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MODES OF DIVINE COMMUNICATION:
Some Aspects of the Rabbinic Views

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-
Jewish Institute of Religion

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DIGEST

The rabbis of late antiquity, at first glance, seemed to sever the traditional lines of communication between heaven and earth. They declared that all of the biblical modes of communication were no longer available. Yet, the silence that would ensue was unacceptable. The people needed to communicate with their God and the rabbis, as religious virtuosi, expected to be able to do so. No less significant, the rupture caused by the destruction of the Temple had to be healed by a new structure that was both rational, predictable and grounded in Torah. Without divine communication, this would be impossible. And so, where one might expect to find silence, there exists a very complex network of communication between God and the people.

This thesis analyzes in detail five vehicles of divine communication, both verbal and non-verbal. Illustrative passages are presented and analyzed primarily from the Mishnah, Tosefta and the Babylonian Talmud. The introductory chapter presents the secondary sources which provide both background and a character sketch of the holy man in late antiquity.

Chapter One deals with Bat Qol. In the early Tannaitic literature the term is used both to refer to a disembodied human voice and a "heavenly voice." Later references identify the relationship between the Bat Qol and God.

Chapter Two explores the prophet Elijah as a vehicle of divine communication. The development of Elijah's role in the

rabbinic sources is traced from the prophecy of Malachi to the Talmudic passages in which he guides the rabbis.

Chapter Three deals with the power of human words to initiate divine communication. The rabbis believed that their words possessed power and could be used theurgically to bend the will of the Deity. Beyond the formal structure of daily prayer, the rabbis prescribed certain incantations effective in times of danger against demons and other forces of evil.

Chapter Four describes the function of signs and omens as vehicles of divine communication. The rabbis considered themselves to be experts in sign and omen interpretation and used this skill to gain information about the past, present, and future. Unlike verbal communication, this information is not immediately apprehensible to all and it requires interpretation.

Chapter Five analyzes the function of Torah as a vehicle of divine communication. Through correct interpretation, the rabbis were able to further direct the people as to how God wanted them to act in their present situation. Legal rulings could be successfully gleaned from Torah. Torah study is also a theurgic activity, for it caused the shekhinah to dwell on earth.

These vehicles, defined and circumscribed by the rabbis, ultimately affirmed the presence of God in their lives through the display of divine providence.

To my parents, Henry and Marilyn, for their loving guidance and support.

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I am deeply indebted to my teacher and friend, Dr. Richard Sarason, who shared his scholarship with me and challenged my expectations. His excellent guidance and warm support are an invaluable component of this work.

These are the things whose fruits a person eats in this world while the capital remains for him in the world to come: honoring one's parents, the practice of loving kindness, hospitality to strangers, and making peace between a person and his neighbor. And the study of Torah surpasses them all.

-Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 39b

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INTRODUCTION

Part I

Communication with the Deity is a goal of the religious person. Part of the desire to communicate is motivated by the need to know that one is living as one should within an ordered, rational, and predictable framework, particularly given the uncertainty in the human experience of the world (crop failures, natural disasters, death, reversals of fortune). Knowledge is power - Knowledge from Deity, the ultimate source of power, helps compensate for one's own ignorance and impotence in the world. This knowledge helps one to gain control over one's situation in the world.

How does one obtain access to divine communication and who can achieve this access? Among the Jews, different groups since the Sinai revelation have battled for power as the arbiters of revelation, divine communication. The struggle to negotiate and maintain hegemony of power within Judaism is thus an old one. The central question is, Where is the authority, and who has it? The rabbis, in their effort to consolidate and legitimate their own power, and also as religious individuals, needed to define the nature of divine communication.

The Tannaim and Amoraim declared that prophecy had ended, the urim and tumim were lost, miracles had ceased with Esther, and the Bat Qol was no longer authoritative in decision-making. At the same time, both the people and the rabbis

believed and expected that God does communicate with human beings. Many means of divine communication, conventional for their time and place and held by their neighbors to be effective, were accepted and adopted by the Jews of late antiquity. On one side, the rabbis thus were confronted with the clear demonstration of need on the part of the people for communication with the Deity; on the other side, as religious virtuosi themselves, they expected to receive divine communication since this, after all, is what being a religious virtuoso is all about! But, after disqualifying traditional modes that appear in the Bible, what did the rabbis have left? There was, at least in theory, a great void demanding to be filled.

This thesis will take up the question of divine communication in the lives of the rabbis. In aggadic material, the rabbis describe various modes of communication in action. In presenting the information, the rabbis determine what are, for them, the legitimate and illegitimate forms of divine communication. To analyze all of the forms of divine communication would exceed the boundaries of a rabbinic thesis. Therefore, this analysis will be illustrative of the vehicles of communication the rabbis felt were legitimate. Literary sources will also be limited to the Babylonian Talmud, Mishnah and Tosefta also for the purposes of manageability, however, when appropriate other materials will be examined. Though in a majority of the materials that

will be considered in this work, the rabbis were concerned with how they might receive communication, they also felt that they, in turn, could direct communication to God.

Five vehicles of communication will be analyzed, both verbal and non-verbal. The first section of the thesis will deal with verbal forms of communication and will encompass the Bat Qol, Elijah the Prophet and prayer/incantation. The second section will deal with the non-verbal forms of communication, specifically, signs and omens, and Scripture, revealed written communication construed as an oracle that must be interpreted by an expert (like signs and omens) to reveal the information.

Bat Qol:

The first vehicle to be discussed will be the Bat Qol. Platzner states that, "...when prophecy ends, Bat Qol comes to fill the void."[1] That is to say, the Bat Qol is understood by the rabbis to be a lesser form of prophecy. "The Bat Qol testifies not so much to the diminution as to the displacement and sublimation of prophecy in the Tannaitic age."[2] As will be shown later, the role and the nature of the Bat Qol were debated both by the sages and by modern scholars who followed after them. Platzner implies that the rabbis felt that the

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[1] Robert L. Platzner, "Reflections on the Bat Qol," Studia Mystica X No. 2 (Summer 1987), p. 51.

[2] Ibid., p. 52.

Bat Qol was indeed divine in origin and was just as valid as prophecy had been.

In discussing the passage from B.T. Berakhot 3a (see below, p. 27) that describes R. Jose praying in a ruin, Platzner observes that the report of the Bat Qol issuing forth emphasizes the special role it played for the rabbis. "Bat Qol as sole communication, reaffirms the covenant between God and Israel in the face of exile and destruction."[3] The Bat Qol was more than just a vehicle of communication; it was a soothing presence in the lives of the rabbis: "Constancy of love, and the judgement that is inseparable from it, are constant themes within the tradition of the heavenly voice."[4] In addition, Bat Qol helps to bridge the gap between transcendence and immanence and thus helps to obviate anthropomorphisms.[5]

Lieberman, too, accepts the divine origin of Bat Qol. He compares the use of the phrase, hayu mishtamshin b'vat qol, in T.P. Sotah IX, 14 and B.T. Sotah 48b. "The expression...is awkward in Hebrew. It looks like a literal translation of the Greek...which means both to make use and to consult a god or an oracle. The Hebrew phrases shall accordingly be rendered:

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[3] Ibid., p. 52.

[4] Ibid., p. 53.

[5] Ibid., p. 58.

to consult a Bat Qol, to consult the Holy Spirit."[6] After a reviewing some of the passages that contain reports of the heavenly voice Lieberman further defines the rabbinic understanding of the Bat Qol as follows:

> An examination of the Bat Qol prophecies reveals that almost all of them were explicitly expressed and needed no special interpretation. As a matter of fact, the rabbis emphasized this characteristic; the prophecies of the Jews were phrased clearly and specifically.[7]

It can be concluded, following Lieberman's interpretation, that the rabbis stressed that their oracles were univocal and unambiguous. No other devices, other than one's own ears, were required to interpret these oracles.

Urbach adds to the observations of Lieberman. He writes that, in most cases, it is the righteousness of the individual or the deeds of the individual which bring about communication from the Bat Qol. But, he continues, there are also cases where there is no special dependence on prior human behavior, i.e., Avot 6:2,[8] "Woe to the people for their disregard of the Torah..."

Guttmann addresses the change in status of the authority of the Bat Qol. He notes that in the dispute between Hillel and Shammai the Bat Qol is authoritative when it states that

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[6] Saul Lieberman, Hellenism In Jewish Palestine, 1962, pp. 195-196.

[7] Ibid., p. 198.

[8] Ephraim Urbach, "Halakha and Prophecy," Tarbiz 18 (1946/7), p. 25.

the words of both are the words of God, but that the halakha follows Hillel. Here the Bat Qol supports the majority view. But later, in the dispute about the oven of Akhnai, the Bat Qol comes to support a minority view and its authority is discounted. Guttmann suggests that this report comes during the rise of Pauline Christianity and may therefore be a defensive reaction.[9] He, therefore, understands that the authority of the Bat Qol is not diminished. It is, however, dependent upon the basic rules of rabbinic interpretation, and can be overridden by the needs of the hour.

I.M. Wise earlier had offered a different opinion. He denied the divine origin of the Bat Qol. In a very selective treatment of the sources, he equates the Bat Qol with the Holy Ghost of the Christian Scripture. He decides that both are the workings of the imagination in an ecstatic state.[10] This view is also supported by Kadushin, who utterly rejects the notion that Bat Qol is associated with God as any form of revelation.[11] This position, as will be shown in the following chapter, is not supported by a careful reading of the texts.

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[9] Alexander Guttmann, "Significance of Miracles for Talmudic Judaism," in Hebrew Union College Annual Vol. XX (1947), p. 68.

[10] Isaac M. Wise, The Origin of Christianity. 1868.

[11] Max Kadushin, The Rabbinic Mind. 1972, p. 261f..

Elijah:

Elijah the Prophet appears throughout the rabbinic literature as another vehicle of communication between heaven and earth. Wiener describes the encounter between Elijah and the rabbis in light of the Biblical characterization of Elijah:

> They [the Sages] recognized more and more the eternal essence of Elijah's personality, his striving to make the divine will manifest in the world, his struggling with his people and with his own ego. With this Elijah the aggadists lived; they met him, were taught and guided by him. It seems that in their confrontation with him they became aware of their own, and also the general human spiritual ambivalence in meeting earthly and divine demands, and that they realized that a transcendence of the painful human limitations would be possible only through divine grace.[12]

The rabbis expected to be able to receive communication through the prophet who never died, but ascended bodily to heaven. They also were able to consult Elijah in order to analyze their own experience. But in a primary sense, the rabbis saw Elijah as an angel of the covenant who watches over circumcision which symbolizes the possibility of a direct relationship between humanity and God as well as between one human being and another.[13]

Wiener adds that in the meeting between the rabbis and Elijah they transformed his character and were themselves

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[12] Aharon Wiener, The Prophet Elijah in the Development of Judaism. 1978, p. 75.

[13] Ibid., p. 76.

transformed by it. That is to say, their own image of God and man was extended. "The divine and the human within them drew closer together.[14] The prophet Elijah represented for them their own potential. They numbered Elijah among the Tzaddikim who can, through their piety, perform the same miracles as God or even command God, inasmuch as they are able temporarily to suspend the God-given laws of nature or to influence God's decisions.[15]

In his analyses of the passages in the rabbinic literature containing reports of rabbinic encounters with Elijah, Neusner takes a more cultural/historical approach. He sees the stories as part of the cultural psychology:

> What must have happened in such incidents [when the rabbis relate Elijah's visits] is that a rabbi, living in a world in which people normally thought that demons or angels, including Elijah, frequently appeared to men, interpreted an unusual encounter in the light of quite natural expectations.[16]

The rabbis, in some cases, perceived in their experiences encounters with Elijah who would communicate to them the divine will.

Prayer/Incantation:

The rabbis did not wait for communication to flow to

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[14] Ibid., p. 77.

[15] Ibid., p. 46.

[16] Jacob Neusner, History of the Jews of Babylonia. Vol. III, 1965-70, p. 105.

them. That is to say, verbal communication did not exclusively flow from heaven to earth. In some cases the rabbis attempted to initiate communication with heaven. The most obvious verbal vehicle of this communication was prayer. Prayer was used additionally to achieve certain specific ends. The most frequent miraculous effect of prayer is the healing of the sick.[17] Prayer in combination with other actions e.g., fasting, could bring rainfall and other material good.[18] The majority of the chapter on prayer will deal with the theurgic power of words. The focus will be on the use of words to attain a specific end and not the general form of prayer conducted daily in any formal way.

Signs and Omens:

In addition to verbal forms of divine communication, the rabbis also recognized non-verbal vehicles. They felt that what was already decreed in heaven ought, in some way, to be discernable by human beings. "The universe is one close-meshed unit; heaven and earth, animals, plants, angels, demons, man, all are creatures of God, manifestations of his will, all so sensitively intertwined that each reacts immediately to the slightest alteration in the composition of

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[17] Guttmann, p. 83.

[18] Ibid., p. 84.

the whole."[19]

Neusner, too, emphasizes this notion. "They [the rabbis] fully expected that the forces of nature would conspire to reveal, then to enforce, the correct view of the law..."[20] Signs were a part of the landscape. When correctly perceived as divine communication, they could reveal important information from heaven concerning, among other things, the correct interpretation of the Law.

Scripture:

Scripture functions as a conduit in both directions. It is a source of revelation and information from heaven. It also provides the rabbi with power enabling him to communicate with heaven. The rabbis felt that piety as represented by Torah study and "personal purity constitute a coat of armor which no demon or magic can pierce. The merit of one's ancestors also serves as protection."[21] Thus, part of the power that was available through Torah study was protective. It could also provide the rabbi with other magical powers.[22] In this chapter, the focus will be on the communicative power of Scripture. In many passages from the rabbinic literature,

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[19] Joshua Trachtenberg, Jewish Magic and Superstition. 1961, p. 209.

[20] Jacob Neusner, Babylonia, V, p. 177.

[21] Trachtenberg, p. 154.

[22] Neusner, Babylonia, III. p. 118.

Scripture takes on a prophetic, oracular quality. Through the correct interpretation of scriptural verses one could wrest information about the future and thereby guide one's actions appropriately.

Part II

Before proceeding with a presentation and analysis of the sources it is necessary to consider several background concepts. Through what kind of lenses were the rabbis viewing their world? In order to understand the rabbinic view of divine communication, contextually relevant issues including revelation, miracles, and the image of the holy man will now be discussed to provide a framework for rest of this study.

Revelation:

Integral to the understanding of divine communication is the notion of revelation. The normative rabbinic view emphasized the revelation at Sinai where God's will was made known to the people through Moses. But the rabbis felt that God continued to interact with them. They had a special name for that aspect of God which they expected to be near them. "Unlike most reverential appellatives for God, the name shekhinah is used in a special context...when the rabbis speak of God's nearness to man."[23]

This is illustrated in numerous passages from the

[23] Kadushin, p. 225.

rabbinic literature. For example, the rabbis held that "whenever ten persons assemble in a synagogue, the shekhinah is with them."[24] This notion of divine immanence juxtaposed with the belief that revelation was completed at Sinai highlights the conflict with which the rabbis struggled.

The rabbis struggled against the notion proposed by Bamberger who states:

> ...The written Torah, as it stands, appears to be composed of numerous single revelations, made over a long period of time. Just when the revelations terminated and the Torah was complete, is not clear. If this be so, it is possible to argue that revelation is a continuous process, that the Torah is still incomplete, and that further revelations may yet supplement or modify what was already received.[25]

The obvious conflict would come about through claims for having received revelation of God's will made by those outside the elite group of religious leaders, or even by those among their own ranks. There was a need to build a fence around the Torah in order to preserve order, consistency and authority:

> If the Law was given through several agents, we may have to regard new prophets as legitimate lawgivers. Hence the insistence that the whole Torah was given in 40 days through a single person - and after that, nothing more. God's later communications to Moses merely repeated for emphasis things already revealed. The utterances of the other prophets were included in the revelation to Moses, and are only restatements of the truths of Sinai.[26]

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[24] Mekhilta II, p. 287.

[25] Bernard Bamberger, "Revelation of Torah after Sinai," in Hebrew Union College Annual Vol. XVI (1941), p. 111.

[26] Ibid., p. 113.

The rabbis, however, saw themselves as conduits for the restatement of Torah that would address the needs of their people in their own time. They believed that they would continue to experience God and thus be able to define halakha.

Underlying the notion of experiencing God is the fact that the rabbis expected this to involve communication. Again, the communication could come in many different forms. Kadushin suggests that we should view the rabbinic experience of God as "normal mysticism," meaning, "the ordinary, familiar, everyday things and occurrences we have observed, constitute occasions for the experience of God."[27] The struggle was to balance a view of an end to revelation with the need to be in touch with God and learn new lessons to meet the new demands of a changing world.

Miracles:

The concept of miracle and the struggle to limit the possibility of miracles help to further our understanding of the rabbinic world-view. A miracle represents divine communication through divine action. The struggle to limit and delimit the use of miracles is consistent with the general rabbinic effort to create a working structure for their faith community. The rabbinic treatment of miracles serves as a paradigm for other efforts to define (and to circumscribe)

[27] Kadushin, p. 203.

vehicles of divine communication

The definition of a miracle for the Talmud includes all categories previously designated in biblical literature and Jewish literature from the late Second Commonwealth period. In addition, it includes natural and somewhat explicable phenomena.[28] This definition is sufficiently broad enough to create confusion for one who wished to classify miraculous events. In fact, the rabbis state that both miracles and witchcraft can achieve the same result.[29] Kadushin writes, "Only he who is worthy can be the agent through whom a miracle is performed. A similar effect produced by one who is unworthy is regarded by the rabbis as an act of magic."[30] Ultimately, miracles must be the deeds of God, even though they may be apparently performed by men.[31] Divine revelation appears as the greatest miracle.[32]

A miracle, in one way or another, involves a change in the order of the world, sidre bereshit. Such changes are very few in number. The rabbinic struggles with the notion of miracle, therefore, represents a rationalist tendency to limit the application of the concept to the Biblical period, if a

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[28] Guttmann, p. 48. See examples of miracles reported in B.T. Nedarim 41a and B.T. Berakhot 54a.

[29] B.T. Gittin 45a.

[30] Kadushin, p. 158 note 29.

[31] B.T. Berakhot 50a.

[32] B.T. Baba Metzia 106a.

miracle is indeed to involve changes in sidre bereshit.[33] The rabbis state, for example, that miracles ended with the Book of Esther.[34] Urbach adds that, "...the restriction and limitation of miracles are to be understood against the background of the existing reality. Immanental tendencies and polemical aims in relation to other faiths are interlinked in this restriction."[35]

Miracles affirmed God's involvement in the world. For, as a vehicle of communication, they inevitably testified to the notions of reward and punishment:

> The miracles and salvations that are wrought for the public are dependent upon their merit and deeds. The contradiction between belief that God performs miracles and the difficult and depressed position of the nation served as a starting point for homilies of reproof.[36]

Miracle stories by their very inclusion conflict with the rabbinic claim that we no longer pay attention to miracles. But, as we can see, they were nevertheless performed by the rabbis. The Sages were still open to the possibility that a miracle would occur upon which one might rely.

An example of this type of reliance is illustrated in the following Baraita which reports that, "It had been taught, [if a man says] this is your get on condition that

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[33] Kadushin, p. 155.

[34] B.T. Yoma 29a.

[35] Ephraim Urbach. The Sages. 1987, p. 115.

[36] Ibid., p. 107.

you go up to the sky...if the condition is filled it is valid, but not otherwise."[37] This passage, however, must be tempered by other Talmudic references that say that one should never rely upon a miracle for protection from any danger.[38]

Baumgarten, in light of the obvious tension, writes that the "fully developed rabbinic movement" was much more fearful of the negative power of miracles than impressed by their ability to confirm the presence of God in the world or the correctness of an opinion.[39] He offers by way of explanation that often those not in power attempt to influence the course of events through miracle stories more often than those in power. Clearly, those in power have other recourse.[40]

Safrai further illustrates the rabbinic use of miracle stories by comparing two traditions of a dispute between R. Judah HaNasi and R. Pinhas b. Ya'ir. R. Judah wished to ease the sabbatical regulations, while R. Pinhas wished to maintain them. The miracle story of how R. Pinhas was able to cause the river Ginnai to part and allow him to pass so that he could fulfill the mitzvah of redeeming captives is brought in to attest and support a rabbinic position against relaxing the

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[37] B.T. Gittin 94a.

[38] B.T. Kiddushin 39b and B.T. Ta'anit 20b.

[39] A.I. Baumgarten, "Miracles and Halakha in Rabbinic Judaism," in Jewish Quarterly Review LXXIII (1983), p. 241.

[40] Ibid., p. 252.

laws concerning Shabbat.[41]

Rabbi as Holy Man:

A discussion of miracles and rabbis invariably leads one to look at how the rabbis viewed themselves, and, in turn, how they were viewed by the people. For Jews living in the ancient world the rabbi was the holy man. He had special access to the Deity and by virtue of his position had power that could produce miraculous results. Brown, citing earlier research, writes that, "The holy man's popularity is explained as a product of the aggression and conflict that the social historian often tends to see as a blatant feature of East Roman society."[42]

The holy man stepped in to fill a need in the prevailing culture. The people felt powerless in the face of the grim realities of their life. They felt alienated from the source of earthly power and ultimately from the Deity. "Above everything, the holy man is a man of power...to visit a holy man was to go where the power was."[43] The holy man mediated the power, i.e., through him people were able to come closer

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[41] S.Safrai, "The Tales of the Sages in the Palestinian Tradition and the Babylonian Talmud," Scripta Hierosolymita 22 (1971), p. 218. The two accounts come from T.P. Demai I 22 and B.T. Hullin 7a.

[42] Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," Journal of Roman Studies 61 (1971), p. 80.

[43] Ibid., p. 87.

to God, the ultimate source of power.

The holy man demonstrated his power through the performance of miracles. The type of miracles attributed to the holy man revealed the assumption, held by the people, that he would play a role in society based on his power. "Furthermore, just as the miracle demonstrates a hidden, intangible nucleus of power, so the miracle story is often no more than a pointer to the many more occasions on which the holy man has already used his position in society."[44]

The miracles most often associated with the holy man fall into two categories. The first includes blessings and curses. The holy man, the rabbi, had equal power to bless or to curse. The second was the ability to exorcise demons. The holy man had the power to force demons to leave a person or a location. The blessings and curses invoked testified not only to the power of the holy man, but also provided knowledge of divine favor or disfavor. In calling for a blessing or a curse, the holy man caused God to reveal His position. Similarly, the exorcism showed the power of God over demons and other gods. The holy man provided the forum for a display of God's power.

Ultimately, the rise of the holy man had something to do with the general silencing of other oracles.[45] In fact the rise of rabbinic power and authority can be seen as coinciding

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[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid., p. 99.

with the erosion of classical institutions. For the rabbis, the most obvious source of their power was Torah. As holy men they had to defend their own position and maintain their authority as they gained power. 'Against "Torah," genealogy and politics could scarcely contend, but one must stress, it was "Torah" based as much upon personal charisma as upon knowledge of facts, even mysteries, that characterized the rabbinical estate.'[46] In this sense the rabbis were different, because of the role played by Torah, from their pagan counterparts. Mastery of the power of Torah was different from the type of miracles produced by divine grace elicited through proper behavior for it was consistently available to them, directly and immediately.

In their struggle to understand the nature of the world and to define their own role as holy men, the rabbis were attempting to grapple with an essential question: "Whence sacred order in the aftermath of 70?"[47] The people too were very much engaged by this struggle: "For other Jews the problematic both after 70 and, as we have seen, for many centuries before, seems the source(s) of sacred (salvific) power outside or apart from the Deuteronomic Temple."[48]

In defining his own character, the rabbi saw himself as

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[46] Neusner, Babylonia, III, p. 104.

[47] Jack Lightstone, The Commerce of the Sacred. 1984, p. 159.

[48] Ibid.

the mediator of the powers of heaven:

> By means of his expertise the priestly magician mediated the powers of heaven and directed them toward specific ends. But sacred power continues ultimately to reside in heaven, even while being called by the skill and knowledge of the holy man to bear below for appointed tasks.[49]

According to this image, theurgy works not just because of the possession of technical knowledge. The technique can only be effective in the hands of the theurgist because of his personal charisma. "The priestly magus is a true holy man, not an engineer."[50]

One may therefore conclude that because of the intimacy of his relationship with heaven, the rabbi could aspire to a communality with the divine world that was unavailable to the common man. This is the basis for the belief in communication with God. The rabbis thought themselves to be in a relationship that would naturally include dialogue. The dialogue might be carried out verbally or non-verbally depending on the nature of the communication and the situation. The communication in many ways was a theurgic activity:

> ...our magician [rabbi] could bind himself by an oath in God's name. This would force the Deity to cooperate lest He cause the practitioner to take the divine name in vain.[51]

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[49] Ibid., p.23.

[50] Ibid., p. 25.

[51] Ibid., p. 40.

The distinction between the holy man and the magician may only be a matter of authority, that is to say, a social definition. The rabbi has the authority to perform actions that are forbidden to the laity. This authority is to a certain extent self-proclaimed, yet it is ultimately affirmed by the society.

The self-image of the rabbi was reinforced by the needs of the people:

> Whether by priestly magus or by divine man, the Jewish communities of the Hellenistic world had recourse to sacred creative power from the heavenly angelic realms. In their man heaven and earth met, the one drawing from the other in a world seemingly under constant attack by demonic and harmful sources.[52]

The culture in which the rabbis lived, a culture in which the "supernatural" was part and parcel of every day life, produced the expectation that some men would enjoy divine favor. This favor could translate into the possession of special powers to produce miracles or to communicate with heaven. "People generally believed in a supernatural God who had not only made the world and directed the destinies of men, but who also directly or through angels, demons, and other forces and powers affected the lives of individual men."[53]

The influence of the outside culture can be clearly felt in the rabbinic literature. The numerous references to folk-medicine in the Babylonian Talmud, "as well as the numerous

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[52] Ibid., p. 49.

