land of Israel. And Moses will only reach what Kubler-Ross would later call the "stage five" level--acceptance--before finally dying by the kiss of God.

The *Midrash Tannaim* chronicles an early view of this bargaining stage and understands it as a first level response to the news of his impending death. Deuteronomy 31:1 opens with the words "And Moses went," and the description of Moses telling the children of Israel that because of his age, he has become limited in his ability to lead and that God has asked him to appoint Joshua as the new leader of the people. After ordaining Joshua in the sight of all the people, God then addresses Moses directly in Deuteronomy 31:14 saying, "'Behold, thy days approach that thou must die; call Joshua, and present yourselves in the Tent of Meeting that I may give him charge." Puzzling to the commentators in *Midrash Tannaim* is the superfluous phrase *and Moses went.* Would it not have been enough for the chapter to begin with the phrase *and Moses spoke these words*? In addition, it would have made more sense for the Torah to announce that Moses was to die and then to follow such a statement with the action of *going* to his death. With this additional action, the rabbis posit that Moses went to engage in argument with God--an argument modeled on the rabbinic discourse of the

early house of study--about his date of death.[161] In this give and take with God, Moses learns that the lives of those younger have always pressed against the lives of those older, and that Moses was facing a critical time in which he had to eventually step aside. The measure of one's life, the length of one's days, according to this reading, is determined from the earliest of time. And try as he might, Moses will learn the difficult lesson that bargaining for a longer life must yield to an acceptance of the inevitable reality of death.

Unlike others in the midrash, Moses receives no funeral or human burial. Perhaps as a concession to this lonely death and more likely as a reward for his greatness, Moses is allowed the reserved burial portion of a ruler among rulers, and interred by God.[162]

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[161]*Midrash Tannaim* to Deuteronomy 31:1.

[162]*Midrash Tannaim* to Deuteronomy 3:26. The midrash here makes brilliant use of the prooftext from Deuteronomy 33:21, "And he chose a first part for himself, for there a portion of a ruler was reserved." This text is part of Gad's blessing in Moses' final oration. It should be noted that the tradition understood Moses' burial to be somewhere in the territory of Gad. Thus the chosen "first part" is Moses himself, whose burial is a special reserve and carried out by the Divine as a reward for the righteousness with which Moses led the people. Special thanks to Dr. Norman Cohen for helping to unravel this midrash.

CHAPTER V

PASSING THE TORCH

One of the functions of the death-scene drama is to set the stage in the narrative for the next generation to inherit the mantle of leadership. The Bible is quite explicit in this regard. We have already looked at some of the ways in which the Biblical figures prepared for death by calling their children near and offering them strength and blessings of hope throughout their lives. Thus, Abraham gives "all that he has" to Isaac; Isaac blesses Jacob and Esau; Jacob assembles his children before dying; and at the end of the Torah Moses *reassembles* the children of Israel in order to address them during his final oration. This notion of addressing what would be the surviving generation is one of the most significant aspects of these death-scene narratives. The addresses seek to establish a sense of continuity between generations, a continuity that will ensure not only the immediate survival of the family but the Divine legacy with which they are charged. Sheer survival of the Biblical record is evidence of the success of this endeavor. Yet on a deeper level, with the rabbinic interpretation to these verses, we see a different form of survival at play: namely, that the rabbis themselves, in their very reading of these verses, constituted the next generation of inheritors of tradition. That their stories, their readings of these Biblical tales *also* survived is testimony to the Divine legacy to which they themselves felt charged. Reading and *interpreting* Biblical texts became for the rabbis every bit as significant as a simple reading of text. The process of ever enlivening Scripture through the craft of

interpretation is what Michael Fishbane calls "a process of symbolic immortality."[163]

A. General Ideas of Continuity: Making Order from Chaos

One of the more common ideas regarding continuity is found throughout the midrash where the inevitability of death is understood in the context of one generation making way for the next. In addressing Isaac's blessing following the death of Abraham, for example, R. Judan taught that "[h]ad not God set up others in their stead, the world would have lapsed into its former state."[164] Death is not an end, in this construction; rather, it is necessary for continuity. Generations must yield to one another, must give way, in order for life itself to be viable. Otherwise, as the midrash suggests, the order of the universe would be reduced to chaos. And as the Torah would seem to suggest, there is a discernible disorder following death: with Abraham's passing, the wells he had dug were stopped up; and with Moses', Miriam's and Aaron's deaths, the manna, the well, and the cloud of glory disappeared. But as the midrash points out, Isaac is

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[163]Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) p. ix. Fishbane argues that the art of interpretation, *hermeneutics,* owes much of its legacy to what he claims is the "polymorphous image of Hermes," who was not only a messenger and agent of monetary exchange, but one whose trips to the underworld helped immortalize the dead. His description is a superb metaphor for understanding the function of the midrash and its efforts at enlivening not only the text but its readers as well.

[164]See, for example, Genesis Rabbah 62.4 The phrase *and it came to pass* in Genesis 25:11 is a textual hint for the rabbis that with the death, the world itself lapses into its former, chaotic state. But with a new generation set up to replace a dying one, universal order is restored.

there to redig the wells and Joshua is there to stand in place of Moses.[165] Continuity is ensured and order is restored.

In another midrash, we find the concern less with chaos than with the ordered coincidence of fate that occurs with death. Not only did continuity establish order in the universe; the very phenomenon of continuity seemed to suggest an inherent order itself. Thus, when Sarah dies, Rebecca is born.[166] For the rabbis, this is part of a Divine plan. "The sun rises and the sun sets," the rabbis argue, quoting Ecclesiates 1:5 in proving that order is manifest precisely when one generation replaces the next. But for the rabbis themselves, this sense of order was not only discernible at the Biblical layer; it extended to their own world as well. Their part, their fate, as players in God's plan was also capable of being interpreted by the same scriptural lenses they employed in reading the lives of the Biblical figures.[167]

A final hint regarding the tension between chaos and order is found in the words

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[165]Ibid. The midrash compares Genesis 26:15, where Abraham's wells are stopped up by the Philistines, with Genesis 26:18, where Isaac redigs them. In addition, the midrash understands the distinct connection between the words in the verse from Joshua 1:1, "Now *it came to pass* after the death of Moses, the servant of the Lord, *that the Lord spoke unto Joshua.*"

[166]See for example, Genesis Rabbah *58.2* for the way that the rabbis read Genesis 22:20-23. Again the words *and it came to pass after these things* appear and Rebecca's birth is announced. Then, at the beginning of the very next chapter, Sarah's death is announced. The two phenomena, in the mind of the reader, appear to be connected by the very will of God.

