Honi's Circles and Serah's Memories:
Narrative Development and the Jewish Story

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This thesis, in seven chapters, aims to explore the re-interpretation of two Talmudic legends. The work primarily asks how poets such as Rahel and Dan Pagis or novelists such as Moshe Shamir re-imagine the classic *aggadic* characters of Honi the Circlemaker and Serah Bat Asher. By focusing on these two Talmudic figures and the ways in which authors incorporate their tale over time, another goal is to examine how Jewish narrative itself operates. How, for instance, do emphases change as stories are passed from one generation to the next? The thesis consists of translations of portions of *Taanit* and *Sotah* from the Babylonian Talmud as well as extensive analysis of these texts. What follows is a study of the ways in which other writers, predominantly Zionist, re-envision these same texts. The final portion of the thesis is an original short story that focuses on a modern Honi and Serah and adds to the on-going dialogue and tradition of re-interpretation. The work makes extensive use of traditional commentaries, literary criticism, Zionist poetry, and contemporary periodicals.

for my teachers

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I. Introduction

Fifteen months ago I attended a lecture by a panel of rabbis at the JCC in Manhattan. One of the rabbis spoke of a peculiar biblical figure, someone by the name of Serah Bat Asher, who supposedly lived long enough to experience the trek both down to and out of Egypt. There are only two references to this Serah in the Torah, the rabbi said, yet because she was mentioned at all the rabbis were forced to account for her. Therefore, the speaker explained, over the centuries rabbis and other teachers paired this ageless Serah Bat Asher with an astounding ability to remember and a strong penchant for storytelling. In time literature about Serah's capacities revolved almost exclusively around themes of Jewish history and communal memory. She became the quintessential grandmother, forever relaying stories about previous generations.

I have long been attracted to stories. I can remember listening to my grandfather talk about receiving a pair of red pants for his seventh birthday. He was so proud of those pants that he insisted he wear them to school for days. Eventually I realized that my grandfather's tale changed with every telling, partially due to the different elements of it that he shared, partially due to what I chose to hear. Over the years the plot changed, new dialogue entered the story, the setting changed from school to the beach to the downtown section of Frankfurt, where he and

his three siblings were raised. Now, years later, all that exists is a story no one can fully remember, set in an apartment that no longer exists. When I begin to tell it to my children, and them to theirs, I suppose it will be more about the telling than the red pants or the birthday or even Germany in 1914. Maybe only the most integral elements of the narrative will survive: My grandfather told me stories and I listened eagerly in order to learn more about him and my roots.

Often only the most crucial components of stories endure. The same occurs with traditional Jewish literature. Serah Bat Asher, whose tale essentially begins in Genesis 46, changes as time passes and new authors invoke her name. What appears in the Torah, therefore, is not what appears in the Mishnah and what appears in the Mishnah is not what appears in the Gemara and on it goes, for centuries, in different languages and versions and literary forms. Each of these literatures indeed decides which elements of the story are most essential, what specifically Serah might say to her audience now, here. So it is with the likes of Honi HaMaggel, Honi the Circlemaker. Like Serah, Honi is a charismatic figure, presumably endowed with unique capabilities, even superhuman facilities. Like Serah's, Honi's story is also modified and transformed from the Talmud forward, to the Middle Ages, early Zionist movements, and modernity. This thesis aims to track those transformations. It seeks to analyze the narrative development of this

curious woman of memory and this circle drawer and bring all implications to the fore.

In broader terms the goal of the thesis is to examine story insofar as Judaism is wrapped in the very notion of story. Its primary documents, including the Torah and Talmud, contain an abundance of often-imaginative narratives. Some of the most sacred rituals, from Shabbat mornings to Purim and Passover, entail a public relaying of, listening to, and reinterpretation of consecrated stories. This is more than the mere importance of books. The written and the spoken word, the word printed in volumes and the word passed from mouths to ears, both contribute to a broader sacred text. By listening to and passing on the stories within this text, we actually become part of them, inside characters actively creating and re-creating the Jewish story. So, just as God created with the word, creation continues with us, in our novels, in our poems, in our songs, teachings, and *midrashim* that forever connect past and present, present and future.