[53] Neusner, Babylonia, V p. 174.

stories about the effects of magic and witchcraft, and the remedies against them which it contains, are further evidence of the hold that these popular beliefs had on Babylonian Jewry."[54]

The prayers of the rabbi were believed by the people to be more effective than their own due to his sanctity and merits. These derived from his knowledge of Torah and his specific observance of the mitzvot. The people believed, as did the rabbis, that the rabbi could bless and curse. Furthermore, the angels visited him and demons sometimes saved him, either willingly or when forced by the power of the rabbi's Torah.[55]

The rabbis did not believe that they were ordinary men, and perhaps more importantly, the people believed that the rabbis had other-worldly powers:

> What was extraordinary about him was his mastery of a body of theurgical learning, the power of which rendered him exceptionally influential in heaven and earth...They were neither wizards nor sorcerers, but their wisdom was such that they could interpret natural phenomena and consort with supernatural beings.[56]

Having now discussed the framework of belief encompassing revelation and miracles as well as the images the rabbis had of themselves and the people had of the rabbis, we now proceed

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[54] Louis Ginzberg, "An Introduction to the Palestinian Talmud," in On Jewish Law and Lore. 1970, p. 24.

[55] Neusner, Babylonia, V p. 175.

[56] Neusner, Babylonia, III p. 104.

to a detailed presentation and analysis of the source materials.

Chapter 1
BAT QOL

Introduction:

The rabbis of the Talmudic period did not believe that the only resident of Heaven was God. They envisioned a heavenly court much on the model of what they experienced on earth. The imperial court was composed of many courtiers, each with different responsibilities and rank. They each had some measure of authority but were ultimately subordinate to the king. Their chief responsibility was to serve the king and the king alone. This is the model applied to Heaven. God was the supreme power, but God did not dwell alone. Many semi-divine beings existed along with God. They each had their particular role to perform, and, just as on earth, they each had a certain amount of power and authority. However, just as on earth, each of the heavenly courtiers was subordinate to the authority and power of God.

The rabbis fully expected to receive communication from heaven through these semi-divine beings. They knew from the Bible that the angels, from time to time, came down to earth on a mission. Through them, the Divine will was often made known. Just as the rabbis expected that they would receive information through the angels of heaven, they also expected to receive communication through the Bat Qol[1]. The Bat Qol

[1] I use the definite article here, though the Hebrew text itself does not support it, to indicate the rabbinic use of Bat Qol as a specific agent of God. I believe, as will be

was distinguished by the rabbis from the voice of God, and from other defined entities such as Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Prophecy. They classified the Bat Qol much in the same way that they classified the angels; beings separate from God yet clearly subordinate to God. The Bat Qol, too, had a special set of tasks and responsibilities established by God. The primary responsibility was the maintenance of the verbal connection between Heaven and earth. The clear difference was the fact that Bat Qol was a disembodied voice; one heard a voice, but saw no form.

Verbal communication was expected to be direct and immediately understandable to the listener. Neither the Bat Qol nor other bearers of verbal communication spoke in riddles or presented mysteries to be unraveled. The rabbis expected clear intelligible verbal communication and this is exactly what the Bat Qol provided.

The above-described expectations, namely that the rabbis expected heaven to be ordered in a parallel fashion to what was observed on earth, that the heavenly hosts would communicate the will of God and that the messages would always be clear and immediately understandable, must all be considered in a study of the Bat Qol.

These expectations created a plethora of problems which

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explained further, that the rabbis implicitly define the Bat Qol as a singular vehicle expressing the divine will to the rabbis and the people.

the rabbis dealt with in a variety of ways. They sought to limit access to the Bat Qol by defining it in such way that reserved access to it for themselves. Their own authority and power might be diminished if all had access to the divine voice. They also needed to reconcile this vehicle of communication with their own sense of God and address the question, Is the Deity transcendent or immanent?

On the other hand, they needed to legitimate this form of communication, and did so through retrojecting the Bat Qol into biblical history. Thus they were able to learn through the Bat Qol heaven's reactions to human events. Disputes were resolved and halakha was supported.

The Conflict of Immanence and Transcendence:

The expectation of communication from heaven relates directly to a conflict that may be perceived in the notion of a Deity who is both immanent and transcendent. The rabbis did not want a God who was too near or too accessible to all people. This would obviate the need for their leadership in the community. That is to say, there would be little need for a mediator of the Divine word. Yet, a completely transcendent Deity becomes too far removed from its creation. The risk of feeling totally abandoned and alone was not an acceptable option. The belief system that modeled the heavenly court after the earthly one provided the rabbis with the necessary resolution to the conflict of immanence and transcendence.

The Bat Qol, as well as the other agencies of verbal communication, helped to bridge the gap that threatened to become too wide between heaven and earth. And it also insured that the rabbis would have a continued role as mediators between God and the people.

The Bat Qol became a tangible proof of the continuing relationship between God and human beings. This is seen in the instances in which the Bat Qol conveys the message that, despite all the evidence to the contrary, God still bestows favor upon the people Israel. The rabbinic story of R. Jose praying in the ruins contains an instance of the Bat Qol reaffirming the relationship between God and Israel. R. Jose is first challenged by the prophet Elijah for praying in a place forbidden because of the inherent danger. After R. Jose justifies his behavior, Elijah asks him what he heard in the ruins:

> I replied: I heard a Bat Qol cooing like a dove and saying: "Woe to the children on account of whose sins I destroyed my house and burnt my Temple and exiled them among the nations of the world!" And he said to me: "By your life and by your head! Not in this moment alone does it so exclaim, but three times each day does it so exclaim! And more than that, whenever the Israelites go into the synagogues and schoolhouses and respond: 'May His great Name be blessed!' the Holy One, blessed be He, shakes His head and says: 'Happy is the king who is thus praised in his house! Woe to the father who had to banish his children and woe to the children who had to be banished from the table of their father!'"[2]

[2] B.T. Berakhot 3a. Here, the close identification of the Bat Qol with God lends support to the argument that it is a specific vehicle of divine communication.

The Bat Qol lends support to the argument of R. Jose against the challenge articulated by Elijah. In turn, Elijah's memory is jogged by R. Jose's report and he adds to what the rabbi heard. With the help of Elijah's explanation, the Bat Qol reassures R. Jose that, even though the people have suffered exile and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, God still is with them. God weeps with the people as a parent might weep after punishing a child. This is not merely a chance outcry. Elijah tells R. Jose that the Bat Qol makes this exclamation three times each and every day. Here the relationship between the Bat Qol and God is also articulated. The same words that were first proclaimed by the Bat Qol are attributed to the Deity in God's response to the prayers of the people, i.e., the Bat Qol speaks for God or indeed, here, is almost an aspect of God.

The motif of the daily proclamation of the Bat Qol is reported also in a second tradition with a few changes in detail:

> R. Joshua b. Levi said: Every day a Bat Qol goes forth from Mt. Horeb and makes proclamation and says, "Woe to men on account of contempt towards Torah..."[3]

The Bat Qol is given a specific location here on earth, the "mountain of the Lord," bringing it even closer to humans. (This passage also serves to solidify the link between the

[3] Mishnah Avot 6:2.

Bat Qol and God.) The sin of the people is identified and again we have record of God's lament, with the suffering of the people attributed to the sin and its consequences.

Another tradition implies that, even though Israel sinned, God still did not wish to punish them so completely. In a report of the continuing miraculous wanderings of Rabbah b. Bar Hana he is led by an Arab merchant:

> He said to me: "Come and I will show you Mt. Sinai." When I arrived I saw that scorpions surrounded it and they stood like white asses. I heard a Bat Qol saying: "Woe is me that I made an oath and now that I have made the oath who will release me?"[4]

In a further identification of the Bat Qol with God, we learn that God is bound by an oath to exile the people even though God now does not wish to do so. In attempting to mitigate the lingering anguish felt by the people due to the harsh punishment perceived as coming from their God, the Bat Qol relates God's thoughts and feelings (here on a daily basis) to comfort the people that all is not lost and that God is still with them.

In yet another tradition this angst is expressed by the rabbis through the patriarch Abraham. Rabbi Yitzhak reports that at the hour of the destruction of the Temple, Abraham worried that perhaps the people would have no hope now, that they were lost. A Bat Qol tells Abraham not to worry; the

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[4] B.T. Baba Batra 74a.

end of the people will not come before its proper time.[5] Unlike in the previously cited traditions, the connection here between God and the Bat Qol is ambiguous, i.e., it is not so clear that the "speaker" is God. In the other traditions, someone hears a "voice"- the "voice" is euphemistically called a "voice," Bat Qol, but almost surely is the voice of God in God's immanent aspect. Nevertheless, Abraham is assured through the agency of the Bat Qol, as are the rabbis, of God's continued support and protection of the people.

God's forgiveness, in addition to his continued relationship with the people Israel, is guaranteed through the content of the message of the Bat Qol, and/or through the fact of the communication itself. A tradition in tractate Berakhot[6] again illustrates these reassurances in the rabbis' reinterpretation of Samuel 21:6. The statement of the Gibeonites relating that Saul was the favored one of God is put into the "mouth" of the Bat Qol. God forgave Saul, who had sinned: he retains his status as a favored one of God. We can gain hope from this for forgiveness of our own sins.

Bat Qol Defined and Limited by the Rabbis:

The above citations reveal aspects of the rabbinic view of the Bat Qol. The Bat Qol is carefully defined and,

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[5] B.T. Menahot 53b.

[6] B.T. Berakhot 12b.

consequently limited by the rabbis of the Talmud, as will be illustrated further. In comparison with prophecy, for the rabbis, the Bat Qol is a lesser form of communication. This is demonstrated by a number of different statements in the Babylonian Talmud, and illustrated in the following Baraita:

> Our Rabbis taught: Since the death of the last prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel; yet they were still able to avail themselves of the Bat Qol.[7]

The rabbis declare that the age of prophecy is over, since the Holy Spirit has departed from the people. Yet there still was verbal communication. But, for the rabbis, this did not carry the same weight as prophecy. This is illustrated in the Baraita's continuation:

> Once when the rabbis met in the upper chamber of Gurya's house at Jericho, a Bat Qol was heard from Heaven saying, "There is one among you who is worthy that the Shekhinah should rest on him as it did on Moses our teacher but his generation does not merit it." The sages present set their eyes on Hillel the Elder. And when he died, they lamented and said, "Alas, the pious man, the humble man, the disciple of Ezra."[8]

At one level, this passage illustrates the ideology that it is because of our sins that prophecy no longer exists. It also shows that the Bat Qol is removed one step from prophecy and two steps from what Moses was able to experience of God through the Shekhinah. Though it is less than what our ancestors experienced it is all we have left.

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[7] B.T. Sanhedrin 11a and T. Sotah 13:2.

[8] Ibid and T. Sotah 13:3.

The Bat Qol, as pointed out earlier, frequently addresses the issue of theodicy. The context of the communication addressed this concern, providing divine sanction. The Bat Qol was a vehicle that helped reassure the people (and the rabbis). At the same time it was a reminder to the people that they lack the same merit as their forebears. This is seen in the previous citation as well as the following one:

> For thus said the Holy One, blessed be He, "If Israel all goes up (to Jerusalem to worship God) then Shekhinah dwells (with them), but if not, they will have to make use of the Bat Qol.[9]

On the same page, prophecy is likened to silver while the Bat Qol is likened to a cedar which is subject to rot.[10] Clearly, the Bat Qol is not as steady or reliable as prophecy once was. It is also clear that merit determines what sort of communication people receive.

The reliability of the Bat Qol aside, not all of the rabbis were certain of what the Bat Qol actually consisted. There are those who said that they would not hear a Qol from heaven. Rather, from that same Qol another Qol would go forth as when a man hits with force and hears an echo that comes from it, a reverberation of the original sound. This is what they heard and that is why it is called a Bat Qol.[11] Here it appears that some rabbis thought that the Bat Qol was some

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[9] B.T. Yoma 9b.

[10] Ibid.

[11] B.T. Sanhedrin 11a

sort of an echo and not necessarily a heavenly voice, though this passage suggests that the Bat Qol was interpreted as an echo of a heavenly voice.

This less reliable, and hard to define form of communication needed strict and careful attention. The role that the Bat Qol played in the determination of the halakha shows the rabbinic concern that the Bat Qol might be used inappropriately. The most famous dispute illustrating this concern occurs in Tractate Baba Metzia in the controversy about the oven of Aknai involving R. Eliezer and R. Joshua. The Bat Qol proclaims:

> "Why do you dispute with R. Eliezer seeing that in all matters the halakha agrees with him," But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed, "It is not in Heaven!" (Deut. 30:12) What did he mean by this? Said R Jeremiah, 'That the Torah had already been given at Mt. Sinai. We pay no attention to a Bat Qol because You have long since written in the Torah at Mt. Sinai, "After the majority one must follow"' (Exodus 23:2)[12]

The Bat Qol is rejected not because it is not believed or that it might not be authentic, but because it goes against the majority opinion in the halachic dispute. On a primary level this is a pictorial and extreme way of asserting human (rabbinic) authority and prerogative in halakhic decision-making. Even heaven cannot intervene or undermine rabbinic authority. It is noteworthy that it was taken for granted that the origin of the Bat Qol was Heaven, as indicated in the

[12] B.T. Baba Metzia 59b.

passage cited and its continuation: Elijah is questioned about God's reaction; he reports that God laughed and said that His children had defeated Him. R. Gamaliel explains later in the same passage that the Bat Qol was dismissed in order to maintain a structure within the community so that the standard and the authority of the rabbis would remain consistent. As in earlier passages, the Bat Qol expresses the will of God. Just as God was bound by an oath, it seems that God is equally bound by what is interpreted from the Torah.

A balancing view to the one represented here is found in another tradition. In enumerating those who have no part in the world to come, the rabbis discuss the case of Solomon. Many supernatural signs are experienced and disregarded by the rabbis as non-compelling:

> Rab Judah said in Rab's name, 'They wished to include [in this list of those who have no place in the world to come] another (Solomon) but an apparition of his father's likeness came and prostrated itself before them, which, however, they disregarded. A heavenly fire descended and its flames licked their seats, yet they disregarded it. Whereupon a Bat Qol cried out to them, "See you a man diligent in his business? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before mean men."(Pr. 22:29) He who gave precedence to My house over his, and, moreover, built My house in seven years but his own in thirteen, he will stand before kings; he will not stand before mean men." Yet they paid no attention even to this. Whereupon the Bat Qol cried out,"Should it be according to your mind? He will recompense it, whether you refuse, or whether you choose; and not I." (Job 34:33)[13]

Though this is not a halachic debate the rabbis involved were

[13] B.T. Sanhedrin 104b.

intent upon ignoring any and all signs from heaven. But this time, instead of the tacit approval of their actions, the Bat Qol rebukes the rabbis for their arrogance. The majority opinion of the rabbis is overruled by Heaven; though, here, the issue is not halakha but theodicy, reward and punishment. This may be why the rabbis allow themselves to be overruled by Heaven.

The ambivalence felt by the rabbis towards divine intervention is seen in their apparently contradictory actions in the stories they relate. At times, the Bat Qol is accepted as reliable evidence or proof. The following tradition records a debate concerning the thickness of heaven. Proof is brought from many different sources in an attempt to define its thickness, first from "Tanna Debe Eliyahu," then from astrology and finally, and definitively, from the Bat Qol. R Johanan b. Zakkai reports that the Bat Qol[14], in a rebuke of the wicked Nebuchadnezzar, says that the distance is 500 years. The rabbis accept this as reliable evidence and end their argument.[15] Though this was not an halachic argument the rabbis allow that the Bat Qol does provide reliable proof for the purpose of resolving this dispute.

In the one clear instance of the Bat Qol being accepted as reliable evidence in an halachic debate, it appears that

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[14] In a dramatization of Isaiah 14:14-15.

[15] B.T. Pesahim 94a-94b.

the rabbis put aside their ambivalent feelings:

> R. Abba stated in the name of Samuel, 'For three years there was a dispute between the school of Shammai and Hillel, the former asserting that the halakha was in agreement with their view and the later contending that the halakha was in agreement with their view. Then a Bat Qol issued announcing, "Both are the words of the living God, but the halakha is in agreement with the rulings of the school of Hillel."[16]

In contrast to the situation in the Baba Metzia passage, this was an ongoing debate that encompassed many issues, not one single dispute. The argument lasted three years. Here, the dispute is between two evenly balanced forces (Hillelites and Shammites) - so who decides when there is no majority? In Baba Metzia, R. Eliezer is depicted as going against the majority - so even if he is "right" logically and in theory, he is "wrong" sociologically, in terms of maintaining the authority structure. The rabbis, here, were again concerned about the division that such a dispute must have generated and wished to resolve it before too much damage was done. So, for the same reason that R. Judah rejected the Bat Qol, the rabbis in this tradition accepted the Bat Qol. Each instance involved a desire to maintain the structure of authority. The Bat Qol could be accepted in one situation and rejected in another to preserve the true goal of the rabbinic leadership: ultimate authority through consistent leadership and the rules of adjudication.

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[16] B.T. Erubin 13b.

Though the Eruvin passage seems to show that the rabbis accept the authority of the Bat Qol in those circumscribed situations, the Baba Metzia passage clearly contradicts it. The editors of the Talmud use this contradiction to help them in their efforts to reconcile other difficulties posed by contradictory rulings involving the houses. In one instance, there is a problem with an apparent redundancy in a Baraita's statement that the halakha follows Hillel. Why would the Baraita state this when it is well-known? The Talmud proposes two possible solutions to help resolve this difficulty. First, the ruling in the Baraita antedates the Bat Qol. Or, second, the ruling follows the opinion of R. Joshua who says that we do not pay attention to the Bat Qol.[17]

The same two options are offered when the problem of following the more lenient view, whenever there are disputes between the rulings, is discussed. The rabbis were concerned that the apparent inconsistencies in the legal rulings from a certain school might encourage the people to always seek out the most lenient opinion. The example of Hillel and Shammai is used as illustrative.[18] Again in a struggle to understand the laws of the Levirite marriage the same two options of understanding the differences between Hillel and Shammai are

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[17] B.T. Berakhot 51b-52a.

[18] B.T. Erubin 6b-7a.

offered.[19] The editors of the Talmud recognize the contradiction between the passages from Baba Metzia and Eruvin and try to make use of it to rationalize and harmonize other potential contradictions or logical problems. The editors, like the rabbis involved in these legal disputes, do not resolve the contradictions between the two traditions.

Bat Qol in Early Tannaitic Literature:

The term Bat Qol occurs twice in the Mishnah, but only once does it appear to have the meaning of a "heavenly voice." One reference occurs in Yebamot 16:6 in the context of rules concerning remarriage after the death of a husband. The problem arises when it is not completely certain that the husband is dead, i.e., he was lost at sea or on travels abroad. The wife can remarry on the basis of a Bat Qol. This is followed by a ma'aseh, an illustrative narrative precedent, of one who stood on a mountain and called out that he was dying but the body was never discovered. It appears that the Mishnah here is referring to a human voice or an echo of a human voice. This tradition is significant for it provides information about what the term Bat Qol, generically, means: a disembodied voice or echo, that is to say, when a voice is heard but no speaker is seen. Sometimes the speaker (as here) is understood to be a human being. But, at other times, the

[19] B.T. Yebamot 14a, see also similar arguments in B.T. Yebamot 122a, B.T. Hullin 44a and B.T. Pesahim 114a.

speaker is understood to be God or a celestial messenger.

The only other instance of Bat Qol in the Mishnah comes in Avot 6:2 where it is reported that the Bat Qol cries out each day from Mt. Horeb. The term Bat Qol here clearly refers to a heavenly voice, a voice closely linked to God

The same dual usage of the term Bat Qol appears in the Tosefta. In a block of material that contains information about the Bat Qol as a heavenly voice, the Tosefta reports the tradition that once the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi died the Holy Spirit came to an end in Israel, but even so they made them hear the Bat Qol.[20] This passage is followed by an identical account of what happened in the upper chamber of Gurya.[21] In the same block of material, more references are made to a Bat Qol announcing the merit of one, which was obviated by the wickedness of the generation.[22] This sort of proclamation by the Bat Qol is immediately accepted without question. Following this the rabbis report that Johanan the Elder heard a Bat Qol in the Holy of Holies prophesying that the young men who went out to war against Antioch had been victorious. Similarly, Simeon the Righteous heard a Bat Qol, in Aramaic, from the Holy of Holies stating that the decree was annulled which the enemy planned to bring against the

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[20] T. Sotah 13:3

[21] See reference on p.31.

[22] T. Sotah 13:4

sanctuary, and Caligula was dead and his decrees had been annulled.[23]

The Tosefta also repeats the ruling that one may remarry on the basis of a Bat Qol, and, again, it appears that this was a reference to a human voice or echo when the speaker was not seen and cannot be located.[24] (This is a comment and variant on the M. Yevamot passage.) In another passage that relates again to an halachic issue it is stated that one may not be considered a witness if reporting what has been heard from a Bat Qol.[25] This occurs in the context of a review of Lev. 5:1, "And he is a witness..." He is not a witness who reports what he has heard from a witness nor is he a witness who has reported what he has heard from a Bat Qol. Here, too, the Bat Qol represents a human voice.[26]

In the Tosefta, due to the inclusion of more narrative material, passages in which the Bat Qol is identified as a heavenly voice are more frequent. With regard to issues of halakha, however, like the Mishnah, the use of the term is confined to a disembodied human voice.

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[23] T. Sotah 13:5-6

[24] T. Yebamot 14:7 see also T. Nazir 1:1.

[25] T. Shevuot 3:8

[26] See B.T. Megillah 32a for reference to Bat Qol that appears to be a human voice: How do we know that we may use a Bat Qol as evidence? Because Scripture says, "And your ears will hear a word behind you saying..." (Isaiah 30:21) This applies only if one hears the voice of a man in town and of a woman in the country, and only if it says yes, yes or no,no.

Retrojection of the Bat Qol:

Despite the evidence pointing to the ambivalence felt by the rabbis towards the Bat Qol, there are many instances in which the Bat Qol is retrojected into the Bible. In the many rabbinic discussions of biblical figures and passages, the rabbis, in their interpretation of the narrative, often refer to the Bat Qol.

The use of the Bat Qol varies. At times it appears to be a homiletical device used to help resolve problems in understanding the text. In other instances, the Bat Qol is a divine messenger who fills gaps in the narrative. The Bat Qol is also used to clarify what the proper attitude should be toward a given biblical character. Ultimately, the retrojection of the Bat Qol into the biblical context sets a precedent for its use in the contemporary rabbinic context. The Bat Qol, despite any reservations felt by the rabbis, gains authority through its association with the biblical text. We cite examples:

In Tractate Sotah there is a discussion of the death of Moses and his subsequent burial in an unknown place. Gaps in the biblical narrative are filled in by various rabbis describing what happened and what was said.

> It has been taught that R. Eliezer the Elder said: Over 12 mil squared [the area in which the voice was heard], corresponding to the size of the camp of the Israelites, a Bat Qol made the proclamation, 'So Moses died there (Deut. 34:5), the great scribe

of Israel.'[27]

The problem with the biblical verse is, Who said it? Certainly not Moses. Here, it is the Bat Qol who speaks, standing in for God. The Bat Qol becomes part of the ornamentation that the rabbis wrap around this portion of the Torah adding posthumously to the glory of Moses.

The Bat Qol is interjected into the story of Judah and Tamar found in Genesis 38. The Gemara states that in this incident, the Bat Qol went out twice. First, after Judah acknowledges his own guilt and Tamar's innocence, the Bat Qol proclaims to Judah that "Because you saved Tamar and her two children, I will, by your merit, save three of your children from the furnace." God applauds Judah's good deed and will recompense it measure for measure. Second, concerning Judah's words, "She is more righteous than I," the rabbis ask how he knew this, and respond that it was from the Bat Qol, which said, "From Me came forth secrets."[28] That is to say, God gives Judah knowledge.

In Tractate Shabbat, the rabbis ask each other how God responded when the Israelites, affirming their unconditional allegiance to God, said <u>na'aseh</u> before <u>nishmah</u>. R. Eliezer reports that the Bat Qol went and demanded to know who had revealed to human beings this secret phrase, which previously

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[27] B.T. Sotah 13b

[28] B.T. Sotah 10b and Makkot 23b.

had belonged to the ministering angels. (The Bat Qol quotes Psalm 103:20, proving that the phrase did in fact belong to the ministering angels.)[29] On one level, this passage highlights the special standing of Israel with God. They are able to wrest, as it were, divine secrets from the ministering angels. But, also, in this example and the previous two, the Bat Qol enters into the narrative to flesh out the text, which is perceived to be elliptical. This could be done just as easily without reference to the Bat Qol. But the rabbis also wished to establish the Bat Qol as a part of the Holy Scripture, as a part of history, not simply a product of their own imaginations. Bat Qol is an agent of divine response and interaction (remembering, of course, that all of scripture represents God's "voice").

The Bat Qol is also a source of textual explanation and correction. Reading the text, one may gain the wrong understanding of a biblical character. Sometimes it was necessary for the biblical characters themselves to be corrected. For example, Ahab did not understand Obadiah. The rabbis focus on I Kings 18:3 which states that Obadiah feared God exceedingly. Why is this said immediately following the statement that Ahab called Obadiah? The rabbis respond that these words were actually spoken by the Bat Qol in response to Ahab's challenge that perhaps Obadiah did not merit favor

[29] Shabbat 88a.

from God. Just as Ahab suggested that perhaps Obadiah's house was not fit for a blessing, the Bat Qol states that Ahab's house is not fit for a blessing.[30] Again, the Bat Qol is used as a narrative device to fill in perceived textual ellipses. The intervention also serves to illustrate the notion of reward and punishment.

When Mephiboshet accused David, a Bat Qol issued forth with a strong rebuke calling him a man of strife. According to the rabbis, this was why he was also known as Mariv Baal. But, at the same time, the Bat Qol announced the punishment merited by David for listening to the slander of Tziva. When David attempted to divide the kingdom between Mephiboshet and Tziva, a Bat Qol issued forth and stated that Reheboam and Jereboam would split the kingdom.[31] The Bat Qol helps to fill in character development and resolve textual difficulties. This passage indicates the integral role, for the rabbis, that the Bat Qol could play in the biblical narrative and its interpretation. Once again, on another level, this passage underscores the notion of reward and punishment, midah k'neged midah.