[167]Ibid. Thus in this midrash we read not only of Sarah and Rebecca, Moses and Joshua, and Eli and Samuel, but also about a generational list of rabbis, beginning with Akiba and ending with R. Hoshaya.

describing Jacob's death in Genesis 49:33. Before dying, the text notes that Jacob "made an end *(va'yachal)* of charging his sons." The rabbis seized upon this verb *va'yachal*, which also appears in the creation narrative--*va'yachal Elohim--and God finished* (Genesis 2:2), to argue that in dying, Jacob acknowledged God as Creator and ultimate arbiter of order.[168] Again, the rabbis read themselves into the narrative. In this midrashic rendering of Jacob *charging* his sons, the rabbis recount the death-bed charges made by R. Judah Ha Nasi, R. Johanan, R. Josiah, and R. Jeremiah. Like Jacob, each rabbi requests burial in a prescribed manner, so as to ensure their lives in the World to Come.[169]

B. <u>Philo and Josephus: The View from Alexandria</u>

Philo and Josephus, though not within the normative rabbinic world and arguably with agendas and audience distinct from the rabbis in expounding upon Biblical texts, offer several interesting insights.[170] As noted in the previous chapter, Isaac was understood by Philo to have possessed a unique body of wisdom and knowledge that allowed for his spiritual migration, upon death, to join a higher race of beings in the heavens above.

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[168]Genesis Rabbah 100.2.

[169]Ibid. In one clever passage, R. Jeremiah requests that he be clothed, sandaled, and buried by the side of the road so that when called, he would be able to stand ready for redemption. R. Jonah suggests in the name of R. Hama that one's feet are a pledge to take one wherever he may be called. It seems a perfect explanation for why Jacob, in the prooftext, gathers in his feet before dying (Genesis 49:33).

[170]For a helpful overview of the lives of Philo and Josephus and their literary audience in Alexandria, see "Josphus Flavius," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Volume 10. (Jerusalem: 1972) pp. 251-265. See also Yehoshua Amir's "Philo Judaeus," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Volume 13. (Jerusalem: 1972) pp. 409-415.

Philo posited that Isaac learned this special wisdom from Abraham, who bequethed it to his son as an inheritance or spiritual legacy.[171] Philo reads Moses' end as somewhat similar to Isaac's. Charged with a "sun-like mind" and "possessed by inspiration," Moses' prophecies at the end of his life are seen as specifically geared toward the individual tribes and not the collective body of Israel.[172] Although Philo's philosophical concerns seem more esoteric than practical, he cannot avoid the simple reading of Moses' final oration which *does in fact* address the individual tribes. Despite his philosophical hermeneutic, Philo also must concern himself with the more practically oriented aspects of Moses' death-scene and the passing of the torch to the next generation of Israelites.

Josephus' readings are far less philosophical than Philo's, yet in a similar manner reflect the Greco-Roman concerns for virtue, spirit and intelligence. Before explaining what exactly Moses said upon dying, Josephus embellishes the record by having Moses claim that death is imminent "since it is now the will of God and the course of old age, at a hundred and twenty, requires it, that [he] should depart out of this life."[173] Similar to the midrashim from above, Moses is aware of the necessity of death--not only from the perspective of God's decree, but also because of the natural, "course of old age." In addition, the unavoidability of death meant that Moses could speak freely; that in

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[171]Philo, *The Sacrifices of Cain and Abel, X,43.* See also *On the Confusion of Tongues, XVI, 74.*

[172]Philo, *On the Life of Moses II. LI, 288.*

[173]Josephus, *Antiquities*, IV, 8.

preparation for death he would not be inhibited by the mundane matters of life and could honestly express himself to the surviving remnant.[174] Finally, Josephus attempts to answer why, after blessing Israel in Deuteronomy 33, Moses ascends Mt. Nebo alone. This, Josephus writes, was done in response to the terrible pain Moses felt upon seeing everyone weep at his impending death. In an attempt to comfort himself, Moses sought the solitude of the mountaintop for his last moments on earth.

C. Death-Scene as Reproof

One can speak in abstract terms about the moment of death as a unique time for reconciliation without fully grasping the power of that moment. Regardless of our bravery in attempting to face death, words can still escape us; and due to the tragic finality of the moment, we are inclined to soften the moment by speaking only kind, last words. And yet, such a stance can be psychologically vexing, leaving the survivors wondering what the dead *really* thought, what their wishes and warnings really were. In this regard, the rabbis read the Biblical death-scenes as a demonstrated opportunity for using the Biblical figures as models for confronting death head on. Words spoken--in the context of the Biblical or midrashic narrative--are not always the comforting, melodramatic words of the dying. They can be the harsh, necessary words of reproof that clear the path for moments of reconciliation before death.

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[174]Ibid. As an interesting sidenote, Josephus claims that Moses wrote of his own death in the Torah in attempt to void the idea that he was a divine being who did not die *per se* but joined with God.

The words that open the book of Deuteronomy serve as a hint for such reproofs. "And it came to pass in the fortieth year," it says in Deuteronomy 1:3, signaling for the rabbis a cycle of time drawing to a close and thus necessitating the reproof of Israel that will follow in much of Deuteronomy. Thus forty is not only significant as a generational marker: for the four who lived to one hundred and twenty (Moses, Hillel, Yohanan and Akiba), the number forty becomes a tool for dividing their lives into three significant eras. In *Sifrei Deuteronomy* the rabbis will argue this very point,[175] dividing Moses' life into subsets of forty years: "Moses was in Egypt forty years, in Midian forty years, and he provided for Israel forty years."[176] And so, when Deuteronomy begins with the fortieth year of the cycle in Moses' life, this leads the rabbis to posit elsewhere in the *Sifrei Deuteronomy* that "the time for reproof is close to the time of death."[177] And as the *Sifrei* argues, this was so not only with Moses, but with Jacob, Abraham, and Isaac as well.[178] In this context, the action of reproof has a specific function, namely allowing those about to die to leave this world with a sense of peace and wholeness. One specific function of the reproof, in the context of passing the torch

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[175]See, for example, *Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piska* 357.