II. Honi HaMaggel of the Babylonian Talmud

Translation of selections from Taanit 19a and 23a:

(Mishnah of 18b-19a) For these calamities do they sound the alarm in all places: Blight, mildew, locusts, beasts and the sword...For these calamities do they sound the alarm even on the Sabbath: A city surrounded by a non-Jewish army, a ship tossing at sea...if there is plague, or if there is trouble that may come to the community, except for the case of excessive rainfall. It once happened that the people said to Honi the Circlemaker: 'Pray that rains will fall!' He said to them: 'Go and bring in the ovens for the Passover sacrifice so that they will not dissolve.' Honi prayed, but rain did not fall. So what did Honi do? He drew a circle around himself and he stood within it. Then he said: 'Master of the Universe, Your children turned their faces to me since I am as if a member of Your household. I swear on Your great Name that I will not move from here until you show mercy upon Your children.' Rain began to fall in drops. He said: 'I did not ask for this, but for the type of rain that fills pits, ditches, and caves!' The rain began to come down more heavily. 'I did not ask for this either, but for rain of benevolence, blessing, and generosity.' The rain then fell in its normal way until all of Israel went out of lower Jerusalem and up to the Temple Mount due to the excessive rain. The people came to Honi and said: 'Just as you prayed for this to come, now pray for it to cease!' He said: 'Go out and see if the Stone of Claimants is washed away.' Simon Ben Shetah sent the following message to Honi: 'If you were not Honi I would decree a ban on you, yet what am I to do to you? You act like a spoiled child before God and He does your will for you, just as a son who acts like a spoiled child before his father and the father still does his will for him. For you is the verse written: Your father and mother will be glad and she who bore you will rejoice."[1]

(Gemara of 23a) The Rabbis taught that once most of the month of אדר passed and rain had still not fallen. Therefore they sent for Honi the Circlemaker and told him: 'Pray that rain may fall.' Honi prayed, but no rain fell. He thus drew a circle and stood within it such as Habbakuk the Prophet had once done. As it is said in the Book of Habbakuk: 'I will stand upon my watch and set myself upon the tower.'[2] Honi said before Him: 'Master of the Universe, Your children have turned their faces to me since I am as if a member of Your household. I swear by Your great

[1] Proverbs 23:24-25
[2] Habbakuk 2:1

name I will not move from here until You show mercy upon Your children.' Rain then began to fall in drops. Honi's students said to him: 'We have seen you, teacher, let us not die, yet it seems that the rain falls only to free you of your oath.' He said: 'I did not ask for this, but for the type of rain that fills pits, ditches, and caves.' They fell more heavily until each drop was large enough to fill the mouth of a barrel. The sages estimated that no drop was less than a לוג.

His students said to him: 'We have seen you, teacher, let us not die, yet it seems that the rain falls only to destroy the world.' Honi said before Him: 'I did not ask for this, but rather rain of benevolence, blessing, and generosity.' They fell in their normal way until the people went up to the Temple Mount because of it. They said to him: 'Teacher, just as you prayed for it to fall, now pray that it will cease.' Honi responded to them: 'Thus have I received the tradition that we do not pray on account of too much good. Nonetheless bring me a bullock for the sake of a confessional prayer.' They brought him a bullock. He laid his hands on it and said before Him: 'Master of the Universe your people Israel which You brought out of Egypt can bear neither too much good nor too much punishment. You became angry with them. They are unable to stand it. You bestowed good. They are unable to stand it. May it be Your will that the rain ceases and there be relief in the world.' At once the wind blew, the clouds dispersed, the sun shone, the people went out to the field and brought back truffles and mushrooms.