The Bat Qol also helps to clear up acknowledged confusion on the part of biblical figures. In a discussion of the proper use of the anointing oils, the rabbis make reference

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[30] B.T. Sanhedrin 39b.

[31] B.T. Shabbat 56b.

to Psalm 133:2 which mentions flowing oil coming down Aaron's beard. Apparently, upon seeing the oil clinging to Aaron's beard, Moses became worried that he had not applied the oil correctly. The Bat Qol responds with the next verse in the same Psalm, reassuring Moses that he had performed the rite correctly. Aaron was still not convinced so the Bat Qol reassures him as well.[32]

The rabbis use the retrojection of the Bat Qol also to help resolve their present-day disputes. In extolling the greatness of Moses, Rab and Samuel argue over the number of gates of understanding given to Moses. One said that there were fifty created in the world and all were given to Moses except one, which was given to Kohelet. The other reports a story about Kohelet as evidence against this theory. Kohelet sought to be like Moses, but a Bat Qol went forth and said to him, "It is written: uprightly even words of truth. (Ecc. 12:10) There arose not a prophet again in Israel like Moses." (Deut. 34:10)[33] Therefore, Kohelet could not have been given something withheld from Moses. The words of Scripture are assigned to the Bat Qol to emphasize their significance in this context. Unlike in the matter of arguments concerning decisions legal and non-legal, citing a Bat Qol is perfectly acceptable evidence in working out difficulties with Biblical

[32] B.T. Horayot 12a and Kritot 5b.

[33] B.T. Rosh Hashannah 21b.

texts and characters.[34]

The retrojection of a Bat Qol also serves to sanction certain actions carried out by Biblical figures. In a discussion of various takkanot concerning hand-washing and the setting of an eruv, the Gemara relates the following:

> R. Judah stated that Samuel said that in the hour that Solomon instituted eruvin and the washing of hands a Bat Qol issued forth, "My son, if your heart is wise, My heart too will rejoice." (Pr. 23:15)[35]

The passage suggests that what seems like a rabbinic takkanah may have biblical foundations. It also shows the approval of heaven regarding such takkanot, as indicated by the Bat Qol issuing forth. Here not only is rabbinic authority enhanced through appearance of the Bat Qol but so, too, are the rabbinic activities sanctioned. Note that the Bat Qol, in citing Scripture, gives the verse an oracular bearing in this context.[36]

Who Hears the Bat Qol?:

Many questions arise in a discussion of Divine communication. The Bat Qol is no exception. Who exactly can hear the Bat Qol? Are there any rituals that must be performed in order to elicit such communication? Can the Bat Qol be forced to speak, manipulated? Merit certainly plays

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[34] See also B.T. Haggigah 13a Bat Qol rebukes Nebuchadnezzar.

[35] B.T. Eruvin 21b and Shabbat 14b.

[36] This will be further explored in chapter 5.

a role in receiving communication through the Bat Qol, but, as will be shown, individual merit is not always a prerequisite. The Bat Qol is heard by individuals and by groups. Israelites and non-Israelites alike may hear its proclamation. Even supernatural beings experience the Bat Qol.

In Tractate Sotah[37], the Bat Qol is given or granted to the rabbis gathered in the upper chamber of the house of Gurya. This is an unusual way for a pronouncement of the Bat Qol to be prefaced. Normally, the Bat Qol issues forth where the implication is of a more random communication, i.e. not dependent upon the meritorious actions of individuals. This deviation, though it does not explicitly state that the communication resulted due to the merits of the rabbis, implicitly suggests that it was given as one would give a gift to someone deserving.

Though merit sometimes plays a role in determining who hears the Bat Qol, acts of righteousness are not directed towards this end. For example, in a discussion of paradigmatic master-pupil relationships, the example of R. Perada is presented as a contemporary illustration. R. Perada had an unusually slow pupil with whom he was very patient. Though it took more than four hundred repetitions before the student was able to grasp a point, the rabbi never lost his

[37] B.T. Sotah 48b and T. Sotah 13:3. See, also, B.T. Sanhedrin 11a cited on p. 29.

temper. One day he delayed attending to a religious matter so that he would be able to spend some extra time with this student. A Bat Qol issued forth asking him if he would prefer that four hundred years be added to his life or if he would choose life for himself and his generation in the world to come. He chose the latter whereupon God says give him both,[38] recalling the story of Solomon's dream.

The actions of R. Perada are indeed meritorious and set an example for teachers. Yet his actions were not directed toward receiving any divine communication. It does appear, however, that the Bat Qol was granted because of R. Perada's righteousness, as was his reward.

A similar instance recounting the righteous deeds of a rabbi elicits a response from Heaven. The Angel of Death is commanded by God to grant R. Joshua b. Levi a wish before taking him. R. Joshua was known for attending to those afflicted with leprosy. R. Joshua fools the Angel and refuses to go with it. God allows R. Joshua to return to life, for R. Joshua had never had a vow annulled. Before taking leave of the Angel, R. Joshua demands the return of his knife. When the Angel refuses, a Bat Qol commands the Angel to return it, for "it is required of mortals."[39] Here the Bat Qol intervenes on behalf of R. Joshua, apparently, due to the

[38] B.T. Erubin 54b.

[39] B.T. Ketubot 77b.

latter's merit. Again the actions of R. Joshua were not designed to elicit a response from Heaven yet is was granted as a result of his character.[40] Here, again, the rhetorical thrust is that God countermands the angel of death.

Just as the Bat Qol seems to respond to righteous people, it also responds to wickedness. In other words, the larger issue that the Bat Qol responds to is ultimate reward and punishment, and vindication of God's justice. Divine intervention in ambivalent situations comes to reinforce the belief in ultimate justice.

For example, Nebuchadnezzar was addressed twice by the Bat Qol: first due to his arrogant assault of heaven[41], and in a second instance when he is called upon to destroy the Temple.[42] Since the Bat Qol first insults the wicked ruler, it is clear that the God is not bestowing any honor upon him through this communication. Rather, the Bat Qol vindicates Israel, even though the Temple is to be destroyed.

The evil Titus, on account of his arrogant assaults upon Heaven, elicits communication from Heaven. After plundering the Temple, Titus sets sail with the spoils. He challenges God to a battle upon land, for it appears to Titus that this

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[40] See also B.T. Shabbat 33b where the Bat Qol interacts with Simeon b. Yohai and his son, due to their merits and zealousness.

[41] See reference on p. 33.

[42] B.T. Sanhedrin 96b.

God of Israel only operates at sea. The Bat Qol responds to the insolence of Titus, "Sinner, son of a sinner... I have a tiny creature in my world called a gnat... Go up on dry land and do battle with it."[43] The gnat flies up his nose and literally terrorizes him for seven years.

It may be argued in the above instances that men, through their challenge of Heaven, provoked a response by the Bat Qol. The Bat Qol, as the agent of God, responds to the wickedness of Titus and Nebuchadnezzar. But again it is important to note that the Bat Qol is not invoked by any of the figures in the stories. The Bat Qol is a vehicle through which God responds to acts of righteousness and wickedness.

The audience addressed is not always here on earth. And those who hear the Bat Qol are not necessarily living. In Tractate Shabbat there is a passage that is meant to reinforce the evil character of Nebuchadnezzar:

> R. Judah said in Rab's name: when that wicked man descended into Gehenna, all who had previously descended there trembled, saying, "Does he come to rule over us? Or to be as weak as we are..." a Bat Qol went forth and declared: "Who do you pass in beauty? Go down and be there laid with the uncircumcised." (Ezekiel 32:19)[44]

In response to the fears of those in Gehenna, the Bat Qol addresses Nebuchadnezzar, once again employing a verse from Scripture, in a way that assures those who are afraid, that

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[43] B.T. Gittin 56b.

[44] B.T. Shabbat 149b.

he will be as weak as they are themselves. The individual is addressed, but the group hears the pronouncement. Wickedness will not be rewarded even in so negative a fashion.

The Heavenly hosts are also addressed by the Bat Qol much in the same manner as occurs in communications with mortals. Metatron is rebuked for acting in a way that misled Elisha b. Abuya to "mutilate the shoots" and believe that there were indeed two powers in the world. The Bat Qol, in the presence of Metatron, quotes Jeremiah 3:22 and excludes Aher.[45] It appears that only Metatron is here addressed individually.

An argument is reported in Heaven concerning who should be the Messiah, Hezekiah or David. God wants Hezekiah. But the Attribute of Justice objects because Hezekiah never sang hymns to God while David did. The Earth offers to sing in Hezekiah's place so that this obstacle may be removed. The Prince of the Universe, Metatron, puts his vote with the Earth. The Bat Qol objects by quoting Ezekiel 24:16.[46] This passage reaffirms the notion that the Bat Qol is a member of the heavenly court, and that it functions in the divine realm as well as the human.

What Does the Bat Qol Say?:

The Bat Qol conveys different types of information in its

[45] B.T. Haggigah 15a.

[46] B.T. Sanhedrin 94a.

proclamations. In passages already cited the range and variety of content is noted, though most seem to deal ultimately with vindication and justice. At times, the Bat Qol issues statements of a practical nature. On other occasions the communication takes the form of a moral teaching or warning. The Bat Qol also issues information of a prophetic nature concerning the future.

Just as the Bat Qol is depicted as giving information that helped to clear up confusion within the biblical narrative, it is represented as doing so in the lives of the rabbis. An incident is related in which a rabbi's body was prevented from entering a cave in which his father was buried. The entrance to the cave was blocked by a snake. The people interpreted this as a sign that the father was greater than the son, and for this reason should not be allowed to enter. But the Bat Qol issued forth and indicated that this interpretation was incorrect: greatness was not the obstacle, rather, that the one who was buried bore the suffering of the cave while the other did not.[47] The Bat Qol issued forth in response to the people's mistaken interpretation - in order to protect the reputation of the dead scholar vis a' vis that of his father, and presumably spoke to all present correcting a mistaken understanding of the moral order.

The Bat Qol also issues forth to provide moral

[47] B.T. Baba Metzia 85a.

instruction pointing to correct behavior. In a discussion of those who are utterly condemned, Shebna, the brother of Hillel, is listed. Shebna would work at his business while his brother studied Torah. One time he asked Hillel to become his partner and split the profits. At this moment a Bat Qol issued forth, and, quoting a passage from Scripture, indicated that this should not be done.[48] The correct behavior is the study of Torah. Further, if there are profits, these should be donated to the service of God.[49]

R. Hannina b. Dosa has a full history of excellent works and exemplary moral behavior. He was also a figure who took on almost mythic dimensions. Using his character as the ideal to be striven for, the Bat Qol issued forth daily and proclaimed that the whole world is sustained "because of Hannina, My son (once again, the "voice" speaks for God), and Hannina, My son, suffices himself with a kab of carobs from one Sabbath eve to another."[50] This moral instruction is very general and contrasts with the individual instruction that the Bat Qol offers in other instances. The Bat Qol is not directed here to a specific individual, but to all within its hearing, conveying divine approbation of a particular kind of behavior.

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[48] B.T. Sotah 21a.

[49] See also B.T. Hullin 87a.

[50] B.T. Ta'anit 24b, see also Berakhot 17b and B.T. Hullin 86a.

In addition to providing positive instruction in correct behavior, the Bat Qol is often the voice of reproof:

> When Jonathan the son of Uziel wrote the Targum to the Prophets a Bat Qol issued forth and said, "Who is this who has revealed my secrets [because these texts are deemed to be "live" oracles] to human beings?" And when he wanted to write the Targum to the Writings a Bat Qol again issued forth and said to him, "Enough!"[51]

Clearly there was a problem with what Jonathan was doing. The Bat Qol intervened and spoke to him on two separate occasions.

Similarly, in the following story, the Bat Qol reproves the rabbis:

> R. Johanan related: Once we were traveling on board a ship and we saw a chest in which were set precious stones and pearls and it was surrounded by a species of fish called karrisa. A diver went down to bring up (the chest) but (a fish) noticed him and was about to wrench his thigh. Thereupon he poured on it a bottle of vinegar and it sank. A Bat Qol issued forth saying to us, "What have you done with the chest of the wife of R. Hannina b. Dosa who is to store in it purple-blue for the righteous in the world to come?"[52]

In both passages the characters do not know that they are engaged in wrong behavior. The Bat Qol goes out to inform that the action is wrong, though not forbidden by the Law.

In another passage the Bat Qol merely warns beforehand rather than waiting until the action is complete. R. Bannah is warned not to look directly at the First Man.[53] This

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[51] B.T. Megillah 3a.

[52] B.T. Baba Batra 74b.

[53] B.T. Baba Batra 58a.

warning is of a very practical nature (anthropogony and cosmogony are the issue here). Here the Bat Qol acts as guide rather than moral tutor.

The Bat Qol in several instances offers information that can be understood as prophetic. It provides the recipient with a glimpse into the future. At the beginning of Sotah there is a discussion of why the tractate was written. This leads to the topic of men and women pairing together in marriage.

> When Resh Lakish began to expound Sotah, he said the following: They only pair a woman with a man according to his deeds... Rabbah b. Bar Hana said in the name of R. Johanan: It is as difficult to pair them as was the division of the Red Sea... But it is not so; for Rab Judah has said in the name of Rab: Forty days before the creation of a child, a Bat Qol issues forth and proclaims, "The daughter of A is for B; the house of C is for D; the field of E is for F!" There is no contradiction, the latter dictum referring to the first marriage and the former to the second marriage.[54]

More than a transmitter of prophetic information, the Bat Qol is an instrument of divine providence, choosing before we do who shall marry whom.

Herod acted upon the proclamation of the Bat Qol that he heard. The proclamation was that any slave who rebels against his master will be victorious. At that point he was a slave. So he rose up and killed all the members of the household save one maiden whom he wished to marry.[55] He was successful just

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[54] B.T. Sotah 2a, B.T. Sanhedrin 22a and B.T. Moed Qatan 18b.

[55] B.T. Baba Batra 3b.

as the Bat Qol had stated.

A Baraita cited earlier[56] relates that both Johanan the High Priest and Simeon the Righteous heard the Bat Qol issue forth in the Holy of Holies. The former heard that the warriors had been victorious. The latter heard that the decrees against the sanctuary had been annulled and that Caligula was dead.[57] Both were noted and proved to be true.

Divine Sanction:

The Bat Qol, as an agent of God, communicates to human beings divine response to human events. The Bat Qol expresses the approval or disapproval of Heaven regarding specific actions. Through this communication, human beings are reassured of God's continued involvement in life on earth. This is illustrated in the many occasions when the Bat Qol issues forth at the death of a righteous person. The Bat Qol relays the response to this event in Heaven. This response has to do ultimately with vindication - reward and punishment.

R. Akiba was forced to endure a horrible and prolonged death. It was reported that with his dying breath, and contrary to what his students expected, he recited the Sh'ma. He tells his students that up until that moment he had not fully grasped what it was to love God with all of one's being.

[56] See p.39.

[57] B.T. Sotah 33a.

Now as he was dying he understood. As R. Akiba's soul departed with the pronouncement of the word ehad, a Bat Qol issued forth and said, "Happy is R. Akiba whose soul departed with the word ehad."[58] The pronouncement of the Bat Qol confirms the fact that R. Akiba, despite appearances to the contrary, had not been abandoned by his God.

Similar traditions are recorded in the Talmud. The legendary Hannah, who lost all of her sons, climbed up on a roof and jumped to her death. This act of complete despair was addressed by the Bat Qol, citing Scripture: "The mother of the children is happy."(Psalm 113) [59] This unusual response to such a tragic event puts it within a framework of divine providence. There is purpose in the world consistent with rabbinic theodicy. The mother is now with her children and is happy in the world to come.[60] Despite appearances to the contrary, Israel is to be vindicated: such is God's moral order.

Similarly, the story of the death of R. Hannina b. Teradion is recorded in several places. He was caught teaching Torah by the Romans. They wrapped him in a Torah scroll and set it ablaze, but they would not let the flames get high enough to kill him. The executioner, seeing the

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[58] B.T. Berahot 61b.

[59] B.T. Gittin 57b.

[60] See also B.T. Baba Metzia 86a and B.T. Ketubot 104a for similar passages.

rabbi's great suffering, intervened and elicited from him the promise of a place for himself in the world to come if he would speed the execution. The officer fed the flames and then jumped on the pyre himself. A Bat Qol issued forth and announced that both men had a place in the world to come.[61] Once again, the moral balance is restored.

R. Hannina b. Teradion, on the basis of the merit acquired during his lifetime, clearly deserved a place in the world to come. But the executioner acquired the same reward with one righteous act performed only after he had gained the promise of reward. Responding to the Bat Qol, Rabbi cries out at the apparent unfairness that such a one receive a place in the world to come in a single moment. But, the response of Heaven is unconditional. God is impressed by the actions of the officer. The merit of R. Hannina guaranteed the promise made to the executioner.

The Bat Qol also speaks in the dreams of the rabbis, imparting a similar form of divine sanction and promise of reward in the world to come. R. Johanan b. Zakkai had a dream in which he saw himself and his disciples surrounding Mt. Sinai. A Bat Qol issued forth proclaiming that they were all to be given a place in the world to come.[62] They had all

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[61] B.T. Avodah Zarah 18a, see also 10b and 17a. See also B.T. Ta'anit 29a for a story about the death of R. Gamaliel and his executioner.

[62] B.T. Haggigah 14b, in this instance as well the Bat Qol is heard by them due to their merit.

earned divine favor through their righteousness.

The Bat Qol makes these pronouncements to reaffirm the involvement of God in the world. The order of the world is enhanced and the reward of the righteous is publicized for all to hear. When Rabbi died a Bat Qol went forth and announced that all who were present at his death had a place in the world to come.[63] They received advance notice of their own reward for their correct behavior towards their master. The passage tells that there was a fuller who used to visit Rabbi every day but failed to call on the day of his death. In great despair he jumped off a roof, killing himself. The Bat Qol issued forth and said that this man would also enjoy a place in the world to come, thus correcting a seeming moral imbalance.

In Tractate Avodah Zara, there is a discussion about which sins, upon being repented of, bring about instant death (i.e., release). The rabbis decide that incest and heresy are two such sins. But the story of R. Eliezer b. Gordia is cited as an example of one who is killed instantly after repenting of consorting with harlots. After being told by one harlot that he had no place in the world to come, R. Eliezer prays to the mountains, hills, heaven and earth, sun and moon to intervene on his behalf. They each refuse whereupon he breaks down weeping, truly repentant, and he dies. A Bat Qol issues

[63] B.T. Ketubot 103b.

forth and states that he has a place in the world to come. As in the case of the executioner, Rabbi laments the unfairness in that one person may acquire Heaven in one moment while others struggle a lifetime.[64] The Bat Qol's proclamation serves to counter the reaction of Rabbi that was probably felt by all who heard this story.

It is not only upon death that the Bat Qol reveals divine favor. There was a report that during the consecration of the Temple, the restrictions for Yom Kippur were suspended. The rabbis ask how we can know that this met with approval in Heaven. The answer is that a Bat Qol issued forth and announced to the people present at the consecration of the Temple, "All of you are destined for life in the world to come."[65] The actions of human beings on earth are responded to by Heaven through the agency of the Bat Qol. Divine sanction is made known.

Rhetorical Function of the Bat Qol:

The Bat Qol was depicted as an agent of Heaven making the will of Heaven known on earth. It reassured the people of a continued relationship between God and creation and of the justice of God. The Bat Qol in the rabbinic literature serves a rhetorical function as well. The Bat Qol affirmed

[64] B.T. Avodah Zara 17a.

[65] B.T. Moed Qatan 9a.

the authority of rabbinic leadership. In its pattern of communication it validated the exegetical style of the sages. The many traditions in which the Bat Qol figures provide a paradigm of instruction for the teacher of Torah.

The special favor extended to the rabbis by Heaven, in responding through the Bat Qol, helped legitimate their position and authority. It emphasized the special relationship they had with Heaven. This translated into very practical help:

> Rabbah b. Bar Hana further related: Once we traveled on board a ship and we saw a bird standing up to its ankles in the water while its head reached the sky. We thought the water was not deep and wished to go down to cool ourselves, but a Bat Qol called out, "Do not go down here for a carpenter's ax was dropped seven years ago and it has not reached the bottom."[66]

This passage comes in the midst of miraculous stories that highlight the character of the rabbis. Not only are they privileged to see wondrous things, but they hear the word of Heaven and gain protection through it.

The Bat Qol defines the degree of righteousness one rabbi may have achieved. Resh Lakish sought to mark the grave of R. Hiyya, but it was hidden from him. He cried out at the unfairness of his treatment. He felt that he had achieved equal merit in the world and could not understand why the gravesite would be hidden from him:

"Sovereign of the universe!" he exclaimed, "Did I

[66] B.T. Baba Batra 73b.

> not debate Torah as he did?" Whereupon a Bat Qol cried out in reply, "You did debate Torah as he did, but did not spread the Torah as he did."[67]

The continuation of the passage describes in a very graphic way what it means to spread Torah in the world. Both rabbis have merit, but the one lived closer to the ideal of teaching Torah and insuring its continued study. The role of the rabbi is divinely sanctioned. Those who fulfill all or part of it are specially distinguished by the Bat Qol, the Heavenly representative, who sanctions their instruction.

According to one tradition, Torah study, the prime vocation of the rabbi, was threatened by the attitude of Hezekiah. He is depicted as treating Scripture with contempt. He is rebuked by the Bat Qol utilizing a citation from Psalm 50:20; "You sit and speak slander against your brother; you slander your own mother's son."[68] This passage appears in a discussion of Torah study and shows how the treatment that the rabbis advocate is indeed that which is desired by Heaven.

Often the Bat Qol interprets Scripture in the style of the rabbis. In a discussion of II Samuel a teaching of the Bat Qol is reported. Responding to the disparity between the thousand men promised to David and the eight hundred he is reported to have killed later, the Bat Qol explains that two hundred were subtracted because of David's evil treatment of

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[67] B.T. Baba Metzia 85b.

[68] B.T. Sanhedrin 99b.

Uriah. The Bat Qol addresses the problem presented by the text in the same manner displayed by the rabbis countless times in their own discourses.[69]

Summary:

The Bat Qol serves to convey divine sanction for the work of the rabbis. They are shown special favor most often in response to their deeds. They use the Bat Qol to support their views when it does not conflict with the majority opinion in an halakhic ruling. For though they do not rely on Heaven to provide answers, they are certainly willing to make use of the Bat Qol as added support for their own rulings as well as for their worldview, and particularly for their view of divine providence.

[69] See also B.T. Megillah 12a, 29a and B.T. Sanhedrin 102a.

Chapter 2
THE PROPHET ELIJAH

Introduction:

The prophet Elijah, who ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot, provided the rabbis with another channel through which they expected the connection between Heaven and earth to be maintained. Rabbinic literature relates that Elijah frequently visited the rabbis and conveyed to them communication from the Heavenly Realm. The nature of this communication varied greatly. Yet, in many ways, it resembled the type of communication conveyed by a Bat Qol.

But why was the figure of Elijah chosen to continue communicating with the rabbis of the Talmud, and what was the function of the communication he brought with him? In II Kings 2:11-12, we read the following report of Elijah's last moments on earth: "As they [Elijah and Elisha] kept walking and talking, a fiery chariot with fiery horses suddenly appeared and separated one from the other; and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw it, and he cried out, 'Oh, father, father! Israel's chariots and horsemen!' When he could no longer see him, he grasped his garments and rent them in two."

Elijah never died. He was bodily taken up to heaven. He bridged the gap between heaven and earth in a very physical way, ascending to the heavens as a man of flesh and blood. It was quite natural to assume that he could continue to do so; to move freely between earth and heaven. Elijah is also

a kind of paradigm, then, for the late antique holyman - who can move between heaven and earth. He would then be in a position to relay heavenly information to mankind.

The personality of Elijah as depicted in the biblical narrative provides further clues regarding the role he played for the rabbis. Elijah is an extreme personality. He is very aggressive in the pursuit of his mission. At times, he vents his wrath upon the people: "How long will you keep hopping between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; and if Baal, follow him!" (I Kings 18:20-21) He challenges Ahab and pours forth fire upon his messengers. But he is equally harsh in his indictment of God: "Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that You, O Lord, are God; for You have turned their hearts backward." (I Kings 18:37) Elijah, through these fierce demonstrations, shows his love both for God and God's people.

Elijah served as a mediator between Heaven and earth who attempted to bring both sides closer together. He was even-handed in his approach. The prophet's zeal to achieve this goal is demonstrated in the biblical account. But the task was not completed at the time of his ascension. The reappearance of Elijah on earth represents the prophet's struggle to complete his mission.

This heroic figure and his mission are further interpreted in the last verses of Malachi. Malachi speaks of the end of days. The book alternates in its chastisement of

the people and its leadership and the message of hope that is embodied in the Messiah. "Behold I am sending My messenger to clear the way before Me, and the Lord whom you seek shall come to His Temple suddenly." (Malachi 3:1) The final verses combine the warning with the hope:

> Be mindful of the Teaching of My servant Moses, whom I charged at Horeb with laws and rules for all Israel. Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord. He shall reconcile the fathers with the sons and sons with their fathers, so that, when I come, I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction.[1]

The mission of the prophet continues to be one of reconciliation, picking up where his earthly existence ended. Here the parents and the children will be reconciled so that God may be reconciled with the people. The stage is set for Elijah to return on at least one occasion before the "great and awesome day." The frequent visits from the prophet which the rabbis record are an extension of the prophet's biblical mission. The process of reconciliation is exactly that, a process, and one that requires Elijah to make more than one appearance.

The coming of the messianic age marks the moment when the gap between heaven and earth will be permanently removed. Elijah provides glimpses of this time in his interactions with the rabbis. As harbinger of the Messiah, this is a role that fits the prophet very well indeed.