[176]Ibid. In the subsequent comments, Hillel, Yohanan and Akiba's life follow similar models. Each was effectively raised for forty years, served as disciples for forty years, and then provided for Israel for the remaining forty years of their life.

[177]*Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piska* 2.

[178]Ibid. Evidence of Jacob's reproof is found in the words, "And Jacob called unto his sons, and said, 'Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the end of days" (Gen. 49:1). Abraham's reproof is found in Genesis 21:25ff where Abraham reproves Abimelech over the wells and then afterward makes a covenant--proving that reproofs get results! Isaac repeats Abraham's reproof at the wells in Genesis 26:27 and like his father, makes a covenant as a result in Genesis 26:28.

from one generation to the next, is the early rabbinic notion that those about to die should be able to speak their hearts and minds to those surviving, that words of reproof are just as vital to making peace as are words of kindness. For the rabbis reading the lives of the Biblical figures, the process of dying becomes an opportunity not only to bestow blessings and lines of inheritance; rather, it is also a last chance to relieve oneself of a critical burden that may allow one to die in peace with oneself and with one's family.[179]

D. Parting with Words of Torah

Similar to the notion of reproof is the idea that before one dies, one should leave the living with words of Torah. Hence the phrase, "These are the words--*eleh devarim*" which begins Deuteronomy is used by R. Shimon to argue that the righteous do not depart from the world without charging their survivors with words of Torah.[180] The key phrase driving this notion is the word for commanding or charging--*tzivah*--which is seen as one of the conceptual connective tissues between the Patriarchs and Moses. God notes that Abraham will *charge* his children with words of Torah; Issac *charges* Jacob; and before dying, Jacob *charges* his sons.[181] The reproof and the commanding

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[179]In this context, the *Sifrei* actually lists four reasons why one waits until a time near death for reproof: so the reproof cannot be rescinded; so one is not shamed for having held back; so one's heart is not heavy with regret; and so that one may die having made peace.

[180]*Midrash Tannaim* to Deuteronomy 1:1.

[181]For the verse relating to Abraham, see Genesis 18:19, where the words are actually spoken by God who claims, as part of His reasoning for not hiding what is to happen at Sodom and Gomorrah, "I have known him to the end that he may *command* his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and

charge to follow the ways of God become an interwoven construct of death-bed statements, interpreted by the rabbis as critical last words spoken by the Biblical characters.

E. When Miracles Occur

Aaron's death presents an opportunity to demonstrate that words themselves are not the sole, driving force behind the death-scene; miracles sometimes occur to facilitate the dying process. One fascinating example is the depiction of Aaron's death in the *Sifra*.[182] In this midrash, Aaron and Moses are depicted as partners in life and death, serving as willing assistants in carrying out God's commands while alive as well as offering what comfort and support they can at death. Thus, when Moses assists Aaron in the priestly investiture in Leviticus 8, the *Sifra* points out that "just as Moses assisted Aaron in life, so, too, did he assist him in death."[183] The *Sifra* bases this reading on a comparison of the original investiture scene in Leviticus 8 with Aaron's death-scene in Numbers 20:25-26, where Aaron is stripped of his priestly garments before dying. In reading the scene in this way, the rabbis take the opportunity to highlight not just the passing of Aaron's priestly role to his son Eleazar; the drama is heightened by a certain

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justice." For the verse relating to Isaac, see Genesis 28:1, where, after gaining the blessing from the dying Isaac, Jacob is called, blessed, and *charged* by his father. Jacob's charge is recorded in Genesis 49:33 with the words, "And when Jacob made an end of *charging* his sons." For a similar argument used in the midrash to describe the end of David's life as well, see I Kings 2:1.

[182]*Sifra, Parshat Tzav, Parashah 6.*

[183]Ibid.

closure to Aaron's life with Moses. Invested by his brother at the beginning of his career as priest, Aaron is eased toward death with the same caring hands.

But the tenderness of the moment is not the only concern for the rabbis. Considerations of modesty and maintaining the strictly prescribed order of investiture raise puzzling questions as to what really occurred atop Mt. Hor where Aaron had gone to die. So that neither Aaron nor Eleazar should stand naked, the *Sifra* points out that a set of miracles occurred in order to ensure that the undergarments and outergarments could be removed and adorned in their proper order, maintaining the requisite respect for the ritual and the necessary modesty in carrying it out. For Eleazar, the miracle was that the proper order was maintained. Aaron's body, in this case, was "clothed with the Divine Presence." And thus wrapped in the Glory of God, Aaron prepared for death.[184] Because Aaron died before Moses, Moses did not have the privilege of being cared for by a sibling at the moment of death. Moses will not pass the torch to his brother or his son, but rather to Joshua. The way in which that is treated in the midrash will be examined in the next section.

F. Moses and Joshua Just Before Death

In much of the early Torah narrative, one finds various sibling rivalries described in the text: Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah to some degree, and Joseph

[184]For a full rendering of this scene, see *Midrash Petirat Aharon.* See also Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews,* Vol. III. (Philadelphia: JPS, 1954.) pp. 324-327.

and his brothers. But beyond Genesis, such rivalries are superseded by more communal concerns--Israel's collective relationship with God. Moses, Aaron and to a lesser extent, Miriam, serve the people as a unified whole when compared with their earlier predecessors from Genesis. Nonetheless, one can still find a sublimated rivalry, particularly with regard to the deaths of Aaron and Moses. Both die with a certain degree of mystery and according to the midrash, Aaron, Miriam and Moses die by the kiss of God. Partners in life in leading Israel through the desert, all three leave this world under the care and intervention of God. And yet the rabbis themselves cannot seem to avoid wondering about any potential competition between the two brothers. The way in which they die is compared in the midrash, and the rabbis highlight the expressed feelings on Moses' behalf that he wants to die as his brother did.[185] If as the Torah claims and the midrash supports, Aaron died with Moses as witness, it must have been a sight to behold; because when the time draws near for Moses to die, he requests a similar experience.[186]

This concern of Moses bears within it a sense of complaint. The *Midrash Tannaim*

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[185]Deuteronomy 32:50 is understood in this context to be God granting Moses' request to die like Aaron. The text states thusly: "and die in the mount whither thou goest up, and be gathered unto thy people; as Aaron thy brother died in Mount Hor and was gathered unto his people."