Shimon Ben Shetah sent the following message to Honi: 'If you were not Honi I would decree a ban on you, for if the years were like the years of Elijah, when the keys of rain were in his hand, would you have not desecrated the name of heaven? Yet what am I to do to you? You act as a spoiled child before God and He does your will nonetheless, like a son who acts like a spoiled child with his father and the father does his will. He says to him: Father, take me to wash in hot water, rinse me in cold water, give me nuts, almonds, peaches, and pomegranates and he gives each of these things. About you is the following verse: Your father and mother shall be glad and she who bore you will rejoice.'[3]

Our rabbis taught the following: What did the men in the Chamber of Hewn Stone send to Honi the Circlemaker? 'You shall decree a thing and it shall be established for you and the light shall shine on your ways.'[4] 'You shall decree a thing.' You decreed it from below and the Holy One,

[3] Proverbs 23:25
[4] Job 22:28-30

blessed be He, fulfills it from above. 'And the light shall shine upon your ways.' A generation in darkness was illuminated by your prayer. 'And he will save him with lowered eyes.' A generation lowered by its sins you saved with your prayer.' 'He will deliver one who is not innocent.' A generation lacking innocence you delivered with your prayer. 'And he will be delivered by the pureness of your hand.' You delivered him with your pure deeds.

Rabbi Yochanan stated: 'Over all the days of this righteous man he was distressed by the following verse: A song of ascent: When the Lord brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like men in a dream.'[5] He asked: 'Is there anyone who sleeps seventy years in a dream?' One day he went along on the road and saw a man planting a carob tree. He said to him: 'In how long will this tree bear fruit?' The man answered: 'Seventy years.' The other said: 'Is it obvious that you will live seventy years?' He said: 'I found a world of carob trees. Just as my father planted for me, I plant for my sons.' He then sat down to eat bread and he fell asleep. A cave formed over him and he remained hidden. He slept for seventy years. When he awoke he saw a man out picking. Honi said to the man: 'Are you the one who planted it?' The man said to Honi: 'I am the grandson.' 'Conclude from this that I slept seventy years.' He saw then that his donkey had given birth to many descendants. Honi went to his old house and asked if his son was still alive. They told him that only the grandson. Honi said: 'I am Honi the Circlemaker.' They did not believe him however. He went to the House of Study and heard the rabbi saying: 'Our decisions are as clear as in the days of Honi who, when he entered, resolved any difficulty that the rabbis had.' Honi said: 'I am he,' yet they did not believe it and they did not respect him as he was due. He was distressed, sought compassion, and died.

[5] Psalm 126:1

Judah Goldin relates the story of King Antiochus IV who, in 168 B.C.E., undertook a second expedition against Egypt with every expectation of success. The Romans interfered, however, and ordered Antiochus to abandon the scheme at once. It was specifically Popilius who accosted the King and, "with a stick cut from a vine...drew a circle around Antiochus and told him he must remain inside the circle."[6] Goldin reports that the King, great Antiochus, was "astonished at the authoritative proceeding," but in time agreed to all that the Roman legion demanded.[7] The circle effectively circumscribed Antiochus. Though it stood as a makeshift, dusty work of artistry, it was an apt metaphor for Antiochus' new set of limitations and distinctiveness. Even if he was temporarily restricted, however, the story itself spread. It held such appeal due to its outrageous series of events that it soon traveled across the geographic and literary landscape of Greek and Roman antiquity. Its basic elements of irreverence and unpredictability, its "sensational example of peremptoriness," became the foundation for similar sounding tales relayed over the course of centuries, and not only within Greek and Roman contexts.[8]

Honi the Circlemaker, the Talmudic drawer of circles, also surrounds himself with a circle before placing demands upon a higher being, not a king, but the God of the people of Israel. In his story Honi,

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[6] Goldin 333
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

not altogether unlike Moses or Abraham, acts as agent and petitions on behalf of his community. Abraham, in Genesis 18, attempts to make a case for the scant innocents dwelling in Sodom, so too with Moses, who cries unto God to heal his sister.[9] Honi's appeal is for God to bring rainfall to the parched fields of his village. What Abraham, Moses, and Honi share, on a most fundamental level, is a willingness and ability to extend oneself and intercede with God. With these figures, readers encounter a trio of images in which a would-be protagonist reaches beyond himself, to grander powers, for the sake of another. *Midrashim*, rabbinic explication tales, attach to the verses pertaining to Moses' attempts to aid his sister the idea that "Moses drew a small circle on her behalf and stood within it, and beseeched mercy on her behalf, saying, 'I shall not stir from here until Miriam my sister is healed.'"[10] It is this relentlessness that elicits a response from God in the case of both Moses and, later, Honi. Just as Miriam's death is at least provisionally evaded, so too will God respond to Honi's request and, while it may be presumptuous to compare a rare appearing *aggadic* character to the likes of the Israelite leader, it cannot be denied that one of the reasons Honi's name survived lies not only in the miraculous nature of the Talmudic legend, but in his undertakings of apparent defiance and exception as well.

