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Report on the Rabbinic Dissertation Submitted by

Jordan Cohen

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

Midrash 'Aseret ha-Dibberot

Jordan Cohen has produced a meticulous translation and competent analysis of Midrash 'Aseret ha-Dibberot, a folkloristic compilation reminiscent of Hibbur Yafeh min ha-Yeshu'ah. He discusses at length the genre of literature represented in the anonymous Midrash 'Aseret ha-Dibberot. In so doing, he surveys a wide range of secondary sources dealing with the nature of "Midrash" proper and with the substantially different nature of the present work. It becomes readily evident that its author utilized the thematic structure of the ten commandments as a convenient ordering device (and, perhaps, a marketing strategy) for a random assortment of popular homilies. Professors Dov Nov and Yosef Dan of Israel and David Stern and Joel Rosenberg of the United States had written about this "Midrash" which is not a Midrash. Mr. Cohen brings all of their comments to bear on his own discussion. He offers some highly interesting speculations about the prevalence and audiences of this inspirational and entertaining literature. Some of the tales contain some surprising and sensational turns. It seems clear, both from Mr. Cohen's remarks and from the remarks of the authorities whom he quotes, that there is a great deal unknown about the Midrash 'Aseret ha-Dibberot, and that much more "detective work" remains to be done in this uncharted territory of medieval Hebrew prose fiction. Mr. Cohen's lengthy exposition about the meaning of one enigmatic tale leads him to some far-reaching conclusions which are provocative but not entirely convincing. His fine writing ability lends persuasive power to his argument, and more of such analyses might have been desirable, notwithstanding their tentative nature. Probing the popular homilistic mind does not always produce elevated and sublime truths, but it does bring us to a closer understanding of popular religion and mores during the Middle Ages. Future researchers will benefit from Jordan Cohen's efforts in exploring this work, which may have served as the content for some late night discussions during the enactment of "Tikkun Lel Shavu'ot.

Respectfully submitted,  
Dr. Stanley Nash  
Referee

April 26, 1990

MIDRASH ASERET HA-DIBBEROT, FORM AND CONTENT

JORDAN D. COHEN

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
Graduate Rabbinic Program  
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This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Rhea and Philip Cohen, without whose love and encouragement over all these years, it never have been done.

As the submission of this thesis denotes a certain amount of closure, I offer my sincerest thanks to all of my teachers of the past years. I have learned much from you all.

I would especially like to thank my advisor and teacher Dr. Stanley Nash for his insight, guidance, and patience throughout this process. I appreciate it.

And lastly, many thanks to Janece. We did it.

**CHAPTER ONE**

**Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot**

**A Historical and Structural Overview**

As Lewis Barth notes in his article, "The Midrashic Enterprise," "The effort to define midrash as a field is difficult because of the problem of boundaries and perspectives."<sup>1</sup> He continues to point out that, in the popular mind, midrash is still equated with *aggadot* (legends), *ma'asiyyot* (exempla), or *meshalim* (parables). While Barth, Bloch,<sup>2</sup> and others argue for the "true meaning" of the technical term *midrash*, the fact remains that the term has always been somewhat equivocal, and its boundaries broad. While contemporary scholars of Rabbinic literature have been able to distinguish between the various genres of what has traditionally been known as the "Oral Law," at the time of its development, the distinctions were not so unclouded. While a particular midrashic work could often be delineated as either *halakhic* or *aggadic*, the differentiations between the various types of non-halakhic works were not as easily distinguished by the Rabbis themselves, and certainly not by their audiences. Aggadah became the term that referred to all non-halakhic works, midrashic or non-midrashic, including the other types of oral literatures that have always been current in Jewish usage, such as folktales, fairytales, and myths. Midrash became distinct, not because of the content or message

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<sup>1</sup>Lewis Barth, "The Midrashic Enterprise," in Jewish Book Annual, XL (1982-83), p.8.

<sup>2</sup>Renee Bloch, "Midrash," in Approaches to Ancient Judaism, I (1978), pp.29-50.

of its stories, but because of the particular form in which they were recorded and the context in which they were told or compiled. As Barth puts it : "The significant area of distinction is not *aggadah* or *halakhah* but organization and purpose."<sup>3</sup> Midrash is defined then, both for contemporary scholars and the classical Rabbis, by certain specific literary techniques and by the apparent purpose or original intent of the author/compiler.

*Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* is a work which straddles the boundaries of the technical meaning of midrash. An early Medieval collection of stories structured loosely around the Ten Commandments, the work includes stories that were taken or adapted from other established midrashim, both Talmuds, as well as apocryphal and pseudepigraphic material. However, most of the stories are folktales, either Jewish in origin or Jewish versions of international folktales. In his introduction to this collection of stories, Dov Noy writes,

The name *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* might be misleading, because it suggests an interpretative midrash or an explication of the verses of the Ten Commandments that are in the Torah. But it is not so. This is not midrash, but rather a collection of stories that are arranged around the structure of the names and subjects of the Ten Commandments, where each commandment is exemplified by one story or more.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Barth, p.8.

<sup>4</sup>Dov Noy, "*Tippusim Bein-Le'umiyyim Vi-Yehudiyyim Be-Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*" in Fourth World Congress of Jewish Studies Papers, II, (Jerusalem : World Union of Jewish Studies, 1968), p.353. All quotations from this work translated by Jordan Cohen.

This brief description of the nature of *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* succinctly highlights its inherent problem : despite its name, the work does not contain any of the organizational or structural attributes usually associated with classical midrashim. *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* is basically a narrative work, a style previously unknown in the Jewish literature of the Rabbinic period. Its treatment of the midrashic material, as Joseph Dan comments, "can only be described as revolutionary."<sup>8</sup> Whereas traditional midrash places primary importance on homiletic material, with only occasional use of stories, *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* is essentially composed of stories, with the homiletic passages, depending on the version, either non-existent or relegated to secondary importance. The work appears then to be an early example of what was a new attitude toward the story introduced in the Middle Ages; it was still called midrash, for lack of any new conceptualization, but it is significantly different in form, purpose, and perhaps even in its proposed audience. In essence, *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* represents the nascent form of a whole new genre of Jewish/Hebrew literature.

No known original copy of *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* survives, but the work exists in about twenty extant

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<sup>8</sup>Joseph Dan, "Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot," in The Encyclopedia Judaica, XI, (Jerusalem : Keter, 1971), p.1514.

manuscripts and appears in several printed versions.\* It is a work from the geonic period, with scholars ascribing to it dates ranging from the seventh to the eleventh centuries. The collection cannot be dated later than the eleventh century however, since in that century both Rabbi Nissim of Kairouan and later the anonymous collector of the legends published by Gaster as *Sefer Ha-Ma'asiyyot* (1894) made use of stories included in it. *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* itself is an anonymous work, a common phenomenon in both the medieval Jewish literature of this type, and other literatures of the period.<sup>7</sup> While the actual community of origin is not known, the collection is generally acknowledged as being Sephardic, with one scholar setting it in Iraq.<sup>8</sup>

The number of stories included in the collection varies from version to version, with some containing as few as seventeen stories and others as many as forty-four. As there are some stories which appear in only one version of the

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\*Noy (1968) cites three published editions - Jellinek in *Beit Ha-Midrash*, Gaster in *Sefer Ma'asiyyot*, and Fishman, *Ma'asim Al Aseret Ha-Dibberot* or *Haggadah Shel Shavu'ot*. In addition I have found Hazon-Rook, *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*, *Nusah Verona* (1971), and Eisenstein in *Ozar Midrashim* (1956). For the purposes of this study, I have used Eisenstein as my primary text, with Jellinek and Hazon-Rook as supplementary texts.

<sup>7</sup>Other comparable works, such as *The Aleph-Bet of Ben Sira* and *Midrash Eleh Ezkerah* are also anonymous.

<sup>8</sup>Joel Rosenberg makes this assertion in his Introduction to the "Midrash on the Ten Commandments" in *Fiction*, 7, Nos. 1 & 2. eds. Mark Jay Mirsky and David Stern, (New York : CCNY, 1983), p.41.

Midrash, the total number of stories connected to the work is over fifty. In addition to the varied number of stories included in the different versions, there are different structural forms and textual substitutions. Some versions include a lengthy introductory section, while others commence immediately with the stories connected to the first commandment. Some versions make use of transitional passages between the stories, which emphasize their particular moral insights, and even include some textual explication. Others simply present the stories, leaving it to the readers themselves to make the connection between the story and the commandment.

Most versions of the collection are called *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*, although there are some versions bearing the titles *Haggadah Le-Shavu'ot*, *Midrash Shel Shavu'ot*, or *Tikkun Lel Shavu'ot*, indicating a tie-in to the festival celebrating the giving of the Ten Commandments. However, there is no proof that any Jewish community ever used this work during Shavu'ot. In all versions, the tone of the stories is extremely moralistic, implying a devotion to the commandments even beyond that required by the Halakhah. Yet the stories never offer any sort of detailed explication of a specific commandment, nor do they provide any instruction as to how a Jew should behave in daily life. Though it maintains the religious-moral sense which is evident in much of midrashic literature, as a literature to be applied to the daily life



of the Jew, the work continues to defy the parameters of classical midrash.

Classical midrash must be defined in context. To begin, midrash must be viewed as a sub-genre of the much more general category of "Rabbinic literature." The term "Rabbinic" refers to the lengthy period in Jewish history commencing in the second century after the common era when Jewish existence was, in the main, governed by the social and religious institutions which were first developed by the Rabbis of Palestine and Babylon. The period effectively comes to an end with the advent of the enlightenment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when, under the gathering forces of modernity, the institutions of Rabbinic Judaism and its way of life began to disintegrate.\* Early in this period, the Oral Law became recorded and authorized, and in its wake, all Biblically-based Jewish literary activity became known as Rabbinic literature. As it is nearly impossible to speak of any truly secular writing during this period, Rabbinic literature then becomes distinct only from folk-literature, which, for the most part, existed only through oral transmission and therefore lacked the authority of the Synagogue or Academy. By this definition, *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*, as a structured written document created during the Rabbinic period, falls into the category of Rabbinic literature.

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\*David Stern, "Introduction" in *Fiction*, 7, Nos. 1 & 2, eds. Mark Jay Mirsky and David Stern, (New York : CCNY, 1983), p.5.



Rabbinic literature however is principally just a historical designation, and tells us little about form. Rabbinic literature is divided into a variety of literary genres, halakhic and non-halakhic, of which midrash is but one type. The term *midrash* can refer to either a specific body of work ("Midrash Rabbah") or a particular form of exegetical literature. Midrash is further divided into *Midrash Aggadah* and *Midrash Halakhah*, the former generally serving as an amplification or example of the Scriptural lesson, and the latter commenting on a Scriptural passage in order to draw from it a rule of life.<sup>10</sup> Midrash as a genre, and more particularly Midrash Aggadah, is distinct from the less structured Rabbinic literary forms, such as *aggadot*, *ma'asiyyot*, and *meshalim*, all different types of "stories" which are, in fact, contained within the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds and the collections of midrash.

Midrash then, in its truest sense, emerges more as a process. As Lewis Barth states, midrash is, "the activity of inquiry into Scripture, drawing lessons from it for legal or edifying purposes, and also the literary collections in which the results of that activity are found."<sup>11</sup> The classical collections of midrashic literature display fundamental characteristics of structure and focus which, while they may

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<sup>10</sup>Bloch, p.33.

<sup>11</sup>Barth, p.9.

make use of any number of different story types, do not render the term itself as synonymous with fable or moral legend. It is many of these fundamental characteristics that are absent in *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*.

Renee Bloch, in an attempt to make clear the "essential and fundamental characteristics of midrash," outlines five points which define midrash : 1) Its point of departure is Scripture, which renders it a genre which is peculiar to Israel, and excludes any possibility of finding parallels outside of Israel. 2) Midrash is a popular genre, and above all it is homiletical. Its origin is to be sought, for the most part, in the liturgical reading of the Torah for Sabbaths and Festivals. 3) It is a study which is attentive to the text. Attempts were made through midrash to understand the text better, and to have its obscurities made clear. The inquiry often began with the asking of a particular question of the text, and then often sought out the answer in parallel passages. It is the Bible being explained by the Bible. 4) Its goal is primarily practical : to define the lessons for faith and for the religious way of life contained in the Biblical text. This practical concern led midrash to reinterpret Scripture and to attempt to "actualize it". 5) There is a distinction between *Midrash Aggadah* and *Midrash Halakhah*. Bloch distinguishes the two forms by context as well as content. Midrash Aggadah relates primarily to the narrative parts of the Torah, seeking to define the meaning

of the stories and the events of history. Generally, it was a product of the Synagogue, serving as the sermon which followed immediately after the liturgical reading of the Scriptures. On the other hand, she perceives Midrash Halakhah as a product of the schools, where the Biblical text was used for instruction. The text was studied, with a view to defining the laws therein and to discovering in them the fundamental principles by which might be derived both new laws for resolving new problems, as well as new arguments for justifying certain customs which were already traditional. While Bloch's conceptualization of the contextual origins of these two different types of midrash is, arguably, over generalized, nonetheless, they still provide the different forms by which classical midrash is defined today.<sup>12</sup>

Bloch's criteria certainly disqualify *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* from the name it bears. While the work's point of departure conceptually appears to be Scriptural, i.e. the Ten Commandments, this relationship between the stories and the commandments is structurally imposed, at best. The stories are arranged according to the order of the Ten Commandments, but seemingly to no end. Joseph Dan notes that the maintenance of the Ten Commandments is an elementary command and a given. It does not make sense that there would be a Jewish work that would preach about them on such a simple

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<sup>12</sup>Bloch, pp.31-34.

level. Thusly, one does not find, either in the introduction, the stories, or in any explication that is included, a simple demand for the maintenance of the commandments. Throughout the collection, the main reason for the commandments is to provide an order, a structure and shape to organize the material that the editor wanted to present to the reader.<sup>13</sup> The Biblical framework is externally imposed, and does not serve as the foundation or the subject of explication of the stories. This is even more evident when one examines the relationship between individual stories and the commandments to which they were attached. The thematic connection between many of the commandments and the stories which are connected to them is artificial and weak. In other cases, the story seems better suited to another commandment. For example, the story "Which is the Most Noble Deed?" (No.39), a recognized international folktale type (Aarne Thompson #976)<sup>14</sup> about a young woman, her fiance, and a highwayman, all three of whom honor the virginity of the young woman and do not harm her, is included under the commandment of "Thou shall not steal," when it would seem more appropriate under "Thou shall not commit adultery."

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<sup>13</sup>Joseph Dan, *Ha-Sippur Ha-Ivri Bi-Yeme-Ha-Benayim*. (Jerusalem : Keter, 1974), p.81. All quotations from this work translated by Jordan Cohen.

<sup>14</sup>Stories which have been categorized under the Aarne-Thompson Folktale Type Index will have their index numbers supplied in parentheses after the initial reference.

The editor justifies his placing of the story through the addition of a frame of a Solomonic tale in which King Solomon identifies the thief among three men, based on their responses to the story he tells. But, as Dov Noy points out, in all versions of the Midrash, the commandment "Thou shall not commit adultery" contains the most stories. In order not to load additional stories on this already overloaded commandment, the story is transferred by the structure of revealing the thief, to "Thou shall not steal."<sup>18</sup> Thus we see, in contradiction to the second of Bloch's points, the story is revealed as being of central importance, and its connection to the Scriptural text, or any explication of it, is incidental.

We find a similar case with the story of Rabbi Matanyah, in which his bride saves him from the angel of death (No.36, Aarne-Thompson #899). Virtually every version of this story clearly indicates that the reason for the arrival of the angel of death on the wedding night is social: the groom does not honor the poor at the wedding feast. This theme is reinforced in our version when we are told that the bride merited saving her groom from death because she helped her poor mother, an old water-carrier. Yet in *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*, the story is included under the commandment of "Thou shall not commit adultery," which has already been noted as being the

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<sup>18</sup>Noy, (1968), p.353.

most populated commandment. Seemingly, the author of the Midrash, needing to justify the inclusion of this story in relation to the Ten Commandments, made the only connection he could. He related the wedding night to adultery, and thereby had the groom bring the decree of death upon himself on account of the excessive joy he felt with his bride. It is obvious that the connection between excessive joy on the wedding night and adultery is weak, but without this hint of excessive joy, the editor would have had to leave out the story, which otherwise would have been of special interest to his audience.<sup>14</sup> As Noy points out, the popular story tellers did not belong to the wealthy class, and their audiences were mostly composed of the poor and the working-class. There would have been great appeal in a story where a wealthy man is visited by the Angel of Death on his wedding night on account of his mistreatment of the poor, especially when the same story hinted at sexual impropriety.<sup>15</sup>

Related to midrash's Scriptural base, and chief among its distinguishing characteristics, is that it is homiletical. The homily is distinguished from other types of sermons in that, while the sermon is usually on a theme drawn from a Scriptural text, a homily usually focuses on practical moral

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<sup>14</sup>Noy, (1968), p.355.

<sup>15</sup>Noy, (1968), p.355.



counsel rather than theoretical doctrine.<sup>16</sup> Homiletics is a popular genre which is functionally designed to impart a clear understanding of expected behavior, based on an investigation of the Biblical text. While Rabbinic homilies often employ the use of exempla, an anecdote usually about a sage or other historical figure presented to illustrate the moral or ethical lesson of the text, the story is simply used as a device, subordinate to the main point of discussion. Often well known stories are simply referred to, or told in part, so as not to detract from the explication. Usually, the final outcome of the discussion is presented quite clearly, either through a concluding statement or the use of a hermeneutical device.

But, as we have already noted, *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* completely reverses this order of priorities. As Joseph Dan notes,

This collection marks the opposite of the relative order of importance between the midrash to a story, as it was done for 700 years and more in the literature of the Mishna, the Talmud, and the Midrashim. In the ancient literature, the explication is the essence, and the story is useless; it does not have status other than as an example, an embellishment, or to make a point, while in *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*, the story becomes important and the explication is incidental to it.... This feature makes *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*... clearly and principally deviant in form from the norms of the literatures of the ancient time.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>C. Hugh Holman, A Handbook to Literature. (Indianapolis : Bobbs-Merrill, 1980), p.217.

<sup>17</sup>Dan, (1974), pp.80-81.

This does not mean that *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* is void of any reference to moral or religious values; clearly there is a distinct or even extreme religious point of view regarding observance of the commandments. Yet this point of view is not drawn from the commandments themselves, but rather from the stories that were chosen to be included in the collection.

This view is evident, for example, in the story "The Cow Who Observed the Sabbath" (No.23), which is found with many parallels throughout Rabbinic literature, is understandably included under the fourth commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy." The commandment stipulates that all who are within the domain of Israel, including non-Jews and animals, are to observe the Sabbath. Yet this story takes this idea one step farther and emphasizes the maintenance of the Sabbath by a cow who was in the possession of a gentile, a viewpoint which has no basis in the Law or the meaning of the commandment. As Joseph Dan points out, there is no preaching here about observing the Sabbath, and no words of praise for those who do observe the Sabbath, but rather it brings the matter to its most extreme conclusion, with no connection to the halakhic precept.<sup>20</sup> The editor of the collection chose a good story which definitely does relate to the Sabbath, yet in an almost absurd way. It reveals the extremes one can go in order to observe a commandment.

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<sup>20</sup>Dan, (1974), p.85.