[186]See for example, *Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piska* 339 and *Sifrei Zuta, Hukkat, 21-26.* Horowitz, ed. (Leipzig: 1917) p. 315. See also *Sifrei Numbers, Piska* 136. And finally, see *Avot d'Rabbi Natan*, A, Chapter 12. In the *Avot d'Rabbi Natan*, Moses begs for a death like Aaron's because of the magnificent splendor he witnessed in seeing his brother being "gathered unto his people."

treats this notion of complaint in a series of passages depicting an exchange between God and Moses from Deuteronomy 3:23-29. There, Moses recalls his interaction with God over the punishment he is to suffer in not being allowed to enter the land. Having his request to cross the Jordan and see the land rejected, God says to Moses in Deuteronomy 3:26, "'Let it suffice thee (*rav lach*); speak no more unto Me of his matter.'" The word (*rav*) itself has a double sense of exasperation--"it is enough"--and argument (*riv*). In the midrash, God comforts Moses where *rav* has the sense of *enough,* meaning that Moses has contented long enough with turmoil and with the Angel of Death, so that the final moments of Moses' life will be spent in the care of the Almighty.[187] As noted earlier, God's care for Moses' death will be described in helping to explain the mysterious aspects of Moses' actual burial.

Besides quieting Moses' complaint, *rav lach* is understood to mean that a new *rav* or rabbi had been set up in Moses' place and this was Joshua.[188] Moses would not simply pass the torch to Joshua; he would ease himself into accepting the inevitability of his own death by apprenticing himself to a new teacher. In a ritualized act of self-humbling, Moses understands his own mortality by seeing that even in life he must

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[187]The exchange depicted in *Midrash Tannaim* uses as one focal point the tradition where Moses resists God's punishment of death and in later accounts, Moses fights off the Angel of Death, sent by God to retrieve Moses. This early tradition is found in a variety of places. See, for example, *Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piskaot* 305 and 357 and *Avot d'Rabbi Natan*, A, Chapters 12 and 50. For the later accounts, see Deuteronomy Rabbah 11.10 and *Midrash Petirat Moshe*. See also the account in Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews, Vol.III.* pp. 466-471.

[188]*Midrash Tannaim* to Deuteronomy 3:26.

pass the torch of leadership to the next generation. But even Joshua has difficulty accepting this mantle of leadership. In a later passage from *Midrash Tannaim*, God chastises Joshua for relying on Moses' reputation.[189] Here the rabbis use God as His own prooftext in Joshua 1:2 ("Moses My servant is dead"), although the meaning is to serve as a wake-up call to Joshua that in order for Israel to hear him as their new leader, he will have to establish an identity separate from Moses. Lest any readers--or in this case, Joshua--believe themselves to be particularly virtuous when inheriting the mantle of leadership due to one's death, God warns Joshua with the additional comment that Moses died *not* so Joshua could lead, but for God's sake alone.[190] To further highlight the sensitive nature of this exchange of leadership, the *Sifrei Deuteronomy* argues, using Numbers 27:21 as a prooftext, that when taking the mantle of leadership he must stand before Moses' nephew Eleazar, so that it is *as if* Moses were passing the leadership through family lines.[191] Indeed, the midrash seems to purposely blur family lines at this point, apparently conscious of the fact that Moses is about to die and unlike the Patriarchs, has not passed down authority through family lines. Like a family caretaker, Joshua will be charged to lead Israel with "strength and courage," but also with tenderness and love. The new generation about to enter the land is compared

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[189]*Midrash Tannaim* to Deuteronomy 34:5. See also *Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piska* 305.

[190]Ibid.

[191]*Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piska* 305. Thus Numbers 27:22 ("Moses did as the Lord commanded him and he took Joshua and set him before Eleazar the priest") and Deuteronomy 31:7 ("Moses called unto Joshua and said unto him in the sight of all Israel, 'Be strong and of good courage'") are combined into a narrative description of Moses conferring authority upon Joshua with *family members witnessing it.*

to a flock of young sheep and to children. Joshua's task is to get them to the Land of Israel with the same firm but loving hand that Moses used and that, as Hosea says in the prooftext, God used in redeeming Israel from Egypt: "When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son."[192] But as Hosea's prophecy continues, Israel is reproved by God for their wayward behavior.[193] Moses' warning to Joshua is to be understood in this light: that Israel should be guarded and protected like children as they finish their journey in exile and return to the land; but at the same time, Israel should be watched with great vigilance, since it is their habit, like children, to be led astray.[194]

So it is that Joshua assumes power from Moses; but in the midrash it is made quite clear that his ascent is not for his own edification. Traditional family lines are blurred; nonetheless, Joshua is to assume control from Moses *as if* he were the rightful inheritor of Israel's leadership. But it would be a while before Joshua had any real control. Moses' reputation lingered. As Deuteronomy 34:9 indicates immediately following Moses' death, "Joshua, the son of Nun, was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands upon him; and the children of Israel hearkened unto him and did *as the Lord commanded Moses.*" It would not be until later, in Joshua 4:14, that Joshua

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[192]Hosea 11:1.

[193]See, for example, the continuation of Hosea's prophecy in 11:2, "The more they called them, the more they went from them; they sacrificed unto the Baalim and offered to graven images."

[194]*Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piska* 305. Here a parable is employed to warn Israel about degrading itself with foul practices and being sent back into exile.

would be able to move the people as a legitimate leader in his own right: "On that day the Lord magnified Joshua in the sight of all Israel *and they feared him, as they feared Moses, all the days of his life.*"[195]

[195]*Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piska* 357.