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[1] Malachi 3:22-24.

Because he is human and possesses a body, Elijah may engage in ongoing discussion (unlike the Bat Qol). Elijah can be summoned. He has the ability to provide not only spiritual help, but physical as well. Thus Elijah, in addition to the functions above outlined, acts as guardian angel for the rabbis. He provides very real assistance in times of danger. Elijah is divine providence incarnate. The harsh and zealous aspects of his character, in their imitation of divine qualities, suggest this function. Though Elijah is harsh in his judgements and indictments of the people, as is God, the rabbis were also confident of his love and protection. And so, for them, there was no contradiction seen in the behavior of the prophet. It helped them to better understand the complexities of their own harsh existence.

As reconciler and agent of Providence, Elijah, by extension, performs other functions. Elijah is the great teacher of Torah, through which people are lead to their God. In many cases Elijah arrives on earth to help the rabbis resolve questions concerning Torah and Halakha. At times the rabbis themselves leave problems to be resolved by Elijah in the end of days, the time of complete reconciliation.

Elijah is also a teacher of correct behavior. Periodically Elijah appears to correct wrong behavior and to encourage that which is proper. These functions can be seen in light of the larger mission of reconciliation. Elijah, in very practical ways, adjusts and fine tunes the actions of the

people to help them come closer to the appropriate point where there can be a reconciliation with God which would allow Elijah to complete his biblical mission and usher in the Messiah.

Elijah and the Messiah:

Based upon the words of the prophet Malachi, Elijah became forever linked with the messianic hope. Elijah would come first to clear the way for the arrival of the Messiah by reconciling parents and children. In an eschatological passage at the end of Mishnah Sotah the rabbis conclude that, "...the resurrection of the dead shall come through Elijah of blessed memory. Amen."[2] The Mishnah also takes the expectation of Elijah's reappearance in the end of days and applies it to halakhic disputes. If a situation is significantly uncertain, the rabbis invoke the phrase: ad sh'yavo Eliyahu.[3]

In Mishnah Eduyot, there is a discussion of exactly what Elijah will do in light of the passage from Malachi:

> R. Judah says: [Elijah will come] To bring near but not to remove afar. R. Simeon says: To bring agreement where there is a matter of dispute. And the Sages say: Neither to remove afar or to bring near, but to make peace in the world...[4]

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[2] Mishnah Sotah 9:15.

[3] See below, note 5.

[4] Mishnah Eduyot 8:7.

The notion of Elijah coming to resolve disputes in the Law reappears in several passages in the Mishnah:

> If one had a document [that had been deposited with him] among his own documents, and he does not know the nature of its validity [whether it has been paid or not], it shall be left [with him] until Elijah will come.[5]

In these Mishnaic passages it is clear that the rabbis expected Elijah to return. But their expectation was for only one appearance at the end of days. This expectation, that Elijah would appear in the end and resolve all legal disputes, evolved into a more far-reaching expectation of frequent appearances, as will be seen later in the chapter.

It stood to reason, for the rabbis, that Elijah would have specific information about the coming of the Messiah due to the prophecy that he would herald the Messiah. Elijah would have to know when the Messiah would come and what might be delaying his arrival. Elijah might even know how to hasten his coming.

In a talmudic discussion in Tractate Sanhedrin, the rabbis speak of the messianic era and speculate about when it might come. The following report is related in this context:

> Elijah said to Rab Judah, the brother of R. Sella the Pious: "The world will exist not less than eighty-five Jubilees and in the last Jubilee, the son of David will come." He asked him: "At the beginning or at the end?" He replied: "I do not know." "Will it be completed or not?" "I do not know," he answered. R. Ashi said he spoke thus to

[5] Mishnah Baba Metzia 1:8. See also similar passages in Mishnah Shekalim 2:5 and Mishnah Baba Metzia 2:8, 3:4,5.

him, "Before that, do not expect him, afterwards you may await him."[6]

Elijah did not give a specific date when the rabbis could expect the Messiah, but he did keep alive the hope and anticipation that he would arrive. Elijah provides the necessary assurance that the messianic era will eventually be realized. Through R. Ashi's version, they further understood when to begin to expect his arrival and, more to the point perhaps, when not to.

At times, the rabbis could not understand why the Messiah had not yet arrived. Though they knew that their own actions were responsible for detaining the Messiah, it was not always clear how much of a factor their actions really were. In Tractate Yoma the rabbis talk about how people needed to help the High Priest stay awake all night on the eve of the Day of Atonement to prepare himself for the next day. In a Baraita, Elijah gives the rabbis an indication of what weight human action does carry:

> It has been taught: Abba Saul said: "Also in the country they used to do so [stay up all night] in memory of the Temple, but they used to commit sin." Abaye, or some say R. Nachman b. Isaac, interpreted that to refer to Nehardea. For Elijah said to Rab Judah, the brother of R. Sila the Pious: "You have said, 'Why has not the Messiah come?' Now today is the Day of Atonement and yet how many virgins were embraced in Nehardea!"[7]

It appears that human action has a very large role in

[6] B.T. Sanhedrin 97b.

[7] B.T. Yoma 19b.

detaining the Messiah. Were it not for the sinful actions of the people of Nehardea on Yom Kippur, the Messiah would already have come. It is interesting to note that while the actions of people are responsible for the delay, it is not the actions of the present generation that are here blamed. It is the actions of the generation of the rabbis who spoke with Elijah in the story. This appears to take some of the sting away from the indictment of human behavior.

Elijah was able to provide the rabbis with reasons for the Messiah's delay. By extension, it is reasonable to assume that Elijah would know how to hasten his coming. In Tractate Baba Metzia it is reported that Elijah used to frequent the academy of Rabbi. On a certain New Moon Elijah failed to come. Rabbi questioned him and Elijah replied that it had been necessary for him to awaken each of the Patriarchs in turn and wait for each one to wash, pray, and rest again before he could awaken the next. Rabbi asked Elijah why he did not wake them all at once, to which Elijah replied:

> "I feared that they would wax strong in prayer and bring the Messiah before his time." "And is their like to be found in this world?" he [Rabbi] asked. "There is R. Hiyya and his sons," he [Elijah] replied. Thereupon Rabbi proclaimed a fast and R. Hiyya and his sons were bidden to descend. As he [R. Hiyya] exclaimed, "He causes the wind to blow," a wind blew; he continued, "He causes the rain to descend," rain came down. When he was about to say, "He quickens the dead," the universe trembled. In Heaven it was asked, "Who has revealed our secret to the world?" "Elijah," they replied. Elijah was then brought and struck with sixty flaming lashes; so he went, disguised as a fiery bear, entered among

among them and scattered them.[8]

Being the champion of both the people and God, it would seem appropriate for Elijah, possessing the information, to share it with the people. But, even Elijah cannot override the plan of God. The rabbis, though disappointed, are reassured that there is an "appointed time."

The question of when the Messiah would come, and why he has been delayed, plagued the rabbis. One can imagine that it was a question with which the people often confronted their rabbis. In their time, the Messiah's appearance did not seem imminent. And yet, it appeared to be exactly the time when the Messiah should come. God's house had been destroyed and the people had been sent into exile. Why wait to bring the Messiah? What is holding him back? Again it is through Elijah that the answer comes.

The story is told that R. Joshua b. Levi met Elijah on the way and asked him if he had a place in the world to come. In the course of their dialogue the inevitable question is uttered by the rabbi. "When will the Messiah come?" What follows is an amazing story of R. Joshua b. Levi actually meeting the Messiah:

> "Go and ask him," was his [Elijah's] reply. "Where is he sitting?" "At the entrance." "And by what sign may I recognize him?" "He is sitting among the poor lepers. All of them untie all at once and rebandage them together; whereas he unties and rebandages each one separately thinking, "Should I

[8] B.T. Baba Metzia 85b.

> be wanted I must not be delayed..." On his [R. Joshua b. Levi] returning to Elijah the latter inquired, "What did he say to you?" "Peace be upon you, O son of Levi," he answered. Thereupon he observed, "He thereby assured you and your father of the world to come." "He spoke falsely to me stating that he would come today, but has not." He assured him, "This is what he said to you: Today, if you will hearken to His voice." (Ps. 95:9)[9]

Elijah has a special connection to the Messiah. He knows where the Messiah is and what he is doing. He can even interpret the words of the Messiah. The message that is repeated charges that human actions are what delay the Messiah. If the Messiah is to come soon, the people will have to correct their actions and hearken to the teachings of God. It is interesting to note that here, in this report, Elijah communicates through the use of a scriptural verse, or suggests that the Messiah is communicating through a scriptural verse, similar to what has been seen in the communications of the Bat Qol. Elijah is speaking in a way that the rabbis would expect and could understand, i.e., he is speaking like a rabbi.

Initiating and Blocking Elijah's Visits:

The rabbis were not at all surprised by the visits of the prophet. They clearly expected that, from time to time, Elijah would come and talk to them:

> So frequent are Elijah's appearances on earth that even the animals recognize his approach. Thus the

[9] B. T. Sanhedrin 98a.

> joyous barking of dogs is an indication that Elijah is in the neighborhood.[10]

The appearance of Elijah becomes a part of the natural order. It is not unusual or out of the ordinary. The link provided by Elijah is a stable and natural one that even the animals are aware of, especially dogs. Perhaps this apparent exaggeration is in part an answer to those who might doubt that the prophet makes an appearance at all. For, as we shall see, the rabbis are the only ones who speak with him. It would be natural for some people to question the rabbis' contact with the prophet.

Though Elijah's visits were quite frequent, it was possible for the rabbis to act in such a way as to block an encounter. In a less than flattering report about the prophet it is revealed that he sought to gain the key of resurrection but was denied by God. Further, in the same passage, R. Jose, with whom the prophet spoke, taught in Sepphoris:

> Father Elijah was a hot-tempered man. Now he [Elijah] used to visit him, but he absented himself three days and did not come. When he came on the fourth day he [R. Jose] asked him, "Why did you not come before?" He replied, "You called me hot-tempered." He retorted, "But before us the Master has displayed his temper!"[11]

This passage serves a number of functions. It first shows that the actions of a rabbi may block the normal passage of Elijah from the Heavenly Realm to earth. It also emphasizes the

[10] B.T. Baba Kama 60b.

[11] B. T. Sanhedrin 113b.

frequency of the visits of Elijah, at least to this particular rabbi. The human aspects of Elijah's character are reasserted. Lest we forget that the prophet is still human to a certain degree, we are reminded that, like any human being, the prophet may be offended. What is more, the prophet, like all of us, has a temper. Elijah, due to his human nature, is flawed just as we are.

Most often it is wrong behavior that is punished by the prophet's absence. The rabbis teach that it is possible to avert disaster if divine grace is prayed for by the people. The point is that we must do all that we can to help one another. It is reported, for example, that R. Joshua b. Levi lived a few parasangs from where someone was devoured by a lion. Because of his lack of intervention, Elijah declined to commune with R. Joshua for three days.[12] Just as Elijah needed to be made aware of his flaws, R. Joshua b. Levi needed to be reminded of his mistake and "punished for it." The subtle message in both of these passages is that no matter how great the individual may be in deeds and merits, flaws exist and are in need of correction.

Often, Elijah appears of his own accord in response to a situation, i.e., rabbinic quandaries or impending danger. He can also be called upon. Through direct rabbinic efforts

[12] B.T. Makkot 11a, B.T. Baba Batra 7b, and see also B.T. Ketubot 61a, where the appearance of the prophet and his withholding of visits is a function of the rabbis' correct behavior toward servants.

to bring him to earth to visit, Elijah can be persuaded to appear. R. Anan is described as a student taught directly by the great prophet. There is a report in the Talmud that R. Anan inadvertently allowed himself to be bribed. After this incident Elijah stayed away from R. Anan. R. Anan then fasted and prayed for mercy and Elijah came again. But, R. Anan was now very frightened of Elijah and built a box wherein he could sit to avoid looking at the prophet as he had in the past. From this point on, the teachings he received were called Zuta whereas the former were called Rabbah.[13]

R. Anan, though a great scholar, was still capable of making mistakes in judgement. Elijah uses his position to help correct the future behavior of the rabbi as well as pointing to the mistake itself. R. Anan did not wait for the prophet to resume communications, as some of his colleagues did in other traditions. He actively sought to regain the prophet's favor and was successful.

The rabbis, in the above passages, teach through examples of their own behavior and that of the prophet that all of us are capable of making mistakes that need to be corrected. This is a vital part of the mission of Elijah. The prophet actively works to bring the behavior of human beings into line. If they see that even their great teachers are capable of mistakes, how much the more so must they be in need of

[13] B.T. Ketubot 106a.

correction themselves.

Elijah and Heaven:

By virtue of his position in this world and that of Heaven, Elijah is able to relay information from Heaven to earth. This information can pertain to vital questions as well as matters of halakha and scriptural exegesis. And on more than one occasion, Elijah reveals God's reactions to human events and what God does in Heaven. The information runs from the practical to the less tangible, or spiritual, in direct relation to the human need.

Human beings need to be constantly reassured that there is order in their world. The people living during the rabbinic period were no exception. If they cannot readily understand the world around them, they need expert authorities who can guide them through the complexities. The rabbis were the experts, but they were plagued with doubts too. They understood and believed that there was a system of reward and punishment in which the good is rewarded and the bad is punished. Though they did believe this, the evidence that they found in their own lives did not always support it. The belief in the world to come helped to provide a way to understand the unfairness of this world, for it allowed for the correction to be realized in the world to come.

Elijah, as a result of his unique mediating status, was able to offer an even more detailed look into the world to

come. Through his communications, the rabbis could be both taught and reassured, as would the people who heard of these conversations. One such case involves R. Beroka Haza'ah who used to frequent the market at Be Lapat. He met Elijah there and asked him who, of the people in view, had a place in the world to come. As they walked through the market Elijah pointed to various people and announced, "This one has a place in the world to come." The people he points to seem to be very ordinary folk, not necessarily engaged in pious activity. The first is one who intervenes when someone is about to sin. Another is a guardian of the community. The third is a jester who, when he sees one who is depressed, acts in a way to make the person laugh.[14] These seemingly ordinary people have a place in the world to come. Surely there is justice in a universe that rewards all who engage in acts that help their neighbor. Surely there is a call to engage in such activity. And surely we can expect the same consideration for ourselves.

Elijah also offers direct glimpses of what is happening in Heaven. When Elijah reprimands R. Jose for praying in a ruin, he also tells him that the words the rabbis heard there from a "cooing voice" are proclaimed by God each day. This is to say that God bemoans the fate of the children of Israel

[14] B.T. Ta'anit 22a. See also B. T. Baba Metzia 85b for a view of the rabbis' concern with their own place in the world to come.

who are subject to harsh judgement.[15] Here Elijah is again reassuring R. Jose as well as teaching. Elijah confirms that God is still intimately involved with the people, despite all appearances to the contrary, by revealing the words of God spoken each day.

In a similar report, Elijah tells R. Nathan, at the latter's request, how God reacted to the actions of the rabbis when they overruled the evidence of the Bat Qol which spoke in support of R. Eliezer. According to Elijah, God laughed and said that His children had defeated Him.[16] This dialogue comes to help the rabbis understand a situation that may not have been very comfortable. It seems that R. Joshua has defied the voice of Heaven. The purpose of the appearance of Elijah is again to reassure that all is going according to plan. There really has been no defiance of Heaven; all is as God desires. The actions of the rabbis are monitored closely by Heaven. Notice that R. Nathan is able to ask the question directly and receive a direct and immediate response. This is very different from what we have seen earlier regarding the Bat Qol, though the messages are similar.

Rabbah b. Shila met Elijah and wanted to know what God was doing. Elijah reports that:

> He utters traditions in the name of all the rabbis, but in the name of R. Meir he does not utter.

[15] B.T. Berakhot 3a.

[16] B.T. Baba Metzia 59b.

> Rabbah asked him, "Why?" "Because he learned traditions from Aher." Said he to him, "But why? R. Meir found a pomegranate; he ate within it, and the peel he threw away!" He answered, "Now He says: 'Meir My son says: When a man suffers, to what expression does the Shekhinah give utterance? My head is heavy, my arm is heavy." If the Holy One blessed be He, is thus grieved over the blood of the wicked, how much the more so over the blood of the righteous that is shed.[17]

Here, too, we can see the intervention of Elijah to help provide the rabbis with the glimpse of the workings of heaven as well as teaching a lesson. God is involved with His children and influenced by them. Elijah shows that God acts in a way consistent with what the rabbis expect. It did not seem reasonable to them that R. Meir would be denied because of his association with Aher. Nor did it seem reasonable that all of Aher's teaching should become invalid. The rabbis are given assurance of God's support and the people see that God is continually and intimately involved in human events. As an end result the attitudes of the rabbis are vindicated and God's behavior is modified on the basis of human perceptions and expectations.

Elijah and Scriptural Exegesis:

Torah is vital to the continued welfare of the people. Through it the desires of God are expressed. Through it the people are able to maintain a correct relationship with God. Therefore, Torah study was imperative. Though the rabbis

[17] B.T. Haggigah 15b.

believed that they were able, through the use of different hermeneutical tools, to interpret Scripture, nevertheless, they did encounter difficulties. On many occasions disputes over what the text meant could not be resolved by the rabbis themselves. Enter the prophet Elijah. The rabbis extended the notion of reconciliation to cover textual exegesis. That is to say, Elijah will tell us what the correct understanding of the text should be. In fact, this is what Elijah did on many different occasions in his communications with the rabbis.

Elijah is an acknowledged expert in Torah with direct access to God, the Author. In Tractate Kiddushin, the rabbis discuss the problem associated with deciding cases concerning genealogies in which evidence cannot be made clear and about which contradictory rulings exist. Citing Mishnah Eduyot 8:7, it is declared that Elijah will come to declare clean and unclean with respect to these disputes involving mixed families.[18] Here the reference is not to immediate intervention, but the expectation that Elijah will help them, in the end of days before the coming of the Messiah, resolve the disputes over interpretation of the Law. It is easy to see how this idea is a logical extension of the reconciliation that is spoken of in Malachi. Here the fathers and the sons are the scholars and their students. In the messianic age

[18] B.T. Kiddushin 71a.

there can be no confusion over interpretation of the law and no conflict stemming from it.

In a similar passage there is a question concerning whether or not Ezekiel 45:18 refers to a sin-offering or a burnt-offering. R. Johanan said that this passage will be interpreted by Elijah in the future.[19] Again the expectation here is that Elijah's resolution of the problem will come only at the end of time. Yet in many other reports we have evidence of the direct intervention of Elijah.[20]

Rabbah b. Abbahu came across Elijah while walking along and took the opportunity to ask him why Esther had invited Haman to the banquet. This encounter is related after the report of many different opinions argued by different sages. Rabbah asks him which of the opinions is correct, which of the reasons prompted Esther to act as she did? To which Elijah replied: "All of the reasons given by all of the Tannaim and all the Amoraim."[21] Note here the familiar refrain of the Bat Qol in negotiating the dispute between the schools of Hillel and Shammai. Elijah, while seeming to offer no answer, does respond to the real question of Rabbah b. Abbuhu. Which

[19] B. T. Menakhot 45a.

[20] See also Yevamot 102a where a decision is made despite conflicting views, and the final argument is sealed with the phrase: "even if Elijah were to come and say..." meaning that there will be no contradiction, not even from Heaven. This is very similar to the view taken by R. Joshua with regard to the intervention of the Bat Qol.

[21] B.T. Megillah 15b.

authority do we go by? Elijah states that each is correct in his understanding, allowing the rabbis to preserve some disputes that do not necessarily involve the halakha, and eliminate some of the anxiety that this produces. It is all right to have different views, there need not be a decision made determining which is right or which is wrong because authority resides in the entire body of sages - each individual opinion has merit. This too is reconciliation.[22]

R. Jose asks Elijah what is meant when Scripture says concerning the first man: "I will make him a help mate." (Genesis 2:18 ezer kenegdo) How is it that a woman helps a man? Elijah answers him with questions: "If a man brings [i.e.,harvests] wheat, does he chew wheat? If flax, does he put on the flax? Does she not bring light to his eyes and put him on his feet?"[23] Here there is no dispute. Elijah is called upon by one rabbi to resolve his own difficulty with the words of Genesis. From this a larger lesson is learned concerning the contribution of a woman. Though the rabbi may not view woman as a help, it is clear, through the prophet, that Heaven believes that she is. This may speak to the need to treat women better and may be part of the prophet's larger mission of reconciliation, that of men and women.

[22] See also B.T. Gittin 6b where a similar answer is given by the prophet when a dispute arises over whether in Judges 19:2 a hair or a fly is indicated. Elijah answers Abiatar that, "Both are the words of the living God."

[23] B.T. Yevamot 63a.

Returning to an earlier theme, the rabbis question Elijah about Isaiah 48:18, which states: "Behold I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction [oni, also poverty, this is a wordplay]." The rabbis want to understand this troubling verse and also need to be reassured again that their bad situation was not the result of God's abandonment. Elijah explains that God went through all of the good qualities in order to give them to Israel and found only poverty. The rabbis immediately understood this by way of their own teaching which said that poverty befits Israel like a red trapping a white horse.[24] There is an order to the universe and God is actively involved. The position that Israel finds itself in is according to the will of God, it suits them, it is appropriate. This text becomes the pretext by which this point is reemphasized.

Elijah and the Halakha:

Elijah teaches by both word and action in cases concerning halachic and non-halachic issues. Examples of the former can be found in many reports. In an argument concerning the limits of an eruv above the ground, the following is recorded:

> Come and hear: Who was it that delivered the seven traditional rulings on a Shabbat morning to R. Hisda

[24] B. T. Haggigah 9b.

> at Sura and the same Shabbat evening to Rabbah at Pumbeditha? Was it not Elijah who delivered them, which proves, does it not, that the law of Shabbat limits is inapplicable above ten handbreadths from the ground?[25]

Elijah was able to travel between two very distant towns that would be impossible to traverse, even with an eruv, for a normal person. He did so by flying ten handbreadths above the ground. The great prophet would never transgress the laws concerning eruv. Therefore those laws cannot hold above the height of ten handbreadths. The actions of the prophet support the view of the rabbis who were then able to confirm their ruling. The order of Shabbat observance is strengthened by Heaven.[26] The actions and rulings of the rabbis receive the support of Heaven, indirectly, through Elijah.

In Tractate Shabbat there is a discussion of what may be eaten or drunk on the Sabbath. The concern here is that food or drink may be used as a remedy for illness, thus violating the prohibition of changing something's status on the Sabbath. Again, the actions of the prophet are cited as evidence for the rabbi's ruling:

> R. Shimi b. Ashi swallowed a snake, thereupon Elijah came and appeared to him in the guise of a horseman. He made him eat cuscuta with salt and run three mils before him and it [the snake] issued from him in

[25] B. T. Eruvin 43a.

[26] See also the passage in B.T. Baba Metzia 114a-b where the actions of Elijah are challenged and later proven to be a correct interpretation of the law and adopted by the rabbis.

strips.[27]

Through his actions (we will discuss, later, the appearance of Elijah in disguise), Elijah is able to teach the rabbis that they should not worry about what foods may or may not be eaten on the Sabbath. In fact, it is permissible for one to be healed through the eating of foods for this purpose. The rabbis gain sanction for their actions from above.

In a discussion of the zab and zabbah and the correct behavior with respect to niddah a report is introduced as Tanna Debe Eliyahu. A particular scholar dies and his wife complains bitterly at the apparent unfairness of his death. Elijah comes, again in disguise, as a guest, and questions her with regard to her husband's behavior during the period of her niddah. It seems that he did not act in accordance with the strictest understanding of the law and was therefore justly taken from this world.[28]

On the practical level, we learn from this report the proper behavior toward a woman during the period of niddah. More importantly, Elijah comes to tell this woman and the rabbis that no one is punished in this world without reason. This scholar was punished for his overly lenient interpretation of the law and for acting according to his own determinations. Again, the orderly nature of things is

[27] B.T. Shabbat 109b.

[28] B.T. Shabbat 13a-b.

affirmed and the people are reassured of God's justice through his spokesman, Elijah. The fact that the woman is able to talk with Elijah and that Elijah is able to question her, allows for the point to be made. The embodied voice allows for a more direct lesson than through Bat Qol.

The proper attitude and behavior surrounding prayer receives extensive treatment in the rabbinic literature. In a passage cited earlier, Elijah appeared in the ruins to confront a sage who was not acting in accord with the guidelines established for prayer. In his interrogation of R. Jose, Elijah was able to teach three things: one should not go into a ruin, one may recite the Tefillah (the statutory prayer) on the road, and if one does recite the Tefillah on the road, one recites it in abbreviated form.[29] Further in the tractate, R. Huna states that one should not pray behind (at the back of) a synagogue. A story is told in this context of Elijah who came disguised as an Arabian merchant to one who did pray behind (at the back of) the synagogue, facing away from it. He confronted the man saying: "Are you standing with your back to your Master?" At which point he drew his sword and killed the man.[30] This story shows in very graphic terms the need to conform to the norm with respect to prayer, and, by extension, all rabbinic rulings. The confrontation

[29] B.T. Berakhot 3a.

[30] B.T. Berakhot 6b.

with Elijah demonstrates this in no uncertain terms. But it again introduces the prophet attempting to reconcile the people with their God. Here, of course there is no reconciliation for the man of our story, but it does provide the lesson for those who come after him. Clearly there is a right way and a wrong way to pray. The right way is the way of the rabbis. They, with the dramatic support of Heaven, determine the form and content of prayer.

The appearance of Elijah in the above passages lends support to rabbinic authority. It is important to note that in two of the three cases, the prophet appears to common people in disguise. They do not know that it is Elijah with whom they speak. The rabbis can recognize this instantly, not so the people. In fact, Elijah rarely come disguised in his visits with the rabbis. This is a privilege reserved for them.