Similarly there is the story of Rabbi Mattiyah Ben Heresh (No.33), which is included under the commandment "Thou shall not commit adultery." Rabbi Mattiyah blinds both of his eyes in order to defy Satan's test of sexual temptation. Certainly this extreme measure teaches nothing new about the intent of this commandment, nor its observance. Yet, even though these stories do not provide any sort of moral guidance that a Jew could emulate in his or her own life, their extremes do reflect a certain moral outlook, presented in a way that should hold the attention of the audience. This manner of dealing with a commandment in a story, although previously evident in conventional Rabbinic literature, continued prominently in the Hebrew story of the later Middle Ages, and is also reflected strongly in the Moslem story literature of the period, which also had a tendency to glorify a particular commandment to an unreasonable extent.<sup>21</sup>

It has become obvious from the discussion of Bloch's first two points that *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* clearly is not attentive to the Biblical text, Bloch's third point. As noted above, the connection between the stories and the commandment to which they are attached is most often weak, and in no case do they deal with the words of the commandment itself. The concern of the Midrash is not to better understand the text itself, or to clarify any ambiguities (if

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<sup>21</sup>Dan, (1974), p.85.

any existed for the average Jew at the time), for if it is, it fails miserably. Rather, as we have seen, the Ten Commandments, probably the best known of all Biblical passages, appear to have been brought in to apply some sort of authoritative structure to the collection of stories. The stories offer no new insights on the commandments themselves. Rather, they are presented as extreme examples of what is already known material. More often than not, the stories actually go beyond the generally accepted meaning of those commandments. In this sense, no new lessons or ideas are drawn from the text at all, thus denying the ultimate purpose of midrash.

In a way, the stories contained in this collection serve the purpose of modern political satire, not so much commenting on a law (be it good or bad), but rather on the application of the law to real life. *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* is seemingly not concerned at all with the textual understanding of the Ten Commandments, but rather with the idea of how those commandments could be played out to the extreme. By choosing the Ten Commandments as his textual framework, the editor has pointedly chosen a text which has already been subject to a great deal of exegesis. This frees him from the restraints of having to explicate the text further, thereby allowing more room for his imaginative faculty. More than stressing its weaknesses as a midrash, this feature of *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* positions the work in a unique place in the

development of Rabbinic literature. The collection is one of the first works of the genre to free itself from the constraints of the literary tradition which demanded new Biblical exegesis and continuous attention to the Scriptural text.

Having defined *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* then as an outlet for the imagination, or what David Stern refers to as "Rabbinic Fantasy" - that is, statements of the private imagination rather than of public doctrine emerging from that period in Jewish history known as Rabbinic<sup>22</sup> - it follows that the material is not primarily concerned with actualizing the Biblical text. The extreme and fanciful nature of most of the stories precludes the direct application of any of the moral lessons contained therein to the life of one who may read or hear them. Not only do the lessons that the narratives are supposed to illustrate and what actually seems to be their message often appear quite at odds, but, as one scholar observed, "the ridiculously profane world sometimes pictured in the stories is rarely appropriate to the conventional piety of the commandments and the homilies extolling them."<sup>23</sup> As it is not attentive to the text, this "Midrash" avoids the "why" question, not allowing for any generalizations of the text which would provide guidelines for contemporary application.

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<sup>22</sup>Stern, p.5.

<sup>23</sup>Stern, p.11.

We see this avoidance, for example, in the section of stories related to the third commandment, "Do not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your God." This is probably the most homiletical passage of all in its use of the Biblical story of Gehazi, the assistant of Elisha, who was cursed with *zaraat* for generations on account of falsely swearing an oath. The story (No.20) concludes with a comment, given in the name of the Sages, stating that one should not accustom himself to making oaths, for he will get in the habit of doing so, and then not be able to stop. Here, in one of the few places in the text where any sort of reason is given for observing a commandment, the stated reason really does not address the specifics of the commandment (to avoid profaning God's name).

This story is then followed by another (No.21) in which a man makes his father a death-bed promise never to swear an oath. As a result of his promise, he endures great hardship, including the loss of all his wealth, as well as his wife and children, only to be rewarded by God in the end. Obviously, the author chooses this story because it is an extreme example of loyalty to a father and to God. This type of trial is a common story type in both Jewish and International Folk literature. Yet the appropriateness of this example to this commandment is not altogether clear. There is, for example, no connection between the loss of the protagonist's wife and children and his refraining from swearing. The cycle of fortune and misfortune throughout the story hints at a variety

of rewards and punishments, none of which are necessarily related to his original promise. The hero commonly behaves in a manner that would be deemed unacceptable in any other context, such as abandoning his children and contemplating suicide rather than turning to God. And, although he is ultimately rewarded by God for refraining from swearing oaths, the reason the protagonist originally promised not to do so was not out of fear of God or concern for the commandments, but rather out of respect for his father's dying wish. At best, this story exemplifies not the third commandment, but rather the fifth, "Honor your father and mother." At worse, the only practical advice the story renders is the idea that one must look out for one's own best interests. These stories help little, if at all, to actualize the lesson of the Biblical text to the life of the reader at any time. Surely, they would provide only problems if one was to read them as such.

It would seem redundant at this point to launch into a discussion of whether *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* qualifies as a Midrash Aggadah or Midrash Halakhah, when it has become abundantly clear that the work does not qualify as midrash at all. However, although not midrashic, *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* can still be defined as a collection of aggadah, in the broadest sense of the word. As Louis Ginzberg notes in the introduction to his Legends of the Jews, probably the greatest modern collection of aggadot, the Aramaic *aggadah*,

or the Hebrew *haggadah*, is a term that can be "explained by circumlocution, but cannot be translated."<sup>24</sup> The term is problematic, because the relation between midrash and aggadah is not altogether clear, as Joseph Heinemann notes, "just as not all aggadah is midrash, not all midrash - the halakhic midrashim, for example - is aggadah."<sup>25</sup> Heinemann further comments that "Perhaps the most convincing explanation of the name aggadah is one that relates the name not to the contents of the aggadah but rather to its methods of transmission. While Scripture was read aloud in the Synagogue from a scroll, the aggadot were not read to the people in the context of the Synagogue service. Rather, the aggadic tradition was transmitted chiefly by word of mouth, that is, by being related orally in the public sermon."<sup>26</sup> Aggadah then is a very broad category of literature, and has been defined to include virtually the whole body of non-legalistic rabbinic literature,<sup>27</sup> including the body of historical and imaginative material.

The stories of *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*, precisely

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<sup>24</sup>Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, 1, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1988), p.viii.

<sup>25</sup>Joseph Heinemann, "The Nature of Aggadah," trans. by Marc Bregman, in Midrash and Literature, eds. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1986), p.41.

<sup>26</sup>Heinemann, pp.41-42.

<sup>27</sup>Chaim Pearl in his Introduction to H.N. Bialik and Y.H. Rawnitzky, Sefer Ha-Aggadah. trans & ed. Chaim Pearl, (Tel Aviv : Dvir, 1988), p.1.



because they do not fit the standardized form of classical midrash, appear to be prototypic examples of the aggadah. Reinforced by the somewhat wooden quotational structure of the dialogue and the unconventional and often uneven narrative, the collection seems to present a fairly faithful representation of the stories as recorded from their oral tradition. It is a collection of stories that have been told, and are to be told, in an age when story telling was one the chief forms of entertainment. The extreme nature of the stories' underlying morals and the thematic threads which often touch on the profane are common devices in folk literature, designed to appeal to and hold the attention of an audience.

The character of the stories themselves seem to belong to a milieu different from that of the midrash; not that of the Academy or the Synagogue service, but rather that of the speech of the *Maggid*, the itinerant preacher, who earned his livelihood through the public appeal of his sermons. Whereas midrash stems from a once oral scholarly tradition that was recorded in an ordered manner, these aggadot emerged from a parallel tradition reflective of the common people, recorded later when written literature itself was more common. Through the process of being written down though, the text takes on a new shape, resembling that which is considered the accepted form, although it continues to serve its original purpose. As Dov Noy concludes, "It can be assumed that many of the

story collections look as if they are part of the religious literature, but a thematic analysis will prove that they do not belong to anything other than the realm of secular-entertainment literature."<sup>28</sup>

What Noy refers to as "secular-entertainment literature," that is, narrative writing drawn from the imagination of the author rather than from history, fact, or legal/religious discourse, is commonly referred to in English as "fiction." While folktales, parables, and myths, all forms of aggadot, may contain some fictional elements, the key is that, through the process of being written down, the text itself becomes more or less static, no longer subject to the changes and variations that characterize oral transmission. Under the subjective hand of the compiler/editor, the stories cease to be folktales, and evolve into a more structured narrative form. In that sense, *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*, as a collection of individual aggadot compiled and edited early in the Middle Ages as a written anthology, qualifies it as one of the earliest examples of what was at that time a new and unique literary form : Hebrew fiction.

As we have seen, *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* bears little resemblance to the form and structure of classical midrash, and is decisively misnamed as such. Rather, the work represents a whole new genre of literature, previously

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<sup>28</sup>Noy, (1968), p.355.



unknown, or unaccepted, in the Rabbinic world. Since no original copy of *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* exists, it is impossible to say with complete surety what was the intention of the original author for compiling this collection, or whether he was ever aware that he was creating a distinct new type of literature. In light of the many differences in the various manuscripts and printed editions, it would seem that, over time, the work came into many hands, and was often changed or altered to suite different needs or situations. Perhaps at one time it did exist in a form that more closely resembled classical midrash. For now, we can only speculate. Regardless, the similarities of the versions we do have far out weigh the differences between them. In that the work consistently falls short of the defining characteristics of midrash, we can safely conclude that others conditions existed that compelled the editor to name this written collection of aggadot, *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*.

CHAPTER TWO

Why Midrash?

The Development of Medieval Hebrew Narrative Literature

It is not really known whether *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* was in fact the original title of this collection of stories. Since no original copy exists, and the author is unknown, we must rely on the earliest versions that are available, all of which do bear this title. Yet, given the nature of the Jewish world, and certainly Jewish literature, during the early Middle Ages, it makes sense that the author/compiler of such a work would have designated it as "Midrash." Having created a new form of literature, and most likely not even knowing he had done so, the author probably tried to give his work a title that would make it seem familiar and of interest to its potential audience. But his options were limited. At this point in the Rabbinic period, the parameters of acceptable Jewish literature were narrow and of singular focus, and the idea of secular literature was virtually non-existent. It was out of this type of literary tradition that the work was created, and it was as part of this tradition that the work was to be accepted, or fail.

By the end of the ninth century, most of the classical collections of midrash had either been completed, or were in the final stages of completion. The authoritarian institutions of the Rabbis had well been established over the preceding seven hundred years, and along with them the parameters of Rabbinic literature. As in medieval literature in general, there was no sharp line in the Jewish writing of the Middle Ages that divided history and legend, fact and

fable. The literature was defined by boundaries that were essentially religious, and reflected the cultural milieu which produced it. Indeed, until the twelfth century, virtually no Hebrew narrative was produced that was not in the guise of one of the traditional legal, exegetical or homiletical genres of Rabbinic literature. It is nearly impossible to speak of any truly secular writing before this time. As David Stern notes, "...to be sure, the terms religious and secular as opposed categories are absurdly anachronistic if applied to medieval civilization. The religious dimension of Jewish life in the Middle Ages encompassed experiences we would hardly consider appropriate, while matters we might call secular would have been treated as a form of relaxation or entertainment, not as a separate quarter of reality."<sup>27</sup> To the author of such works of Rabbinic literature, and to their proposed audiences, narrative writing was considered to be sacred text. It was not, of course, on the same order as the Bible, but it was considered part of the Oral Law, emphasizing and illustrating the Divine will as prescribed through Scripture. So grounded was all narrative writing, and in fact all creative expression, in the process of explicating the Divine will that, by the twelfth century, there was still no exact term in Hebrew for "imagination." Creative inspiration or acts of the imagination were related to prophecy, which was relegated

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<sup>27</sup>Stern, p.6.

to the remote past, or to messianism, which was considered part of the uncertain future. The gift of inspiration was disparaged for the greater glory of knowledge of the Divine law. This knowledge was part of the present, represented by the Sages, the Rabbis, and the scholars of halakhah.<sup>30</sup>

As has already been mentioned, the Bible served as the source for all Rabbinic literature. Since Biblical times, narration had been regarded as an art among the Jewish people. Yet, for a variety of reasons, the Rabbis chose not to continue to compose narrative of their own invention in the Biblical mode. This fact is revealing not only because they surely could have, but because their slightly older contemporaries did in books that are today part of the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and New Testament literature.<sup>31</sup> For the early Rabbis, the Biblical narrative had exhausted the possibilities for all narrative; there was no way they could match its majesty. Intuitively, they may also have understood that the time for composing narrative in the Biblical fashion had passed, and, as there were no other models available to them in the way of written narrative, they turned their energies instead to commentary upon the Biblical narrative.

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<sup>30</sup>Shalom Spiegel, "On Medieval Hebrew Poetry," in *The Jews*, ed. Louis Finkelstein, (New York : Harper & Brothers, 1960), pp.855-856.

<sup>31</sup>Stern, p.7.

This turn in the form of literary activity extended as much from Israel's social history as its literary history. The Rabbinic institutions grew out of the ashes of the Second Temple and the end of Israelite self-sovereignty. . With the loss of sanctuary and state, when the very future of Judaism seemed imperiled, the reliance on Torah and its scholars became more urgent and insistent.<sup>32</sup> With the long past expiration of prophecy, halakhah became the only thing left; all that mattered was Torah, and the Rabbis were the ones who interpreted it and made it relevant to the daily life of the Jewish people. It represented the will of God and God's relationship with the people at a time when there was no longer direct communication. This centrality of the canonized Hebrew Scriptures in the life of the Jewish community of the early Middle Ages is compounded by the development of Christian doctrine and their own scriptures, purportedly the "New Testament" replacing the old covenant between God and Israel. Together, they account for the frequency and apparent preoccupation of Medieval Jewish literary activity with Biblical exegesis and commentary. An understanding of Torah became the chief concern not only of the Rabbis, but of the people as well.

But, as Louis Ginzberg notes, the fancy of the people did not die out in the post-Biblical time. Rather, the bent of

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<sup>32</sup>Spiegel, p.854.

its activity was mostly determined by the past. "Men craved entertainment in later times as well as in the earlier, only instead of resorting for its subject matter to what happened under their eyes, they drew from the fountain head of the past."<sup>33</sup> The events of the past were studied and commented upon, and they were combined with the Biblical myths, the folktales of the people, and the legends of the Sages to create one broad literary product. The result was the *aggadah*, a literature which is reflective of the communal experience, but which also pays some attention to the lighter phases of life. It provided amusement in addition to moral and spiritual edification. This telling of stories for entertainment and the learning of the faith were interwoven in a manner unparalleled in other Western cultures. Although it originated as an oral medium, as it became recorded, the *aggadah* took on a "quasi-theological function,"<sup>34</sup> serving both ideological and didactic purposes, and acquiring a distinction equalled only by the *halakhah* as a path to the Divine. "If you wish to come to know Him who by His word created the world," it is written, "study the *aggadah*."<sup>35</sup> Thus there transpired a curious reversal of the usual folkloric process. The medium of written literature and the teachings of the

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<sup>33</sup>Ginzberg, (1988), I, p.x.

<sup>34</sup>Stern, p.9.

<sup>35</sup>Sifre Deuteronomy 49.

Rabbis actually encouraged rather than suppressed the oral tradition.<sup>36</sup> The currency of the major aggadic works in the Synagogue and the schools, which were connected with Scripture and therefore authoritative, validated the telling of stories outside as a mode of acceptable, and perhaps even Divine, entertainment. Story-telling, both homiletically and recreationally, developed as a integral part of the daily life of the Jews of the Middle Ages, a daily life whose religious dimension was all-encompassing.

As story-telling became the medium of creative expression among the people, within the Rabbinic institutions midrash became the natural arena in which the Rabbis and scholars exercised their imaginations, safely rooted in the Biblical text. As David Stern notes, "Contradictions in the Scriptural text, discontinuities, lacunae, silences, inexplicable motives, lexical peculiarities, awkward or unusual syntactic constructions - any one of these "irritants" in the Biblical text or in its manner of telling became for the Rabbis either an occasion for recounting a narrative of their own invention or a peg upon which they hung an extra-Biblical legend or tradition passed down to them without explicit source in Scripture."<sup>37</sup> Through the process of midrash, the Biblical

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<sup>36</sup>Richard Dorson's introduction to Folktales of Israel, ed. Dov Noy, trans. Gene Baharav, (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1963), p.vi.

<sup>37</sup>Stern, p.7.



narrative was used as a screen upon which the Rabbis projected their own understanding of existence, and related that understanding to the people. As a set, institutionalized literary form, based in Scripture, it carried the authority of the Bible - the Written Law - to disseminate the Divine will, as well as the more immediate authority of the Rabbis - the Oral Law - to determine halakhah and establish the accepted patterns of daily behavior.

But for the people, midrash was also a popular literature, much less legalistic and technical than some of the other products of the Rabbis, such as the various commentaries and codes. While addressing their daily concerns, midrash also shared in their love of the story, actually utilizing many of the same aggadot that were current among the people. The social institution of the sermon (*derasha*) became one of the most popular attractions within the Jewish communities of both East and West, and the preacher (*darshan*) became the main instrument of diffusion of both the halakhah and the latest stories. Midrash, while consistently religious, was the literature that bridged the needs for both religious/ethical instruction and diversionary entertainment, needs common to both the Rabbis and the people.

Midrash evolved then as the medium which was both popular and authoritative. It was a literary genre that was recognized and familiar. But it also evolved as the literature most commonly used to veil criticism and dissent,

as well as works of independent achievement. Any new idea, in order to gain a foothold in Medieval Israel, had to be in some way related to Torah. Biblical commentary, and specifically midrash, was viewed as the easiest way to do that. As it developed into a set form, the structure was used to disguise, and ultimately to preserve, many ideas that might not otherwise have found a receptive audience, and certainly would not have been accepted by the Rabbis. Scripture, as interpreted through midrash, was used to support political ends, personal gain, and social change, as well as serving as running commentary on the more mundane aspects of daily life. While the midrashic form provided a safe haven for what might otherwise have been deemed subversive, or simply unacceptable or inappropriate views, the title "Midrash" itself began to become attached to many pointedly non-midrashic works, which possessed neither the form nor prestige of the real thing.

*Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* fits into this last category. Not only was independent creativity outside of the realm of Scriptural commentary considered inappropriate and untimely by the Rabbis, it was actually suppressed. Thus we see even Saadia Gaon (d.942), generally acknowledged as the greatest scholar of his generation, having his poetry denounced as a "pretense to prophecy."<sup>38</sup> As late as the eighteenth century, the mystic and poet Moses Hayyim Luzzatto (d.1747) had a

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<sup>38</sup>Spiegel, p.858.

manuscript confiscated and burned by a Rabbinic court. With such a prevalent attitude towards non-Biblically based literature, authors of such works had to carefully protect their creations under the guise of an acceptable form. Not only would such a measure have been necessary to avoid Rabbinic censure, but it would also facilitate acceptance of the work by the people themselves, by appealing to their sense of the familiar. Thus we see in *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* not only the designation "Midrash" in the title, but also the pretense of midrashic structure. This pretense was facilitated by arranging the collection of stories around the Ten Commandments, a most identifiable Biblical text. Whether the "midrash" works or not as exegesis is inconsequential as long as the people are attracted to the work, and it avoids the undue attention of the authorities.