CHAPTER VI

REDEMPTION AND RESURRECTION

One great fear related to the perceived finality of death is that the lives allotted to the living will turn out to be the only aspect of living that we know. Relative to the history of humankind, one life is a small link in the great chain of being. And yet we know from experience that the dead continue to have an effect on us long after they have died. On the simplest level, this may lead us to immortalize the dead by living according to their words and deeds; upholding their memory by making their lives an example. On a more complex, religious level, we contemplate the *eternality* of life and deny the perceived *finality* of death by positing that lives exist beyond the grave and that God has the power to revive souls and grant eternal life. Thus life itself is understood to signify something beyond the mere life we know on earth; indeed, it extends into a greater, eternal realm beyond our comprehension but supported by our faith.[196] This will become the normative rabbinic view in the early rabbinic period. Life is not a simple calculation of the years of the individual, but a realm of eternality that can only be grasped, in this life, through an act of faith.

In this last chapter, we will examine ways in which the midrash represents an attempt to grasp at a meaning of death by pointing toward the eternal aspects of life. This quality is most commonly found in the various midrashim that define one's death as a

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[196]See for example, Ephraim Urbach's *The Sages*, p. 89, for a discussion of the rabbinic conception of resurrection of the dead as an expression of God's power. See also B.T. *Berakhot* 33a, regarding the question as to why the blessing for rain is included in the blessing for resurrection of the dead in the *Amidah* prayer: "Just as the resurrection of the dead means life to the world, so rainfall means life to the world."

hint of the messianic era. Second, it is expressed in a variety of sources that make burial in the Land of Israel a necessary prerequisite for earning resurrection and eternal life.

A. Death as a Hint Toward Messianic Era

1. Jacob

On Jacob's way into Egypt, where he is going to meet Joseph, whom he had long thought dead, Jacob is described as sending Judah "ahead." This simple act, the Torah notes, is "to show the way before him unto Goshen."[197] There, united with his son, Jacob announces to Joseph, "Now let me die, since I have seen thy face, that thou art yet alive."[198] The midrash takes this to be a messianic vision of the wolf and the lamb feeding together, where the wolf, Judah, lies down with the lamb, Joseph--an echo of Isaiah's redemptive vision of healing and reconciliation.[199] Recalling further the messianic power of reconciliation, when Jacob sends Judah ahead "to show the way," the rabbis understood the phrase *to show* (*l'horot*) in the context of learning. They then use this reading to argue that Jacob and Joseph, reunited after many years, simply

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[197]Genesis 46:28.

[198]Genesis 46:30.

[199]Genesis Rabbah 95.1, makes use of Isaiah 65:25. A slightly different but related reading is also found in this midrash, where the wolf is Benjamin and the lamb is the other tribes of Israel. In either case, the reconciliation of the brothers toward the end of Jacob's life is understood in a distinct, messianic light.

picked up where they left off in their study of Torah.[200] Besides making clever use of the term *l'horot*, the rabbis reveal a picture of their own belief in the redemptive power of study.

2. Moses

Moses' death is also suffused with hints of messianism and a union of Moses' soul with the Divine. R. Shimon's reading of Deuteronomy 32:50--"and die in the mount, *there*, where you go up, and be gathered unto your people"--is an excellent example of a reading which emphasizes the need for Moses to face his mortality, while at the same time promising a reward for his soul.[201] R. Shimon argues that although Moses must die alone, his soul will labor for him by living beyond him.[202] In R. Shimon's clever reading, he differentiates between a mere *ish* (man) and *nefesh* (soul) to argue that Moses may die as a *man*, but that his *soul* will continue to labor for him.[203]

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[200]Genesis Rabbah 95.3. In the midrash, Jacob and Joseph drop hints to one another as to where they left off in their study. This subtle communication serves as a sign between the two that they will indeed be reunited.

[201]In a later passage, Deuteronomy 34:1, when Moses actually does "go up" to die, he does so from the plains of Moab. The *Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piska* 357, uses this as an opportunity to make another significant link, where God shows Moses three kings who will arise from Ruth's Moabite line: "David and his seed," a clear messianic reference.

[202]*Midrash Tannaim* to Deuteronomy 32:49. R. Shimon uses Proverbs 16:25-26, "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man (the *ish* here taken to be Moses), but the end thereof are the ways of death. The hunger (*nefesh*) of the laboring man laboreth for him; for his mouth compelleth him."

[203]For a similar doubled use of the term *nefesh* indicating the soul and hunger in regard to the dying, see Numbers Rabbah 19.18. There, Proverbs 10:3 ("The Lord will not suffer the soul of the righteous to famish") is used to argue that before dying, the righteous will see the Shechinah. In seeing God's presence they will demand to reprove Adam for his sin that

Gravely disappointed that he will not be allowed to enter the Land of Israel, Moses asks God for the opportunity to bless Israel.[204] As a consolation for not entering the land--either as a king or commoner, living or dead--God shows Moses something no other mortal has ever seen: the entire Land of Israel, from its inception at creation to its messianic existence with the resurrection of the dead at the End of Days.[205]

Once again the word *sham* or *there* is employed to derive greater meaning from the verse, "So Moses, the servant of the Lord, died *there* in the land of Moab" in Deuteronomy 34:5. In this rendering, the word *there* is reminiscent of Moses being *there* atop Mount Sinai with God. Moses' death is a heavenly ascent where he serves alongside God.[206] In a memorable passage that will be expanded upon in Deuteronomy Rabbah 11.10 and later in *Midrash Petirat Moshe*, the Angel of Death goes off in search of Moses. The sea, mountains, the Land of Israel, the Cloud of Glory, the Ministering Angels, the birds, the deep, Sheol and finally man all spurn the Angel of Death in his pursuit of Moses. But God has promised Moses a heavenly burial by God's own care, not the care of the Angel of Death. Moses is shown his death bed just

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caused mortality. Adam will be given a chance for rebuttal and argue that each person will die for his own sin and not for Adam's "original sin." For another view of the dead seeing God's presence before death, see *Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piska 357.* God is understood as having told Moses that in "this world" he could not see God's face but in the World to Come he would.