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[9] Genesis 18:22-33 and Numbers 12:13
[10] Goldin 332

In many ways the very existence of a character such as Honi underscores the centrality of rain in pre-modern eras. Religious thinking aside, in agricultural arenas the necessity of rain cannot be underestimated. Drought often meant bankruptcy or starvation or, in some cases, both. Rebbe Tanhum Bar Hiyya noted in a *midrash* concerning the opening of Psalm 117: "The falling of the rain is greater than the giving of the Torah, for the giving of the Torah is a joy only to Israel, while the falling of the rain brings rejoicing for all the world, including the cattle and the wild beasts and the birds."[11] God is referred to as "the One who brings on the rain" in numerous liturgical texts, including the second portion of the principal *Amidah* prayers. Ancient Jewish communities, quite simply, interpreted rain as blessing. It represented God providing a rare indicator that He had not forgotten them, that displays of religiosity would not be overlooked, but rewarded and rewarded in potential abundance. Conversely, then, residents of early Babylonia and the Land of Israel believed that absence of rainfall signified God's anger with them due to a lack of piety, a lack of penitence, or outright insolence. In the Bavli, the Talmud of Babylonia, readers learn that "rain is withheld only on account of neglect of Torah."[12] Drought thus became reason for drastic measure indeed, such as lengthy prayer sessions and fasting, an idea which provides backdrop for the first tale in which Honi appears.

[11] Midrash Tehillim on Psalm 117:1
[12] Taanit 7b

Taanit 18b discusses the relationship between fasting and rainfall. The Mishnah begins by referring to a sequence of fasts that commence on the seventeenth day of *Heshvan* if drought continues. These fasts, three in number, only the pious of the community observe in that the situation is not dire enough to ordain a wider dictum. If rain still did not come by the beginning of *Kislev*, the month following *Heshvan*, the pious called upon the general populous to commence their fast as well.[13] These fasts, if proved futile, were followed by another three communal fasts and, ultimately, another seven, each characterized by increased severity[14]. Shops are locked. Betrothals and marriages cease. Pleasant greetings between man and his fellow, bathing, anointing, and all sexual relations likewise come to an end in order for the beleaguered community to devote full spiritual energy to the return of rain.[15]

Later in 18b readers discover that this series of procedures does not apply if the plants have changed, a seasonal reference in a passage very much rooted in the would-be rainy season of the portion of the world at hand. So if the crops, late into autumn, appear peculiar, unhealthy, rather than follow the prescribed sequence of fasting, various segments are passed over. Instead the people turn to the final component of the system, the sounding of the *shofar*, their communal alarm. The *stammim*, the Talmudic editors of the fifth and sixth century,

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[13] Taanit 10a
[14] Taanit 7b
[15] Taanit 12b

use this proclamation as reason to present additional instances in which the alarm is sounded. Therefore the Mishnah continues as follows, shifting focus from fasting to alarms: When there is a period of dryness lasting forty days, the *shofar* is sounded to declare a drought. If rain falls upon the plants, but not the trees or vice versa, the alarm is sounded. If the rain falls upon the plants and the trees, but not the pits, ditches, or caves, the alarm is sounded.[16] Passages such as this one appear like an encyclopedia of rabbinic conversation, a compendium of solutions to potential tribulations communities may have likely encountered. The alarm, like the fasting, represents human attempts to alter presumably divine proceedings. Both stand as among the most extreme measures a Jewish community could take at the time, equivalent to declaring a state of emergency.