But the people were not fooled. While such works as *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* enjoyed limited popularity, as Joseph Dan notes: "Few of the story essays that were compiled in the Middle Ages, particularly in the earlier period, were accepted by their readers, as later by scholars, as part of the Midrashic literature..."<sup>39</sup> These works, although enjoying some popularity within certain communities, were recognized as being fundamentally different from the norms of the genre to which they aspired. While avoiding suppression, they were

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<sup>39</sup>Dan, (1974), p.79.

differentiated from the main body of Talmudic-Midrashic literature by categorization as "Minor Midrashim" or "Late Midrashim," not so much indicating the period in which they were produced, but rather their form. These works blended a mixture of early and late material, mystical and folk, along with established midrashic aggadot.<sup>40</sup> This relating of story collections to the "late" midrashic literature indicates the lack of familiarity in the early Middle Ages, and later, with the new form of the Hebrew story.<sup>41</sup> Thus the necessity to disguise the uniqueness of this new form with an older, more recognized form.

Among these "Late Midrashim," *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* is considered a fairly conservative collection. That is to say, it does not maintain a differentiating approach to the Rabbinic literature, and it reflects a religious attitude not far from the mainstream of the Jewish thought of the time. As one of the earliest of the story collections, whether it was compiled intentionally for entertainment or for any other number of reasons, the author clearly seems to have imitated the dominant literary model, and perhaps even believed himself that his structured story collection was true midrash. Later compilers maintained no such illusion.

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<sup>40</sup>Late Midrashim are usually found today in larger collections of aggadot such as Jellinek, *Beit Ha-Midrash* and Eisenstein's *Ozar Midrashim*.

<sup>41</sup>Dan, (1974), p.79.

One of the best known of these later story collections, *An Elegant Composition Concerning Relief After Adversity* by Rabbi Nissim of Kairouan,<sup>42</sup> was a work created specifically to provide entertainment and diversion. Rabbi Nissim was an eleventh century Talmudist and leader of the North African Jewish community. Originally written in Arabic, the collection was compiled by Nissim for his father-in-law at the time when the latter was mourning for his son. The stated purpose of the work was, "that he might be occupied by the reading of pious and moral stories and thus assuage his pain."<sup>43</sup> "An Elegant Composition," displays much more literary development than the earlier *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*, from which it borrowed many stories. It is considered to be typical of this phase of Jewish literature, being greatly influenced by the Arabic models of prose literature that were so prominent at the time throughout Medieval Europe. The work is multi-colored, containing fanciful and sometimes grotesque fables, moral folktales, proverbs, and apothegms. Although the primary aim of the work was to entertain, at the same time it was not able to break from the desire to teach. While the majority of stories were

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<sup>42</sup>Translated into English from the original Arabic by William M. Brinner, (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1977). Available in Hebrew as *Hibbur Yafeh Me-Ha-Yeshu'ah*, ed. H.Z. Hirschberg, (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1954).

<sup>43</sup>Meyer Waxman, *A History of Jewish Literature*, (New York : Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), p.453.

borrowed from Jewish sources, the collection also includes some stories taken from Arabic sources, but as a rule, Nissim tinged them with Jewish color.\*\* As was typical of the Rabbis, Nissim was no mere compiler, faithfully rendering the stories as recorded from the oral tradition. He reworked the stories with a strong editorial hand, to make them not only artistic, but reflective of his agenda. As in many of the story collections, his version of the popular stories tend to be much more elaborate than they are found in their original sources.

Nissim's collection, while neither the earliest or the most voluminous of the Medieval Jewish story collections, distinguishes itself by being the only collection with a known compiler and origin. It represents a fuller expression of the literary trend begun with *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*, but freed from the earlier need to disguise its form. Other collections closer in both time and style to *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* include *Midrash Eleh Ezkerah*,\*\* *Alpha Beta D'Ben*

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\*\*Waxman, p.453.

\*\*Also called *Aggadat Aseret Harugei Malkhut*, in Eisenstein, vol.2, pp.439-449.



*Sira*,<sup>46</sup> and *Sefer Ha-Ma'asiyyot*,<sup>47</sup> the last being the latest, and largest collection. Each of these story collections is the work of an anonymous author/compiler, and each represent a different step in the evolution of the story collection.

*Midrash Eleh Ezkerah*, while maintaining the designation "Midrash," steps even further away from the midrashic form. Although it shares a similar structure to *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*, it utilizes different rubrics, in this case the Talmudic stories about the death of Rabbi Akiva and nine other martyrs. While the title of the Midrash is derived from Psalm 42:5, its account of the execution of the ten Sages is drawn almost entirely from talmudic and midrashic literature, denying even a pretense to Biblical exegesis. But despite its shortcomings as true midrash, this collection of exempla proved to be the first in the tradition of martyrologies that became popular during the Middle Ages, and lent its theme to many liturgical poems, including the *Eleh Ezkerah* which is recited to this day on Yom Kippur.

The *Alpha Beta D'Ben Sira*, originally thought to be a pseudepigraphical work attributed to Ben Sira, was later discovered to be an eighth or ninth century collection of

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<sup>46</sup>Eisenstein, vol.1, pp.35-50.

<sup>47</sup>Originally published as *The Ancient Collections of Agadoth, The Sefer Ha-Maasiyoth and Two Facsimiles*, (Ramgate : Judith Montefiore College, 1896), it was later republished simply as *Sefer Ha-Ma'asiyyot*, (New York : Ktav, 1968) Gaster also prepared an English version known as *Exempla of the Rabbis* (London : Asia Publishing Co., 1924).

stories and epigrams structured around the alphabet. Although couched in the style of an aggadic midrash, the aim of the work is to protest against the accepted norms of Judaism. The stories treat Biblical characters irreverently, and parodies the rabbinic methods of learning. Some of the stories even seem to protest against the way God rules the world. While the work has been criticized for maintaining an anti-Rabbinic bias, modern scholars have concluded that the primary purpose of the work was simply to entertain, following in the trend of the satirical and often vulgar amusements of popular folk literature.<sup>48</sup> Whatever the intent, the tales included in the *Alpha Beta D'Ben Sira* are considered to be some of the highest examples of artistic form found in early medieval Hebrew literature.<sup>49</sup> In addition, despite its irreverent tone, the collection bears the distinction of being the only story collection of this type cited as a source in an opinion referred to in the *Shulhan Arukh*.<sup>50</sup>

*Sefer Ha-Ma'asiyyot*, entitled *The Exempla of the Rabbis* in English, is a collection of stories published from a

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<sup>48</sup>Norman M. Bronznick's introduction to "The Alphabet of Ben Sira," in *Fiction*, p.100.

<sup>49</sup>Joseph Dan, "Fiction, Hebrew" in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, (1971), VI, 1264.

<sup>50</sup>The 13th century French Tosafist Rabbi Peretz of Corbeil used the "Aleph-Bet" as a source to prove that artificially inseminating a daughter with her father's sperm was halakhically permissible and did not constitute an incestuous act. This opinion was cited by the Taz in *Yoreh De'ah* 195:7 (Bronznick, p.100).

manuscript discovered by Moses Gaster. This collection, probably the latest of the four, was compiled sometime in the late 11th or 12th century. The work represents a culmination of the story collection form. Its title bluntly represents what it is, and its content is simply the retelling of story after story, with no pretense to commentary or externally imposed structure. The work aspires to no ideological or didactic intent; its sole aim is to entertain. Most of the over two hundred stories are talmudic, but many are taken from Hebrew folktales. The work displays artistic effort in the captivating manner in which the stories are presented and the structure of sequences which organizes the collection into a unified narrative work.<sup>31</sup> While it shares some stories in common, *Sefer Ha-Ma'asiyyot* marks the stylistic culmination of the process begun by *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*; the medieval Hebrew story collection has matured as a separate literary form, independent of midrash, and free from the need to disguise itself.

Among the Medieval Hebrew story collections, *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* seems to have been the least successful in terms of popularity or widespread attention. As the earliest of its form, it stood alone, not quite fitting into any genre. Despite its name, it was never accepted as an authoritative midrash, not only because it lacked any true exegetical

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<sup>31</sup>Dan, "Fiction, Hebrew," (1971), p.1266.

insight, but probably also because of its portrayal of extreme conduct and its apparent preoccupation with lascivious behavior. As a narrative work, it bore no special appeal to the masses. As a written work, it had neither precedent as a form of entertainment literature, nor the clarity or straight forward arrangement of the later story collections. It was a work always struggling for an audience. This is most evident in the some of the changes the collection underwent through out its history. Some later versions bear the title *Haggadah Le-Shavu'ot*, or *Midrash Shel Shavu'ot*, leading one to believe that the text was used liturgically on that festival. However, there is no evidence that any Jewish community ever utilized the work during Shavu'ot. The work also did not succeeded as a pedagogic work. Some later, somewhat bowdlerized versions of the work seem to emphasize the moral tone of the stories, with added comments before and after the individual stories. Yet even such a modified edition of the work never achieved the same type of popularity as a moralistic storybook as did Nissim's "Elegant Composition," or the much later Yiddish ethical stories. Lacking a niche, if it was to be read at all, *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* was forced to present itself under a false pretense, that of the most familiar and popular form of Rabbinic literature. The collection stands as a work out of time, the renaissance of the written story in Jewish life. Yet coming out of the religious epoch in which it did develop, its

author probably did believe the work to be midrash; better to be viewed as a bad example of an establish form, than the first example of a new one.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Hand of the Editor

In describing the literary quality of our version of *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*, one can say that, at best, it is uneven. But, as Joseph Dan points out, any attempt to describe the work's character meets with several difficulties.<sup>32</sup> The main problem of course is that no original copy of the Midrash is known to exist. Since, in the Middle Ages, there was no authoritative form of the collection or a formulated number of stories included in it, the work underwent numerous revisions, as is evident by the many disparate versions that exist today. As a result of these revisions, each printed version of the work reflects the hand of many editors, most of whom no doubt added their own stories as well as reworking the structure and flow of the document. Thus we find in the divergent versions not only different numbers of stories, but also different stories within the same commandment rubrics, differences in language, and differences in style and presentation.

These differences are not limited though to the various manuscripts. Inconsistencies in style and language are found within the individual versions as well, making it even more difficult to hypothesize as to the original form and intent of the work. Yet, despite these inconsistencies, we can still tell much about the work from the commonalities of the disparate versions, including a glimpse into the editorial

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<sup>32</sup>Dan, (1974), p.80.



process, and we can speak to the stylistics of the individual version we have at hand.

Eisenstein's text of *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* appears to be deficient in many ways. Based primarily on Jellinek's text from *Beit Ha-Midrash*, the work follows exactly the same order, yet leaves out a number of stories. In one case (No.35), Eisenstein gives only the first line of a long, well known story about Rabbi Meir that is included in full in the Jellinek collection. Most startling in both versions is the omission of the entire tenth commandment, *Lo Tachmod*. While Jellinek's non-annotated text makes no comment about this exception, Eisenstein explains in a note that the commandment is omitted, "because there is no midrash about it."<sup>83</sup> However, in his introduction he does describe the Midrash as containing, "stories about each and every commandment,"<sup>84</sup> which is in fact the case in all other printed versions.

Peculiar to both the Jellinek and Eisenstein versions is the inclusion of an introduction borrowed from *Divrei Rabbi Eliezer*, based on the verse, "Who can recount the mighty acts of the Lord, proclaim all His praises" (Psalm 106:2).<sup>85</sup> This introduction is included under the heading, "First Commandment," supposedly relating to God's dominion over all

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<sup>83</sup>Eisenstein, p.461, note #14.

<sup>84</sup>Eisenstein, p.450.

<sup>85</sup>See Friedlander's edition of *Pirkei De Rabbi Eliezer*, (New York : Sepher-Hermon Press, 1981), p.9.

creation. This section (Nos.1-15), which in length is greater than any of those which deal with particular commandments, focuses mostly on the process of creation and the structure of the cosmos. Never is a specific reference made to the first commandment. This section is then followed immediately by a second section, also headed "First Commandment" (No.16), which tells of God's giving the Ten Commandments to Israel and specifically refers to the first commandment. As most other versions of the Midrash begin at this point, it is safe to assume that this introduction was added to the collection at a later time, perhaps to give it more of an authentic midrashic "feel."

This first section really contributes little to the collection beyond a few stories which could be used to greater effect in other parts of the collection.<sup>86</sup> In addition, the language and structure of this introduction is distinctly different from the concise flow and division of stories throughout the rest of the collection. More than stories, this section uses parables and the more technical exegetical devices common to midrash to describe the heavens and the structure of the universe. Also, truer to midrashic form, there is much more use in the introduction of Scriptural text

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<sup>86</sup>For example, section 15 contains the well-known story about God's offering the Torah to many different peoples prior to Israel's acceptance. This story would seemingly fit well under the rubrics of either the first or second commandments. Yet, it is lost in the introduction.

and cross-references.

The introduction is also distinct from the body of the collection by the world view it presents. *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* as a whole contains some very particular biases, which, one would assume, reflect the milieu out of which it developed. As has been discussed above, the collection presents a very extreme view towards observance of the commandments, far beyond that required by halakhah. This view echoes that found in contemporaneous Arabic literature, as well as in later Jewish literature written in both Arabic and Hebrew. The collection is also distinguished by its peculiar view of women, one that simultaneously presents the conventional Medieval role of women in society, as displayed throughout Rabbinic literature and the general culture of the Middle Ages, while also reworking the stories and presenting them in a manner that will make the collection of particular appeal to women. As Dov Noy notes, women made up a high percentage of the community who listened to the popular sermons, and to folktales in particular. Thus, in order to appeal to this audience, there is understandably a high proportion of female heroes among the stories of the Midrash.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, we find included in the Eisenstein version a retelling of the story about the woman and her seven

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<sup>37</sup>Noy, (1968), p.354.

sons from the Book of Maccabees,<sup>38</sup> as well as numerous other stories where women emerge as the wisest, morally strongest or ultimately most successful, characters.<sup>39</sup> In addition to these stories contained in the Eisenstein version, other versions of *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* include retellings of stories about Judith, Miriam Bat Tanchum, and Bruriah, all portraying women in a positive light.

Besides women, *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* also seems designed to appeal to the common people. In any culture, folktales, as an oral literature, commonly gave voice to certain themes and socio-economic inclinations which were not deemed appropriate to the more distinguished, and costly, written literature.<sup>40</sup> Some of the most popular themes include confrontations between individuals of distinctly different social classes, usually with the poor outsmarting, or somehow coming out ahead of, the rich, and, even more so, relations between men and women, complete with plenty of thinly veiled sexual innuendo. As a product of this genre, it is no surprise then that, in every version, the commandment "Thou shall not commit adultery" contains more stories than any other commandment.

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<sup>38</sup>2 Maccabees 7.

<sup>39</sup>See the treatment of women in stories number 21, 36, 37, and 39.

<sup>40</sup>Early printed literature was very costly, and therefore was produced to appeal to those who could afford it, i.e. wealthy patrons, and academic and religious institutions.

Throughout *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* we find that confrontation plays a critical role. The stories of the collection not only depict confrontations between the sexes and the classes, but also confrontations between beings in a variety of different situations in life : Jew and non-Jew, animal and human, Heaven and Earth, God and Satan, the people and the governing power, honest people and swindlers, children and parents, and many others. In each case, as one would expect in a work of this nature, the confrontation can be distilled down to a conflict between good and evil, right and wrong. But it is through the designation of what is considered good, and what is considered evil that the biases of the particular stories emerge. In some cases the distinction is obvious, as in the case of the story of Rabbi Matthiah ben Heresh's avoidance of adultery (No. 33). Satan, as the tempter, is clearly evil, and the Sage, who exercises extreme self-discipline, is shown to embody all that is good. But the dichotomy is not always so clear cut. As noted above, in the story of the wife who saved her husband from the Angel of Death (No.36), mistreatment of the poor clearly emerges as a sin, punishable by death. Yet, the story is complex. In the context of the commandment to which it is connected (Thou shall not commit adultery), this conflict between rich and poor is not so obvious. Yet, subtle as the message may be, we find in this story a combination of all the elements which would be included to appeal to the masses : a strong, smart

woman who confronts God in order to save her husband, a poor, dirty man (actually the Angel of Death in disguise) who stands up to a wealthy man for his rights, and a brief, titillating description of a wedding night. Whether the message comes through or not, the story seems carefully calculated to attract, and amuse, the common people who are the targeted audience of the collection.

The story about Shaul, the man who was sold as a slave (No.37), is very typical of most the stories found in the body of *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*. Not only is the story indicative of the style of presentation and the language used throughout the collection, but it exhibits a heavy editorial hand. When compared with versions of the same story in other collections,<sup>41</sup> it becomes obvious that the version in *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* has been reworked by its editor/compiler in order to make the story fit a particular commandment, and to make it more appealing to his prospective audience. In many ways, the changes were made to the detriment of the narrative flow, and they muddled rather than clarified the apparent message of the story. Nonetheless, these changes are reflective of those which appear to have been made throughout the collection, in order to meld the disparate stories into one, more or less cohesive, collection.

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<sup>41</sup>The primary text used for comparison will be, "The Man Who was Sold as a Slave Because He Neglected the Study of Torah," in Moses Gaster, *Ma'aseh Book*, (Philadelphia : Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), p.528-533.



In *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*, "The Man Who was Sold as a Slave" is another story included under the commandment "Thou shall not commit adultery." The plot follows a conventional structure in Rabbinic literature : a childless man prays to God for a son, usually accompanying the petition with some sort of promise. A son is granted, given a name related to the conditions under which he was born (*Shaul* - "asked"), and is set by his father on a particular path of study or endeavor. The father then dies, and the son embarks on some sort of adventure which is resolved in a way that relates to the father's promise, and which illustrates the moral point of the story. Variations on this structure can be found in many of the stories in *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*.<sup>42</sup> There is, however, a major departure from this structure in our story; one that also distinguishes it from other versions of the story. It is the wife, not Shaul, who emerges as the chief exemplar of the story's moral, and the virtue she embodies in the end of the story is vastly different from that which is proposed by the father in the story's beginning.

In the *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* version of the story, as well as that of Gaster, the father petitions God for a son, and promises that the boy will be trained in the study of Torah. The father keeps his promise, teaching the boy Torah until "he became very wise." It seems then that study of

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<sup>42</sup>See Nos. 21, 30, 34, 36, 37.



Torah is the virtue being promoted in the story, and in fact, the Gaster version continues this way. After his father's death, we are told that the son leaves his home to pursue a life of Torah study. Along the way he meets Elijah the Prophet, who arranges a marriage for him. After the wedding, we are explicitly told that Shaul is sold into slavery for seven years after neglecting his studies for a week.<sup>43</sup> After he is swept away by Elijah, his wife Sarah is left unaware of the reason for his disappearance. It is only when they are briefly reunited after five years that Sarah is informed by her husband as to the root cause of his enslavement.

In the *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* version, the reason for Shaul's enslavement is never made absolutely clear, and the wife, called Hannah in this version, is portrayed as a radically different character. While Shaul is described as being wise, there is no indication in this version that his commitment to Torah study is the same as his father's, and that it continued at all after his father's death. Shaul does not leave home to pursue his studies, but simply goes out to accompany a funeral procession. It is then that he meets Elijah who arranges for him to marry Hannah. But before the marriage takes place, the incident occurs which results in Shaul's enslavement :

...the young man came to be married on the seventh day. Elijah came and found him as he was sitting and playing with the bride. Elijah said to him, You

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<sup>43</sup>Gaster, (1981), p.530.

lay down and forgot your life! Seven years you will be sold as a slave after the seven days of the feast."<sup>4</sup>

Apparently, from this passage, the catalyst for Shaul's being sold as a slave was that he was "sitting and playing with the bride." While the meaning of this phrase is unclear, given the context of the story within the rubric of the seventh commandment, one can assume that this phrase is being used euphemistically to indicate some sort of sexual encounter, probably pre-marital. This is supported by Elijah's admonition, "You lay down and forgot your life!" Seemingly, in the clutches of passion, Shaul forgot everything that he had ever been taught, including proper moral behavior. We are told that when Shaul is taken by Elijah from the riverside, Hannah understood the situation, so no explanation is given. Later, when the husband and wife are reunited, Shaul explains all that has happened to him, but no further attention is paid to the cause of his enslavement. While the narrative remains somewhat ambiguous for the reader, the characters themselves seem to understand all that has happened.