[204]*Midrash Tannaim* to Deuternomy 32:52.

[205]Ibid.

[206]*Midrash Tannaim* to Deuteronomy 34:5.

as his brother Aaron was and then only after being shown his special throne in the Garden of Eden was Moses able to relax and find a semblance of comfort and satisfaction in his death.[207]

These are not the only illusions to Moses and messianism found in the midrash. Joshua, whom we noted in the last chapter cries out to God, testing the Almighty's patience, does so again here. Only this time his reaction mirrors that of Elisha's in 2 Kings 2:12, who, upon seeing Elijah (also an *ish elohim* or *man of God*, like Moses), cries out, "My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof!" Moses' ascent is compared to Elijah's ascent in a chariot of fire with horses of fire; and both, in messianic form, move heavenward in deaths that are nothing like other mortal figures in the Biblical tradition. Finally, in a moving dialogue between Moses and his soul taken directly from Psalm 116, we find the dramatic rendering of Moses, of great faith, convincing his soul that God will redeem him from death and from tears, allowing him to walk in the land of everlasting life.[208]

Final proof for the rabbis that Moses found his rest in the World to Come appears in another exchange with Joshua. After Moses' burial, Joshua is distraught and in mourning. But Joshua is not the only one. Even God, using Isaiah 22:12, claims to be

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[207]Ibid. See also *Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piska* 305.

[208]Ibid. Here Moses understands the Psalm 116:9--"I shall walk before the Lord in the land of the living"--to mean the place of eternal life.

in great mourning: "And in that day did the Lord, the God of hosts, call to weeping and to lamentation and to baldness and to girding with sackcloth." Whereas in the Isaiah passage the prophet relates God's mourning for Jerusalem's destruction, in *Sifrei Deuteronomy*, the verse is recontextualized and made to describe God's anthropomorphized mourning practices for Moses. The lamentation described in Isaiah becomes a promise made by God to Moses in the midrash; a promise of resurrection as a *ben olam ha'ba*, as one destined for a place in the World to Come.[209]

B. Death and Resurrection in the Land of Israel

Since Abraham and Isaac died while living in the Land of Israel, there was no expressed fear of being buried anywhere else. After Abraham secured the family plot at Machpelah, burials there seemed a matter of course. But by the time the narrative shifts to Jacob, who in his old age will descend to Egypt, the text reflects Jacob's fear that he will not be "gathered unto his kin" upon dying and will be buried in exile. The Torah rectifies that dilemma in Genesis 46:1-4, where God appears to Jacob and assures him that he will be redeemed from Egypt and as will later be demonstrated, will be buried in the Land of Israel. And so, in Genesis 47:29-31, when Jacob exacts a pledge from Joseph that he be buried in Machpelah, Jacob helps to fulfill the promise

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[209]*Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piska* 305. Here the rabbis brilliantly "misread" the prooftext from Deuteronomy 31:16: God says to Moses, "Behold, thou art about to sleep with thy fathers and this people will rise up and go astray after foreign gods," so that it actually reads, "thou art about to sleep with thy fathers and *rise*." Later, in *Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piska* 357, we read of God showing Moses all the land in Deuteronomy 34:1-3, including the *yam ha'acharon--the hinder sea*." This passage is re-read as *yom* (day) not *yam* (sea), so that Moses sees not the "hinder sea," but the *last day* or messianic End of Days.

made to him by God and engages his beloved son in carrying it out.[210] The clear tension at the interpretive level is seen in the degree to which the rabbis, writing from exile or writing in fear of exile, comment upon the importance of burial in the Land of Israel.

Josephus comments upon this tension to some extent. Noting Jacob's dream before journeying to Egypt for his reunion with Joseph, Josephus follows the Biblical account of Jacob's death, pointing out that Jacob will be returned to the Land of Israel after dying "in the arms of Joseph."[211] That the fulfillment of the act of burial will be key to Jacob's redemption is emphasized in the midrash and Joseph's actions are understood to exemplify the love of a child for a parent. Thus when Jacob charges Joseph to bury him in the Land of Israel, he says in Genesis 47:29, "deal kindly with me and truly." For the midrash, the love Joseph shows his father after death is nothing less than an expression of true love.[212] On the interpretive level, Jacob's death provides the rabbis with an opportunity to extol the virtues of children attending to the proper burial of parents. At the most basic level, Joseph fulfills his duties as a son while also helping to carry out God's promise to his father.

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[210]See Genesis 50:4-13. After observing the forty day mourning period that was customary in Egypt, Joseph seeks permission from Pharaoh to bury his father at Machpelah.

[211]*Antiquities II, 7.* Josephus' comment that Jacob will die in Joseph's arms is a variant of the Bible's comment in Genesis 46:4, "and Joseph shall put his hand upon thine eyes."

[212]*Genesis Rabbah 96.5.*

Although the Torah provides little detail regarding the exact reasons Jacob requests burial in the Land of Israel, the midrash fills in the gap. Jacob fears being worshipped as an idol and being called upon to redeem the Egyptians from the future woes.[213] The safety of burial in Machpelah will assure Jacob a truly peaceful resting place. But even this explanation does not satisfy a later generation of rabbis who will seek reasoning other than that exemplified by the simple dichotomy expressed by Jacob, that of worshipping God or worshipping idols. Thus in Gensis Rabbah, when the rabbis ask why the Patriarchs were so anxious for burial in the Land of Israel, the answer focuses more on the future redemption than on the practices of other peoples in other lands.

One early explanation makes use of Psalm 116:9, with its references to the "land of the living," so that the Land of Israel is also the land of eternal life upon burial.[214] For R. Helbo, burial in the Land of Israel means that one is first to enjoy the years of the Messiah at the time of his arrival. R. Hanina, using a prooftext from Jeremiah with allusions to a "double-death" for burial in exile, makes burial *in the land* preferable. R. Simon appropriately asks what will become of those known to be righteous who are buried outside the land--a certain reality for generations of Jews living in post-Temple days--and answers that long tunnels are made underground to connect the righteous to

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[213]Ibid.