Elijah does not always wish to be immediately recognized. We can assume that the corrections that Elijah wishes to make need to be made anonymously when in the street with the "laity."[31] Since the rabbis held that the era of prophecy had ended, it would be problematic if Elijah, the prophet, could be seen by everyone, taking an active role in the life of the

[31] In B.T. Nedarim 50a, Elijah appears in disguise to Akiba and his wife as a beggar. The motivation is to cause Akiba's wife to see that there are those even worse off and encourage her husband to study Torah: divine providence working anonymously through the prophet.

people. They would wonder if prophecy had indeed ended.

Elijah as the Guardian Angel:

As can be seen in the passages already discussed, Elijah plays a very active role in the lives of the rabbis. In many instances, Elijah will save the rabbis' lives. In times of danger the rabbis expected that Elijah could and would come to their aid. The rabbis expected that Elijah would be the embodiment of Providence through which their reward would be given in the form of a life-saving intervention.

In two cases the intervention is of a passive nature, in the form of good advice for attaining a long life. The first occurs in the context of a discussion of the short prayer and a journey where the appearance of Elijah is again introduced. The following is reported:

> Said Elijah to Rab Judah, the brother of R. Sila the Pious, "Fall not into passion and you will not sin, drink not to excess and you will not sin; and when you go forth on a journey, seek counsel of your Maker and go forth."[32]

The second example deals with the issue of diet and maintaining one's health:

> Elijah once said to R. Nathan, "Eat a third, drink a third and leave a third for when you get angry, and then you will have had your fill."[33]

In both cases the advice is straightforward, although there

[32] B.T. Berakhot 29b.

[33] B.T. Gittin 70a. See also Niddah 24b for repetition of this report.

is discussion as to what exactly is meant by the last phrase in each passage. The advice is given so that, in addition to following the laws of Torah, the rabbis would have some other practical ways of maintaining their own physical and spiritual well-being. Elijah is the guardian and the friend of the rabbis. This seems to fill the need of solidifying the special relationship the rabbis believed that they had with the prophet. The idea that Elijah is around and concerned and that, by extension, God is around and concerned is very comforting, for, in reality, the prophet gave them information that they sometimes already possessed.

The help that Elijah provides can be very concrete as well. Many cases are recorded in which the life of a rabbi is protected or saved through the intervention of the prophet. R. Kahana was out in the market selling baskets when a Roman matron came and made sexual demands of him. He told her that he first wanted to go and clean himself. He went up on the roof and threw himself to the ground. Elijah came and caught R. Kahana and scolded him for making him come so far. In a surprising retort, R. Kahana tells Elijah that it was poverty that got him into trouble in the first place. Elijah then gives him money so that he would not have to sell baskets in the market.[34] Though Elijah provides the vital help, the story serves to showcase the virtue of R. Kahana who not only

[34] B.T. Kiddushin 40a.

is saved but has his complaint addressed too.

In the tale of R. Simeon b. Yohai, he and his son are forced to flee to a cave to escape from the wrath of the Roman emperor. Elijah is sent to announce to them that the Emperor has died, i.e., it is safe for them to come out of hiding. Elijah is the guardian sent by Heaven to aid this great rabbi and his son.[35] The rabbis simply expected that this kind of intervention from Heaven, through Elijah, would occur.

Elijah would often appear in disguise, though recognizable to the rabbis, to intervene on their behalf in dangerous situations. In the story told of Nahum of Gimzo, Elijah comes in the guise of a Roman soldier to help save his life. Nahum had been sent with treasure from the Jewish community for the Emperor. On the way it was stolen and replaced with dirt. Elijah came to the angry Emperor, who thought the Jews were mocking him, and suggested that, "Perhaps this is the earth of Abraham, the Patriarch, who threw earth which turned into swords, and chaff which became arrows." This, of course, became true and Nahum was saved.[36] The merit of this particular man was that he viewed everything in life as for the good. He never despaired no matter what befell him and he was duly rewarded. Righteousness is rewarded.

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[35] B.T. Shabbat 33b.

[36] B.T. Sanhedrin 109a and Ta'anit 21a.

In the continuation of the story the same thieves hear of Nahum's great miracle and try to sell the Emperor more dirt. The earth is not transformed as it was for Nahum and the thieves are executed. Evil is punished.

R. Shila is informed against by the man to whom he administered lashes for sleeping with an Egyptian woman. Elijah comes and acts as a witness on behalf of R. Shila and he is saved.[37] R. Eleazer b. Perata was saved from the Roman court when Elijah comes in disguise and hurls the prosecution's witness four hundred parasangs.[38] Elijah comes disguised as a harlot and embraces R. Meir so that the Roman soldiers will not recognize him and jail him. After all, such a great rabbi would never behave so in public.[39] In each of these cases, the rabbis are saved from certain doom by a special individual who is identified after the fact as Elijah in disguise. The rabbis are the only ones who identify the person as Elijah. It is important to note that the rabbis warn against relying upon a miracle. That is to say, they warn against acting foolishly and carelessly because one believes that a miracle will save him/her. Yet, at the same time, the rabbis clearly believed that Elijah was there to protect them. We can speculate that, because the rabbis

[37] B.T. Berakhot 58a.

[38] B.T. Avodah Zarah 17b.

[39] B.T. Avodah Zarah 18b.

expected Elijah to intervene, when help arrived, in whatever form, they assumed that the helper really must be the prophet himself.

There are times when Elijah must save the rabbis from themselves and their power. Rab Judah, after seeing two men wasting bread, causes a famine in the land. In an effort to end it, his colleagues convince Rab Judah's aide to show him what suffering had been wrought. Rab Judah relents and takes his shoe off whereupon rain began to fall. As he moves to take off the other shoe, Elijah appears and says, "The Holy One, blessed be He said that if you will take off the other shoe He will lay waste to the world."[40] The famine had already been removed. There was no need for further action. Elijah steps in to maintain the balance that must exist in the world. This story shows the vast powers that certain rabbis possessed and that at times it was necessary for Heaven to intervene to keep these powers in check. Moreover, the natural order would have been upset had Rab Judah removed his other shoe. God acts to maintain the course already set. Elijah is the instrument whereby this can be insured. Affirmed once again is the active presence of God in the course of human events.

[40] B.T. Ta'anit 24b.

Summary:

Elijah's role as prophet continues into the rabbinic literature. The mandate described in the last verses of Malachi is extended to include a reconciliation of God with the people and the people to their God. This must be done gradually and subtly through time so that the Messiah may come without the world being destroyed. Elijah can be seen as the cosmic "repairman" who can "fine-tune" the world through teaching and direct action. The important byproduct of this activity is that the connection between Heaven and earth is affirmed as just and continuous. Divine providence is a fact of human existence, and for the rabbis Elijah was the embodiment of this Providence, always pointing the way to the ultimate goal of bringing the Messiah.

Chapter 3

PRAYER/INCANTATION

Introduction:

The rabbis of the talmudic period clearly expected that they would receive communication from Heaven. The prophet Elijah and the Bat Qol were two of the vehicles that were understood to convey information from Heaven to human beings, specifically, the rabbis. The dilemma presented by these two vehicles was their seemingly random nature. There were few ways, if any at all, by which such communication might be induced. They were initiated in heaven and therefore subject to divine will (though, clearly, this is more true of the Bat Qol than Elijah as shown in chapter 2, where the prophet might at times be invited or even cajoled into making an appearance).

The rabbis believed, however, that Heaven was responsive to their needs. That is to say, they assumed that the immanent presence of God could be called upon by human beings in time of need. The power of God was an active force in their lives, and a force that could be directed, as it were, by people. Words in the form of prayers and incantations could be used to bring about several kinds of immediate results.[1] Words could be used to protect an individual from

[1] For the purposes of this chapter, the terms incantation and prayer will be used interchangeably to refer to the formula of words which, when uttered, will provide immediate and tangible results. There is a continuum leading from

spiritual or physical harm. Words could protect one from both natural and supernatural dangers. Incantations had the power to heal the sick, and in some cases, to bring back the dead. The physical world, the forces of nature, could be manipulated theurgically. And information could be procured through the use of incantations.

The available source material relevant to this topic is as enormous as it is diverse. It would be beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt an exhaustive treatment of this material. I will, however, present a representative group of passages that will serve to define the rabbinic understanding of how verbal communication might move from earth to heaven and what the expected results of such communication might be. A discussion of the rhetorical function of some of the materials analyzed will also provide insight into the rabbinic view of such communication.

Practical Effects:

The rabbis knew that the words of prayer were very powerful. The enterprise itself was necessary and an integral part of human life. Prayer was an activity in which the rabbis engaged at least three times each day. They spent a great amount of time determining the proper structure of the

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request/petition to demand,command, binding. In prayer God may or may not respond but with incantation God is compelled to obey.

prayer service as well as the proper attitude of the participant. An entire tractate of the Talmud is devoted to this subject. In turn they fully expected the activity to produce results. This is seen in the concern that the activity be carried out properly.

To help illustrate this point further we may look to a passage in which the rabbis imagine that even God prays; that God, in an extension of the belief that God is subject to His own laws, engages in an action that would effect a desired result:

> R. Zutra said in the name of Rab (This is the content of God's prayer): May it be My will that My attribute of mercy will suppress My anger, and that My mercy may prevail over My (other) attributes, so that I may deal with My children with the attribute of mercy and, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice.[2]

If God engages in the activity of prayer and expects it to be efficacious, how much the more so with human beings. It is, of course, important to note that this is a rabbinic projection and therefore meant, in part, metaphorically. Our prayer activity can be seen as an aspect of <u>imitatio Dei</u>. More than this, it is a powerful activity to be carefully employed.

In the Mishnah and again in the Tosefta there is a report of people who knew a special mode of singing and a special mode of writing. They did not wish to teach it to others for

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[2] B.T. Berakhot 7a.

fear that it would be misused:

> Agdis b. Levi knew a certain mode of singing, and he did not want to teach it to others. Sages said to him, "Why did you not want to teach it to others?" He said to them, "The members of my father's house knew that the Temple was doomed for destruction, and they did not want to teach their mode of singing to others, so that they should not sing before an idol the way in which they sing before God..."[3]

Words must be carefully used, and in this case, the mode of the recitation and the performance of the words is guarded, lest they be incorrectly employed.

The world is filled with many dangers. Some of the danger posed is physical and some is spiritual. Some threats come in what we would call a "natural form." And still others come from the supernatural realm. Words, when uttered in a specific way under the right conditions could offer protection from all of the above mentioned threats.

Demons filled the natural world and posed a constant threat. Incantations offered great protection:

> Against a demon one should say: "You were closed up, closed up were you. Cursed, broken, and destroyed be Bar Tit, Bar Tame, Bar Tina as Shamgez, Mergaz and Istami." For a demon of the privy one should say: "On the head of a lion and on the snout of a lioness did we find the demon Bar Shirika Panda, with a bed of leeks I hurled him down, with the jawbone of an ass I killed him."[4]

Knowing and using the names of the various demons provided one with power over them. The texts themselves are somewhat non-

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[3] Tosefta Kippurim 2:8. See also Mishnah Yoma 3:11.

[4] B.T. Shabbat 67a.

sensical but have meaning in their use. It is difficult to determine if there is a hidden meaning within the words or not. The efficaciousness comes from the recitation of the set formula.

There are certain formulas that are to be accompanied by a corresponding action. Pairs of actions were dangerous and made one vulnerable to the actions of demons. In a discussion of the number of cups of wine that are drunk during the Passover celebration, the following words are recorded:

> R. Papa said, Joseph the demon told me: For two we kill; for four we do not kill, for four we harm. For two [we hurt] whether [they are drunk] unwittingly or deliberately; for four, only if it is deliberate, but not if it is unwitting. And if a man forgot himself and happened to go out, what is his remedy? Let him take his right hand thumb in his left hand and his left hand thumb in his right hand and say: "You and I, surely that is three!" But if he hears one saying, "You and I surely that is four!", let him retort to him, "You and I surely are five!"...This once happened until one hundred and one, and the demon burst."[5]

The story and prescription come in the midst of a discussion concerning proper behavior. One of the functions of this particular passage seems to be to reinforce the care that must be taken to observe the Passover ritual and the danger to which one is exposed if care is disregarded. Here we seem to have a case where an old superstition concerning pairs is interwoven with the desire to insure that observance of the festival is proper.

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[5] B.T. Pesahim 110a.

The rabbis also responded to the fear people had of the evil eye. An incantation with a corresponding action were prescribed. The following passage is clearly addressed to the people and not a part of the rabbinic discussion:

> If a man, on going into a town, is afraid of the evil eye, let him take the thumb of his right hand in his left hand and the thumb of his left hand in his right hand and say: "I, so-and-so, am the seed of Joseph over which the evil eye has no power..." If he is afraid of his own evil eye, he should look at the side of his nostril.[6]

In this case, as well as the one cited above, the rabbis seem to be addressing, quite reluctantly, a fear held by the people and, perhaps, even by themselves. The prescription, as seen through the words and the action, is mild. The point is to reinforce their own belief. Here it is the belief that as descendants of Joseph, the Jews are a special people and should not be subject to the same dangers as others. Though they do take these beliefs seriously, there is a subliminal message to the one who recites the words that his fear is groundless.

Sickness was a random variable in the lives of the rabbis over which they could exert little, if any, control. Medicine was still, relatively speaking, in its infancy. But there were other forces that could be called upon through incantation:

> For an abscess one should say, "Let it indeed be cut down, let it indeed be healed, let it indeed be

[6] B.T. Berakhot 55b.

> overthrown; Sharlai and Amarlai are those angels who were sent from the land of Sodom to heal boils and aches; bazak, bazik, bizbazik, mismasik, kamun kamik, your color within you, your seat be within you, your seed be like a kalut and like a mule that is not fruitful and does not increase in the body of so-and-so." Against ulcers one should say, "A drawn sword and a prepared sling, its name is not Joheb, sickness and pains."[7]

One could tap into the power that exists through the messenger of God to help heal physical ailments. Words used in this manner can comfort and reassure the patient that there is an order, in as much as one can exert some control over one's illness.[8]

God was with the sick, supporting the invalid. This notion is integral to an understanding of the efficacy of incantations. When reciting such for the purposes of healing, one may be assured that God is close and will act upon the request or, in the case of an incantation, the demand.[9]

For continued good health one may pray before performing certain actions. If one was beginning a work project, he may say a prayer of thanksgiving and one of praise before God. If he opens a jar or starts a loaf of bread, he prays that a blessing may enter into them and that a curse may not enter

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[7] B.T. Shabbat 67a.

[8] It should also be mentioned that the spoken words of incantations were often used as the written text for amulets. One such case is the amulet used against the harm caused by the bite of a dog: "I, so-and-so, the son of so-and-so, write upon the skin of a male hyena: Kanti, kanti, Kloros, Ya, Ya, Yahweh, Sabaoth, Amen, Amen, Selah." B.T. Yoma 83b.

[9] B.T. Shabbat 12b.

into them.[10] Here it seems, again, that the rabbis are trying to walk a fine line between assenting to the fears of the people, and to a certain extent their own fears, and their own sense of proper worship of God. Here in this Tannaitic source, the formulaic aspect of the prayer is downplayed as is the expectation of immediate, tangible response.

The world is filled with demons. This was an operating premise. We cannot see them unless the ashes of the burned after-birth of a she-cat are placed upon our eyes. There is a warning, however, that one must keep the mouth closed. It is recorded that R. Bibi b. Abaye did not keep his mouth closed and came to harm. But the other rabbis prayed and he was restored to good health.[11] Not only could one be protected from harm, one could be restored to health through the power of a prayer. Here, it is important to note that it is the power of the prayer of rabbis that is able to help one who has been harmed by demons.

Sympathetic magic seemed to play a significant role in the way the rabbis thought that they could help others heal themselves. Words along with specific actions that incorporate symbolic transference were often advocated:

> Abaye also said: Mother told me for a daily fever one must take a white zuz, go to a salt deposit and tie it up in the nape of the neck with a white twisted cord. But if this is not possible, let one

[10] Tosefta Shabbat 7:22.

[11] B.T. Berakhot 6a.

> sit at the crossroads and when he sees a large ant carrying something, let him take and throw it into a brass tube and close it with lead, and seal it with sixty seals. Let him shake it, lift it up, and say to it, "Your burden be on me and my burden upon you." ...But if this is impossible, let him take a new pitcher, go to the river and say to it, " O river, O river, lend me a pitcher of water for a journey that had chanced to me." Let him then turn it seven times about his head, throw it behind his back and say to it, "O river, O river, take back the water you gave me, for the journey that chanced to me came in its day and departed in its day.[12]

It is significant that here the report concerns what Abaye learned from his mother. Women were often the ones associated with magic. Here, rather than reject the magical content of the teaching, Abaye sanctions the words of his mother.

Many of the incantations prescribed by the rabbis involve the recitation of verses from Scripture. This follows from the belief in the magical/theurgic power the words of Torah possessed. The rabbis felt that this power could be channeled through recitation in certain situations. Again, actions are required along with the words:

> R. Johanan said: for an inflammatory fever let one take an all-iron knife, go where thorn hedges are to be found, and tie a white twisted thread to it. On the first day he must slightly notch it, and say, "and the angel of the Lord appeared to him..." [Exodus 3:2] On the following day he makes a small notch and says, "And Moses said, I will turn aside now and see..." [ibid.] The next day he makes a small notch and says, "And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see..." [ibid.,4] ...And when he has recited his verses, he pulls it down and says: O thorn, O thorn, not because you are higher than all the other trees did the Holy One, blessed be He, cause his presence to rest upon you, but

[12] B.T. Shabbat 66b.

> because you are lower than all other trees did he cause His presence to rest on you. And even as you saw the fire for Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah and did flee from before them, so look upon the fire of so-and-so and flee from him."[13]

This citation includes both the use of scriptural verses and the use of a form of sympathetic magic. The use of the verses and the motif of the thorn bush are connected by the events of Moses when God appeared to him at the burning bush. The fire and the fever are identified, so that as the fire fled from before the three friends of Daniel, so too should the fire leave the one with fever.

In addition to all of the physical ills that may be treated through the recitation of certain formulas, one's spiritual health can be improved. That is to say, one may remove an impure spirit that may have infected him/her. In Tractate Berakhot, the rabbis teach that the recitation of the Shema will subdue the evil inclination that exists within the individual.[14] These words, from Scripture, have the power, when repeated, to help one gain inner health and strength.

One may become spiritually (as well as physically) impure through contact with a woman at the wrong time. If a woman has just come up from her statutory immersion after menstruation, and one is the first to have intercourse with her, a spirit of immorality will infect him. Similarly if she

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[13] B.T. Shabbat 67a.

[14] B.T. Berakhot 5a.

is the first to have intercourse, a spirit of immorality will infect her. The remedy in either case is the recitation of the following verse, "He pours contempt on princes, and causes them to wander in the waste, where there is no way." [Psalm 107:40-41].[15]

Manipulation of the Physical World:

The forces of nature could be manipulated through the use of incantations. The most well-known story involves a man known as Honi the Circle-Maker. It is not clear that Honi was a rabbi, only that he was favored by God in that his prayer was answered immediately:

> Once they said to Honi the Circle-Maker, "Pray that rain may fall." He answered, "Go out and bring in the Passover ovens so that they will not be softened." He prayed, but the rain did not fall. What did he do? He drew a circle and stood within it and said before God, "O Lord of the world, your children have turned their faces to me, because I am like the son of the house (i.e., an intimate member of the family) before You. I swear by Your great name that I will not stir from here until You have pity upon Your children." Rain began to fall drop by drop. He said, "Not for such rain have I prayed, but for rain that will fill the cisterns, pits, and caverns." It began to rain with violence. He said, "Not for such rain have I prayed, but for rain of goodwill, blessing and graciousness." Then it rained in moderation until the Israelites went up from Jerusalem to the Temple Mount because of the rain. They went to him and said, "Just as you prayed for the rain to come, pray for the rain to stop. He replied, "Go and see if the Stone of the Strayers has disappeared!" Simon b. Shetah sent to him saying, "If you were not Honi I would have pronounced a ban against you! But what shall I do

[15] B.T. Pesahim 111a.

> to you? You beseech God, and He performs your will, like a son who beseeches his father who performs his will..."[16]

It appears that this man has the power to compel heaven with the drawing of a circle and the prayer for rain. It is important to note the words of Simon b. Shetah at the end of the tale. It is clear that the behavior of Honi was not to be encouraged for it bordered on the edges of blasphemy, i.e., this form of sympathetic magic, apparently, was not approved of (since it was practiced by a non-rabbi and compelled God's assent). Yet because Honi himself was successful, Simon b. Shetah could not pronounce a ban upon him. God answered the prayers and actions of Honi.

The dilemma facing the rabbis regarding incantation is best illustrated in the tale of Honi. Though the words of Honi may not fit into a rigid definition of incantation, his prayer had theurgic power like that of an incantation. The people clearly believed that Honi could bring rain. After all they asked him clearly expecting him to have the power. The rabbis did not deem it seemly, however, for a human being (and probably not even a rabbi) to harass heaven in the manner of Honi. The results, though, precluded any human sanction. Incantation and sympathetic magic (the circle and adjuration inside the circle) worked, but who should (could) control its use?

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[16] Mishnah Ta'anit 3:8. A similar story appears anonymously in Tosefta 2:13.

In a Baraita, a similar tale is told concerning the actions of Nakdimon b. Gorion. He was able to demand from heaven rain and the suspension of some of the laws of nature. We read that the day was lengthened on his behalf. All of this occurred through the supplications of Nakdimon b. Gorion, praying for the pilgrims who had come up with him to Jerusalem. In a manner similar to that of Moses, Nakdimon b. Gorion invokes the honor of God's name. He pleads with God to act for the honor of His name and to show the world that He still cherishes the people Israel.[17] God responds to this form of persuasion as He did for Moses. The words are efficacious.

The lesson that the rabbis wished to teach here and in the story of Honi is that God does respond directly to the distress of the people. The rabbis felt the need to qualify the story of Honi because of the harshness of his words. But they expected their own words to have theurgic power in that they could attain immediate results from their pleas and incantations.

The Talmud contains other examples of the rabbis using incantations to manipulate nature. In Tractate Hullin the following tale is related:

> R. Phinehas b. Jair was on his way to redeem captives and came to the river Ginnai. He said, "O Ginnai divide your waters for me, that I may pass through you." It replied. "You are about to do the

[17] B.T. Ta'anit 19b-20a.

> will of your Maker. I, too, am doing the will of my Maker. You may or may not accomplish your purpose. I am sure of accomplishing mine." He said, "If you will not divide yourself, I will decree that no waters ever pass through you." It, thereupon, divided itself for him...[18]

This tale seems to serve the purpose of highlighting the power of the rabbi. The people expected that their religious leaders would possess special powers which they themselves lacked.[19] The rabbis use this story, and others, to reinforce the expectation and to show its practical aspect. This power is only used in the service of God, in this case, the redeeming of slaves.

Sympathetic magic has already been seen in earlier passages involving healing. Such passages are surprising in that they seem to violate the general prohibition against magic, sorcery and other types of witchcraft. More astonishing is the following tale of R. Eliezer which serves again to reinforce the power of the rabbi:

> ...I [R. Eliezer] have studied three hundred, (or as others teach, three thousand laws) about the planting of cucumbers [by magic] and no man, except Akiba b. Joseph, ever questioned me. For it once happened that he and I were walking together on a road, when he said to me, "My master, teach me about the planting of cucumbers." I recited one utterance, and the whole field was filled with cucumbers. Then he said, "Master, you have taught me how to plant them. Now teach me how to pluck them up." I said something, and all the cucumbers

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[18] B.T. Hullin 7a.

[19] See Introduction.

gathered in one place...[20]

Clearly this story shows the power of this great rabbi to use words to manipulate nature; in this case, cucumbers. The story acknowledges that such power exists and can be tapped by those with knowledge. In the continuation of the passage the question is raised concerning Eliezer's actions in light of the prohibition against the practice of magic. It is pointed out that for pedagogical purposes it is allowed. Akiba is not the only one who learns from this tale. The student who studies such a passage learns that such power is possible, but that it may not be used.

Danger and Fear:

Certain locations were viewed as inherently dangerous. Bath houses and privies were the favored domains of demons and evil spirits. Just as entering these places was seen as fraught with danger so, too, was drinking water at night. The fear was that one might be attacked by demons or overcome by an impure desire to perform some act of sexual perversity. There was some disagreement, however, among the rabbis over what if anything should be said in such a situation, as can be seen in the following Baraita:

> On entering a bath house one should say, "May it be Your will O Lord, my God, to deliver me from this and from the like of this, and let no humiliation or iniquity befall me; and if I do fall into any

[20] B.T. Sanhedrin 68a.

> perversity or iniquity, may my death be an atonement for all my iniquities." Abaye said: A man should not speak this way, so as not to open his mouth for the Satan. For Resh Lakish said, and so it was taught in the name of R. Jose....On leaving the bath house what does he say? R. Aha said, " I give thanks to You, O Lord my God, that you have delivered me from the fire." R. Abbahu once went into a bath house and the floor of the bath house gave way beneath him, and a miracle was wrought for him, and he stood on a pillar and rescued a hundred and one men with one arm. He said: This is what R. Aha meant.[21]

In the above citation the main danger presented seems to be spiritual (moral) in nature, the rabbis fearing that in a place where people gathered and did not wear clothing, one might be overcome by his own evil yetzer. The rabbis feared the immorality that might flare up in a communal bath-house, though the last part of the citation represents danger of a physical order. It appears that there was a reluctance to prescribe a prayer in that this might plant the seed that would bear the fruit of iniquity. Still the greater argument seems to have been made by those who advocated arming the people with the appropriate words that would offer protection.

When entering a privy one is cautioned to address the angels that will serve as his protectors. Before one enters, he should say, "Be honored, you honored and holy ones that minister to the Most High. Give honor to the God of Israel. Wait for me till I enter and do my needs and return to you." Abaye argued that this again might induce the angels to leave

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[21] B.T. Berakhot 60a.

him. He should say instead, "Preserve me, preserve me, help me, help me, support me, support me, till I have entered and come forth, for this is the way of human beings."[22] The passage continues with what should be said when exiting.