In the end though, it is not Shaul's sin that is presented as a negative example of proper behavior, but rather Hannah's actions in his absence are shown in a positive light. In both versions of the story, Shaul's wife is understood to be a virtuous woman, one who is fitting to be the wife of a

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<sup>4</sup>Eisenstein, p.458.

righteous man. In the Gaster version, Sarah is described twice as "pious", while Hannah is described in *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* as "beautiful and heaven fearing" and as an *Aishet Hayil*. The women, however, serve different functions in their respective versions of the story, and are therefore portrayed as being distinctively different characters. Sarah serves simply as a foil; a straight character who represents the home and normal life of which Shaul is deprived as he serves out his indenturedness. She is someone to whom things happen, possessing none of the foresight or ingenuity that distinguishes Hannah. When she is asked to marry Shaul, she asks, "Shall I marry a man whom I do not know?"<sup>88</sup>, and must be persuaded by Elijah to marry. When her husband disappears by the river, she simply accepts what has happened, and continues on with life, remaining by the river and building a little house. She relies on God's pity for her survival.

On the other hand, in keeping with the sense of extremeness that permeates all of *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*, Hannah is portrayed as the very pinnacle of virtue. She is a woman of almost prophetic insight and infinite faith in God. When Elijah asks if she will consent to marry, she accepts the proposition as Divine will, stating: "If the word has come from God, I cannot say anything about it at all."<sup>89</sup> When her

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<sup>88</sup>Gaster, (1981), p.530.

<sup>89</sup>Eisenstein, p.458.

husband disappears, she understands implicitly what has happened and does not worry. Her decision to remain by the river and grow wheat is calculated, predicated on her foreknowledge that a famine is about to occur. By virtue of her insight, she becomes very successful, and builds an entire city. When she is reunited with her husband, she controls the situation, and it is she who calmly sends him back to complete his service. In the end of the story, when her husband finally returns for good, they go to visit his mother, and it is Hannah, not Shaul, who is exalted by his family. Mindful that this story is an reproof against adultery, Hannah is praised for her fidelity throughout the years, to both her husband and to God. Ironically, after the woman is shown to be the very embodiment of the story's moral, the narrative is concluded with the statement, "This is a story about Shaul."

We can see, by comparison, that the story has evidently been revised to include a female hero and some sort of allusion to sexual impropriety. The plot line of the *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* version of the story appears inconsistent, not following the usual order of development. Based on the introductory device of the father's oath to rear his son in Torah, it is more fitting that the son's transgression have to do with a lapse in Torah study, as in the Gaster version. It is also rare, within the context of Rabbinic, and in fact virtually all Medieval, literature that a woman be depicted as so much more virtuous and successful than a man. The

character of Sarah would be a much more typical portrayal of a woman than that of Hannah.

However, even when we consider these changes, it still takes a stretch of the imagination to relate the story to adultery at all. The true meaning of the phrase "sitting and playing with the bride" is unclear, and, taken literally, it could simply mean that the groom was so enjoying his wife's company that he neglected his other duties, such as scholarly study. Yet this is precisely the type of leap of meaning the editor has been seen to make in order to connect his stories to commandments.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, we are given no indication that Hannah was ever actually tempted to commit adultery, or fought an impulse to do so with some heroic measure, as did Rabbi Matthiah ben Heresh.<sup>48</sup> Yet her faithfulness to her husband, maintained with full knowledge of his situation and eventual return, is held up as a great virtue, and the epitome of this commandment. We are also asked to believe that a wise, learned man, one who chose not to go into business because he felt that all tradesmen were deceitful, would so easily give into his sexual impulses, engaging in pre-marital sex with a woman already described as an *Aishet Hayil*. Such behavior seems inconsistent with the characterizations that we have been given. Rabbinic literature generally presents

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<sup>47</sup>See the above discussion of Story No.36, p.12.

<sup>48</sup>Story No.33.

characterizations that are fairly black and white, that is, either completely good or completely evil. In *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* we see Rabbi Matthiah ben Heresh (No.33), on the one extreme, encompassing all good, and the man who seduced an engaged young woman on Yom Kippur (No.34), on the other extreme, indicating complete evil. The image of a righteous, scholarly man who gives in to a sexual impulse tends to contradict this general trend.\*

Yet, despite these inconsistencies, the story still works. It is the very breaks from the dominant conventions of Rabbinic literature, both oral and written, that make the work unique. If one accepts the idea that *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* is essentially a collection of divergent stories reworked to fit into an externally imposed structure (i.e. the Ten Commandments), when taken on their own terms, the stories display a sense of development and irony that I am sure was not lost on its intended audience. Behind what one scholar has called its "veil of orthodox exhortation,"<sup>70</sup> the work dares to depict behaviors and allude to themes which, by their very nature, do appear inconsistent, and therefore more truly reflect human nature. The combination of the fanciful and supernatural elements, layered over the mundane and so very

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\*The common exception, of course, is a story about an evil person who suddenly becomes repentant, such as the old highwayman in story No.39.

<sup>70</sup>Rosenberg, p.42.



human experiences, demonstrates the people's need for diversion from their every day problems, and the imagination that was used to create such diversion.

Thus we are presented with this image of the young scholar, who, after he leaves home, is confronted for the first time with issues of employment, marriage, and creating for himself a new, proper life. Faced with all this responsibility for the first time, the young man somehow transgresses acceptable norms of behavior, be it neglect of study or some sexual impropriety. As a result of his failing, which may or may not be so bad, he is swept away upon the wings of Elijah to a far away place where he is sold as a slave. Luckily, the wife who has been arranged for him turns out to be a patient and righteous woman, who, with the implied help of God, amasses great wealth and success during her husband's absence. At the completion of his sentence, the husband is able to return to his wife, and resume the proper type of life that he set out to find in the first place.

This is a pleasant story, describing an experience that, one can imagine, was not so unique in the lives of Jews in the Middle Ages, and continues in the popular literatures of today as the "coming of age" story. The character of Elijah plays a pivotal role, serving as both mentor and judge to the young man. He is the one who sets him on the path to his new life, modeling a proper livelihood and finding for him a wife. But Elijah is also the one who condemns the young man for his



iniquity and actually imposes the punishment. Although Elijah is a heavenly figure, he represents here all that is good in life, as well as, in a sense, all that is harsh and real.

Ultimately, regardless of the moral outcome or the intent of the author, this is a story about changes, especially if, as the stories concluding statement tells us, we are to read it as a story about Shaul, and not his wife. Shaul's father, and his mother to whom he returns in the end, represent his old life, one of faith in God and Torah study. Hannah represents his new life, one also of faith in God, but also one of self-sufficiency, self-discipline, and material and personal success. Elijah is the catalyst of change, guiding the young man's way into his new life, while at the same time not allowing him to forget his old life. Thus Elijah's admonition is read in a new light - "You lay down and forgot your life!" Shaul's sin was not in the lying down, but in his forgetting who he was as he changed and grew. In the context of Medieval Jewry, with the wound of exile very fresh and oppression and anti-semitism as a ways of life, forgetting who you are and where you come from is the gravest of sins. It is fitting then that as punishment, Shaul is sold into slavery, a reminder of who we were as slaves in Egypt, and who we are as Jews in exile. Elijah is not an evil character. His role as mentor necessitated that he educate the young man as effectively as possible. Hannah's wisdom lay in the fact that she did understand the situation; she knew the purpose

of the enslavement. Her effort to teach her husband the same lesson is evident in her repeated offers to go with him to visit his home and his mother. Ultimately, all of the characters around Shaul serve as guides in his growth and development. His father gives him wisdom, but he then dies, leaving the son to continue on his own. His mother sends him out to seek a trade, encouraging him in his livelihood. Elijah gives him a trade and a wife, and teaches him to remember who he is. Hannah provides a home, faith, and understanding. And, it is understood from the nature of the story, God watches over all.

There are two ways that one can read the stories in *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*. They can be approached, as perhaps the author intended, as a cohesive anthology, with each story selected to exemplify a particular commandment. But, as we have seen, this fashion of reading the stories can be very unsatisfying. The respective stories have obviously been reworked in order to cursorily relate them to individual commandments. If the revisions work at all, they usually prove to be detrimental to the narrative flow of the story to which they are applied. It is a rare story in the collection that truly develops a moral which models the generally accepted fulfillment of a commandment.

Conversely, the stories can be approached as individual entities; complex narrative tales which address daily concerns through the application of the imaginative faculty to the

religious idioms which were common to all of the collection's readers. Clearly, the structure imposed on the collection gets in the way of the power of the individual stories. But as a new form, the need for such a structure has already been discussed. Taken as concrete moral dicta, or as midrash, the collection as a whole, as well as the stories individually, simply do not work. Yet if one can get past this structural pretense of midrash, and allow the imagination displayed in the stories to entertain as well as edify, then the stories not only work, but many of them continue until today as classics of their idiom. These are popular stories, very much reflective of the tradition out of which they emerged. But, in order to hold our attention and speak to us on any level, be it edification or entertainment, they must be approached on their own terms, as stories, and nothing more.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot :

The Text in Translation

## TRANSLATION NOTE

In the following translation, I have tried to remain as true to the text as possible, while at the same time producing a readable and comprehensible document. To that end, the translation is quite literal, and I have retained the rather wooden quotational structure of dialogue. In places where textual errors seem to exist, I have usually translated as printed and offered an alternative reading in a note. I have also duly noted any words or phrases that, for one reason or another, seem to defy literal translation. In such a case, I have usually substituted an idiomatic translation from my understanding of the phrase in context.

All quotations and textual references have been rendered in quotation marks. While dialogue has not been so marked, the beginning of new speeches are always indicated with a capital letter. I chose this manner of demarcation because I found it to be a more satisfactory way to distinguish between the natural story narrative that is dominant in the stories of the collection, and the numerous scriptural references that accompanied the imposed midrashic structure. This distinction is made most obvious when comparing the number of quotation marks in the introduction with those in the body of the text.

Translation of Midrash Aseret Ha-Diberot  
from Eisenstein's *Ozar Midrashim*

1) First Commandment :<sup>71</sup>

It is written, "Who can recount the mighty acts of the Lord, proclaim all His praises" (Psalm 106:2). Even Angels can not recount His mighty acts, but it is possible to expound a little about what He did and about what there will be in the future, so that the name of the King will be elevated and praised, the King of Kings, the Holy One Blessed Be He. He created the Torah, which is more precious than gold and fine gold, and sweeter than honey and fine flour.<sup>72</sup> And when the Holy One Blessed Be He desired to create the Universe, He consulted it<sup>73</sup> and said, I will create the Universe in order that they know about my might. When the Torah heard this, she responded and said before Him, Master of the Universe, You foretell from the beginning to the end of days and all the secret things are revealed to you; do as You wish. When the Holy One Blessed Be He heard the words of the Torah, its words were pleasing before Him. He took it and placed it before Him.

2) We find that before the Universe was created, no hides

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<sup>71</sup>Eisenstein notes in his introduction that this beginning passage is taken from Divrai Rabbi Eliezer 83. See Friedlander's edition of Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer (1981), p.9.

<sup>72</sup>Alludes to Psalm 19:11.

<sup>73</sup>The Torah.

of parchment were found so that the Torah could be written upon them, for the beasts were not as yet. So what was it written upon? On the arm of the Holy One Blessed be He, in black upon white fire. And the Holy One Blessed Be He took it and placed it before him and He would look at it. And when He desired to create the Universe, all the letters came in reverse order, and each one said before the Holy One Blessed Be He, Master of the Universe, May it be your will that with me the Universe will be created. First, the *Tav* entered before the Holy One Blessed Be He and said to Him, Master of the Universe, May it be your will that with me you will create the Universe, just as your Torah was named with me. The Holy One Blessed Be He responded to her, It will not be as you will, since you are *Terumat*.<sup>74</sup> Afterwards, the *Shin* entered to the Holy One Blessed Be He and so on. It will not be as your will, since you are *Shav*<sup>75</sup> and *Shohad*,<sup>76</sup> and a letter which does not have feet<sup>77</sup> and a letter which does not have feet, there is no reason for the Universe to be created from it. Afterwards, all the letters entered in reverse order until the *Bet*, and, after all, *Bet* entered and said, Master

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<sup>74</sup>The Priestly tithe on produce.

<sup>75</sup>falsehood/vanity.

<sup>76</sup>Bribery.

<sup>77</sup>A word play on *raglayim* meaning both "feet" and "reason" or "foundation". Suggests both the physical appearance of the letter *Shin* and the idea that lies are a statement with no foundation.



of the Universe, May it be Your will that with me You shall create Your Universe, so that Your children will be destined to bless Your name with me, as it is said, "Welcome in the name of Adonai," "Blessed is Adonai every day," and it is said, "Blessed is Adonai, God of Israel". He said to her, Yes, I will do so; With you I will create My Universe, as it is said, "Bereshit Bara Elohim."<sup>76</sup> And *Aleph*, when she saw that the Holy One Blessed Be He wanted to create the Universe from *Bet*, stood to one side and was silent until the Holy One Blessed Be He called her and said, *Aleph*, why are you silent? Why do you not speak like one of your friends? *Aleph* responded and said before Him, Master of the Universe, if my friends, who add up to such a great amount are thus, I, who do not amount to much, how much more so should I remain docile. The Holy One Blessed Be He said to her, Do not worry, for you are head over all and King, for I am one and you are one, and since you have humbled yourself, I will glorify you, for you will add up for a reward of a thousand.<sup>77</sup> And further He said to her, Be comforted, for when I give the Torah, I

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<sup>76</sup>In the beginning, God created.... The beginning of the Book of Genesis.

<sup>77</sup>Play on the word *Eleph* - "a thousand."

will open with you.<sup>80</sup> Thus, the Holy One Blessed Be He opened with *Anokhi* in His giving the Torah to Israel. For *Anokhi* is an acrostic : *Ana Nafshi Katvit Yahbit* - "I pray my soul, a writing, a gift." And *Anokhi* in reverse : *Y'heva Ketiva N'imim Amira* - "A writing, a gift, a sweet proclamation."<sup>81</sup> Another explanation : Why did the Holy One Blessed Be He open His giving of the Torah *Anokhi*? Because *Anokhi* is in the Egyptian tongue, and in order to utilize the language which they used in Egypt, He opened with *Anokhi*.

And the Holy One Blessed Be He wanted to create the Universe all at once, and its length, a travelling distance of 500 years and its width a travelling distance of 500 years. And the great sea surrounded the whole Universe like a type of arch on a great column. And all the Universe was surrounded by the fins of Leviathan, standing in the lower waters, and they could be compared to a small fish in the sea, and the lower waters stood on the back of the waters of *Bereshit*,<sup>82</sup> and the waters of *Bereshit* on top of the waters

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<sup>80</sup>There are many different versions relating the controversy of the precedence of the letters. Ginzberg, (1988), I, pp.5-8 gives a version based on 2 Alphabet of R. Akiva 50-55, and cites other versions in Midrash Ha-Gadol I, 12-13; Midrash R. Akiva 23-24; and the Zohar I, 2b-3a and 205b. Most versions end at this point.

<sup>81</sup>Translated literally, it is not really clear what these passages mean. For another explanation of *Anokhi* (Ex.20:2), see Sabbath 105a; Pesikta Rabbati 21, 105-106a gives numerous explanations of *Anokhi*; also Beit Ha-Midrash VI, 42; and Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 1, 22.

<sup>82</sup>The primeval waters.

of the Ocean<sup>83</sup> and the waters of the Ocean on the back of the waters who lament (*bokhim*). And why are they called by the name of *Bokhim*? For at the time when the Holy One Blessed Be He divided the waters, He put half above and half below. They that He put below began to cry and say, Woe unto us that we do not merit to be close to our Creator! And they were insolent and wanted to go up on high until the Holy One Blessed Be He rebuked them and squeezed them under the soles of His foot. Then they said before the Holy One Blessed Be He, It is open and known to you, that for Your honor we acted. The Holy One Blessed Be He said to them, Because you acted for My honor, know in truth that I will not give permission to the waters from above to say a song to Me until they receive from you permission, as it is said, "The Lord on high is mightier than the noise of many waters, than the mighty waves of the sea" (Psalm 93:4).<sup>84</sup>

3) Moreover, the Holy One Blessed Be He created the seven upper and lower heavens, and the lowest of all of them is

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<sup>83</sup>Greek for the Mediterranean - the "sea of the dead".

<sup>84</sup>Ginsberg notes that the song of praise to God by the waters originally belonged to another cycle which states that the lower waters - the primeval element - praised God before any other thing that had been created, and that they willingly submitted to his command to withdraw in order to render creation possible (1988, V, p.18, Note #53). *Hadar* on Genesis 1:4 states that, as compensation to the lower waters, the salt seas, God commanded the use of the water libation in the Temple and the use of salt with all sacrifices.

called, *Vilon*,<sup>85</sup> and it is like [the type of] curtain that is stretched across the opening of the houses so that those inside see those outside, but those outside don't see those inside. And through *Vilon*, the Ministering Angels see the people who walk on the earth; who walks in a good way and who in a bad way. [Whoever walks in a good way, they accompany him],<sup>86</sup> and whoever walks in a bad way, they leave him alone. And he will [only] prosper in his wickedness until the day of his accounting.

4) Above the *Vilon* is the *Raki'a*,<sup>87</sup> and in the *Raki'a* there are stars and constellations, and twelve windows corresponding to the twelve hours, and 365 angels appointed over the sun, who lead it gently from window to window, so that the universe will not be off by one hour, and in these windows, they lead the moon gently in the night, and as soon as it comes out, they begin singing a song. They do not become silent until the sun rises, and as the sun sets in the west, they prostrate themselves and say, We have done all which we were commanded, as it is said, "You dispatch lightnings, and they go! They say

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<sup>85</sup>curtain.

<sup>86</sup>Eisenstein's inclusion.

<sup>87</sup>expanse/sky.

to you, here we are!" (Job 38:35).<sup>88</sup> How do we know that in the *Raki'a* is the sun and the moon and the stars and the constellations? As it is written, "And God set them in the firmament of Heaven to give light upon the earth" (Gen.1:17).

5) Above the *Raki'a* is *Shehakim*,<sup>89</sup> and in *Shehakim* there are fixed millstones that grind manna for the Zaddikim in the world to come, as it is written, "He commanded the clouds from above, and opened the doors of heaven; and rained down manna for them to eat" (Psalm 78:23-24).

6) Above *Shehakim* is *Zevul*,<sup>90</sup> and in *Zevul* there is a built up alter. And Michael, the Guardian Angel of Israel, is the High Priest, and he regularly offers upon it an offering every day. And what are the offerings that he offers? Does he offer lambs? Rather, the Sages say, Michael, Guardian Angel of Israel, is the High Priest of Heaven, and from the day that the Temple, may it be built quickly in our days, was destroyed, and the Priesthood ceased, he offers the souls of the Zaddikim, until the Temple is rebuilt and then the Holy One Blessed Be He will lower the Temple that is in *Zevul* to

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<sup>88</sup>New JPS translation : "Can you dispatch the lightning on a mission and have it answer you, I am ready?" Read here as a declarative statement.

<sup>89</sup>Clouds.

<sup>90</sup>Place of offering or entertainment; term used for the Temple; place of the heavenly Jerusalem and Sanctuary.

the Jerusalem that is below.