[214]Ibid. The tradition cites Psalm 116 in the name of R. Eleazar, R. Hanina and R. Joshua b. Levi.

the Land of Israel.[215] The land itself, in this view, possesses the capacity to revive the dead, to have their lives and souls restored.[216] More evidence for the land's ability to revive souls and even cleanse them from sin is given in a tale about R. Judah Hanasi and R. Eliezer who are walking outside the gates of Tiberias when they see the coffin of a person who lived in exile, but was brought to the Land of Israel for burial. Presumed guilty for living in exile, this person is redeemed through the atonement of burial in the Land.[217]

Judah Hanasi's own death, depicted in this section of *Genesis Rabbah*, will mirror Jacob's. Thus the midrash relates that when leaving the world, Judah Hanasi gave instructions, one of which was that those who attended to him in life should attend to him in death. If the hint of Jacob and Joseph is not clear enough, the midrash continues to inform the reader that Judah Hanasi's seventeen years in Sephorris were similar to Jacob's seventeen years in Egypt.[218]

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[215]Genesis Rabbah 96.5. The idea of tunnels connecting the Land of Israel to burial places in exile is an echo of earlier midrashim in which Moses' burial place is connected by a tunnel to the Cave of Machpelah. See, for example, *Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piska* 357.

[216]Ibid. Here Ezekiel 37:12-14 and Isaiah 42:5 are used to argue that the dead will be revived and that upon arrival in the Land of Israel, God will endow them again with a soul.

[217]Ibid. R. Judah Hanasi is concerned that as a result of this person's spurning life in the Land of Israel, his corpse would defile the Land. But using Deuteronomy 32:43--"And His land maketh atonement for His people"--his fears are set aside.

[218]Ibid. Judah Hanasi's last years in Sephorris--in the Land of Israel to be sure--were likened to being in exile from Jerusalem. Judah Hanasi's physical suffering for thirteen years before his death is said to have held off death in childbirth and miscarriages. A visit by Elijah--a hint that death was near--brings about a reconciliation between Judah Hanasi and R. Hiyya prior to Judah Hanasi's death. See also Genesis Rabbah 62.2 for further examples of a

This concern for a proper burial in the Land of Israel--with the accompanying benefits of physical proximity to the messianic era and the atoning power of the land--are perhaps best exemplified by this final midrash found in the *Sifrei Deuteronomy*. Here, visions of building, destruction and rebuilding the Temple are described as having been witnessed by the Patriarchs in their own lifetimes. And perhaps one may say that the righteous, in this construct, are considered to be the human embodiment of the Temple itself.[219] The Temple serves as a metaphor for the life and the soul of a human being: it is built, it is destroyed, but in the messianic time to come, it will be resurrected and rebuilt. Just as the Temple was meant to signify a dwelling place on earth for God's presence, so is the soul of a person, like the Temple, rebuilt in the redeeming act of resurrection and brought into the realm of the Divine.

C. Joseph's Bones

The metaphor of the Patriarchs' lives serving as an embodiment of the Temple is a perfect point of departure for this final section, where we will examine the midrashic attempt to understand the symbolic meaning of Joseph's bones.

We will recall that before dying, Joseph exacts a pledge much like his father before him, charging his brothers to carry his bones from Egypt so that he may be buried in

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Patriarch's death serving as a segue for *aggadot* about rabbis' deaths.

[219]*Sifrei Deuteronomy, Piska* 352.

the ancestral homeland.[220] Philo recognized the utter importance of this pledge, speculating that Joseph sought a burial in the Land of Israel so that "pure things" could be "united with pure things."[221] For Philo, Joseph embodied Greco-Roman notions of virtue. It thus made perfect sense that his bodily remains, which housed his virtuous soul, should be reunited with his soul and find rest in the "cities of virtue" in the Land of Israel.[222]

The act of carrying Joseph's bones was also a sign of great virtue. In the Mishnah, for example, Moses is extolled as meriting the privilege of carrying Joseph's bones from Egypt.[223] The midrash will elaborate on Moses' particular virtue in this regard, noting that during the Exodus from Egypt, while all the other Israelites were occupied with the accumulation of gold and silver, Moses remembered Joseph's pledge and thus set about collecting his bones.[224] Although Moses was not obligated to care for Joseph (he was neither his father nor son), his actions would result in God's care for Moses' own burial.[225] According to a variety of traditions, Moses finds Joseph's bones through the

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[220]Genesis 50:25. Joseph does not specify where he should be buried, only that his bones be carried from Egypt. The pledge will be recalled by Moses in Exodus 13:19.

[221]Philo, *The Migration of Abraham*, IV, 17-18.

[222]Ibid.

[223]M. *Sotah* 1:9.

[224]Exodus Rabbah 20.19.

[225]Ibid. See above the way in which the midrash understands the verse, "And he buried him in the valley" (Deut. 34:6) to mean that *God* buried Moses.

aid of Serah, the daughter of Asher, or through the intervention of miracles.[226] In any case, the intercession of Moses is further extolled by the rabbis as they draw parallels between his actions and Joseph's. *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, for example, will explain that just as Joseph was rewarded for caring for his father (whom God had promised to bury), so, too, was Moses rewarded for attending to Joseph's bones--by burial at the hands of the Almighty.[227]

It is fitting to close this examination with a scene in the desert. I do so with the idea that to end in the Land of Israel would indicate preparation for either burial or redemption, times which, though one day desirable, are not yet at hand. And, as we shall see, the symbolism of Joseph's body will serve as a powerful metaphor for all Israel--in a state of movement toward a final redemption, though not yet there. I have chosen two parallel passages from the *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael* and the *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai*.[228] Both are early Amoraic compilations and represent therefore an early level of interpretation of the Biblical record. They are remnants of a tradition with chronological proximity to the generation of Jews who witnessed the Second Temple's destruction and therefore saw themselves as new inheritors and shapers of the Jewish tradition. Thus, Joseph's bones take on a meaning which is

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[226]See, for example, Genesis Rabbah 94.9, 100.19 and Deuteronomy Rabbah 11.7.

[227]Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7.2 See also Genesis Rabbah 85.3 and Deuteronomy Rabbah 8.4 for a view extolling the virtue of those who complete the task of burial, thus restoring the dead to their proper place.