These words were the protection that one could invoke against the demons that might overtake him. The privy, a place of filth and impurity, would seem to be a natural place for a demon to reside. One is also in a vulnerable position, a position that would be taken advantage of by a demon. The passage also instructs one in proper behavior, namely that even when one is engaged in the most basic of human functions, one must be aware of God and always mindful of His sovereignty.[23]

In another Baraita the rabbis warned about drinking water at night:

> A man should not drink water from rivers or pools at night, and if he drinks, his blood is on his own head, because of the danger. What is the danger? The danger of blindness. But if he is thirsty, what is the remedy? If a man is with him, he should say to him, "So-and-so, the son of so-and-so, I am thirsty for water." But if not, let him say to himself, "O so-and-so, my mother told me: Beware of shabrire; Shabrire, berire, rire, ire, re. I am thirsty for water in a white glass."[24]

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[22] B.T. Berakhot 60b.

[23] See also B. T. Berakhot 62a for a similar passage concerning proper behavior and the words to be recited when one goes about his needs.

[24] B.T. Pesahim 113a, see also B.T. Avodah Zarah 12b for a slight variation.

There was a belief that a demon causing blindness dwelled in rivers and pools at night. If one drank unprotected one could be harmed by the demon. The incantation, again taught by a woman, was a way of overcoming the power of the demon. It is interesting to note that the best advice is not to drink at all. The incantation is only offered as a remedy for a bad situation.

In another Baraita an alternative incantation is offered which incorporates biblical verses.[25] The warning, again in a Baraita, is not to drink water on Wednesday nights or Shabbat nights. The danger is posed by an evil spirit. The remedy is to recite the sheva qolot, the seven "voices" of David.[26] The alternative, if the psalm is not recited, is to say the words: "Lul shafan aniqron anirdafin, I dwell among the stars, I walk among the lean and fat people." Here the best advice is still not to drink the water. There is a descending order of options from which one may choose. The rabbis seem to favor not placing oneself in such danger in the first place.

In another Baraita, several psalms are said to offer protection. Psalm 30 is known as the psalm against evil occurrences or the song against plagues. These alternative

[25] B.T. Pesahim 112a.

[26] Psalm 29:3-9.

uses come from different understandings of its content.[27] The implication here is that not only are there isolated verses that can serve as protection, but entire psalms, too, may be recited to protect one from danger.

Incantations and Intermediaries:

The previously cited passages deal primarily with the power of incantations to protect and heal an individual or a community. There are, however, incantations that may be uttered to acquire information from the dead or from demons. This hearkens back to the description of how the universe is populated. The rabbis in their vision of the heavenly court saw that there were high- and low-level intermediaries just as there were high- and low-level officials in the court of the king. It was possible to contact the low-level intermediaries such as the dead and various demons through incantation.

In Tractate Gittin, the rabbis report that Onkelos, before his conversion, consulted with the dead. He was still uncertain that what he was about to do was the proper course of action. Through incantations, which are not included in the report, Onkelos raises Titus, Balaam and the sinners of Israel. Each offers his advice but also tells of the punishment each must endure in death. Through these

[27] B.T. Shevuot 15b.

interchanges, Onkelos confirms his decision to join the house of Israel.[28] In this story we learn of the power to raise the dead through incantation and we learn important aspects of divine reward and punishment. The rabbis use this story to reinforce their theological agenda.

It is permissible for people to consult demons. This can be done by uttering incantations over eggs and oil to help recover lost objects. But we are warned that we cannot always rely upon the information obtained because demons are apt to be tendentious. The information is not reliable, though it is available.[29]

There is another passage in the Tosefta that goes a bit further in its counsel against consulting demons. In discussing what may or may not be proper behavior on the Shabbat, it is clearly stated that one should not "whisper over a matter concerning demons." An objection is raised stating that even on the weekday one should not "whisper over a matter concerning demons."[30] Whether or not the information is reliable, one should not get involved with demons. It seems, though, that the fact is granted that such communication may be achieved through the utterance of an incantation.

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[28] B.T. Gittin 56b-57a.

[29] B.T. Sanhedrin 67a.

[30] Tosefta Shabbat 7:23.

The Rabbinic Agenda:

Many of the rabbinic reports that deal with incantations have another function for the rabbis. They serve to teach lessons of proper religious observance and proper behavior toward other human beings. The incantation also reaffirms the close relationship between God, or divine powers/intermediaries, and human beings. If people can tap into the power of God through their words, God must be very close. At least God's presence is understood to dwell in their midst. God becomes accessible to people and immediately provides for their needs, protecting and healing them.

The rabbis understood dreams to be a type of minor prophecy. That is to say, they believed that dreams were filled with important information. It was therefore deemed obligatory that these dreams be interpreted. But what if one did not remember the dream? The rabbis teach that one must pray:

> Sovereign of the universe, I am Yours and my dreams are Yours. I have dreamt a dream and I do not know what it is. Whether I have dreamt about myself or my companions have dreamt about me, or I have dreamt about others, if they are good dreams, confirm them and reinforce them like the dreams of Joseph. And if they require a remedy, heal them, as the waters of Marah were healed by Moses, our teacher, and as Miriam was healed of her leprosy and Hezekiah of his sickness, and the waters of Jericho by Elisha. As you turned the curse of the wicked Balaam into a blessing, so turn all my dreams into something good

for me.[31]

One can sense the force of this passage in the images that are invoked. The rabbis wanted people to pay attention to their dreams because of the conviction that dreams are revelatory communication, too. This imperative took precedence over the actual incantation supplied.

Similarly, the proper observance of the Shabbat is reaffirmed in a passage in Tractate Shabbat that deals with incantations. One may heal another on Shabbat. The text, which also outlines the incantation one may use to heal, permits the healing of another. Lest one should think that the act of healing is forbidden work, the text teaches that one is permitted to use, for this purpose, an incantation and sympathetic magic.[32]

Their use of the above texts notwithstanding, the rabbis felt awkward about magic, sorcery and incantations. Though they believed that God did respond to prayers and incantations, they were concerned that people might move too far from "acceptable" practices. An example of this ambivalence can be seen in a passage from Tractate Pesahim:

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[31] B.T. Berakhot 55b. See also on the same page the specific scriptural passages prescribed to help in this endeavor to find the meaning of a dream, beginning with the words of R. Huna b. Amni in the name of R. Pedath who received his tradition from R. Johanan. There is also a catalogue of prescriptions of what verse must be said over a certain element of the dream in B.T. Berakhot 56a.

[32] B.T. Shabbat 66b.

> Amemar said: The chief of the sorceresses told me: He who meets sorceresses should say, "Hot dung in perforated baskets for your mouths, O you witches! May your heads become bald, the wind carry off your crumbs, your spices be scattered, the wind carry off the new saffron which you are holding, you sorceresses, as long as He showed grace to me and to you, I had not come among you, now that I have come among you, your grace and my grace have cooled.[33]

Contradictions abound in this passage. The rabbi is taught by a sorceress an incantation to be used against her own people. It seems clear that the passage is meant to teach that there are limits placed upon the use of incantations. More specifically, there are strict limits imposed on the use of witchcraft. These limits are imposed by the rabbis.

It is with this in mind that a Tanna taught concerning the forbidden practices of the Amorites:[34]

> All these are forbidden as Amorite practices, save the following: If one has a bone in his throat, he may bring of that kind, place it on his head, and say, "One by one go down, swallow, swallow, go down one by one." This is not considered the ways of the Amorites. For a fish bone he should say, "You are stuck in like a pin, you are locked up as a cuirass; go down, go down."[35]

The rabbis are the sole arbiters of what constitute forbidden practices and what may be properly done. Certain healing practices and their corresponding incantations are permitted. But what this passage does is to limit that which might be

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[33] B.T. Pesahim 110a.

[34] See chapters 7 and 8 of Tosefta Shabbat.

[35] B.T. Shabbat 67a.

unseemly, not because it is ineffective but because it smacks of the practices of heathens.

The rabbis were very concerned about the interaction of men and women. They were concerned specifically about contact with a woman in menses and generally with spending too much time with woman lest suspicion of impropriety arise. In Tractate Pesahim, two incantations that involve the use of Scripture are deemed necessary when one has contact with a woman in menses and when one sees two woman conversing with one another (they are suspected immediately of practicing witchcraft). "If another man is with him, let them clasp hands and pass through; while if there is no other man, let him say: Igrath Izlath, Asya, Belusia have been slain with arrows."[36]

Though it is possible to bring immediate results through the agency of words, the rabbis of the Mishnah cautioned about "vain" prayers. That is to say, the rabbis did not want people to feel that because words had power they could utter them in a way that would change the present order:

> If he built a new house, or bought new clothes he says, "Blessed is He who kept us alive..." One who recites over evil the blessing for good, or over good the blessing for evil, one who cries out about the past, behold, this is a vain prayer. How so? If one's wife was pregnant and he said, "May it be Your will that she give birth to a male," behold, this is a vain prayer. If he is coming along the road and heard a noise of crying in the city and said, "May it be Your will that those are not

[36] B.T. Pesahim 111a.

members[37] of my household," behold, this is a vain prayer.

God is available to human beings through prayer. But, one must be careful not to abuse this through making unreasonable requests or "vain" prayers over things that are already done and may not be reversed.[38]

Who Can Utter Incantations?:

So many different strains of thought are represented in the materials presented for discussion that a clear picture is elusive at best. It seems that in terms of the practical incantations that can provide protection and healing, anyone may pronounce them. But for the manipulations of nature, a rabbi is required. Or, at the very least, a very righteous individual as in the case of Honi. Certainly, the rabbis arrogated to themselves the right to define what is acceptable in all cases.[39]

There are, of course, exceptions to this analysis. In

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[37] Mishnah Berachot 9:3.

[38] God is certainly close to those who are in need, specifically to those who are sick, and is responsive to words. See page 61, note 9.

Similar to the injunction against the "vain" prayer is the statement in Mishnah Ta'anit 1:2 that "We only pray for rain near the time for rain."

[39] I must add that we have passages such as B.T. Shabbat 66b, which state that Abaye learned about incantations from his mother, and not from another rabbi, implying that his mother had knowledge of effective words.

the Mishnah, there is a discussion of those who do not have a place in the world to come. It is reported that R. Akiba added to the list those who "utter charms" over a wound.[40] No one, not even the rabbis, are permitted to heal by way of an incantation according to this passage.[41]

The rabbis reserved for themselves the words that would manipulate nature. These became incorporated in "miracle" stories that sing the praises of individual rabbis. One such story tells of the persecution of Rabbah b. Nahmani. While being held captive by a Roman officer, he prayed and the walls of his cell fell down, allowing for his escape.[42] In another instance, R. Haninah b. Hama is able to raise the dead through a prayer at the challenge of Antonius.[43] The rabbis are the judges of what is appropriate and reserve the most powerful of the incantations for themselves.

Summary:

Incantation as a vehicle of communication is very different from both Bat Qol and Elijah. The differences can

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[40] Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1. This is also found in Tosefta Sanhedrin 12:9-10.

[41] There is a rebuttal offered to this position in B.T. Shevuot 15b, where the clarification is made that only one who spits during the recitation has no part in the world to come because one may not spit and mention the Name of Heaven.

[42] B.T. Baba Metzia 86a.

[43] B.T. Avodah Zarah 10b.

be seen in the type of information that is attained, the direction and the style. Incantations rarely address God directly. This occurs only when the incantation takes on a form resembling normative prayer. Incantations do not produce a direct verbal response. The response comes in the form of actions. The Bat Qol provided communication in only one direction, from heaven to Earth. Elijah allowed for a dialogue by virtue of his human form. The incantation does allow for a two-way call and response, but the response is in the form of a tangible result.

In an analysis of the traditions reporting on the various vehicles of verbal communication one can detect a difference in the stratification of the materials. The traditions about incantation are divided proportionally between the Tannaitic and the Amoraic sources. This is unique to the material on incantation. Though the Tannaitic material seems to be more restrictive as a whole, there is still to be found the permission to use incantation and the belief that such use will yield results. In contrast, the materials containing references to the Bat Qol and Elijah are mainly Amoraic sources.

In prayer and incantation the communication is initiated by human beings and flows upward. It is usually in response to immediate demands of a specific situation. This contrasts with the random nature of the communication seen in the vehicles of Bat Qol and of Elijah. The practical aspects of

this vehicle of communication also contrast with those involving Bat Qol and Elijah, in that the latter vehicles provide advice while the incantation produces tangible results.

Chapter 4

SIGNS AND OMENS

Introduction:

In addition to verbal communication between heaven and earth through intermediaries, the rabbis also believed in the possibility of non-verbal communication. Signs and omens, that is to say, portentous phenomena both natural and human, were understood to contain information or instruction of divine origin.

This form of communication differs from its verbal counterpart in that it is ambiguous and needs interpretation by an expert. A sign or an omen, in fact, must first be perceived as a sign or omen rather than a mute or inconsequential event. Though the actual sign may be unambiguous in form, it must then be interpreted by an expert in order to divine its true meaning. The rabbis viewed themselves as qualified to fill this roll: they were the authoritative interpreters.

It is noteworthy that the rabbis differentiate between a sign and an omen. The difference lies in the time-referent of the information conveyed. The sign construed the significance of past or current events. The omen, however, generally spoke to the future. But in each case, the sign or the omen came in the form of a natural event.

The rabbinic use of the sign and the omen reveals important aspects of their worldview and of their perception

of the relationship between God and the world. The phenomena of the world are filled with meaning as are the events in history. The meaning represents God's continuing relationship to humanity in the world and God's continued presence in the unfolding of history. God wishes to maintain contact with creation and makes such contact possible through signs and omens built into the natural order.

The concept of randomness has no place in the world of the rabbis, for God created the world carefully and with a plan in mind. Part of this plan can be discerned through the signs and omens left to us if we will but see them and understand. The analogy suggested by Bahya ibn Pakuda, the medieval Jewish philosopher, of the world as text is helpful in understanding the rabbinic view of non-verbal communication. The world as we see it is not the result of some careless spilling of ink on a page. Rather, the world was carefully "written" in such a way that it might be "read" by us.

In addition, the rabbis understood certain signs and omens to be corrective of human behavior. Divine approval or disapproval would be revealed through a sign or omen triggered by human action or inaction in a particular circumstance. The rabbis could discern whether or not they were on the right path by looking to signs in their own world.

The passages in rabbinic literature that contain references to signs or omens are too numerous to be dealt with

exhaustively here. Therefore, material has been gleaned from the Mishnah, Tosefta and the Babylonian Talmud that will be illustrative of the ways in which the rabbis treated the subject. Recurring themes will be noted in an analysis of the form and function of the communication media. The literary context of the reports will also be studied to further understand the rabbinic views.

Function of Form:

Signs provided the evidence that God was involved in the lives of the people. The form of this revelation is very subtle when compared to the biblical reports of other revelatory phenomena such as prophecy and direct experience of the glory of God. God's presence was detected in the order that was observed in natural events perceived as signs. The subtlety is brought to light by the lack of direct references to God in the attribution of a source for the sign. It is certain, however, that the rabbis understood God to be responsible for the creation and placement of the signs.

In a Baraita, the rabbis point to phenomena in nature that, when understood correctly, function as omens:

> Our rabbis taught: When the sun is in eclipse, it is a bad omen for the whole world. This may be illustrated by a parable. To what can this be compared? To a human being who made a banquet for his servants and put up for them a lamp. When he became angry with them he said to his servant, "Take away the lamp from them, and let them sit in the dark."

Similarly, in the same passage:

> It was taught: R. Meir said, "Whenever the luminaries are in eclipse, it is a bad omen for Israel since they are inured to blows." This may be compared to a school teacher who comes to school with a strap in his hand. Who becomes apprehensive? He who is accustomed to be daily punished.[1]

In these passages it is easier to see the connection between God and the omen. The rabbis make this more explicit through the help of the parable. We must understand the natural phenomena as instruments that are utilized by God to communicate with us. God remains in close touch with creation through the manipulation or control of these phenomena which thereby become purposeful and not merely random.

Sometimes the presence of God is felt in a more intimate way. The following event is related in a discussion of whether or not the dead pay heed to what the living do or say:

> ...has not R. Papa said: A certain man made derogatory remarks about Mar Samuel [who was already dead] and a log fell from the roof and broke his skull? A disciple of the sages is different because the Holy One, blessed be He, avenges his insult.[2]

God is the protector and avenger of students of Torah. This can be proven by the seemingly accidental occurrence of a log falling and killing someone. God remains involved in the lives of His creatures. One can also sense the corrective nature of this event as an omen for those who would hear or read of the death of this man. One must act with a certain

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[1] B.T. Sukkah 29a.

[2] B.T. Berakhot 19a.

respect toward the rabbis, dead or alive.

In another example of the corrective element of the sign, a Baraita speaks of a child studying at the house of his teacher who suddenly apprehended the meaning of hashmal, in the Book of Ezekiel. A fire went forth from the word and consumed the young student.[3] The passage contains a great deal of information that requires several interpretations. The rabbis want to guard against the uninitiated engaging in the study of ma'aseh merkabah. This story serves as a sign that heaven did not approve of the actions of this young student. The passage also serves as a portent to those who would hear of it later. They, too, would be warned against imprudent study of this subject. This stands out as an unnatural sign from heaven that would indicate incorrect action. But, while standing out as an exception, it still furnishes us with further information concerning the relationship between God, the sign, and people. Here, in a most direct and immediate manner, God is involved in the world.

One can sense another function of this form of communication in the rabbinic discussion of the historical sign. Looking back through history it is easy to see patterns and construe events as signs indicating important points. This etiological use of the sign is found particularly in the

[3] B.T. Haggigah 13a.

Tannaitic materials:

> Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel said, You should know that the dew has been cursed. In olden times the dew came down on straw and on stubble, it would turn white...but now it turns black. In olden times, any city which got more dew than its neighbors produced a larger harvest. Now it produces less...From the day on which the Temple was destroyed, there is no day on which there is no curse, and dew has not come down as a blessing, and the good taste of produce is gone...[4]

Looking back in history allows the rabbis to find indications of why things have unfolded as they have in their own day. They were able to see correlations and draw their own conclusions. Though this may appear to be only an attempt to justify events after the fact, this does not mean that the rabbis did not accept the sign as true communication. On the contrary, it was the expectation that signs did communicate information which motivated the search. This is illustrated in the following Amoraic passage:

> R. Elai b. Jebrekya also said: If two disciples of the sages reside in the same city and do not support each other in the Law, one dies and the other goes into exile.[5]

The death of the first sage came as a sign to the other that the way they behaved toward one another did not meet with heavenly approval. The rabbinic interpretation is that the one, through his participation in their disputes, caused the death of the other. Consequently, he would have to flee just

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[4] Tosefta Sotah 15:2, see also Mishnah Sotah 9:12.

[5] B.T. Sotah 49a.

as one who kills accidentally must flee to a city of refuge. Though the sign explains the event, it is understood as divine communication which becomes an omen for those disciples who will hear of the event.

Function of the Form for the Rabbis:

The rabbis, as indicated earlier, clearly felt that signs were a legitimate form of divine communication and should be sought out. In the Palestinian Talmud, R. Eliezer b. Jacob is reported to have reiterated the biblical prohibition against the practice of divination or soothsaying. This is followed by the comment that though there is no divination in our own day, since Scripture prohibits it, there are signs.[6] Signs, a way of circumventing the prohibition, were a valid form of communication, sanctioned by the rabbis. It appears that in some ways, as indicated by the above quotation, the permission to pursue the interpretation of signs was a concession in the struggle with the larger problems posed by divination and soothsaying. It is the initiation of the sign or omen by a magical act that is forbidden. In the latter cases, the rabbis sought to prohibit these practices which were too closely related to the practices of their neighbors (the ways of the Amorites). After all, Scripture did condone and actually legislate a form of divination in the urim and

[6] T.P. Shabbat 6:9.

tummim.

The rabbis engaged in the reading of signs. They in turn used their interpretations to enhance their own position within the community. This form of communication helped the rabbis to demonstrate their own holiness and superior power, to resolve ambiguities in decision-making and to show the causal relationship between their activities and the condition of the world. The rabbis saw their own actions as having a profound effect upon the state of the physical world. They felt, therefore, a heightened sense of responsibility. More than this, rabbinic interpretation of signs and omens showcased the power that they possessed to read these divine communications correctly.

For example, the story is told of R. Joshua b. Levi who was vexed by a certain Sadducee and wished to curse him. It seems that this man differed with R. Joshua in his interpretation of Scripture:

> One day the Rabbi took a cock, placed it between the legs of his bed and watched it. He thought: When this moment [the propitious moment for cursing] arrives I shall curse him. When the moment arrived he was dozing. [When he woke up] he said: We learn from this that it is not proper to act in such a way...[7]

R. Joshua took his slumber as a sign from heaven that what he wished to do was not proper. One may assume that he was granted such "preemptive" communication due to the stature of

[7] B.T. Berakhot 7a.

his person. Such an assumption comes from the view that the rabbis held of themselves, that because of their own merit they received special favors from heaven. They merited various forms of heavenly intervention in times of danger, though they are cautioned not to rely upon such help. Though this is not the primary point of the passage, it appears to be present at a deeper level of the text. Rabbi Joshua, and those who came after him, understood his slumber to be a corrective sign from heaven. Surely such intervention was due to the merit he acquired.

Frequently, the rabbis' opinions in legal matters or scriptural interpretation were challenged by a member of the group or from the outside. In the Tosefta, there is a story that shows the challenge presented to a certain group who followed the rulings of the sages, though they themselves were closely associated with the Sadducees. They were not acting in a proper way in the eyes of one of their members. A sign from heaven proved who was correct, albeit after the fact:

> ...Now when this Boethusian went forth, he said to his fathers: In your entire lives you would expound Scripture, but you never did the deed properly until I arose and did it right. They said to him: Even though we do expound matters as you say, we do not do things in the way in which we expound them, we obey the sages. [One from among their ranks said:] I shall be very much surprised if you live for very long. Not thirty days passed before they put him into his grave.[8]

The correctness of the fathers' actions, in following the

[8] Tosefta Kippurim 1:8.

sages in practice if not in theory, in this story is proven by the death of the one who challenged their behavior. Divine communication through this sign adjudicates the dispute. In fact, the sign is anticipated, not merely reacted to after the fact, though the one who predicts is a Boethusian and not a rabbi (though the one who tells the story is a rabbi!).

There are cases in which the actions of a rabbi are disparaged by his colleagues. The character of Aher, Elisha b. Abuya, was often commented upon both positively and negatively because of his apostasy. In one passage it is reported that when he died, the heavenly hosts declared that he should not be judged because of his study of Torah, but that he should not be let into the world to come because he sinned.[9] Further in the same passage the following is related:

> Aher's daughter came before Rabbi and said to him: O master, support me! He asked her: Whose daughter are you? She replied: I am Aher's daughter. He said: Are any of his children left in the world? ...She answered: Remember his Torah and not his deeds. Immediately, a fire came down and enveloped Rabbi's bench. Rabbi wept and said: If it be so on account of those who dishonor her, how much the more so on account of those who honor her![10]

The verdict in heaven seems to be in favor of Aher. This is revealed in the sign that appears during the conversation between his daughter and Rabbi. The merit of Aher is

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[9] B.T. Haggigah 15b.

[10] B.T. Haggigah 15b.

proclaimed through the sign given to Rabbi. This type of sign seems to be in the same category as that which R. Joshua b. Levi received that prevented him from acting improperly. Both signs indicate divine displeasure at a contemplated mode of action, and they forestall it. Here Rabbi is prevented from acting callously towards this woman. The merit which Aher achieved through the study of Torah is highlighted as well as, implicitly, the zekhut of Rabbi who merited such an intervention.

In another story of a confrontation with a Sadducee, Rabban Johanan b. Zakkai's legal opinion is divinely vindicated by the death of that same Sadducee. The Sadducee had come to offer a sacrifice and, through a bit of deception, R. Johanan b. Zakkai renders him unfit to perform the ritual. The Sadducee threatens revenge, but dies before he can make good on his threat. His death occurs only three days after this incident.[11] This sign comes to validate the superiority of the sages over the Sadducees.

Similar is the story told of Simon the Righteous. While he was alive, the western lamp remained lit. When he died, it went out and, from that time on, observers found that sometimes it was lit and sometimes it was extinguished. After his death the altar fire was weak, requiring less wood during

[11] Tosefta Parah 3:8.

the day.[12] After the fact, this was construed as an omen of impending doom foretelling the destruction of the Temple. The righteousness of this man's character had a tremendous impact upon the world around him both in his life and in his death. The changes in the behavior of the altar fire bore witness to this.

The interpreter of signs and omens is a powerful figure. This ability gives one the information necessary to successfully navigate this life. One can detect the signs that reveal divine approval or disapproval of a particular course of action or form of behavior. The ability can also provide protection or allow one to warn others of impending dangers. It is related that R. Eliezer while lying sick in bed had a vision of a horrible death for R. Akiba. He understood this also to be a sign that his disciples would not die natural deaths.[13] This type of story illustrates the power of the rabbi. He is able to receive this type of communication and also understand what it means.

Another example of this comes from Tractate Baba Batra in a discussion of various miracle stories:

> Rabbah b. Bar Hama further related: We were traveling in the desert and saw geese whose feathers fell out on account of their fatness, and streams of fat flowed under them. I said to them, "Shall we have a share of your flesh in the world to come?" One lifted up its wing, the other lifted up its leg.

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[12] Tosefta Sotah 13:7.

[13] B.T. Sanhedrin 68a.

> When I came before R. Eleazar he said to me, "Israel will be called to account for [the sufferings of] these [geese]."[14]

Rabba b. Bar Hama understood that he had apprehended a sign. He thought that certain information could be gained from it. He actually speaks to the geese in an effort to understand the meaning of their gestures. It is only when he turns to R. Eleazar that he learns the true meaning of the sign. R. Eleazar has the power to interpret the sign for his colleague and construes it very differently.

The power available through the interpretation of signs is illustrated by a form of sign-manipulation. Divination, though for the most part proscribed (as we have seen), was a skill acknowledged to be possessed by the rabbis. Their feeling was that if all is determined, one might be able to take hold and read signs to be able to gather information and, specifically, to gain knowledge of the future.[15] It is important to note that instances of the rabbis engaging in divination, that is to say, actively seeking to produce signs that would reveal information, are relatively rare.