7) Above *Zevul* is *Makhon*,<sup>11</sup> and in *Makhon* there are storehouses of snow and storehouses of hail and a loft of dew, and rooms of tempests and storms, and for all of them, doors of fire. Are they above? For are they not in the land, as it is said, "Praise the Lord from the earth, O monsters, and all deeps: fire and hail, snow and vapors, stormy winds fulfilling His word" (Psalm 148:7-8)? Thus the Sages said, When David came to the world, he requested mercy upon them, and he caused them to descend to the earth, as it is written, "For You are not a God that has pleasure in wickedness, nor shall evil dwell with thee" (Psalm 5:5).

8) Above *Makhon* is *Maon*,<sup>12</sup> and in *Maon* there are groups of angels who sing at night and are silent during the day, out of honor for Israel, and also there are in it storehouses of blessing, as it is written, "Look down from thy holy habitation, from Heaven, and bless your people Israel..." (Deut.26:15).

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<sup>11</sup>institute; site.

<sup>12</sup>dwelling; habitation; the Temple.



9) Above *Maon* is *Aravot*,<sup>13</sup> and in *Aravot* there is justice and righteousness and dews of life, and blessing and the souls of *Zaddikim*, and the throne of glory, and the holy beasts, and *Seraphim*, and *Ophanim*, and *Keruvim*,<sup>14</sup> and they come to proclaim the honor of the Holy One Blessed Be He, who made them from fire and from water, and water is above them, and peace among them, so that the water does not extinguish the fire and the fire does not consume the water, and about this it is said, "Dominion and fear are with Him, He makes peace in His high places" (Job 25:2). And the angels stand far from the *Shekhinah* thirty-six thousand *Parsangs*.<sup>15</sup> And do angels stand? For do we not find that they don't have standing (*Amidah*) or sitting (*Yeshivah*) in heaven, only bowing? Rather, they stand bowing before the Holy One Blessed be He and they don't see the place of His *Shekhinah* and they sanctify the name of the Holy One Blessed Be He who sits on a high and exalted throne, and a cloud and darkness surround it, as it is written, "Clouds and darkness are round about Him, righteousness and judgement are the foundations of His throne" (Psalm 97:2).

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<sup>13</sup>Pleasantness; sweetness - poetic for heaven.

<sup>14</sup>Different types of heavenly creatures or angels.

<sup>15</sup>Persian measure of distance, close to a mile.



10) Blessed is the name of the Holy One Blessed Be He who created seven expanses and seven lands and seven seas and who suspended them by the might of His arm, as it is written, "...and beneath the everlasting arms..." (Deut.33:27). And all of them the Holy One Blessed Be He did not create except for the sake of the Torah and beyond that, for the sake of Israel who would receive it. And He further created seventy nations and seventy princes over them. He further created Israel as a unique nation in the land. And when the angels saw Israel, they quarrelled with one another, one saying, Israel will be in my jurisdiction, and another saying, Israel will be in my jurisdiction, and when the Holy One Blessed Be He saw, thus He said to them, Draw lots for my people Israel, and we shall see on whom the lot shall fall, and whoever receives the lot, it shall be his. And so they drew lots and the lot of the Holy One Blessed Be He fell on Israel, and He placed them before Him, as it is written, "The lines are fallen to me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage." (Psalm 16:6). And the Holy One Blessed Be He chose them and called them treasure, as it is written, "...and you shall be my own treasure from among all peoples, for all the earth is mine." (Ex.19:5).

11) Come and see that you do not have anything of Torah that does not have in it mounds of midrash. And the Holy One Blessed be He warned Israel about them, and said to them, see

these tips,"<sup>96</sup> if you smooth them, you will destroy the universe. For example, if you make from *Het* a *Hey*, and similarly from *Hey* a *Het*, you will destroy the universe, for example, "our soul waited for the Lord" (Psalm 33:20),<sup>97</sup> and for example, "Let all that breathes praise the Lord, Halleluya!" (Psalm 150:6),<sup>98</sup> and further, if you make from a *Dalet* a *Resh*, or from a *Dalet* a *Resh*, you will destroy the Universe. For example, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4).<sup>99</sup> And for example, "you shall worship no other god" (Ex. 34:14).<sup>100</sup> From this they learned that you do not have a tip in the Torah that does not have in it mounds of law, certainly in the letter itself, and in the word itself. And the Holy One Blessed Be He looked at all the people that He created and He did not find a man [from among those that] He looked upon who was as worthy to have the Torah given to him as Moses. And Why did Moses merit to be the Groom of Torah? On account of humility. And He saw that it was in him, as it is written, "And Moses hid his face for he

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<sup>96</sup>The strokes of the letters. If even one stroke is altered in appearance, it could change the letter to another, thereby changing the meaning of a word.

<sup>97</sup>The meaning of the word *hikketa* would change from "waited" to "struck".

<sup>98</sup>The meaning of the word *tehallei* would change from "praise" to "profane".

<sup>99</sup>*Ehad* (one) becomes *aher* (another).

<sup>100</sup>"no other god" becomes "the one God."

was afraid to look upon God" (Ex.3:6). The Sages said, On account of three things that he did, Moses merited three rewards: on account of "for he was afraid," he merited, "and they were afraid to come near him" (Ex.34:30); on account of "and He hid his face," he merited, "a special aura in his face;" on account of "to look," he merited, "and he beholds the likeness of the Lord" (Num.12:8); and he further merited, "and they looked after Moses until he was gone into the Tent" (Ex.33:8). And what of the humility that is found in Moses? as it is said, "Come now therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh..." (Ex.3:10). Said the Sages : the *Hey* of *Lechah* is vague. And why is it vague? For at the time that the Holy One Blessed Be He said to Moses, Go and redeem Israel, from the great humility that was in him, he said, Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and how will I bring the children of Israel from Egypt? He said, There are in my family greater than I in wealth, and in silver and gold. The Holy One Blessed Be He said to him, to Moses, You are great, as it is said, "Moreover, the man Moses is very great" (Ex.11:3).

12) And furthermore, you I chose from all of Israel, and of you it is destined that they will prophesy like this, as it is said, "Then You spoke in a vision to your faithful ones, and You said, I have laid help upon one who is mighty, I have exalted one chosen out of the people." (Psalm 89:20). Who is he chosen out of the people? This is Moses. Nevertheless,

Moses humbled himself and stood to one side. The Holy One Blessed Be He said to him, Why do you stand to one side, for if they are not redeemed through you, they will not be redeemed by another.

13) And furthermore, come and see Moses' humility, that when the Holy One Blessed Be He said to him, Make a Tent of Meeting, he made it, and when it was made, because of the great humility that was in him, he went outside. The Holy One Blessed Be He said to him, Why did you go outside? For it is fitting for you to serve me. And from where did the Holy One Blessed Be He call him, and say to him thus? As it is written, "And the Lord called to Moses, and spoke to him out of the Tent of Meeting, saying..." (Lev.1:1). And also the Torah attested about him, that he was humble, as it is written, "Now the man Moses was very humble..." (Num.12:3). Thus Moses merited to be the one through whom the Law was given, and to have the *Shekhinah* rest upon him, as Isaiah said, "The Spirit of (the Lord) God is upon me; because the Lord has anointed me to herald joy to the humble..." (Isaiah 61:1). It is not written, to herald joy to the pious, but rather, "to herald joy to the humble". From this, it can be inferred that humility is the greatest of all the Mitzvot in the world.

The Holy One Blessed Be He looked at all the mountains, but He did not find a mountain that was suitable to have Torah

given upon it, and to have the *Shekhinah* rest upon it, like Mount Sinai. And why did Mount Sinai merit all this? Because it humbled itself, for when it saw that Mount Hermon and Mount Sirion were quarreling with each other, one saying, Upon me it will reside, and the other saying, No, it will reside upon me. Then, when Sinai saw they were quarreling with each other, and exalting themselves, it humbled itself, and subsequently, the Holy One Blessed Be He saw its humbled state, and rested His *Shekhinah* upon it, for God is high and lofty, "and He sees the lowly, but the haughty He knows from afar" (Psalm 138:6).<sup>101</sup> "In the third month of the children of Israel's going out from the land of Egypt, at this time, on this day, they came to the desert of Sinai" (Ex.19:1). [They came to Sinai] to receive the Torah, and on it the Holy One Blessed Be He gave the Torah to Israel. And why was it not given to them at the time of their going out from Egypt? For, as the Holy One Blessed Be He said, I will do favors for them at the outset, so they may recount my greatness, and afterwards they will receive my Torah and my Mitzvot. I shall explain to you with a parable [the reason] why : the matter is like a king who desires to marry a woman. The king says, I will do favors for her, and afterwards I will marry her. Similarly, the Holy One Blessed Be He saw the community of

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<sup>101</sup>Alternative reading (New JPS translation) : "High though the Lord is, He sees the lowly; lofty, He perceives from afar."

Israel naked, and He dressed them,<sup>102</sup> as it is written, "And I clothed you...with fine linen..." (Ez.16:10). He saw them barefoot and shod them, as it is written, "...and I shod you with *tahash* skin..." (Ez.16:10). And they came to the sea, and He caused them to pass. He saw that Amalek came upon them and He rescued them. And when Israel recognized the good things and the powers of the Holy One Blessed Be He, everyone said, "All that the Lord has said, we will do, and obey" (Ex.24:7).

14) Another idea. Why did the Holy One Blessed Be He give the Torah in the third month and not give it to them at the time of their leaving Egypt? This is comparable to the son of a king who was ill and recovered from his illness. His mother said to him, Go to study. The king said, He has not yet recuperated from his illness. Give him two or three months and afterwards he will go to study. Thus Israel, immediately, when they came out of Egypt, were worthy to receive the Torah, but they were crippled because they had made bricks and plaster. The Holy One Blessed Be He said, My children have not yet recuperated from the enslavement, so how will they receive the Torah? Therefore, He delayed them until the third month, and afterwards He gave them the three-part

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<sup>102</sup>*Knesset Yisrael* is further referred to in the Hebrew by the third person feminine personal pronoun (her). In the English, I found it preferable to refer to Israel by the third person plural (them).



Torah by the hand of the third Adam (Moses).<sup>103</sup> You find that every incident involving Torah happens in threes : Torah, Prophets, and Writings; in the three letters Aleph, Bet and Gimel; on account of the third Adam, Moses, that he and his brother and sister were three, Moses and Aaron and Miriam, that they came from the third tribe, Reuven, Shimon, and Levi, and that the letters of *Levi* are threefold; and he bequeathed to groups of threes, Priests, Levites, and Israelites, the children of the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; on the day of threes, as it is said, "On the third day" (Gen.22:4), and in a month of threes, as it is written, "In the third month of the children of Israel's going out from the land of Egypt..."(Ex.19:1). On the day that the Holy One Blessed Be He rejoiced in Israel, His people, and in Moses His servant, Moses was joyful in his heart, for he saw everything that was with him. The universe and that which dwelt in it were astonished as they saw Moses ben Amram, how he captured a king's daughter, and descended in great joy, as it is written, "You have ascended on high; you have taken captives" (Psalm 68:19). The king's daughter, this is Torah, and the precious stones, these are the twelve tribes.

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<sup>103</sup>Discussions of God's preference for threes, and the importance of the number three in the life of Moses are common. See Ginzberg, (1988), II, p.79-80 and *Pisikta L'Rav Kahanna* 12, 105a-105b. Yet, this concept of Moses as the "Third Adam" seems unique to *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*. A possible alternative translation of the phrase is, "the man of threes," indicating the importance of the number in Moses' life.



15) The Sages said that the Torah was created two thousand years before the world was created, as it is written, "And I was by him as a nurseling,<sup>104</sup> and I was daily his delight, playing always before Him" (Prov.8:30). We have already found that one day for the Holy One Blessed Be He is a thousand years, as it is written, "For a thousand years in thy sight are but like yesterday when it is past..." (Psalm 90:4). And the Torah was complaining before the Holy One Blessed Be He, and said, Why was I created two thousand years before the world was created? Why have I not been given to the children of Adam? The Ministering Angels said to her, We are detaining you, for the children of Adam are destined to sin against you, and therefore it is better that you be with us.<sup>105</sup> At that very hour, the Torah was playing before the Lord, as it is written, "playing before Him" (Prov.8:30), and the Holy One Blessed Be He was saying to the angels, The Torah makes fun of you. She says, why do you need the Torah? For did you go out from Egypt? Were you slaves to Pharaoh? Do you have eating and drinking? Is there an unclean thing among you? So why do you request the Torah? You have no need to receive

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<sup>104</sup>The New J.P.S. translation renders the word as "confidant."

<sup>105</sup>Eisenstein's note #3 : "This is not an explanation of the Torah's quest, because of what was created a thousand years before creation, for this was before the angels were created. It is possible then that the answer of the Holy One Blessed Be He is missing here, and the obstruction of the angels was at the time of the giving of the Torah."

the Torah. Rather, humankind, which becomes unclean, needs it to atone, and to repair, and to purify its soul. Immediately, they were all silent until Moses came and convinced them with this answer, and gave the Torah to Israel in joy.

And before He gave the Torah to His people Israel, the Holy One Blessed Be He went to every nation to give them the Torah, in order not to give to them a pretext in the future to come to say, If it had happened that the Holy One Blessed Be He gave us the Torah, we would have accepted it. He went to the children of Esau and said, will you accept the Torah? They said to Him, What is written in it? He said to them, "Do not murder." They all responded and said, The blessing by which our father Esau was blessed, You want to uproot it from us, as it is written, "by your sword you shall live" (Gen.27:40). We do not want to accept it. He went to the children of Lot (Amon and Moav). He said to them, Will you accept the Torah? They said, What is written in it? He said to them, "Do not commit adultery." They said, From adultery we came. We do not want to accept it. And again He went to the children of Ishmael. He said to them, Will you accept the Torah? They said to Him, What is written in it? He said, "Do not steal". They said to Him, And the blessing that our father Ishmael blessed, You want to abolish it from us, as it is written, "his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against his" (Gen.16:12). We do not want to accept your

Torah. Quickly the Holy One Blessed Be He went around to all the peoples of the world, and they did not want to accept it. Afterwards, He came to Israel. He said to them, Will you accept the Torah? They said before Him, What is written in it? He said to them, Six hundred and thirteen commandments. They said, "All that the Lord has said, we will do and we will obey." (Ex.24:8). Immediately, a hundred and twenty thousand angels descended with two crowns tied to each one, one representing "we will do" and one representing "we will obey," and they received the Torah with rejoicing. And when the Torah was given to Israel, He said to them, Give me pledges that you will fulfill it. They said before Him, Here is Abraham, he will be a pledge on our behalf. He said to them, He is unacceptable, on account of Ishmael, for he is going to murder my son by thirst. They said to Him, Behold, Isaac. He said to them, He is unacceptable to me, for he loved Esau my enemy. They said to Him, Here is Jacob. He said to them, He is unacceptable to me, for he did not complete his oath in his coming from Padan Aram. They said before him, Behold, our children. Immediately the Holy One Blessed Be He said, Give me them as a pledge and I will accept them. Immediately the Children of Israel brought their women with suckling babes, and their pregnant women, and the Holy One Blessed Be He made their bellies as glass, and they were talking with Him. He said to them, See, I want to give Torah to your ancestors, and you are a pledge for them that they will uphold it. They said

to Him, Yes. He said to them, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out..." (Ex.20:2). They said to Him, Yes. "You shall not have other gods." (Ex.20:3) They said to Him, No. He said to them, "You shall not swear falsely by name of the Lord your God" (Ex.20:7). They said to Him, No. And so they were answering Him with Yes, Yes, and with No, No. And where were they that pledged? Inside their mothers, and from the mouths of babes was the Torah established, as it is written, "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings have you found strength" (Psalm 8:3). And there is no strength except for Torah, as it is written, "The Lord will give strength to His people." (Psalm 29:11). And when the Holy One Blessed Be He saw Israel that they were devoted with all their hearts, and out of great love they were hurrying to receive the Torah, He praised them and blessed them, as it is written, "Happy are you, O Israel, who is like you" (Deut.33:29).

16) First Commandment : When it<sup>106</sup> had come out from the mouth of the Holy One Blessed Be He, may His name be praised for ever, there were sparks going out from His mouth, a torch on His right side and a torch on His left, and His voice burst forth into the air of Heaven, saying, My people, my people, O House of Israel! "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt." (Ex.20:2). And when Israel heard

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<sup>106</sup>The first commandment.

the commandment coming out of the mouth of the Holy One Blessed Be He, they fell back twelve miles, and their souls departed, as it is written, "My heart went out when he spoke" (Shir.5:6). The Torah remarked to the Holy One Blessed Be He and said, Master of the Universe, to whom did You give me, the living or the dead? The Holy One Blessed Be He said to her, For the living. She said to Him, Behold, everyone is dead! He said to her, For your sake, I will resurrect them. What did the Holy One Blessed Be He do? He sent down dew on which He is going to hereafter resurrect the dead, as it is written, "A plentiful rain You sent, O God, Your languishing legacy You have strengthened" (Psalm 68:10). And further, at the hour when the Holy One Blessed Be He began to speak, the upper and lower worlds quaked, and the Israelites were not able to stand on their feet. What did the Holy One Blessed Be He do? He sent to each and every Israelite two angels, one who lay his hand upon his heart so that his soul would not depart, and one who lifted his head up so he would be able to see his Creator. And the Holy One Blessed Be He gave them permission so that they would be able to look upon His splendor, and while they were viewing His splendor, the word was going and circulating around their ears, and it was the commandment, saying, Will you accept upon yourself the Torah, which has in it 248 commandments which are worthy to be fulfilled, corresponding to [the number of] your organs? And they answered, Yes, Yes! And it emerged from the ear and

kissed them upon their mouths. And again the word returned and circulated around the ear and said, Will you accept upon yourself the Torah, which has in it 365 prohibitions, corresponding to the days of the year? And they answered, Yes, Yes! And the word emerged from the ear and kissed them upon their mouths, as it is written, "Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth" (Shir.1:2). Immediately the Holy One Blessed Be He opened for them the seven heavens, and the seven lands, saying, Behold, you are My witness, for there is none like Me in the heavens or on the earth! Behold, I am one and I will reveal Myself to you in My glory and in My splendor. If there is a anyone who says to you, serve other gods, say to him, Is there a man who has seen his Creator face to face, His glory and His splendor and His might, and left Him and went over to idolatry? See, It is I, I who redeemed you from the house of bondage, and I am He who parted the sea before you and lead you to dry land, and your enemies I drowned in the depths.

17) Second Commandment : "You shall not have other gods beside Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved idol or any sort of image..." (Ex.20:3-4). The Holy One Blessed Be He said to them, I gave to you my Torah to set forth for you law, do not anger Me and do not break My covenant with false gods, and do not bow to the dead except to the one who brings death and resurrects, and the soul of all the living is in His



hand. And do not learn from the practices of the nations, for the practices of the nations are vain, as it is said, "They are vanity, the work of delusion; in the time of their punishment they shall perish. The portion of Jacob is not like them, for he is the former of all things..." (Jer.10: 15-16). He saves from distress all who are confident in Him, for He saved Abraham our father from the fiery furnace when Nimrod the wicked passed him through the fire, because he had confidence in the Holy One Blessed Be He, and did not want to bow to his idol. And He saved Haninah, Mishael, and Azariah from the fiery furnace when Nebuchadnezzar threw them into the fire, because they had confidence in the Lord and did not bow to his idol. And at the hour that they went out from the fiery furnace, all the people gathered together, the nobles and officers, to see if the fire had overcome them or not. And they saw that the hair of their heads and their garments were not changed, and they saw that the fire had not overcome them, and they immediately praised the Holy One Blessed Be He. And from here you can learn that because of fear of death, humans should not engage in idolatry, for the pain of death occurs only at one time, and afterwards his soul rests in the Garden of Eden.