[228]*Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, B'shalach*, pp. 78-79. See also *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai*, Exodus 13:19, pp. 45-46. See also B.T. *Sotah* 13a.

greater than the physical or material; the reading of the midrash, as we will see, represents a symbolic act of redemption, achieved through the embodiment of Scripture, which each Jew can enact.

In both accounts we receive the tale of Moses' search for Joseph's casket and the importance of fulfilling the vow in transporting it through the desert. Of course, it is the midrash that adds the crucial detail that Joseph's bones are in the casket--in the Biblical text, only his own bones are mentioned. This leads the rabbis to wonder what is the good of carrying two *aronot* or caskets: one with the tablets of the covenant; the other with the bones of a dead man. And yet the rabbis answer their own question by positing that both containers hold the key to life. The *aron* which holds the tablets contains for Israel the Ten Commandments, the words of revelation given to Moses and Israel atop Mt. Sinai, words that, if followed, represent the key to Israel's redemption. Similarly, the *aron* which holds Joseph's bones contain the remains of someone who *fulfilled* each of the commandments engraved into the tablets which are carried in the ark. Thus Israel is accompanied by two symbolic arks in its march toward the redemptive promise of the land: one ark containing a remnant of God's revelation to Israel atop Sinai; the other containing the glorified fulfillment of God's word.

CONCLUSION

I live my life in widening rings
which spread over earth and sky.
I may not ever complete the last one,
but that is what I will try.

I circle around God, the primordial tower,
and I circle ten thousand years long;
and I still don't know if I'm a falcon, a storm,
or an unfinished song.

Rainer Maria Rilke
(translated from German by Stephen Mitchell)[229]

Despite the absolute certainty of death, the rabbis found a way to not only understand the experience but to find comfort in its often fearsome and impending reality. The variety of midrashim examined in this thesis were composed in places and circumstances ranging from Jerusalem to the Galilee, from Egypt to Babylonia. In some of the earlier midrashim, there was a discernible sense of providing comfort to the reader living in a post-Second Temple period, when Jewish life was in great need of stability, when the turmoil of destruction called out for a response. In other midrashim, there is a sense of timelessness to the stories offered; a sense that the history of humankind moves along one continuum, while the world of the Jewish

[229]Ranier Maria Rilke, *Ahead of All Parting: The Selected Poetry and Prose of Ranier Maria Rilke*. Edited and translated by Stephen Mitchell. (New York: Modern Library, 1995).

people's relationship with God moves along another span of time. And so it was in the midrash, where kernels of truth were drawn from the exigencies of the historical moment or from the hard earned wisdom of the rabbis' own learning and experience.

One can see these two perspectives manifested in a number of ways. We noticed, for example, how concerns of strict grammar were often the driving force behind a particular midrash. Like Abraham busying himself with the practical considerations of Sarah's burial, the rabbis found solace from the weightiness of the Biblical death-scenes in their search for meaning in the very composition of the Biblical text. Thus, a scene that was depicted with too few words could be expanded into wider narrative that answered many questions left by the often more terse, original accounts.

In keeping with the normative rabbinic view that upon death one merits either the reward of eternal life (for the righteous) or punishment (for those who committed evil), the midrash to death-scenes were an opportunity for the rabbis to demonstrate that theological stance. Further, the death-scene became a moment for the children of the dying to gather around and a parent and make peace. This had the effect of allowing one about to die to do so with tranquility--often times by delivering curses as well as blessings as cathartic last words. In addition, the scenes brought to the fore great acts of reconciliation between siblings, whose rivalries, prior to the death of a parent, bordered on war.

Legacies passed from one generation to the next were also a central concern in the midrash. In this sense, the reader experiences the greatest immediacy to these scenes. For the rabbis brilliant readings of these passages brought not only the Biblical characters around the dying; future generations would also have a sense of deriving wisdom from the last words of the dying. The more ancient Near Eastern acts of delivering food and gifts to the dying become recontextualized by the rabbis into a mitzvah system. Thus a reading of Jacob and Esau bringing venison and wine to their dying father, which originally posed a threat to the rabbis attempting to prevent people from engaging in the pagan practice of feeding the dead, becomes a lesson for all future readers of this text that in order to bring about redemption, our actions must focus on feeding those in need, not the dead.

The midrash notices patterns to the lives of the figures we examined and in so doing, is able to generalize about the qualities and virtues of the righteous. The need to maintain the covenant with God necessitated, at the Biblical level, the passing of the torch from one generation to the next. And for the rabbis this was no less a reality. Formulating Jewish practice for a new generation of Jewish life following the destruction of the Second Temple became the top priority for the rabbis. But rather than succumb to despair, the rabbis in the midrash face the challenge and set about building a people with new systems of sacrifice--study and worship. The patriarchs and matriarchs become, then, very much like rabbis; and contextualized in this manner, have much to teach each new generation of readers. And so the Biblical characters face the tragedies

of their lives and their impending deaths with great bravery and wisdom. The fear and mystery of death is answered with the terms of Israel's intimate relationship with God.

And finally, we examined the relationship in the midrash between the dying and the Land of Israel. The centrality of the Land of Israel--especially from the position of exile--continued to be a focal point in the post-Biblical, rabbinic formulation of Jewish life. The distant, mysterious qualities of the Land of Israel are extolled--able to provide rest for the weary, atone for the sins of the less than righteous, and setting the stage from which the dead will rise with the coming of the messiah.

For as much as we have included, this project does not represent the complete picture of the midrash to Biblical death-scenes. A future project should attempt a systematic comparison of the different levels of midrash, attempting to discern changes in the narrative from early to late midrashic works. Second, we did not examine the death-scenes of those other than patriarchs, matriarchs, Joseph, Aaron, Miriam and Moses. A future project should attempt to examine other heroic figures from the canon beyond the Torah in an attempt to discover what similarities and differences exist in the midrash to those scenes. And finally, a future project should examine more closely the cultural and religious influence of Greco-Roman life on the early formulation of midrash to Biblical death-scenes. Here, a comparative study of the death-scene in Greco-Roman mythology as well as among philosophers would yield valuable information for our study of midrash.

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