There are reports that Rab practiced certain charms in order to receive information about the dead. "Rab went up to a cemetery, performed certain charms and then said: Ninety-nine have died through an evil eye and one through natural

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[14] B.T. Baba Batra 73b.

[15] See B.T. Sanhedrin 65b and B.T. Hullin 95b.

causes."[16]

In the following cases, the texts hint that the activities of the rabbis, that is to say, their actions which provide the information, may be understood as divination. There is an instance recorded where R. Hanina b. Dosa was able to know the moment that the daughter of Nehonia was safely out of a well into which she had fallen.[17] He was not at the scene, nor do we have any information as to how he divined the knowledge. Yet, the nature of the report indicates, through this conspicuous gap, that R. Haninah b. Dosa performed an action to get the information.

There is another instance involving R. Gamaliel in which it is concluded that he was able to divine through the Holy Spirit:

> ...It once happened that R. Gamaliel was riding on an ass when travelling from Akko to Chezib while R. Ila'i was following behind him. Finding a gluskin on the road he said to him: "Ila'i, pick up the gluskin from the road." Later he met a heathen. "Magbai," he said to him, "take away that loaf from Ila'i". R. Ila'i thereupon approached him [the gentile] and asked: "Where are you from?" "I am," the other replied, "from the station keepers settlements." "And what is your name?" "My name is Magbai." "Did R. Gamaliel ever know you?" "No," the other replied. At that moment we discovered that R. Gamaliel divined by the holy spirit...[18]

We are not told how this occurred, only that he knew a man's

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[16] B.T. Baba Metzia 107b.

[17] B.T. Yebamot 121b and also B.T. Baba Kama 50a.

[18] B.T. Erubin 64b and also Tosefta Pisha 2:15.

name without ever having met him. The only way that the other rabbis could explain this knowledge is through the notion of divination. The Hebrew word, kivein, is somewhat ambiguous. It has been translated in this context as divined. Though this meaning may be questionable, at the very least it does introduce the possibility that R. Gamaliel performed an action by which he was able to receive information through the Holy Spirit. The rabbis are careful to note that this was done through the Holy Spirit. By design, they do not elaborate on the means.

The number of cases that are reported suggest that the rabbis were reluctant to go so far as to sanction divination. They were much more comfortable discussing the interpretation of signs without prior initiation of theurgic activity. It was sufficient that they were the arbiters of the communication through their interpretive powers.

Who Converses Through Signs and Omens?:

By the very fact that we are alive and possess certain senses we can all see the natural face of signs and omens. That is to say, no special qualities are necessary to see the sign. All can experience the natural events, but all do not necessarily construe them as signs and omens. When someone dies, all are able to perceive the death. It is not certain that all will grasp its full meaning. The various aspects of nature are equally apprehensible by all. It is their full

meaning as sign that may not be so readily accessible:

> R. Huna said in the name of Rab citing R. Meir, and so it was taught in the name of R. Akiba: A man should always accustom himself to say, "Whatever the All-Merciful does is for the good"...R. Akiba was once going along the road and he came to a certain town and looked for lodgings but was everywhere refused. He said, "Whatever the All-Merciful does is for the good," and he went and spent the night in the open field. He had with him a cock, an ass and a lamp. A gust of wind came and blew out the lamp, a weasel came and ate the cock, a lion came and ate the ass. He said, "Whatever the All-Merciful does is for good." The same night some brigands came and carried off the inhabitants of the town. He said to them, "Did I not say to you whatever the All-Merciful does is for the good?"[19]

A seemingly random bit of bad luck to the casual observer is filled with portent for R. Akiba. He is able to successfully understand the nature of the world so as to be able to derive meaning from such occurrences. Akiba saw these events as omens, for he knew from the start that these events had meaning. He, as an expert, was able to understand the significance hidden within the sequence of events.

A similar illustration is provided in the Tosefta. Again the story concerns Simeon the Righteous:

> In the year in which Simeon the Righteous died, he said to them, "This year I am going to die." They said to him, "How do you know?" He said to them, "On every Day of Atonement there was a certain elder, dressed in white and cloaked in white, who would go in with me [into the Holy of Holies] and come out with me. This year, however, while he went in with me, he never came out." After the festival he fell ill for seven days and then died.[20]

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[19] B.T. Berakhot 60b.

[20] Tosefta Sotah 13:8.

Through careful observation of what many may have been able to see,[21] Simeon the Righteous was able to understand a hidden meaning concerning his own death. For him this was an omen because he was able, as an expert, to interpret it correctly.

It is possible to state that a sign or omen will exist where people are open to interpreting an event or an object as a sign. The father of R. Hananiah b. Hananiah made a Nazirite vow over him. R. Gamaliel was examining him to see if there were any signs of puberty when the boy said:

> Why are you so troubled? If I am subject to the authority of father, the authority of father is on me and I am a Nazir. And if I am subject to my own authority I am a Nazir from this point forward... He [Gamaliel] said, "I am certain concerning this one that he will not die before he has taught instruction." And he did not die before he taught instruction to Israel.[22]

R. Gamaliel saw in the words spoken by the boy a sign that he would lead a long and productive life teaching Torah. Certainly, everyone near could hear the words spoken. But, Gamaliel interpreted the meaning of the "sign."

Most of the examples that have been presented so far have been passive in nature. The rabbis depicted have not actively sought out the sign. They reacted to an event or an object as they happened into or upon it. The exception, of course,

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[21] It should be noted that because this event took place with regard to the Holy of Holies, it is possible that the elder that Simeon saw was really an angel that could only be seen by him.

[22] Tosefta Niddah 5:15.

concerns the few examples of divination. There are passages that present a form of active sign-reading that approaches the activity of divination, i.e., actions that the rabbis knew would yield them a sign or an omen.

In a discussion of prayer the following is reported:

> One who prays and errs, it is a bad sign for him. And if he is a prayer leader, it is a bad sign for them that appointed him...They said concerning R. Haninah b. Dosa that when he would pray for the sick he would say, "This one shall live," or "this one shall die." They said to him, "How do you know?" He said to them, "If my prayer is fluent, then I know that it is accepted. But if not, I know that it is rejected."[23]

The passage does not suggest that R. Haninah b. Dosa prayed in order to learn the fate of the sick person. He did know that the fluency or lack of fluency in his prayer for the sick would signal to him this person's fate. The story is brought to support the notion that errors in prayer or lack of fluency were bad omens. Not simply Haninah's fluency, but any man's error in prayer (in this context) is not within the person's conscious control, since one does not have control over the prayer. It is by heavenly design that his prayer is fluent or not.

Additionally, we find that Rab used to regard the presence of a ferry as an omen. If he passed by as the ferry was coming in then it was a good omen.[24] Rab did not

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[23] Mishnah Berakhot 5:5.

[24] B.T. Hullin 95b.

deliberately cause the ferry to move, but he knew that he would be able to determine good or bad events by watching it as he walked by it. Again this would seem distinct from an act of divination in that Rab did not initiate the action. He only interpreted it knowing where to look.

In the same passage it is stated that R. Johanan used the random recitation of Scripture heard from a child as a sign. He would pass by the schoolhouse and listen for the scriptural verse that the children were reciting. He would then interpret this as a sign (i.e., an oracle.)[25]

The heavenly bodies were also a constant source of information by way of sign. In a Baraita the following is reported concerning eclipses of the sun and moon:

> When the sun is in eclipse it is a bad omen for idolaters; when the moon is in eclipse, it is a bad omen for Israel since Israel reckons by the moon and idolaters by the sun. If it is eclipse in the east, it is a bad omen for those who dwell in the east, if in the west, it is a bad omen for those who dwell in the west, if in the midst of heaven it is a bad omen for the whole world...But when Israel fulfills the will of the Omnipresent, they need have no fear of these omens.[26]

These recurring events are full of meaning. One does not initiate an action, but by knowing where to look, one can acquire knowledge of the future. What is particularly interesting about this passage is the ambivalence it reveals toward the study of the heavenly bodies and their meaning.

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[25] Ibid.

[26] B.T. Sukkah 29a.

These omens, or warnings from heaven, are applicable to Israel only when they are not behaving as they should. If they are acting in accordance with Torah, then they may disregard the omen. One wonders if the rabbis might be trying to get around the readily observable fact that eclipses occur on a regular basis no matter what is happening on earth. At another level, the rabbis are also dealing with their ambivalence about whether or not Israel is subject to planetary influence like the rest of the world, or whether Torah protects them.

In Tractate Shabbat there is a lengthy discussion of the planetary influences and whether or not Israel is subject to them.[27] What can be gathered from the various positions is that the rabbis felt that under normal circumstances one could rely upon the heavens for information in the form of omens. But Israel is granted a special immunity in most cases when the will of God is obeyed. There is also the view that the influence of the planets can be overruled by good acts:

> Chaldeans [the acknowledged experts in astrology] told him [R. Akiba]: On the day she [his daughter] enters the bridal chamber a snake will bite her and she will die. He was very worried about this. On that day she took a brooch, stuck it into the wall and by chance it penetrated into the eye of the serpent. The following morning, when she took it out, the snake came trailing after it. "What did you do?" her father asked her. "A poor man came to our door in the evening," she replied, "and everybody was busy at the banquet, and there was none to attend to him. So I took the portion which

[27] B.T. Shabbat 156 a-b.

was given to me and gave it to him."[28]

The information given to R. Akiba proved to be entirely reliable. There was a snake that would have killed his daughter. Her actions toward the poor man saved her from the snake. God intervened, as indicated by the phrasing of Akiba's question which implies that something she did merited this divine act of grace.

Astrology, for the rabbis, was a valid science that interpreted signs from the planetary bodies. The information gleaned was valid. The signs were a form of communication. But the rabbis felt that the information was a sort of warning. It did not reveal events that must occur necessarily, i.e., there is no sense of fatalism. We can do something about it. If evil was forecast, good deeds could counteract it. Again this is far from being a form of divination. The heavenly bodies were a consistent source of communication through signs and omens. The clear emphasis is that our actions must be tempered by this knowledge in order to avoid some of the dire predictions.

Form of Communication:

The form of communication through signs and omens is natural. The signs themselves are for the most part a part of the natural world. This stands in contrast to the Bat Qol

[28] B.T. Shabbat 156b.

and Elijah who exist on a different level not really a part of this world.[29] Signs and omens are implanted and are therefore very intimate, existing in the world around us and even at times emanating from within us. Yet, the signs are seen as the work of God.

As noted earlier, the heavenly bodies provided information through explicit signs. The natural movements of the planets, sun and moon communicated to human beings:

> When the lights are in eclipse it is a bad omen for the whole world. It is to be compared to a mortal king who built a palace and finished it and arranged a banquet and then brought in the guests. He got mad at them and said to the servant, "Take away the light from them," so all of them turned out to be sitting in the dark. R. Meir said, "When the lights of heaven are in eclipse, it is a bad omen for Israel, for they are used to blows. It is to be compared to a teacher who comes into the schoolhouse and says: Bring me the strap. Now who gets worried? The one who is used to being strapped."[30]

The natural elements comprise the form or medium of the communication. In this passage the assumption that the communication emanates from God is spelled out in the parables cited. The bad omen is a sign of God's displeasure. The sign in heaven is created solely by heaven to communicate with human beings.[31]

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[29] The exception may be when Elijah appears in disguise - a real person who, later on, is identified as Elijah in disguise.

[30] Tosefta Sukkah 2:6.

[31] See also B.T. Shabbat 156a-b for other passages involving the same structure.

In some cases human beings contribute to the creation of the sign. Their behavior can actually bring about the sign. In these cases too the sign emanates from within the person:

> On account of three transgressions do women die in childbirth: because they are not meticulous in the laws of menstrual separation, the dough offering and the kindling of a lamp.[32]

Though this is a disturbing passage, it does convey the view that the rabbis held regarding their own sense of human responsibility. Why do women die in childbirth? Because they have sinned. The outcome is a sign of what was wrong. This serves as an omen to other women who would be told of these events.

Similarly in the statement of R. Hiyya b. Abba in the name of R. Johanan: "If one draws out his prayer and expects therefore its fulfillment, he will in the end suffer vexation of the heart..."[33] Here, too, the effect has a cause. The effect is the sign which translates into an omen for others.

Human actions, for better or worse, could serve to precipitate the appearance of a sign:

> Our rabbis taught, on account of four things is the sun in eclipse: On account of an Ab Bet Din who died and was not mourned fittingly, on account of a betrothed maiden who cried out aloud in the city and there was none to save her, on account of sodomy, and on account of two brothers whose blood was shed at the same time...[34]

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[32] Mishnah Shabbat 2:6.

[33] B.T. Berakhot 55a.

[34] B.T. Sukkah 29a.

The information that the omen conveys is here seen in reverse. That is to say, we see what it is that causes the sign to appear in the first place and, therefore, what behavior must be changed. This follows the general principle laid out in the Tosefta:

> When righteous people come into the world, good comes into the world and retribution departs from the world. And when they take their leave from the world, retribution comes into the world and goodness departs from the world.[35]

There is a direct link between cause and effect. Good creates good and evil causes good to depart. The signs help to warn about these relationships and to guide us back onto the right path. Again the intimate nature of the form is striking inasmuch as it resides with the individual.

The Rabbinic Understanding of Signs in History:

In a practical way, the sign enhanced the rabbi's understanding of the world and history. The sign could be used to trace the sequence of events leading to the present condition of the Jewish people. For the rabbis, it was axiomatic that there was an order and purpose to the world; all one needed to do was to read the signs correctly to see this. Implicit in the texts that will follow is the fact that the rabbis had to struggle with the question of why things were so bad in their time and place. They were members of

[35] Tosefta Sotah 10:1.

God's chosen people and yet they were enduring endless oppression. The answer to this question was necessary to maintain the faith of the people and the rabbis.

Their particular situation was reflective of what they felt to be a general decline in the state of the world since the Sinaitic revelation. They did not feel themselves to be as learned as their ancestors who were, in turn, slightly less learned than theirs. With the death of each great sage, a certain quality was lost as well. The rabbis saw each loss as a sign in history that, when viewed as a whole, explained logically why things were so bad in their own time. A time line is created with each significant event clearly marked.

The rabbis in their look backward could discern meaning in the deaths of their ancestors by recognizing a corresponding feature:

> When R. Hanina b. Dosa died the men of good deeds ceased. When R. Jose Katnutha died there were no more saintly ones...When R. Johanan b. Zakkai died the splendor of wisdom ceased. When Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died, the glory of the Law ceased and purity and abstinence died. When R. Ishmael b. Phiabi died the splendor of the priesthood ceased. When Rabbi died, humility and the shunning of sin ceased...[36]

The rabbis saw in the death of the sages a sign marking the condition of the world. There was a distinct limiting of power and good in the world which directly corresponded to the loss of these leaders. This same pattern can be seen in how

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[36] Mishnah Sotah 9:15.

the rabbis understood certain events:

> R. Phineas b. Jair says: When the Temple was destroyed the associates and the freemen were put to shame and walked with covered head, and the men of good works waxed feeble; and men of violence and men of loud tongue prevailed. And now there is none that expounds and none who seeks [compassion for them], and none who inquires [after his fellow's welfare]...[37]

This pattern is continued in the Mishnah with reports of the clear signs that the rabbis saw in history allowing them to understand and explain the condition of their own world. There was order in the world which could be detected through the proper understanding of the signs.

The above passages, to be sure, bear several meanings concurrently. On one level, they serve to highlight the greatness of the sages who have preceded the later rabbis. The texts illustrate the direct consequences the death of one such sage had on the rest of the Jewish community. On another level, there is the sense that God is involved in these events and that the cause and effect relationship is a sign of the divine reaction to the events:

> When R. Meir died there were no more makers of parables. When Ben Azzai died there were no more diligent students. When Ben Zoma died there were no more expounders. When R Joshua died goodness departed from the world. When Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel died the locust came and troubles grew many. When R. Eleazer b. Azariah died wealth departed from the sages. When R. Akiba died the glory of the Law ceased.[38]

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

The elevation of the stature of these sages by the later rabbis is somewhat misleading. Clearly they revered their predecessors. But they knew that when they spoke highly of them, they enhanced their own position as their heirs. It is a somewhat false modesty that is exhibited. After all, the rabbis still engaged in the activities that they report to have departed with the death of an earlier sage. They still created parables, gathered diligent students, and contributed to the glory of Torah.

The causal relationship between the behavior of the righteous and the state of the world has been noted in earlier passages. This notion further validates the rabbis' own self-image as being responsible for the continued welfare of the world:

> When R. Eliezer died, the glory of Torah ceased. When R. Joshua died, men of counsel ceased, and reflection ended in Israel. When R. Akiba died the arms of Torah were taken away and the springs of wisdom ceased.[39]

It was important to show that the loss of one sage represented a greater loss to the world. The death marked the departure of an important element of life. The power attributed to these people is manifest in the fact that either they caused the quality to be available in the world or at the very least, while alive, prevented its loss.

The multivalent structure of these passages permits many

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[39] Tosefta Sotah 15:3f. See also Mishnah Sotah 9:15.

different interpretations. One interpretation that is supported by these texts is that the rabbis saw history replete with signs of God's presence. This was defined by the change seen in the condition of the world when a great sage departed and, certainly, in the perception of these events as signs.

Literary Stratification:

The material on signs and omens found in the various rabbinic documents seems to be fairly evenly distributed among earlier and later sources in proportion to the size of the documents. The Mishnah, Tosefta and the Babylonian Talmud each contain a significant amount of information concerning the interpreting of signs and omens as communication from God. That is to say, there seems to be little distinction between the Tannaitic and the Amoraic strata in their understanding of the sign and omen. The following texts will be used to show that the main difference between the materials in these three documents lies in the fact that material containing information about omens occurs almost exclusively in the Talmud. The passages in the Mishnah and the Tosefta contain information mainly pertaining to signs.

The Mishnah and the Tosefta present an interpretation of signs which reveals information about the past and the present. The passages found in the Babylonian Talmud cite examples of signs that convey information about the future,

specifically omens.[40]

In Mishnah Shekalim there is a passage that reports about a priest who was occupied in the Temple. He noticed a block of pavement that was different from the rest. He went and told this to someone else, but before he could make an end to the matter he died. They determined from this episode that the ark lay there hidden.[41] Here the sign revealed information to the people of the time about a past event. Citations from Tosefta Sotah, presented earlier in the chapter, similarly report interpretations of signs that reveal information about the past or present.

In the Talmud, tractate Ketubot there is a general discussion of death and the omens associated with it. Reported here is an encounter between R. Hiyya and Rabbi, who is weeping on his death bed:

> Was it not taught if a man dies smiling it is a good omen for him, if weeping it is a bad omen for him; his face upwards it is a good omen, his face downwards a bad omen; if his face is greenish it is a bad omen, if bright and ruddy it is a good omen. Dying on Sabbath eve is a good omen; on the termination of the Sabbath is a bad omen. Dying on the eve of the Day of Atonement is a bad omen; on the termination of the Day of Atonement is a good omen. Dying of diarrhea is a good omen because most righteous men die of diarrhea.[42]

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[40] Tosefta Horayot 2:9 contains the statement that the rabbis understood omen to refer to prophecy, information about the future.

[41] Mishnah Shekalim 6:2.

[42] B.T. Ketubot 103b.

Here the understanding is that one may gain knowledge of a person's status in the world to come by the state of the body at the time of death. This information is of the ultimate future, the world to come.

Summary:

In previous chapters, it has been noted that reports of verbal forms of communication occur in both the aggadic and halakhic traditions of both the Tannaitic and Amoraic sources. Though the material containing information about signs and omens is fairly evenly distributed in the Tannaitic and Amoraic sources, it primarily appears in the aggadic stratum. Further, it has also been noted in the preceding chapters that there was a certain ambivalence expressed regarding the verbal forms of communication. Though there is ambivalence concerning astrology and forms of divination, the validity and interpretation of signs and omens is almost universally accepted.

Similar to other forms of communication, the primary rhetorical function of reporting this material is didactic. Signs and omens are used to illustrate correct and incorrect behavior. The most common sign is an early death. This almost always indicates improper behavior:

> Rab Judah said: Three things shorten a man's days and years: To be given a scroll of the Law to read from and to refuse, to be given a cup of benediction to say grace over and to refuse, and to assume airs

of authority...[43]

The rabbis in reserving for themselves the ability to interpret signs are therefore able to legislate behavior using a different pedagogical and enforcing tool. It is somewhat revealing that one of the behaviors that the rabbis point to in the above passage is the assuming of airs of authority.

Within the halachic literature as well these passages come to lend support to laws concerning behavior. In Tosefta Sotah, the rabbis discuss the various marital situations that may be encountered. They have a clear notion of propriety and use signs to help support their view:

> "And if she goes and becomes another man's wife..."[Deut. 24:2], Scripture calls him, "A different man," because he is not his match. The first man put her away because of transgression, and this other one comes along and stumbles through her. The second husband, if he has merit in Heaven, puts her away. And if not, in the end she will bury him...[44]

The world is so constituted that different forms in nature and different natural events reveal information. These signs and omens employed by the rabbis were also the lingua franca of the Mediterranean world at that time. This is borne out by the uniform appearance of the information in the Tosefta, Mishnah and Babylonian Talmud and in the way that the material appears in context. That is to say, there is little hesitation exhibited in

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[43] B.T. Berakhot 55a.

[44] Tosefta Sotah 5:9.

the exposition of these passages.

The references to signs and omens, again in contrast to verbal communication, are quite ubiquitous. Many of the details in the passages cited are given merely in passing. This is to say, the rabbis do not draw undo attention to the phenomena of signs and omens, because they are taken for granted (and are thus, in principle, non-controversial).

This was a form of communication with which the people were familiar. The rabbis in turn were able to use this familiarity to bolster their own authority as interpreters and legislators. What further popularized this form was the desire of the rabbis to avoid the "miraculous." God does not hop in and out of history. God works through the natural order and through history in its unfolding and communicates with the people through signs and omens.

Chapter 5

SCRIPTURE

Introduction:

According to Jewish tradition, the Torah was revealed to Moses when he ascended Mt. Sinai at God's command. The inherent holiness of the document is derived from its source. Because the Torah was given as a guide to human beings it is necessary to study it. In fact, study of Torah is divinely commanded and mediated to the people through their leaders: first, Moses and later, the rabbis. The rabbis were distinguished specifically as masters of Torah -the study of the text, as revelation, was their preoccupation.

The Torah is a complex document that contains, for the rabbis, much more than what a literal interpretation of its words might reveal. The rabbinic Oral Torah represents the "supplementary" revelation that aids us in our reading of the written document that Moses received. More than this, the rabbis felt that the text was a source of ongoing communication with God, maintained through their careful reading and use of the text.

Torah has a certain power that can be tapped into by experts, the rabbis. This power provides help and information and the ability to control. The power can also be used theurgically to influence God. The Torah is a series of signs; it has an oracular nature. Careful study as well as random reading may provide valuable information about the

future. It can also reveal practical information about the present, specifically, how one should act.

The Torah, through its study, was a source of direct revelation as well. The rabbis firmly believed that an experience of gillui shekhinah occurred when Torah was studied. The text was also a source of prophecy. Again, information could be derived through the interpretation of specific verses deemed to be prophetic oracles.

One of the main difficulties encountered in the study of this topic is that the material is so abundant. The use of Scripture as prooftext (and intertext) permeates every page of the Talmud as well as the other rabbinic documents. Because of this, the rabbinic attitude toward the use of Scripture and its unique qualities may seem to be treated cavalierly or taken for granted by the rabbis, although, to be sure, the glory of Torah and its sanctity are frequently attested to in the rabbinic literature. In addition to their frequency, the references to Torah and its power tend to be at times quite subtle.

For these reasons, the nature of the present chapter will be illustrative and not exhaustive. I have selected passages that will give the reader a broad sample of the different ways that the rabbis expected the Torah to be a vehicle of communication. The study will highlight the unusual and explicit references to the Torah as a continuing source of communication from God or as a tool for receiving such.

Value of Torah:

The value of the Torah is illustrated in a variety of ways: the emphasis on its study, the description of its revelation to the children of Israel at Sinai and the belief that even God is engaged in its study. One of the more unusual ways in which the glory of Torah is exemplified is in its personification. The Torah, in one passage from the Talmud,[1] is depicted as a beggar going from door to door seeking students. Torah is seen as an active agent, not just in the content of the revelation but in obtaining students who will receive it.

One may receive the impression from the rabbinic comments that will be presented further on that the study of Torah is humanity's highest excellence or glory. But, although the study of Torah is, in principle, incumbent upon all, practically, it cannot be realized in its fullness by all. Only a small minority, the rabbis, were able to accomplish this tremendous undertaking.

One more observation may be helpful before analyzing the various texts. The imagery employed in the description of actions involving study is that of a dialogue. The mouth of God originally, and later of the rabbis, was the "source" of Torah. "Hearkening" is the action that must be performed in

[1] B.T. Sotah 47b.

the fulfillment of its words. The echo from Deuteronomy, im shamoa tishmah, "if you will truly hearken to the words," reflects the revelatory character the rabbis attribute to study (i.e. the nature of biblical revelation was auditory) and, therefore, the inherent value of the text as a source of continuing communication.

Power of Torah:

In most of the passages in which there is a reference to the communication contained in the verses of Scripture, the direction of the communication is downward. There is a passage in Tractate Makkot that asks the rhetorical question of whether anyone has actually gone up to heaven and brought back information.[2] The lesson is that the information comes to us from heaven by way of the Torah (mediation). The primary power of the Torah is to convey information that will help people.

The metaphor that is used most often is medicine. The words of Torah are likened to medicine in their power to help heal what ails the person.[3] The communication that comes through the vehicle of the Torah not only heals but is also limitless:

> ...and as the words of the Law have no limit, so has their reward no limit. As it says, "How great is

[2] B.T. Makkot 23b.

[3] B.T. Kiddushin 30b.