18) A story about a woman who had seven sons,<sup>107</sup> and they were brought before an captain. He said to the first son, Worship an idol. He said, I will not deny my God, for it has been written for us, "I am the Lord your God" (Ex.20:2). And he had him taken out and killed. He called to the second son and said to him, Worship an idol. He said, I will not deny my God, for it has been written for us, "You shall not have other gods" (Ex.20:3). And he had him taken out and killed. He called to the third son and said to him, Worship an idol. He said to him, I will not deny my God, for it has been written for us, "do not bow to another god" (Ex.34:14). And he had him taken out and killed. He called to the fourth son and said to him, Worship an idol. He said to him, I will not deny my God, for it has been written for us, "do not bow to their gods" (Ex.23:24). And he had him taken out and killed. He called to the fifth son and said to him, Worship an idol. He said to him, I will not deny my God, for it has been written for us, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one..." (Deut.6:4). And he had him taken out and killed. He called to the sixth son and said to him, Worship an idol. He said to him, I will not deny my God, for it has been written for us, "Know therefore this day, and consider it in your heart, that the Lord, He is God..." (Deut.4:39). And he had him taken out and killed. He called to the seventh son and said

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<sup>107</sup>Retelling of the story found in 2 Maccabees 7.

to him, Worship an idol. He said to him, Wait, I will go and consult my mother. He said to him, Go. He went to his mother. He said, Mother, what should I do about this matter? His mother said to him, Do you want that your brothers should dwell in the company of the Lord, and you dwell apart from them? Do not pay attention to this matter, and do not separate yourself from your brothers. He went back to the evil captain and he said to him, What will you do? He said to him, I will not deny my God, for it has been written for us, "You have avouched the Lord this day [to be your God]...and the Lord has avouched you this day [to be a people for His own possession]" (Deut.26:17-18). Already we have sworn not to substitute Him with another, and He swore not to exchange us for another people. The captain said to him, I will toss my coin to the ground. Bend down and pick it up so that they will say that you did as I desired. He said to the captain, Woe to you, woe to you, captain. If it should be done for your glory, how much more so should it be for the glory of the Holy One Blessed Be He. I will not deny Him. He had him taken out and killed. Their mother said to them, I beg of you, give him to me and I will kiss him. And she went and kissed him, and then she too went up to the roof and fell off and died. A heavenly voice went out and said, "a joyful mother of children" (Psalm 113:9), and there is a portion in the world to come for them with the righteous ones in the Garden of Eden. Therefore, all of Israel will be

cautious in their fear of the Holy One Blessed Be He, in order that they merit to dwell with the righteous ones in the Garden of Eden.

19) Zonin<sup>108</sup> said to Rabbi Akiva,<sup>109</sup> You and I both know in our hearts that idolatry has nothing real in it, but what about the phenomenon of people who go to worship idols : A cripple, and he was healed, a blind person, and he regained his sight, a deaf person, and he was cured? He said to him, Idiot! I will relate to you in a parable [the reason] why. The matter is like a man who was in a city and he would make loans to people for pawn. And there was this one man and he made a loan to him without a pledge, and without a guarantor, and without witnesses. His wife said to him, Have we been granted atonement? He said to her, No. Because of this that he did which is not proper, we should loose our faith? So it is with this one who went to worship an idol and arrived at his time to be healed. Said the Holy One Blessed Be He, Because of this foolishness that he did that was not proper, he should not be cured from his sickness?<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup>Character unknown.

<sup>109</sup>Akiva ben Joseph, the most influential teacher of his generation. A Palestinian Tanna, born about 50 C.E., he began his studies late in life. One of the principal supporter of Bar Kochba, he was put to death by the Romans around 135.

<sup>110</sup>Eisenstein's note #4 : "See Avodah Zarah 45 for another version."

20) Third Commandment : "Do not swear falsely by the name of Lord your God; for the Lord will not clear one who swears falsely by his name" (Ex.20:7). Do not hasten to swear falsely, and do not let an oath be customarily on your lips, for there is great punishment in it. For the one who is accustomed to swearing oaths, a plague will never be lacking from his house, and all who swear an oath will not be cleared, as it is written, "And I will come near to you in judgement, and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and those who swear falsely (by my name)"<sup>111</sup>..." (Mal.3:5). Come and learn about Naaman,<sup>112</sup> when he brought an offering to Elisha, "and stood before him and said, Behold, now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel. Now, I pray, take a blessing from your servant. But (Elisha) said, As the Lord lives, before whom I stand, I will receive none. And he urged him to take it, but he refused." (II Kings 5:15-16). Then Gehazi, Elisha's assistant, because he coveted possessions,<sup>113</sup> swore falsely, and was driven out of the world, as it is written, "And Gehazi pursued after Naaman..." (II Kings 5:21). And he said to him, My master has sent me to you [to ask] if you will send to him

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<sup>111</sup>Imbedded in quotation, but not found in Biblical text.

<sup>112</sup>A Syrian general cured of leprosy by the prophet Elisha. See II Kings 5.

<sup>113</sup>In another version (Nusah Verona) the given phrase is, *Hamor Nevi'im* - "by a prophet's donkey".

a talent of silver for two youths who came from Mount Efrayim, and two changes of garments. And Naaman said to him, Swear an oath and take two talents, as it is written, "Please, take two talents" (II Kings 5:23). The word *ho'el* is not found except in reference to an oath, as it is written, "...and hear the voice of adjuration" (Lev.5:1). And he swore an oath and took. What did he take? He took the *zaraat*<sup>14</sup> of Naaman, which clung to him and to his seed forever. Therefore, the Sages said that one should guard his lips from false oaths, for everyone who accustoms himself to oath-making, there will be times when he will not want to make an oath, but his tongue will get him used to making an oath, even when a person really is not permitted to swear an oath. For when his tongue is accustomed to oath-making, he will make an oath today and he will make an oath tomorrow, and an oath will habitually be on his lips, and it will be light in his eyes, and all who profane the name of the Holy One Blessed Be He and swear falsely, or even truthfully, it will result in the Holy One Blessed Be He revealing his wickedness and his punishment to all people. Woe to him in this world and woe to him in the next world.

21) A story about a man who did not want to make oaths all his days, and was exceedingly rich. At the hour of his

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<sup>14</sup>Generally translated as "Leprosy".

departure from the world, he called to his son. He said to him, My son, I warn you never to swear an oath at all, not in truth and not falsehood, for all the wealth that I had I was not able to gain except for the fact that I guarded myself against swearing oaths, and even a truthful oath I did not want to swear, and the Holy One Blessed Be He made me successful every day, in every transaction, and in all of the deeds of my hands. His son responded to him and said, Father, I will up-hold all of your commands, I will not swear oaths at all. And when his father departed from the world, and a he was laid to rest, swindlers came to the bereaved son and requested from him lots of money. They said to him, Your father owed us money, give it to us. He said to them, It never happened. They came before the judge for a judgement, and they required that he take an oath. The bereaved son thought to himself, and said, What should I do? If I swear an oath, behold, I will profane the Heavenly Name and neglect the commands of my father. It would be better that I pay them and not swear an oath. He paid them all the money that his father had left for him, and they even demanded ten dinars of gold more from him that he did not pay to them, and nothing was left over for him. The swindlers came and said to him, Pay us the money that you owe us or swear to us that you have nothing left. He said, I will never swear. They bound him and imprisoned him in the jail-house. And his wife was a righteous and beautiful woman and she felt ashamed to ask



people for anything. And she took in linens to wash and supported her husband in the jail-house and her children and herself. One day she went with her children to the river to do laundry, and a ship came there. And when the captain of the ship saw her, he coveted her in his heart. He said to her, Wash my clothes and I will give you a gold dinar. She said, Yes, I will do so, and she took the dinar and gave it to release her husband from the jail-house, and she washed the clothes. And when she went to return them, the ship's captain seized her and had his way with her, and her children stood from afar and cried greatly. And they went to their father and redeemed him, and they said, Our mother has been captured. He raised his eyes to heaven and said, May the name of the King, the King of Kings, the Holy One Blessed Be He be blessed and praised, who has brought us to this, for I am left without any sustenance or livelihood. And he raised his eyes to Heaven and said, Master of the universe, have mercy upon me and upon my little children, for they are [like] orphans. And they went together until they came to the river that was close to the sea, and there was no passage there to cross the river. What did this pious man do? He removed his clothes and wanted to swim the river. As soon as he reached the place in the river where the water flowed, the Holy One Blessed Be He prepared for him a great leaf,<sup>118</sup> and he sat upon it, he and

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<sup>118</sup>The word is "fish" in another version (Nusah Verona), which makes more sense in context. This is probably a textual error.



his smallest son, until they came to a country, and they gave him their cattle to watch.<sup>118</sup> And his children who remained on the bank of the river were lamenting and crying until a ship came and took them captive. One day this pious man was sitting on the bank of a river that was full of serpents and scorpions and he reminisced about when he was vastly rich and how he was now left alone. He raised his voice in tears and said, Master of the universe, I am left without a wife and children, and without money and I do not have anyone who will have pity upon me. It is obvious therefore, that it is better for me to die than to live. And he wanted to throw himself into the river. But when he saw the bodies of those who were killed by the serpents and the scorpions, he was afraid, and he saw a figure who called out to him, So and so, do not be afraid! For this is the day! Much money been kept for you for some years, and now the time has arrived for you when the Holy One Blessed Be He will promote you to greatness for guarding your lips from swearing oaths, and you did not profane the Heavenly Name, and you did not neglect the commands of your father. Take from there all the money. He took the money that was there, and he hired many workers, and he built for himself a huge palace and great cities, and he was made king. And, in the end, the Holy One Blessed Be He made a miracle for him, and returned to him his wife and

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<sup>118</sup>Another version elaborates here on the details of the story (Nusah Verona).

children, and He made them kings and rulers. And that man gave *Tzedakah* to the poor, and praise and thanks to the Holy One Blessed Be He who restored to him his reward completely. What brought about all of this for him? Nothing except guarding his lips from swearing oaths, for even a truthful oath he did not want to swear. For thus the Holy One Blessed Be He said, If the angels,<sup>117</sup> who sanctify His name with the *Kedushah*,<sup>118</sup> are afraid and shaken by Him, you humans, when you are filled with favor from my gifts, how can you be so haughty as to swear by My name?!

22) **Fourth Commandment** : "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" (Ex.20:8). As the Lord your God commanded you, "Six days shall you labor, and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God, you shall not do any work..." (Ex.20:9-10). The Holy One Blessed Be He choose the seventh day and He sanctified it for His name, and He called it the most precious of days, for on it He united heaven and earth, and He blessed it, as it is written, "And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, for on it He rested from

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<sup>117</sup>Two synonymous terms are used here, *Melakhim* and *Aralim*.

<sup>118</sup>The celestial beings are said to praise God with the words of the *Kedushah* - "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts," but they may not begin their songs of praise until the earthly beings have brought their homage to God. This is because human beings, though inferior by nature to angels, surpass them by overcoming the evil inclination, which has no power over angels. Therefore the pious are considered greater than the angels. See Ginzberg, (1988), I, p.17; *Bereshit Rabbah* 48:11; 65:21.

all His work..."(Gen.2:3). And He bequeathed it to His people Israel, for He choose them from the rest of the peoples, and He gave it in their lot so that there would not be sorrow in their camp, for God gave it to us for great joy, for even prisoners of *Gehinnom* are to rest on the Sabbath day. When Shabbat enters, the angel who is in charge of souls, *Dumah* is his name, announces and says, Go out from *Gehinnom*, and he releases them, and no one is punished on Shabbat. And when Israel says *Kedushah* at the end of Shabbat, *Dumah* announces and says, Go and return to death, great darkness and chaos, you who do not say the *Kedushah* service, but not Israelites who say the *Kedushah* service. And therefore all of Israel is obligated to the *Kedushah* service at the end of Shabbat."<sup>1</sup> and to observe Shabbat, for anyone who keeps the Sabbath will have a share in the world to come, and anyone who profanes the Sabbath, it is as if they bear false witness against their Master. Happy is the one who keeps the Sabbath and happy is the one who honors it, as it is written, "If you honor it, not doing your own ways, nor pursuing your own business, nor speaking of matters" (Isaiah 58:13).

23) A story about a pious man who had a cow and he would plow with her each and every day. And when the Sabbath day

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<sup>1</sup>"There is a supposition that Israel is to recite the *Kedushah* only on the Sabbath. See Ginzberg, *Geonica*, II, (New York : Hermon Press, 1968), p.48.

arrived, he would set her to rest. After some time, the righteous man lost his wealth, and he did not have anything, and he sold her to a gentile. The gentile would plough with her six days, and when the Sabbath day arrived, he would take her out to plough with her. When she was taken outside, she would lay down under the yoke and not want to do work on the Sabbath day. And he beat her with crushing blows, but it did not help him at all. When the gentile saw her like this, he went to the righteous man and said to him, Come and take your cow. Six days I worked her, but on the seventh day I took her outside to plow and she lay down under the yoke and did not want to do any work at all. And I beat her, but it did not help at all. When he said this to him, the righteous man understood why she would not work, for she had learned to rest on the Sabbath day. The righteous man said to him, Go, and I will stand her up and I will make it so that you will be able to plow. When he arrived to her, he said to her in her ear, Oh cow, cow, when you were in my possession, I would keep the Sabbath. But now my sins have forced me to sell you to this man. I beg of you that you do the bidding of your master. When he said this to her, she stood and asked to work. The gentile said to him, Tell me, perhaps you cast a spell on her? I will not leave you alone until you tell me what you did to her or what you said in her ear. The righteous man said, Such and such I said to her. When the gentile heard this, he was astonished and shocked. And he

learned a *Kal V'Homer*,<sup>120</sup> and said, If she, who does not have knowledge or understanding, recognizes her Creator, then I, who the Holy One Blessed Be He created in His image and has given me knowledge and understanding, how much more so should I recognize my Creator? Immediately he converted and he was heaven fearing, and he merited to study Torah and he was called Rabbi Hanina ben Torta.<sup>121</sup>

24) The King said to Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah,<sup>122</sup> why is it that the smell of Sabbath cooking carries more than that of [the cooking of] the rest of the days of the week, whose smell does not carry at all? He said to him, There is a particular spice we put into it (and Shabbat is its name). He said, give me some of it to eat. He said to him, It can only help those who observe the Sabbath, but all who do not observe the Sabbath, it cannot help.

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<sup>120</sup>A hermeneutic device which reasons that if one thing is of little value (*Kal*) is important, then another of greater value (*Homer*) should be even more important.

<sup>121</sup>A Palestinian Amora of the third century who was a disciple of Johanan.

<sup>122</sup>Prominent Tanna in the period immediately after the destruction of the Temple (c.50-130 C.E.). Needle maker or tailor by trade, he was a disciple of Johanan ben Zakkai. Established a school at Pekiin.

25) Tineius Rufus<sup>123</sup> the wicked said to Rabbi Akiva, Why is this [Sabbath] day different from all other days? He said to him, Why are you different from other men? He said to him, Because the master<sup>124</sup> has found pleasure in me. He said to him, And so it is with the Sabbath, because the Lord has found pleasure in it. He said to him, What is the evidence? He said to him, Let the River Sambbatyon<sup>125</sup> prove, for it has no rest until the Sabbath comes. And he further said to him, Let your father's grave prove, for it burns all the week, but on the Sabbath it rests. He went to his father's grave and he found that all the week it was giving off smoke, but on the Sabbath, no smoke went up.<sup>126</sup> He said to him, You made light of my father, cursing him and degrading him. He said to him, I answered your words. Therefore, a person is obligated to observe the Sabbath and to honor it with good cooking and beautiful clothes, for thus the Sages said, Eighteen garments a person is obligated to wear on the Sabbath.

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<sup>123</sup>A Roman general who was governor of Judea. See Sanhedrin 65a; Bereshit Rabbah 11:5; Pesikta Rabbati 23:119b for elaborations on his discussions with Akiva.

<sup>124</sup>The emperor.

<sup>125</sup>Said to cease from flowing on the seventh day.

<sup>126</sup>The image reflects the idea that all who are in *Gehinnom* are released for the Sabbath. See above No.22. Another version (Bereshit Rabbah 11:5) has a necromancer rasing his father from the dead during the days of the week, but on the Sabbath he remained in his grave.



26) Fifth Commandment : "Honor your father and mother, so that your days may be lengthened on the land which the Lord your God gives you" (Ex.20:12). The fathers from which you went out, honor them as you would Me, said the Holy One Blessed Be He, The womb from which you were born, honor it. The breast from which you sucked, support it, and so on. (Fear them) who were with Me when I created you, as it is written, "You shall fear every man, his father and his mother..." (Lev.19:3). And it is written "Honor your father and mother". How is a person obligated to honor them? With food and drink and clothing and in coming and going. And how is a person obligated to fear them? He should not sit in their place, nor speak before them nor contradict their words. Everyone who honors his mother and father, the Holy One Blessed Be He will consider it as if he has honored Him, and everyone who scorns his father and mother, the Holy One Blessed Be He will consider it as if he has scorned Him. And further, the Sages say, Honor him in his life, honor him in his death. Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba<sup>127</sup> said, There is the type who feeds his father pheasant and it drives him [the son] out from the world, and there is the type who mills grain for him, and it brings him to live in the world to come.

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<sup>127</sup>A Palestinian Amora of the third century who studied under Johanan, Hanina and Joshua ben Levi. He was very poor and, in order to make a living, he often travelled throughout the country lecturing, inspecting academies, and raising money. He was known to be severe in his interpretation of the Law, and of a gloomy disposition.



27) A story about a Jew who every day his son would bring to him a pair [of pigeons], and he would feed him and he would give him to drink. And one day he said to him, My son, from where do you get all this, that every day you feed me two pigeons? His son responded to him, Wicked, narrow-minded dog! Eat what I have brought you, and what does it matter to you where I get it from?! And there is the type who mills for him grain, and it brings him to the world to come.

28) A story about a man, that, one time, the Monarchy decreed that every person who sat idle and did not work, they would chop off his hands and feet. Everyday his son milled grain, and he sat on a bed. One day, servants of the king entered. The son said, Father, you mill the grain, and I will lie on the bed. The servants of the king found him [the son] sitting on the bed, and they brought him before the king, and they chopped off his hands and feet. And this brought him to the world to come, for he saved his father.

Also consider what a gentile in Ashkelon did. Dama ben Netina was his name. One time someone asked him for merchandise and he would have earned from it a profit of two hundred thousand *dinarim*. But the key was under his father's head and he would not disturb him. Another time some wisemen asked him for stones for the *Efod*, for six hundred thousand *dinarim*. But the key was under his father's head, and he would not disturb him. Another year, the Holy One Blessed Be

He granted him his full reward, for it happened that he had a red heifer<sup>128</sup> in his herd, and wisemen of Israel came to him. He said to them, I know that if I ask of you all the money in the world, you would give it to me. But I do not ask of you anything but the money I have lost on account of honoring my father. They gave it to him. One time he was dressed in a *sirkin*,<sup>129</sup> and he sat among the greats of Rome. And his mother came and tore it off of him and spit in his face, but he did not respond to her. Thus a person is obligated to honor his father and mother.

29) There are three partners in [the creation of] a child : the Holy One Blessed Be He, his father and his mother. From his father, brains, bones, veins, nails, and the white that is in the eyes are created. From his mother, flesh and skin, the black that is in the eyes, and blood. And the Holy One Blessed Be He gives to him breath, soul, knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. And when he departs from the world, the Holy One Blessed Be He takes His portion, and the portion of his father and mother is left before them. And if the Holy One Blessed Be He sees that he has honored his father and mother, his days and years are lengthened for him. [But] everyone who scorns his father and mother, he shall be hanged

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<sup>128</sup>see Num.19.

<sup>129</sup>A type of Roman tunic.

on a tree and stoned with stones, for thus we find with Avshalom ben Maakhah,<sup>130</sup> that, because he scorned David, he was hanged on the tree, and he was cast into a pit, and they erected a mound of stones upon it.<sup>131</sup> And everyone who honors his father and mother, the Holy One Blessed Be He will grant him his reward, in this world and the world to come.

30) A story of a pious old man, seventy years old, who did not have a son, but had much money. Every single day he would go to the Synagogue, and when the young men would leave the house of the Rabbi, he would embrace them and kiss them and he would say to them, Recite for me your verses. And every one of them recited to him one of his verses, and he would cry and say, Happy are those who merit sons who engage in [the study of] Torah, and he would say, Woe to me that a stranger shall inherit all my riches. What did this pious man do? He stood and distributed his riches to scholars. He said, Perhaps I will have a share in the world to come with you. Immediately, the Holy One Blessed Be He took pity on him and He gave him a son in his seventieth year. When the son was five years old, he would put him on his shoulders and take him

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<sup>130</sup>Third son of David by Maakhah who led a revolt against his father. He was killed while escaping when his head became caught in the branches of a terebinth, and he was left hanging while the mule on which he was riding ran away from under him. See 2 Sam. 18:9-18.

<sup>131</sup>An old proof of bitter hostility. See Joshua 7:26.

to the study house. He said to his teacher, Which book will my son begin to study? He said to him, The book of Leviticus. He said to him, My son will not begin except in the Book of Genesis, for it exalts the Holy One Blessed Be He. Immediately he opened the Book of Genesis. One day the son said to his father, How long will you put me on your shoulders? Allow me to walk. I know the way, and I will go by myself. He said to him, Go. When he went, an emissary of the king encountered him. When he saw him, that he was very handsome, he took him and led him to his house. And when his father came home at evening time, he saw that his son had not returned. He went to his teacher. He said to him, My son whom I sent to you, where is he? He said to him, I don't know, for he didn't come to study today. When his father heard this, he screamed and cried and went to the crossroads and asked, Did you see my son? He had such and such a distinguishing mark. They said to him, We have not seen him. And his father and mother screamed and cried and they rolled in the dust until their tears ascended to heaven. At that very moment, the Holy One Blessed Be He took pity on him and He brought a sickness upon the king. And he said to his servants, Bring me a book of healing, and they did so. And the Holy One Blessed Be He turned it into the Book of Genesis. His servants opened it, but they were not able to read it. His servants said to him, It appears to us that this is a book of the Jews. They searched for, but did not find, Jews. The

emissary said to the king, When I went to the village of the Jews, I stole from there a child. Perhaps he knows how to read it. The king said, Go, bring him to me. He went and he brought him before him. The king said to the child, My son, if you know how to read this book, it will be fortunate for you, and it will be fortunate for us. When the child saw the book, he screamed and cried, and his whole body fell to the ground. The king said, it seems to me that you are afraid of me. He said to him, I am not afraid of you, rather I am the only one of my mother, and the Holy One Blessed Be He gave me to my father in his seventieth year, and he taught me this book. He said to him, I know how to read it well. He recited for him from *Bereshit*, and he read until *Vayekhullu*. He said to him, Do you know how to explain it? He said to him, Yes. Immediately, the Holy One Blessed Be He gave him knowledge, wisdom, and understanding, and he explained the whole thing to him. When the king heard about the might of the Holy One Blessed Be He, he immediately rose from his bed and he sat in his place until he explained to him the whole thing. The king said to him, Healing has come to me because of you. Ask of me what you desire, and I will give it to you. The child said to him, I do not ask of you anything except for you to return me to my father and mother. Immediately the king ordered [the emissary] to take him to his treasure house and to give him silver and gold and pearls, and he returned to his father and mother. When his father and mother saw him, they gave praise

and thanks to the Holy One Blessed Be He, and at that very hour they rejoiced in great happiness. From here the Sages said, If he, who did not study anything except the Book of Genesis, had a reward like this, for the one who teaches his son Torah or Mishnah, so much more so. And if he did not honor his father except at one time and the Holy One Blessed Be He gave him this honor, for the one who honors his father and mother day and night, so much more so that the Holy One Blessed Be He will grant him a good reward in this world and the world to come.

31) Sixth Commandment : "You shall not murder" (Ex.20:13). Do not associate with murderers, distance yourself from their associates, so that your sons do not learn about murder. And, as punishment for murder, destruction came to the earth. A soul which you cannot restore, why should it be lost without the Law of the Torah? A light that you are not able to revive, why should it go out? For the ability of God, (to cause death and life), a little of it is in humans. But you do not know how much, for it is written, "Just as you do not know what is the way of the wind, like bones in the womb of a pregnant woman, so you do not know the actions of God who makes all" (Ecc.11:5).<sup>132</sup> For the murderer who destroys the

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<sup>132</sup>New J.P.S. translation : "Just as you do not know how the lifebreath passes into the limbs within the womb of the pregnant woman, so you cannot foresee the actions of God, who causes all things to happen."



soul, from the eye of one who is flesh and blood he can hide, but he cannot hide from the eye of the Holy One Blessed Be He. For His eyes are on all the ways of humankind, and He sees all his deeds, be them good or evil. There is no darkness or shadows before him, and the doers of wicked deeds will not be able to hide there. For how is the murderer able to hide from killing a man? For he is a creation of the Holy One Blessed Be He, that He nourished, built, and bore him in his mother's womb, as it is written, "Have You not poured me out like milk, and curdled me like cheese?" (Job 10:10).

Rabbi Eliezer<sup>133</sup> said, Just as there are doors and latches for a house, so there are doors and latches for a woman, as it is written, "Because He did not shut up the doors of my mother's womb..." (Job 3:10). Rabbi Joshua<sup>134</sup> said, Just as there are keys to a house, so there are keys to a woman, as it is written, "And the Lord opened her womb..." (Gen.29:31), and just as there are hinges for a door, thus there are hinges<sup>135</sup> for a woman, as it is written, "...And she bowed and gave birth, for her pains came upon her" (I Sam.4:19). And at the hour when the child is to be born, the angel in charge of pregnancy comes and takes the child and brings him before

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<sup>133</sup>A fifth century Palestinian Amora.

<sup>134</sup>Probably Joshua ben Hananiah, a prominent Tanna in the period after the destruction of the Temple (c.50-130 C.E.).

<sup>135</sup>A pun on the similarity of the words for "pain" and "hinge".

the Holy One Blessed Be, and he says, Master of the Universe, what do you command regarding this child? Will he be wise or will he be stupid, rich or poor, blind or sighted, mute or speaking, large or dwarfed? But "righteous or wicked" he does not say, for everything is in the hand of heaven, except for fear of heaven. And how is the child laid in his mother's womb and so on? Folded and laid out like a notebook. And a light is kindled on his head, and he looks and sees from one end of the world until the other, as it is written, "when His candle shone upon my head..." (Job 29:3). And when his time arrives to go out [from the womb], his closed organs are opened and so on. And the Holy One Blessed Be He says to him, My son, know that I formed you and I made you and in the future I will settle accounts with you. Be righteous and do not be wicked, lest a person say, Who gives testimony about me? The stones of a person's house and the furnishings of his house testify about him, as it is written, "For the stone will cry out of the wall, and the beam out of the timber shall answer it" (Hab.2:11). Rabbi Shila<sup>134</sup> says, The Ministering Angels who accompany a person through his life, they testify about him, as it is written, "For He shall give his angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways" (Psalm 91:11). And there are some who say that a person's organs testify about him, as it is written, "You are my witnesses says the

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<sup>134</sup>A third century Amora who was principal of the academy in Nehardea.

Lord" (Is.43: 10), and I am God. Therefore, humankind is cautioned against murder, for it<sup>137</sup> is a divine act and His construction, and how can a human rise up and destroy it? For, in the future to come, the murder victim will stand before the Holy One Blessed Be He and plead before Him, Master of the Universe, You formed me, You raised me, and You sheltered me in a womb. And You took me out from there without a fault. And You were my support in Your great mercy. And this one stood and murdered me<sup>138</sup>, and he destroyed a creation which You formed. Master of the Universe, avenge me for this evil person who did not have mercy upon me. At that very moment, the Holy One Blessed Be He became angry at him and threw him to *Gehinnom*, and he burned him there. And the murder victim saw that he was avenged, and he saw and rejoiced, as it is written, "The righteous shall rejoice when he sees the vengeance, he shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked" (Psalm 58:11). May salvation quickly be hastened, and redemption shall draw near.

32) Seventh Commandment : "You shall not commit adultery" (Ex.20:13). A person shall not anger his Creator, and he shall not exhaust himself with evil deeds, and he shall not think about another woman, and he shall not look at women. For if he tries to purify himself, he will be assisted by

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<sup>137</sup>human life.

Heaven, and the Holy One Blessed Be He Himself will join with him to make him holy, and He will not allow the evil inclination to rule over him.

33) A story about Rabbi Matthiah ben Heresh,<sup>138</sup> who was sitting and expounding Torah. And his face resembled the sun, and the features of his face resembled those of the Ministering Angels in awe of Heaven. For he had never cast his gaze upon the wife of a colleague. One time, as he was sitting and expounding and occupied with Torah in the study house, Satan passed before him and saw him, and he was suspicious of him. He said, Is it possible for a man like this that he would not sin? What did Satan do? He ascended to Heaven and stood before the Holy One Blessed Be He, and said, Master of the Universe, give me permission and I will test him. He said to him, Go. He went and he found him, as he was sitting, occupied with Torah. What did he do? He appeared as a woman, the likes of which there had never been

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<sup>138</sup>A second century Tanna who lived in Rome and transplanted the knowledge of Jewish Law from Asia to Europe. He was born in Palestine and was probably a pupil of Ishmael ben Elisha.

since the days of the Na'amah, sister of Tuval-Qayin,<sup>139</sup> by whom the Ministering Angels were led into error, as it is written, "And the sons of God saw how beautiful the daughters of men were, and took wives from among those that pleased them" (Gen.6:2). She came and she stood before him. When he saw her, he turned to the left. She stood on his left side, and he turned his faced to the right side. When he saw that she was always moving to his side, he said, I am afraid that perhaps the evil inclination will overcome me and I will sin. What did this righteous man do? He said to his students who sat before him, Go and bring me fire and nails. They brought them to him, and he put the nails into the fire until they were red-hot, and he put them on his eyes. When Satan saw this, he was shocked, and he fell on his face and he trembled. And he ascended on high, before the Holy One Blessed Be He and he said before Him, Master of the Universe, here is what happened.... The Holy One Blessed Be He said to him, Didn't I tell you that you have no power over him? At that very hour, the Holy One Blessed Be He called to Raphael and said to him, Go and heal the eyes of Rabbi Matthiah ben Heresh!

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<sup>139</sup>See Gen.4:17-22. Of the line of Cain, Na'amah was considered to be so lovely, that she led the angels astray with her beauty. She is often identified with Lilith, and, from her union with Shamdon, gave birth to the devil Asmodeus who, together with Lilith, strangles little children. She was said to be "as shameless as all the other descendants of Cain and prone to bestial indulgences" (Ginzberg). Not to be confused with Na'amah, the wife of Noah. See Ginzberg, (1988), I, pp.150-151; V, pp.147-148, 171-172; Nahmanides on Genesis 4.

Raphael came and stood before him. He said to him, The Holy One Blessed Be He sent me to you to heal your eyes. He said to him, Leave me alone. What was, was.<sup>140</sup> He returned before the Holy One Blessed Be He and said before Him, Master of the Universe, This is what he said to me.... He said to him, Go, say to him that the Evil Inclination will never rule over him. Immediately he went and healed him. From here the Sages said, Whosoever does not cast his eyes upon the wife of another man, the Evil Inclination will not rule him. Let a man be careful that he shall not cast his eyes upon another woman, except for his own wife, for anyone who touches her, she will bring him to impoverishment, and moreover, she will kill him, as it is written, "The last loaf of bread will go for a harlot; a married woman will snare a person of honor" (Prov.6:26). And woe to him in this world and woe to him in the world to come.

34) A story about a man who came upon<sup>141</sup> a engaged young woman on Yom Kippur, and they took him out and killed him. After his death, a son was born to him by his wife, and the children of Israel prevented his circumcision. One time Rabbi Akiva was going along the way, and he found a person who was most ugly and he was carrying such a great load of wood, that there

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<sup>140</sup>Eisenstein's note #8 : "For he feared that perhaps he would sin again." Another version (Nusah Verona) has Matthiah saying, "I'm afraid lest the Evil Urge will conquer me."

<sup>141</sup>Euphemism for sexual intercourse.



was no person in the world, and no ass and no horse, who was able to carry as much as him. Rabbi Akiva said to him, Swear to me, saying if you are a human, or a demon, or a whatever kind of creature you are. He said to him, Rabbi! I was a human, but I have already departed from this world. And each and every day I carry a load like this, and I bring it to *Gehinnom*, and they burn me with it three times a day, and this is my labor every single day. Rabbi Akiva said to him, What did you do that they are punishing you like this? The man said to him, I came upon a engaged young woman on Yom Kippur. He said to him, My son, have you heard if there is relief for you in that world? He said to him, Thus I heard from behind the curtains, that at the time that my son goes up to the Torah scroll and says, "Praised be the Lord, the Blessed One," they will take me out from *Gehinnom* and enter me into the Garden of Eden. Rabbi Akiva said to him, Have you left a wife or son? He said to him, One son was born to me after my death, but the Jews refused to circumcise him. He said to him, What is your name? He said to him, My name is Arnonya. And what is the name of your wife? He said to him, Siskiyah. And what is the name of your city? He said to him, Lodkiya. Immediately, Rabbi Akiva wrote his name, and the name of his wife and the name of his town, and Rabbi Akiva went until he came to that very town. When he came to the town, the people of the town went out to greet him. He said, Do any of you know the man so and so, and his wife? They said, May the name

of the wicked rot! He said to them, On what account? They said to him, This is what he did.... He said to them, Nevertheless, bring his son to me. They brought him and he commanded [them] to circumcise him. And he set him to study, and so he did. And they taught him the blessings that are needed to for the Torah scroll. On the Sabbath day he commanded [them] to call him to the Torah scroll, and he said, "Praised be the Lord, the Blessed One, for ever and ever". Immediately his father was taken from *Gehinnom* and entered into the Garden of Eden. That very night he came in a dream to Rabbi Akiva and said to him, You shall be comforted, for I am comforted.

35) And another story about Rabbi Meir<sup>142</sup> that once he went up to Jerusalem....<sup>143</sup>

36) A story about a man who had sons, and they died. He stood in prayer and said before him, Master of the Universe, if you favor me to see a son who reads Torah, and I accompany him to the marriage canopy, I will invite to his wedding all the students and the paupers and the orphans who are in the city. And the Holy One Blessed Be He granted his request, and

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<sup>142</sup>A Tanna of the second century, he was the student of Akiva and the wife of Bruriah.

<sup>143</sup>The complete story is not included here. For the complete version, see Adolph Jellinek, Beit Ha-Midrash, I, (Jerusalem : Bamberger & Wahrmann, 1938), pp.81-83.

his plea came before Him, and there was born to him a son. And he called him Matanyah, for he is a "Gift of God." And he taught him much Torah, and he was married. All the students and the paupers and the orphans in the city were invited to his wedding, and he filled six houses with students. The Holy One Blessed Be He sent the Angel of Death. He made himself like a pauper, and he said to the bridegroom, Do me a favor and give me a place among the students. The bridegroom responded, Those that I wanted to invite, I already invited. And he asked him three times, but he did not want to invite him. He forced his way into his wedding. The groom encountered him, and he appeared to him as a man dressed in garments covered with dung. The bridegroom responded to him and said to him, Not only did you force your way into my wedding, but you came in garments covered with dung! He went away ashamed, and afterwards the bridegroom joyously entered under his wedding canopy with the bride. And while he was celebrating, the pauper forced his way in the door. The bridegroom stood and saw him, and he began to be angry. And he said, How long will you persist, for I have already chased you from the feast, and now you come here?! Go away from here! At that very hour the Angel of Death went and came to stand by the bridegroom, before his bed, like a pillar of fire from the Earth until Heaven. The bridegroom responded to him and said to him, Who are you? He said to him, I am the Angel of Death and I have come to take your soul. The bride

responded and said, Master of the Universe, will You make your Torah a fraud? For You wrote in Your Torah, "When a man takes a new wife, he shall not go to war, neither shall he be charged with any business; but he shall be free at home one year, and shall cheer his wife whom he has taken" (Deut. 24:5). For now it is not a month and not a week and not even one day. Master of the Universe, make me pregnant by him, so I will not go out as a harlot. At that very hour the Holy One Blessed Be He heard her prayer, and He rebuked the Angel of Death, and she saved her husband from death. And what were her deeds that merited this for her? Her mother used to draw water every day and she would supply the children of the school and she was old women. And her daughter (the bride) would take a stick and put it in the hand of her mother and it would support her. And the daughter would carry the water and say to her mother, Mother! Do not leave the drawing! If you are not able to do it, I will do it, and it will be called in your name. And so she did all her days. And because of this *Mitzvah*, she saved her husband from death. And about this it is said, "Who can find a woman of worth? For her price is far above rubies" (Prov.31:10). She will not fear for her household because of snow, for all of her household wears fine garments. There is no snow except for the Angel of Death who is half fire and half snow. This is a story of Rabbi Matanyah.