Your goodness which You have laid up for those who fear You." [Psalm 31:19][4]

This passage comes in a description of how the Torah was given in the desert and is therefore accessible to all. The view is that the words of Torah have no limit in their power. The vehicle of communication is limitless in the amount and way that information can be understood.

The downward flow is further illustrated in the belief, mentioned earlier, that even God studies Torah. Since both heaven and earth engage in the activity, there is the possibility of establishing thereby a link originating from heaven. God is connected consistently with Torah and its study, highlighting the value of the activity. "R. Judah in the name of Rav: The day has twelve hours. In the first three God sits and busies Himself with Torah..."[5] I understand this passage not only to underscore the importance that the rabbis place on Torah study, but also to show that God is continually engaged with Torah that continues to be the link between God and the people.

The power and divine origin of the Torah can also be seen in one aspect of the story of the death of R. Hanninah b. Teradion.[6] In this story a Torah scroll is wrapped around the rabbi and he is set on fire along with it. His students ask

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[4] B.T. Erubin 54a.

[5] B.T. Avodah Zarah 3b, and also, B.T. Shabbat 107b.

[6] B.T. Avodah Zarah 17b-18a.

him what he sees and he tells them that he sees the letters of the Torah flying up to heaven, returning to their source. The imagery here helps to emphasize the link between heaven and earth that the rabbis felt was provided by the words of Torah. In a very physical way R. Haninah saw this link and conveyed it to his students. One might say that the downward flow, for the, moment, was reversed. The words of Torah have a life of their own. They, like Elijah and the Bat Qol, exist as separate entities capable of being vehicles of divine communication.

The link between heaven and earth is embodied in the Torah. That divine power is manifest in it is well illustrated at the beginning of Genesis Rabbah in a comment on the verse from Proverbs 8:30, "Then I was by Him, as a nursling (amon); and I was daily all delight:"

> Another interpretation: amon is a workman (uman). The Torah declares: I was the working tool of the Holy One, blessed be He. In human practice, when a mortal king builds a palace, he builds it not with his own skill but with the skill of an architect. The architect moreover does not build it out of his head, but employs plans and diagrams to know how to arrange the chambers and the wicket doors. Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, "In the beginning God created" [Genesis 1:1], beginning referring to the Torah...[7]

Through Torah, God was able to create the world. The words provided the "blueprint" by which everything was created. Hence they provided the key to understanding and controlling

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[7] Genesis Rabbah 1:1.

creation. The link that Torah provides between God and creation is enhanced by this understanding of Torah's role in creation.

Torah Study:

Study of Torah is the key to releasing the communicative power contained in the words. The rabbis were very specific in their statements concerning the proper way to study the holy text. Unless done properly the Torah is capable of causing harm much in the same way that it causes relief. The Torah is unlike any other document and therefore merited special care. This care translated into the protocols of its study. The rabbis discouraged the study of Torah alone because of the fear that wrong interpretations might result and, more importantly, they feared that many of their traditions would not be accurately transmitted. They felt that the dialectical process was the best way to further Torah understanding:

> A rabbi said that as fire does not burn when isolated, so will the words of Torah not be preserved when studied by oneself alone. Another said that the learned who are occupied in the study of the Law, each one by himself, deserve punishment, and they shall become fools.[8]

It is not enough to study Torah by yourself, one must do so in accordance with certain rules. These rules were dictated by the rabbis because they believed and feared that the

[8] B.T. Ta'anit 7a.

awesome power of the medium may cause harm instead of the good that was sought.

In a Baraita this line of thought is continued. "He who recites a verse of the Song of Songs and treats it as a (secular) air...brings evil upon the world."[9] The Torah must be studied and recited in an appropriate fashion. The consequences of ignoring this teaching can have cosmic dimensions.

In this same passage the Torah is once again personified and engages God in a dialogue. Torah complains that people are not studying her at the appointed time. The dialogue thus underscores the conviction that a proper time and place exist for the study of Torah. "R. Simeon b. Eleazar testified on the authority of R. Simeon b. Haninah: He who reads a verse in season brings good to the world..."[10] The consequences are dependent upon the fulfillment of the proper procedure for the study of Torah.

The power that is released in the study of Torah is illustrated by the story of R. Hisda about whom it is told that the angel of death could not overcome him because he never spent a moment free of reciting and rehearsing his learning. Only when he stopped for a moment after a tree

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[9] B.T. Sanhedrin 101a.

[10] Ibid.

collapsed was the angel of death able to overcome him.[11] Here the prophylactic power of Torah is illustrated. Torah study was able to restrain the angel of death.

R. Banna'ah is reported to have taught that if one studies the Torah for its own sake, that is to say without the expectation of a reward, it becomes for that person an elixir of life. But, if the intention in the study of Torah is impure, the Torah will become like a deadly poison.[12] This is a continuation of the rabbinic efforts to define the proper method of study. One may begin to sense the awe that the rabbis had for the Torah and its power. They were concerned that the power be respected and contained for good.

This theme can also be found in the following passage dealing with the reward for teaching Torah:

> ...He who teaches Torah to his neighbor's son will be privileged to sit in the Heavenly Academy...And he who teaches Torah to the son of an <u>am ha'aretz</u>, even if the Holy One, blessed be He, makes a decree, He annuls it for his sake...[13]

That is to say, the power of Torah is equally accessed through its teaching. The result of teaching Torah is comparable to the result of studying Torah. One may argue that the reward is even greater for the teacher.

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[11] B.T. Moed Qatan 28a.

[12] B.T. Ta'anit 7a.

[13] B.T. Baba Metzia 85a. See also B.T. Haggigah 14b, where an episode concerning the teaching of the "Work of the Chariot" is reported. Here we find both a reward for correct action and a punishment indicating divine displeasure.

Torah study is an action that is rewarded by heaven and certainly this is part of what the texts are attempting to address. But, clearly, on another level, these texts all point to the inherent power that is contained in the Torah. This power in turn represents the opportunity to receive communication from heaven. Often this communication takes place through the interpretation of a scriptural verse.

Examples of this can be found throughout rabbinic literature. But the rabbis were also able thereby to learn things of more immediate and practical concern:

> It is written, "Keep My statutes: through them shall a man live" [Lev. 18:5]. R. Ishmael said: How can one know that if [in a time of persecution] they say to an Israelite in private, "Serve the idol, and you shall not be killed," he should serve the idol and not be killed? Because it says, "A man shall live through them," and it does not say, "a man shall die through them."[14]

Here, through the reading of a verse from Scripture, the rabbis are able to derive practical information concerning actions that may be taken in order to save one's own life; even actions that may otherwise be prohibited elsewhere in Scripture. The communication comes from the study of the text and represents the potential Torah has to continually divulge information from heaven to people.

Scripture as Oracle:

Information was expected to be conveyed through direct

[14] Sifra 86b.

study of the text. But the rabbis also felt that there was another way that communication might be revealed. Verses from Scripture, when perceived as signs, could provide the rabbis with information about the future. According to the rabbis, these oracular properties were not noted just by them. There are even reports that non-Jews were able to perceive the Jewish Scripture as oracular and act according to the information conveyed to them.

There is a report in Tractate Hullin about the various vehicles through which different rabbis recognized signs.[15] In this passage various types of divination are discussed. It is related that Shmuel was able to divine information from a random scriptural verse. How this was done is not explicitly stated. One may imagine that he may have relied upon the first verse that appeared when he began his daily study. It is further reported that R. Johanan was able to divine from the verses he heard being recited by a child as he passed by the schoolhouse. The type of information each of these men was able to understand from the verses is also not explicitly stated. But it is clear that the verse in question was perceived as addressing the contemporary situation (or the immediate situation of the rabbi).

In an earlier report from the Tosefta, the following story is found:

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[15] B.T. Hullin 95b.

> ...And when the ark was stored away, the commandments were stored away. Who stored it away? Josiah the King stored it away. Why did he do so? When he saw written in the Torah, "The Lord will bring you and your king whom you set over you, to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known."[Deuteronomy 28:36][16]

Here the type of information is given but the method of divination is not. Clearly, however, Josiah understood this verse to contain information that motivated his actions regarding the ark and the tablets. The verse was perceived as having an oracular quality.

In a similar case, Nero is said to have been guided by the random verse of Scripture recited by a child. Nero asks a boy what the last verse of Scripture was that he had heard. The boy responds that it was Ezekiel 25:14, which states "I will wreak My vengeance on Edom through My people Israel, and they shall take action against Edom in accordance with My blazing anger; and they shall know My vengence - declares the Lord God." Nero perceives this as a sign and immediately became a proselyte from whom R. Meir descended.[17] Even the non-Jew (it is claimed) was able to perceive the oracular nature of Scripture and act according to the information obtained.

Scripture was able to provide comfort to the rabbis in that they could derive from it a glimpse of what was to be in

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[16] Tosefta Sotah 13:1.

[17] B.T. Gittin 56a.

the future.

> Samuel Yarhina'ah was Rabbi's physician. Now, Rabbi having contracted an eye disease, Samuel offered to bathe it with lotion. But he said: I cannot bear it. Then I will apply an ointment to it. He said: This too I cannot bear. So he placed a phial of chemicals under his pillow, and he was healed. Rabbi was most anxious to ordain him, but the opportunity was lacking. Let it not grieve you, he said, I have seen the Book of Adam in which it is written, "Samuel Yarhina'ah shall be called Sage, but not Rabbi. And Rabbi's healing shall come through him. Rabbi and R. Nathan conclude the Mishnah, R. Ashi and Rabina conclude teaching, and a sign thereof is the verse, 'Until I went to the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end.'"[Psalm 73:17][18]

Here, again, a verse from Scripture is used as a sign to confirm what will be in the future. On one level, this passage serves to reaffirm established authority. But, it clearly underscores the belief that Scripture communicated as sign, and must be interpreted as such.

The rabbis used verses from Scripture to reaffirm the established order of authority. They also used Scripture to reaffirm their own teachings. Prooftexts serve to do more than provide a scriptural basis for rabbinic legal rulings. They also show the revelatory nature of the ruling that is derived from the text. The following example is typical:

> If a man counts out money from his hand into the hand of a woman so as to have the opportunity of gazing at her, even if he can vie in Torah and good deeds with Moses our teacher, he shall not escape the punishment of Gehinnom, as it says, "Hand to hand, he shall not escape from evil." [Proverbs

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[18] B.T. Baba Metzia 85b-86a.

11:21][19]

Scripture is cited here as testimony and as a sign to the truth of a rabbinic teaching; this can be multiplied ad infinitum in the rabbinic literature. These latter day rabbinic rulings are seen to be divinely communicated through the interpretation of the Torah; any midrash halakha is exemplary of this.

The rabbis remain consistent in their use of Scripture. Not only does it confirm their own legal rulings, but it is also able to confirm the advice they gave to one another. The following report shows how Scripture is used by one rabbi to advise another:

> Mar Ukba sent for advice to R. Eleazar saying: Certain men are annoying me, and I am able to get them in trouble with the government. Shall I do so? He traced lines on which he wrote, "I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue, I will keep a curb upon my mouth while the wicked is before me." [Psalm 39:2] He added, although the wicked is before me; I will keep a curb on my mouth. Mar Ukba again sent to him saying: They are worrying me very much, and I cannot stand them. He replied, "Resign yourself to the Lord, and wait patiently for him." [Psalm 37:7] He added, wait for the Lord, and He will cast them down prostrate before you. Go to the House of Study early morning and evening and there will soon be an end of them. R. Eleazar had hardly spoken these words when Geniba [one who was troubling Mar Ukba] was placed in chains.[20]

This is a story that affirms the excellence of R. Eleazar and the value of study. But it also shows again how Scripture can

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[19] B.T. Berakhot 61a.

[20] B.T. Gittin 7a.

communicate information as sign or oracle to the one who is able to properly discern.

Revelation:

The revelatory experience is an integral part of Torah study. It represents the most explicit illustration of the communicative properties of Scripture. Study is a theurgic activity that causes God's presence to dwell among those who are engaged in study.

The act of study compels the shekhinah. In Tractate Berachot the rabbis state that one who goes out of the House of Prayer and enters immediately into the House of Study and engages in Torah merits and receives the presence of shekhinah.[21] Other Tannaitic statements confirm the expectation that study has the power to induce gillui shekhinah:

> ...if two sit together and interchange words of Torah, shekhinah rests between them, as it is said, "They that feared the Lord hearkened and heard." [Malachi 3:16][22]

In these passages the content of the revelation is not disclosed. But the revelatory experience is recorded time and again.

The content of the revelation appears to be the rulings and the teachings that the rabbis are able to derive from the

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[21] B.T. Berakhot 64a. See, also, Moed Qatan 29a.

[22] Avot 3:2.

text. The notion that these are arrived at through experiences of revelation, on one level, certainly serves to validate and support the authority of the rabbinic statements. Nevertheless, one can sense from the passages cited, and others like them, that the rabbis did believe that such a revelation could and would occur.

Since prophecy is dead and God no longer makes the kind of appearances that are recorded in the Bible, the rabbis saw the Torah as the sole remaining major vehicle of divine communication. That is to say, they felt that God had not stopped communicating to the people. Now the revelation unfolds through them as interpreters and teachers of Torah:

> R. Isaac said: The prophets drew from Sinai the inspiration of all their future utterances, for God spoke "with him that stands with us this day" [Deut. 29:15], that is, with those who were already created...(and) the souls which are destined to be created...[in Isaiah 48:16] it says, "From the time that it was, there am I, that is, from the hour when Torah was given, I received this prophecy. Not only to the prophets alone does this apply, but to all sages that are destined to arise in later times..."[23]

This passage recorded in Midrash Tanhuma reaffirms that all was revealed at Sinai, but that revelation continues to unfold through the mediation of the rabbis.

In passages such as the one just mentioned, it is difficult to sort through the levels of meaning. The rabbis must continue to issue new rulings to meet the current needs

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[23] Tanhuma Yitro 11.

of their time and place. But they could not add to what has already been given in the Torah. The notion that anything that they would glean from the Torah had already been told to Moses on Sinai helped to validate their own halakhic activity. Yet, coupled with this is the sense that the rabbis believed they could receive a kind of revelation through their own studies. When they engaged in the study of Torah they were joined by the presence of God and also encountered, in Torah, the revealed mind of God.[24]

The following passage provides an example of the kind of exegesis that derived instruction from verses that do not readily lend themselves to this:

> R. Huna b. Nathan asked R. Ashi: What is the point of the verse, "Kinah and Dimonah and Adadah?" [Joshua 15:22] He replied: [The text] is enumerating towns in the land of Israel. Said the other: Do I not know that the text is enumerating the towns of the Land of Israel? But I want to tell you that R. Gebihah from Agriza learned a lesson from these names: 'Whoever has cause for indignation, kinah, against his neighbor and yet holds his peace, domem, He that abides for all eternity, ade'ad, shall espouse his cause.' Said the other: If that is so, the verse "Ziklag and Madmanah and Sansanah," [Joshua 15:31] should also convey a lesson. He replied: If R. Gebihah from Agriza were here, he would derive a lesson from it. R. Aha from Be Hozae expounded: 'If a man has just cause of complaint against his neighbor for taking away his livelihood, za'akat legima, and yet holds his peace, domem, He that abides in the bush, shokni sneh, will espouse his cause.'[25]

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[24] See Megillah 29a where such experiences are recorded about the Amoraim and specifically about R. Sheshet.

[25] B.T. Gittin 7a.

This example provides a glimpse of the extent to which the rabbis went to derive meaning from a text that on its surface seems to be a simple listing of place names. They endorsed this activity because of their understanding of the communicative nature of the text and their belief that each foray into the text was a revelatory experience capable of yielding additional new information.

The demands of their time and place often went beyond the legal code established in the Torah. But to add to the law was strictly forbidden. In the Sifrei to Deuteronomy, it is stated, "God's word is ever new; men run to read it."[26] This meant that, though the Torah may never change, God's word is always new. One could continue to find new things in the text to meet the new demands of the time and place. This was the revelatory experience, the communication from God.

That the Torah was the link between heaven and earth was axiomatic:

> When God created the world, He decreed that "The heavens are the heavens of the Lord and the earth is for men."[Psalm 115:16] But when He intended to give the Torah, He repealed the former decree and said, 'The lower shall ascend to the upper and the upper shall descend to the lower and I will make a beginning,' as it is said, "And the Lord came down upon Mt. Sinai and said to Moses, 'Come up to the Lord.'"[Exodus 19:20][27]

The link is maintained through the revelatory experience that

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[26] Sifrei Deuteronomy, Ve'etkhanan 33:6.

[27] Exodus Rabbah, Va'era 12:3.

occurs and the new information that is decoded whenever the Torah is studied. "Whoever busies himself with Torah and fulfills it, is accounted as though he had received it on Sinai."[28] These passages are consistent with the levels of meaning previously discussed. The rabbis felt constrained. They needed to continue to learn from the Torah and have their statements understood as authoritative. This was accomplished by establishing the Torah as the ongoing link between heaven and earth and placing themselves in the role of mediating this connection through their expertise in textual exegesis. Running through all of these statements, however, is the belief that it was truly possible to communicate with God through the medium of Torah.

Prophecy:

The key to understanding the Torah as a vehicle of divine communication is to understand how the rabbis saw themselves. They believed that they possessed certain powers that came with their learning. Their expertise in textual exegesis was the secret to their power, the ability to communicate with God.

In both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, the rabbis maintain that prophecy had been given to the Sages

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[28] Tanhuma Re'eh 1.

after it was withheld from the prophets.[29] Though there are statements made expressing the belief that there has been a steady decline in ability since Sinai, it is clear from the activities of the Tannaim and the Amoraim that they still felt that the skills possessed by their predecessors were passed on to them (at some level).

The type of prophecy that they expected to receive through the study and interpretation of Torah, however, was not on the order of that which is described in Scripture:

> R. Johanan said: If at the moment of rising a text occurs to one, this is a minor kind of prophecy. Five things are a sixtieth part of something else, namely, fire, honey, Sabbath, sleep and a dream. Fire is one sixtieth part of Gehinnom. Honey is one sixtieth part of manna. Sabbath is one sixtieth part of the world to come. Sleep is one sixtieth of death. A dream is one sixtieth part of prophecy.[30]

Scripture itself was felt to be prophetic in that it contained information about the future. In a response to the Mishnah's statements concerning the differences in ketubah prices, the following is reported:

> Why [is a widow called] almanah? R. Hana of Bagdad said: because of the maneh. But what can be said with regard to a widow from the betrothal? Because that one is called almanah this one is also called almanah. What can be said with regard to the almanah that is written in the Bible? [The woman] for whom the rabbis will in future institute [the ketubah of] a maneh. But does the Bible speak of a thing which will be in the future? Yes, for it

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[29] B.T. Baba Batra 12a and T.P. Avodah Zarah 2:8.

[30] B.T. Berakhot 57b. See, also, Berakhot 55b where this is repeated.

> is written, "And the name of the third river is Hiddekel, that is it which goes towards the east of Ashur." [Genesis 2:14] And R. Joseph learned: Ashur, that is Seleucia. But was it already then in existence? But [it is mentioned] because it will exist in the future. Here also almanah is mentioned in the Bible because it [the ketubah of a maneh] will exist in the future.[31]

The prophetic nature of the Bible is recognized by those who expect to be the recipients of prophecy. The rabbis saw this as another aspect of the communicative property of the Torah. This interpretation of Scripture allowed the rabbis to further authenticate their own decisions. It also served to reaffirm their faith that God would continue to communicate through the vehicle of the Torah.

Summary:

For the rabbis, the Torah was a living document. The stress that they placed upon its study reveals their fundamental belief that Torah provided an ongoing link between heaven and earth. This link afforded the rabbis the opportunity to both receive and transmit communication. Through their study and manipulation of the Torah, the rabbis could even exert influence over heaven. The Torah, and its study, had these theurgic properties.

Torah as a vehicle of communication is similar to the vehicles of signs and omens with respect to the different forms it can take and, also, in that both function as

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[31] B.T. Ketubot 10b.

communication through the act of interpretation. The communication can be revelatory through generating a new piece of halakha. The communication can also be the experience of gillui shekhinah without any new information. The function of Torah can also be oracular or prophetic. Similar, too, here is the acknowledgement of the rabbi's expertise. Though all may be able to study the Torah, only a few can really discern the mysteries, the hidden knowledge it contains. The various rabbinic hermeneutical rules help to enhance the rabbis' position, for they are the ones who set up these guidelines.

This form of communication is neither direct nor immediately apprehensible to the receiver. It must be interpreted by an expert. This is very different from the verbal forms of communication discussed in earlier chapters where the nature of the message was immediately understandable and direct.

CONCLUSION

If the rabbis were to be taken at their word, we would have to believe that after the destruction of the Temple, communication between God and God's people ceased. Previous vehicles of communication were no longer available to them. However, in reality, the rabbinic position was radically different from what they at times publicly declared. For not only did the rabbis acknowledge the existence of alternative vehicles, but this network of communication which they now employed was far more extensive than what was reported in the biblical literature. Where one might expect silence, we find a virtual cacophony of communication.

Though the rabbis declared that prophecy had ended, they now received prophetic information through the vehicles of the Bat Qol and Elijah. The oracular qualities of Scripture, signs and omens further enhanced the rabbis' knowledge of the workings of heaven and what the future might hold in store for them and their people. For above all, the people still needed to know that they were living their lives in accordance with God's will and, if not, what they could do to bring themselves back into line.

Though there were attempts made to ground these vehicles in the past, in large measure they represented something new. This activity reflects the compelling need, felt by the rabbis, to reconstruct the boundaries of their religion after the catastrophic destruction of the second Temple. The

structure, which until that point had been physically represented by the Temple and the priestly cult, had suddenly disappeared. Without the structure there would only be chaos left to fill the void.

The framework within which the people could live their lives had to be rebuilt. One of the essential components of this effort was the reestablishment of a link between heaven and earth. The transmitter that had been the Temple now had to be replaced in order to communicate with Heaven.

It is useful to look at a social work paradigm to better understand the rabbinic endeavor. The model used by psychologists in their treatment of adolescents is founded on the premise that human beings need to know that there are limits to which they must conform and that these limits will be enforced consistently in their lives. Human beings will live within this structure understanding that they are free to act within it as they like in accordance with the rules, the boundaries of the structure, and with the understanding that they may not hurt anyone else. Any observer of adolescent behavior will find that once the structure is defined, the adolescent will test out the limits. When the limits are enforced consistently, the adolescent will learn to trust the structure and begin to accept it with a decreasing amount of testing. Once adolescents learn that for every action there is a consequence, good or bad, they will settle comfortably into their environment.

People never fully outgrow their adolescent tendencies, so that what has been stated above will be found to hold equally for human beings of any age. The rabbis of old, as good caretakers and professional students of human behavior, realized that they must provide themselves and their people with a structure that they could trust and which would withstand the inevitable test of a human being's "adolescent" qualities.

The boundaries must be reasonable and logical, that is to say, they must be acceptable based upon their inherent logic as well as their grounding in the common history of the people. The rabbis, too, needed assurance that they were moving in the right direction and that their leadership was in line with the will of Heaven. This was the task with which the rabbis busied themselves in their quest to serve God and uphold the Torah and in light of which they sought out divine communication.

Each of the vehicles studied in this work reflects the principles stated above. The Bat Qol as an echo of the divine voice or as God's agent reaffirms the presence of God in the world. In its continuous proclamation daily, the Bat Qol reassures the people that God still cares deeply for them. Like Elijah in his visits with the rabbis, the Bat Qol reveals divine favor and displeasure with human actions. Both provide one aspect of the structure through verbal communication with the rabbis and the people.

The incantation allowed the rabbis to help further develop and define the structure. The theurgic power of words gave the rabbis creative abilities which reaffirmed their own power and enhanced their stature as teachers and setters of limits. The power that God displayed through them authenticated their leadership. Their ability to interpret signs and omens as well as their legal expertise allowed them to further delimit the behavior of the people. And when the rabbis studied together they were actually able to compel the shekhinah to dwell on earth.

Thus, one may conclude that the vehicles here described function in three specific ways. They authenticate the power and leadership of the rabbinic class. This, in turn, allowed for the definition of a religious structure within which the people could live out their lives harmoniously. These two functions allowed for the third, the expression of God's enduring love for the people and continued involvement in their lives.

With the Sinaitic revelation as their guide the rabbis acknowledged the centrality of Scripture with respect to each of the vehicles of communication. The Bat Qol and Elijah each use verses from Scripture when they communicate with the rabbis and the people. The "new" revelation of information was firmly grounded in the original revelation experienced by Moses and the children of Israel.

The rabbis knew that the power of the words of Torah

could be manipulated and they thus incorporated them into their incantations. They also understood that through proper interpretation they could wrest information from the text beyond its simple meaning. This should not be surprising, for the rabbis lived a life of Torah and Torah study. It would not be possible for them to maintain contact with Heaven through any other means. The power of Torah was also accepted by the people and therefore authentic in their eyes.

The tight control the rabbis exerted over the various modes of divine communication reflects the rabbinic expectation of divine favor and also reflects their zealous guarding of their own status. Not only did they feel the need to establish limits for appropriate and inappropriate behavior, but they expected that by virtue of their merit they would receive special favor in the form of communication.

The rabbis expected that this communication would have both practical and protective value. Concretely, Elijah served as a guardian angel and the information from signs and Scripture helped the rabbis to navigate successfully the dangers inherent in the world. Favor was also bestowed upon the rabbis when their legal rulings were supported (protected) by heaven.

The people once again had a religious structure within which they knew they could live in harmony with God and one another. This structure had divine sanction, as did their religious leadership. The rabbis advertised, argued, cajoled

and persuaded the people to accept this structure through demonstrating their right to authority. The different vehicles of divine communication attested to these truths. Ultimately, God's presence was affirmed unconditionally through the continued display of reward and punishment, midah k'neged midah. Without this display, the limits of the religious structure would be devoid of meaning and chaos would result. For just as adolescents need to be shown the cause-and-effect relationship of their actions through consistent consequences so, too, did the rabbis and the people.

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