37) A story about a man who asked for a son from the Holy One Blessed Be He. He said before him, Master of the Universe, give me a son and I will teach him Torah as my heart desires. The Holy One Blessed Be He heard his prayer and gave him a son, and he named him Shaul, for "From God I asked for him". And he grew and became about twenty five years old, and he taught him Torah and he became very wise, and afterwards his father died. Some days later, his mother said to him, take money and go to trade. He went and saw these people kidnapping, and these robbing, and these stealing and these swearing false oaths, and he returned to his house empty-handed. His mother said to him, Why did you not trade? Her son said to her, The merchandise did not look proper to me, and among themselves, the merchants spoke only deceit. He saw people who were carrying a person to the grave. He said to his mother, I will go and I will render righteousness unto the dead with this group. She said to him, Go. He went, and upon his return, he saw a man in a field plowing with his own neck,<sup>144</sup> and he put the second yoke on the plough, and he was calling and plowing. The young man came and he saw it and he said to him, Peace unto you my lord. And he said to him, Peace unto you, and he was Elijah, may he be remembered for good. And the young man said to him, What is this work at which you toil? He said to him, My son, I am plowing so that

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<sup>144</sup>Pulling the plow himself, with no animal.

all these, me and my wife, my sons and daughters, and the poor and the needy, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the sky, and the creatures of the land, will eat. The young man said to him, This is the work I desire. Elijah, may he be remembered for a blessing, said to him, What you ask for, I shall grant to you. He said to him, My lord, the Holy One Blessed Be He gave me Torah, and now I request a wife who will be beautiful and Heaven fearing. He said to him, My son, upon your life, the only one who is called a worthy woman is one who is named Hannah, and she is in the East, and one who is named Hannah in the West, who is reserved for you. From this very place until there, it is three days walk. Elijah, may he be remembered for a blessing, took him, and he led him there in a short time, and he set him on the way. And Elijah, may he be remembered for a blessing, went to her, and he said to her, What do you say? Will you marry this man? She said to him, If the word has come from God, I cannot say anything about it at all. Immediately, Elijah, may he be remembered for a blessing, brought the young man and adorned him and he matched them. And he was going out and the young man came on the seventh day to be married. Elijah came and found him as he was sitting and playing with the bride. Elijah said to him, You rested and forgot your life! Seven years you will be sold as a slave after the seven days of the feast. Elijah went out and left them, and the young man began to worry. The bride began to say, What is wrong with you? Am I not fit for



you, or am I not worthy of you? Or, if you are lacking in money or anything, behold, everything I have is yours. Or perhaps you are pinning for your parents. Let us go to them. Immediately they saddled their asses, and they prepared calves to carry their money, and they took slaves and maidservants, and they went on their way. As they were going, they came across a great river. The wife said, Let us sit and eat, and they sat to eat. The young man stood and went to the river to wash his feet. Elijah, may he be remembered for a blessing, came and took him on his wings and took him to a far away place and sold him as a slave. The wife tarried an hour, but he did not come back. She understood the situation. She gave a confession to the Holy One Blessed Be He. She said to her servants, Hear me, I am going to sow this field, for it makes bountiful wheat, and build for me a city and houses and we shall sow the field and we shall work the wheat, for I know that there will be a great famine in the world and here, in the future, all people will come to trade. Thus they did, and everyone came to her place. After five years, the young man came with his master and he was carrying his sack, and they came by her house. And she asked every person who came to buy wheat their names. And when she saw him, she recognized him and said to his master, Give me the young man and he will eat bread in my house. She took him and asked him, Who are you and what is your name? He said to her, My name is Shaul. She said to him, I am your wife and you are

my husband. Immediately she embraced him and kissed him and she began to cry and she gave praise and thanks to the Holy One Blessed Be He who made for her miracles. She said to him, My lord, what has happened to you, tell me? He told her all that had happened. He said, Still, I do not have but five years. She stood and fed him and gave him to drink, and she covered him and she hugged him and she said to him, Go in peace. The young man went with his master and she did not lament or cry, but she lifted her eyes to heaven and gave praise to the Holy One Blessed Be He. And the young man went with his master and worked for him another two years, and afterwards Elijah came and set him on his wings and returned him to his wife. Immediately the young man took his wife, and his slaves and maidservants, he went to his mother, and he found her still alive. They came and they saw that she<sup>148</sup> was a virtuous woman, who was not unfaithful to her Creator or her husband during these years. About her it is written, "A woman who fears God, she is to be praised". This is a story about Shaul.

38) Eighth Commandment : "You shall not steal" (Ex.20:13). Always be careful and habitual in fear of the Holy One Blessed Be He and you should not transgress His words, so that you shall merit to see and to be in the company of the Righteous.

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<sup>148</sup>Hannah, his wife.

And you shall not be in the company of the wicked, and you shall not be disgraced in their shame, and you shall not extend a hand in thievery, for there is not a person who can accumulate riches from thievery, for anyone who steals shall repay double. If he has nothing, sell him for his theft, as it is written, "If he has nothing, he shall be sold for his theft." (Ex.22:2).

39) A story that happened in the days of King Solomon about three men who were going along on Erev Shabbat, and the day descended upon them [while they were on their way]. They said to one another, Come, let us hide our money in one place, and they went and hide the money. When mid-night arrived, one of them got up and took the money and hide it in another place. After the Sabbath, they desired to continue on their way, and they went to the same spot, but they did not find the money. One said the other stole it, and another said the other stole it. They went for a judgement before King Solomon. They presented the matter to him, and they asked him to render a decision. When he heard the cases, he said [to himself], If I do not give them the judgement now, they will say, Where is the wisdom of Solomon? What did he do? He sat and probed with his wisdom and insight in order to give them an answer, and to catch them from their words. As soon as they returned to him, he began to speak to them. He said to them, I have heard about you that you are masters of Torah and masters of

wisdom and laws. I ask of you one question, which a Roman king sent to me. He asked me to examine a matter which happened to him in his kingdom with a boy and a girl who were dwelling in one courtyard and they desired one another. The boy said to the girl, Come, and we shall make an agreement between us by oath, that anyone who wants to become engaged to you, you will not heed him except with my permission. And she swore to him so. After some time, the girl became engaged. Just as the groom came to her, she said to him, I cannot heed you until I go to so and so and ask him permission, for I have already sworn to him. What did she do? She went and said, Take much silver and gold and free me for my husband. He said, Since you stand by your oath, behold I free you for your husband, and I will not take from you a thing. And to the young man who came with her, he said to him, Be happy in your lot in peace, and they went on their way. As they were returning on the way, highwaymen approached them. And there was among them an old man, and he took for himself the young woman and all the silver and the gold which was with them, and the jewelry that was upon them. And he wanted to come unto the young woman. She said to the old highwayman, I beg of you, wait for me a little until I tell you about a thing that happened to me, and she told him all that had happened. The young woman said, If that young man, who is in his prime, he suppressed his desires, and he did not want to touch me, then you, who are old, and it would seem

right that you should be God-fearing every hour, how much more so should you not touch me? Here, have all the silver and gold that is with me, but free me in peace and I will go with my husband. When the old man heard this, he raised his eyes to heaven, and he learned for himself a *Kal V'Homer*. If I am walking on the edge of my grave each, and every day, should I do this?! What did he do? He sent her and she went to her husband and he returned to her all the jewelry and all the silver and the gold that he took from them, and he did not want to touch or enjoy anything that they had. Now the Roman king sent [this problem] to me to declare which of them is to be commended of all of them. They gave to him the judgement. The first opened and said, I commend the young woman who stood by her oath. The second one opened and said, I commend her husband who suppressed his desire, and did not want to touch her. The third opened and said, I commend the old highwayman who stole money and returned to them all the money that he took, and did not want to touch her. And further, if he returned the woman, why did he return the money? Immediately King Solomon opened and said, If, in this instance, when he was only present in hearsay, and he was taken with money that he has never really seen, how much more so this money? Immediately, King Solomon ordered him and they bound him and they whipped him, and he confessed to him, and he showed him the place where he hide the money. And they saw that the wisdom of God was in him. Because of this a person should not

extent his hand in thievery, for all his hidden things will be revealed and known.

40) A story about a man who was a merchant and he was going to a far off place to buy merchandise, and he had five hundred gold pieces in one purse. The merchant said to himself, What should I do? If I carry it with me, perhaps people will see it and steal it from me. Rather, I will hide it until the day of the transaction arrives. What did he do? He went to a secret place, and he looked here and there, and he saw that nobody was there, and he made a ditch in the earth to hide it. And He did not know that in a wall by that very place there was a hole, and there was a person who saw that he hide the purse in that very place. And afterwards, the merchant went away, and immediately came the very man who saw that he hide the money, and he went and he stole the money. A few days later the merchant came back to get the money that was needed to buy the merchandise that he desired, but he did not find it. The merchant began to grieve and he said to himself, What will I do? Who shall I ask and who shall I seek out? For behold, when I buried the purse, there was nobody around. He raised his eyes and he searched here and there, and he saw the hole and he thought to himself, Perhaps the owner of the house there saw me when I hide the money and he took it. Since he did not know him, he went and asked [someone] who he was, and he showed him to him. And he came to his place and he said,



Behold, I heard them say about you that you give counsel and are wise. I request of you that you give me the advise that I shall ask of you. He said to him, Speak. He said, My lord, I came to here to trade and I brought with me two purses, the first with five hundred gold pieces and the second with eight hundred. And when I came, I did not know a single man in this city with whom to entrust it. What I did was, I went to a secret place and I buried there the purse of five hundred, and the second I still have guarded in my possession. And therefore I have come to ask you if [you think] I should hide it in a different place or should I put the next one in the same place that I hide the first, or should I entrust it with a trustworthy person in this city? He said to him, If you ask me, do not entrust it to any man with whom you are not acquainted. Possibly they will lie to you. Rather, put it in the same place that holds the other money you have. Immediately, the owner of the house who stole the purse thought that if the merchant went to the same place to deposit the second purse, and he did not find the first one, he would refrain from depositing again. Rather, I will return there the purse to its place, and then I will take the two of them. The merchant went and found it and said, Blessed is the One who returns lost things to their owners. Thus a person should not extend his hand in thievery, for that which he desires he will not find, and that which is in his hand will be taken back from him.

Come and see to what the sin of thievery leads : pleasant things were made ugly, joyous people were made sad, lofty things were made low, those clothed were made naked. For behold, Adam and Eve had ten wedding canopies made for them in the Garden of Eden completely of precious stones and pearls.<sup>146</sup> But because they extended their hands in stealing from the fruit of the Tree which knows good and evil, the Holy One Blessed Be He became angry at them and brought to the world forty curses, ten upon Adam, ten upon Eve, ten upon the Serpent, and ten upon the earth.<sup>147</sup> And also Rachel our mother, although she stole the household gods in order to prevent her father from idolatry,<sup>148</sup> nonetheless, this sin caused her not be buried in the cave of the Righteous.<sup>149</sup> About this Jacob said, "Anyone with whom you find your gods, let him not live" (Gen.31:32). Thusly, a person should not extend his hand in thievery, nor in robbery, but rather [he shall prosper] by his labor and the sweat of his hands. If he does so, he shall be happy in this world, and he shall be happy in the world to come, as it is written, "If you eat the labor of your hands; you shall be happy and it shall be good

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<sup>146</sup>See Ginzberg, (1988), I, p.68.

<sup>147</sup>For a description of the forty curses, see Ginzberg, (1988), I, pp.77-80.

<sup>148</sup>See Genesis 31.

<sup>149</sup>Another explanation given for Rachel's not being buried next to Jacob is that she traded his company to Leah for the two *dudaim*. See Ginzberg, (1988), I, pp.366-367.

for you" (Psalm 128:2).

41) Ninth Commandment : "Do not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Ex.20:13). Said King Solomon in his wisdom, A person should do everything that he can to work hard and to strive for *Mizvoth* and good deeds; it is not sufficient for one to attempt to be repentant for that which comes out from his mouth in wickedness. Thusly a person is obligated to guard his mouth from evil speech, for the tongue is burnt first of all the organs, and it comes first to judgement.<sup>130</sup> Come and see just how bad is the sin of evil speech. As David said to Doeg the Edomite,<sup>131</sup> It [the tongue] is like a sharp sword : "Your tongue devises mischiefs like a sharp razor..." (Psalm 52:4). And it is written, "A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a maul, and a sword, and a sharp arrow" (Prov.25:18). Just as the evil [blade] of a sharp sword devours from two sides, likewise evil speech destroys from all sides, the one who says it, the one who

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<sup>130</sup>This is an allusion to the fact that when one ingests something hot, the tongue is the first internal part of the body to feel its heat, and thereby be burnt.

<sup>131</sup>Doeg is referred to as an Edomite and an Aramean, although he was of the tribe of Judah. These designations refer not to his nationality, but rather to his character. He was bloodthirsty by nature, (*Adomi* - "the bloody one") and he often slandered (*Edomi* - "he who causes the blush of shame"). Ultimately, Doeg's tongue was devoured by worms (probably leprosy), and he was sentence to eternal punishment in *Gehinnom*, never to be resurrected. Being eaten alive by worms was viewed as the punishment for blasphemers and slanderers. See Ginzberg, (1988), IV, pp.74-76 (plus notes); VI, p.98, note 552.

receives it, and the one who it is spoken about. And just as a person is not able to bring back an arrow which goes out from under his hand, likewise, one is not able to revoke it.<sup>192</sup> Whoever bears false witness against his neighbor in a court, even if he feels remorse a hundred times, he is not able to turn from his evil and to help him.

42) A story about two men in Ashkelon who were eating and drinking and studying Torah together. One of them died and the son of Baiyah the tax-collector died on the very same day. When they were taking them to the cemetery, they heard a noise and they fled. Upon their return, the biers became switched, and they paid great honor to the coffin of the son of Baiyah the tax-collector, (and did not direct honor to the coffin of the other). His friend the scholar said to them, It is not his coffin. And he was very sorry, and he said, Perhaps, Heaven forfend, there is no merit for the enemies of Israel.<sup>193</sup> He<sup>194</sup> appeared to him in a dream [and said], My son, do not despise your Master. This one performed one culpable act, and this one performed one meritorious act. Did the scholar perform a culpable act? Heaven forfend! He did not perform a terribly culpable act, except that one time he put on the

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<sup>192</sup>Evil speech.

<sup>193</sup>Euphemism for the Jewish people.

<sup>194</sup>the deceased man.

phylactery of the head before that of the arm. And what was the meritorious act in the world which the son of Baiyah the tax-collector performed? One time he was walking in the market and he had in his possession loaves of bread, one under each of his arms. And he dropped a loaf and a poor person came and took it and he did not say anything to him. By that right he merits to be honored. And there are those who say he made a feast for the people of the city on the eve of the Sabbath, and they did not come, so he gave it to the poor. Afterwards they showed him the tomb of his friend in the Garden of Eden, by the Rivers of Persimmon, and they also showed him the son of the tax-collector going down the bank of the river to draw water, but he was not able.

They also showed him Miriam, the daughter of Maglai.<sup>155</sup> Rabbi Eliezer bar Rabbi Yossi<sup>156</sup> says, The hinge pins of the gates of *Gehinnom* are driven into her ears. He said to them, Why do you do to her thus? They said to him, Because she fasted and announced it to her neighbors. And there are those who say, Because she gave two and said three. He said to them, How long will you cause her this pain? They said to him, Until Ben Shetah<sup>157</sup> comes and takes them from her ears and

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<sup>155</sup>Unknown.

<sup>156</sup>A second generation Tanna who was one of Akiva's younger disciples.

<sup>157</sup>One of the members of the Great Bet Din and one of the five *Zugot* (c.70 B.C.E.). A leading Pharisee, he was known to be very strict in his administration of the Law. His main activities were directed towards the improvement of judicial procedures, and the

puts them in his ears. He said to them, Why? They said, Because he vowed to the Holy One Blessed Be He that if he became the Prince,<sup>138</sup> he would hang the witches.<sup>139</sup> He became the Prince, but he did not destroy them. They said to him, Go, tell him what happened. He said to them, He is a great Prince, and he busies himself with his deeds, and he will not believe me. They said to him, He is very modest and he shall believe your words, and if he does not believe, make for him this sign : take out your eyes and put them on your hands, and so he did. What did he do? He went to his place and told him all about the incident and asked to make for him all the signs, but he would not allow him. He said, It is know about you that you are greatly righteous, and although I said it in my mouth, I did not believe it in my heart<sup>140</sup>. What did Rabbi Shimon ben Shetah do? He went on a cloudy day and took with him eighty very handsome students and gave them eighty clean garments and gave them eighty pots and stood them under a cave and he said to them, When I whistle and hiss, put on your

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establishment of a school system for children. Although he possessed great influence and political power, personally, he was very poor, and he supported himself and his family with a small linen business.

<sup>138</sup>Head of the Sanhedrin.

<sup>139</sup>See M.Sanhedrin 4:5; J.T.Hagiga II, 2, p.77d; J.T.Sanhedrin VI, 9, p.23c.

<sup>140</sup>Alternative reading (J.T. Hagiga 2:2) : "I did not say publicly [that I would uproot witchcraft], but I only thought about it [so I know that your knowledge comes from Heaven]."



garments and enter with me from the cave. He went to the witches and he cried, Hear my voice O God, Have mercy upon me and answer me, "Horror, Horror."<sup>141</sup> And they opened for him. He said to them, I am one of you.<sup>142</sup> And before he entered there, he put on clean clothes. They said to him, Where have you walked? He said to them, Between the drops of rain. They said, Do you request that we do anything? He said to them, Whatever you desire. The first said something, and she produced bread of silver, and another said something, and she produced bread of gold, and another said something, and she produced food of copper. They said to him, What will you do? He said to them, I will whistle and I will bring you eighty young men, dressed in handsome and clean garments. They said to him, If you desire, do so. He whistled to them, and they put on clean clothes and went towards him. When they entered, Rabbi Shimon ben Shetah said to them, Each of you pick up one and lift her up off the ground, because a witch is not able to do anything if her feet are not standing on the ground. And so they did. The one who made the bread, he said to her, Make bread, but she could not. He said to him, Go, hang her, until they hung them all, as it has been learned, "Rabbi Shimon ben Shetah hung eighty women from the witches of

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<sup>141</sup>Eisenstein's note #12 : "This is the sign for the witches who want to enter."

<sup>142</sup>Eisenstein's note #13 : "Also a witch."

Ashkelon."<sup>163</sup> Because he did this, the witches's relatives came and they conspired that day and that hour and they testified against the son of Rabbi Shimon ben Shetah, that he had sinned a sin which was punishable by stoning. And Rabbi Shimon, his father, sentenced him to stoning, even though it was known that he never sinned, since they had coordinated their testimony, and they took him outside for stoning. Rabbi Shimon ben Shetah's son said to them, If I have sinned this sin, the witnesses will be clean, and all Israel is pure, and death will atone for me. And if not, all my sins will be forgiven me, and the responsibility will rest on the neck of the witnesses, and all of Israel will be clean. The witnesses said, How is it that innocent blood has been shed? They said to him, We testified false testimony, because his father killed our relatives. Rabbi Shimon said, It is already written in Torah, "If he does not tell, he shall bear his iniquity" (Lev.5:1). Once a witness has given testimony, he cannot recant it. And they killed him, and the responsibility was borne by the witnesses. And therefore, let a person guard himself against evil speech, and so shall he guard his soul from distress.

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<sup>163</sup>M. Sanhedrin 6:6.

Tenth Commandment :<sup>166</sup>

43) "You shall not covet your neighbor's house..." (Ex.20:14). Let the Law of God be serious in your heart, "For it is better merchandise than merchandise of silver" (Prov. 3:14). How is it so? Two merchants came to trade. In the hand of one was a robe and in the hand of the other was a pearl. One said to his friend, If you desire, you take the pearl and I will take the robe. He said to him, We shall find that what is in the hand of one is not is not the same [in value] as what is in the hand of the other. But words of Torah are not like this. If they were two learned men, one would study *Seder Moed* and one would study *Seder Nashim*. And one said to the other, you teach and instruct me about what you have [learned], and I will teach and instruct you what I have [learned], and thus they did. We shall find in the hand of every one who knows both of them, two orders are found, "For it is better merchandise than merchandise of silver" (Prov.3:14). And if a man goes along the way and carries money with him, he fears lest a highwayman take it, and he shall take what is in his hand, but no one is able to take Torah from the heart of a man.

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<sup>166</sup>Eisenstein's note #14 : "The tenth commandment *Lo Tachmod* is omitted from it because there is no midrash about it." This last section is translated from Galit Hazan-Rook, Ed., *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot, Nusah Verona*, (Jerusalem : Hebrew University, 1971).

44) A story about merchants who were going by ship and there was there with them a sage. They said to him, Where is your merchandise? He said to them, It is set and hidden in my trunk on the ship. They examined all of the ship but they did not find anything. They began to mock him when they arrived at the port. The merchants came and took all that was on the ship, and they did not leave anything there. And the man entered the study house and preached to them, and they bestowed great honor upon him, and they took him to eat and drink with them. The men of the ship came to him and said to him, We beg of you, speak on our behalf with the men of the city so that they will have pity upon us and do not allow us to die of hunger. And so he did. And on account of his intervention, all people of the ship showed to him great honor. From this we learn, "For it is better merchandise than merchandise of silver" (Prov.3:14). And a man should not say that so and so is wise and I am not wise like him, for I do not engage in Torah like him, for the Torah brings a man near wisdom. And a man should not say that so and so is strong and I am not strong, for no one is strong except the one who suppresses his own inclination [in order] to do the will of his Creator, as it is written, "Bless the Lord, you angels of His, you mighty ones who perform His words..." (Psalm 103:20).

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