The Mishnah continues with not only rain-related instances in which leaders sound the alarm, but additional circumstances befitting alarm. So, if there is a city affected by plague that city fasts and sounds the alarm while surrounding cities only fast. What comes next is discussion concerning what constitutes plague. Here is another instance of the text beginning in focused ways, as it had likewise done with fasting, before branching to wider arenas. Some of the afflictions that fill the category of plague, then, are mildew, locusts, and wild beasts, or, put otherwise, natural forces with the potential to strike humanity in

[16] Adapted from Taanit 18b

exceedingly threatening of ways. Not unlike rain in either excess or scarcity, these elements carry the power to damage one's crops, one's home, and thereby one's livelihood. These forces today, but in rabbinic age all the more so, easily overwhelm even the most ardent human attempts at defense. The final remaining option is the sounding of the alarm, a very human expression in times of inhuman displays of force. The sounding of the alarm again corresponds to a state of alarm in which outright disaster seems imminent.

The next list that appears, still within the Mishnah, will eventually introduce readers to Honi the Circlemaker. It relays the occasions on which sounding the alarm even on Shabbat, the day typically reserved for conscious cessation of work, becomes permissible. Of the various ideas mentioned thus far, only the following verses are shared by the Babylonian Talmud and the Palestinian Talmud. Whereas the Yerushalmi is in various ways far more detailed with regards to its discussion plague, for example, the two texts agree that for "a city surrounded...and for a ship tossing at sea," the alarm is sounded, even on the Sabbath.[17] In both documents Rabbi Yose qualifies this by noting that use of the alarm in such instances is for the sake of help, not mere crying out, לעזרה ולא לצעקה. This is not supplication to God on the Sabbath, therefore, but a more utilitarian practice. The *shofar*, which contemporary Jewish communities associate with high liturgical

[17] BT Taanit 19a and PT Taanit 3:8

procedures, is here represented as an example of the pre-modern propensity to deny boundaries between secular and religious. Shimon the Tamanite argues that this act of sounding the *shofar* applies to plague as well, yet the sages, the majority conglomerate of rabbinic thought, do not agree with such an assertion.

The text continues, providing segues to the *aggadic* material that will at last introduce Honi by declaring: "For any trouble not to come to the community the alarm is sounded except for excessive rains."[18] The very notion of excessive rainfall proves problematic for the rabbis as they and their followers consider rain a blessing, nothing short of a stroke of grace from God, and thus no reason for alarm. (In this vein, the *Shulchan Aruch*, a later text, comments: "Fasts are not proclaimed in the Land of Israel in times of excessive rainfall, except in places where there is concern that the water will cause buildings to collapse.")[19] While water held a primary role within discussion to this point, from famines to surrounding rivers to sinking ships, with Honi the Circlemaker, *Taanit* attaches these broader concepts to a lone individual. Honi HaMaggel attempts to link the grand and the diminutive, the Eternal and the finite, not to mention the unachievable and transcendence itself. Following extensive lists and a compendium of laws pertaining to plague and drought, the Bavli offers the story of one man who attempted to stand in the way of such forces and, in effect, alter divine proceedings.

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[18] Taanit 19a
[19] Shulchan Aruch, Orah Hayyim, 576:11

Hermann Strack suggests that the Honi tale is absolutely integral to the tractate. In his book, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, Strack's summary of *Taanit* appears as follows:

> Taanith or in the plural Taaniyyoth 'Fasting.' Four chapters: 1. From what time on rain is made mention of, when one commences, in the absence of rain, to pray for it and when to fast and in what manner public mourning is ultimately manifested. 2. Order of the seven days' fasts and the prayers appertaining thereto. On which of these days even the officiating priests do fast. On which days it is not permissible to appoint fasts. 3. The events for which otherwise fasting and blowing an alarm is prescribed. Honi, who drew circles and was answered as often as he prayed for rain. At what time, when rain is forthcoming, the fasting is cut short. 4. The institution of the body of delegates present at the Temple sacrifices and consisting of priests, Levites and Israelites; how they fasted and read portions of the Scriptures. The seventeenth day of Tammuz, the ninth of Ab. How the fifteenth of Ab was kept.[20]

Honi is a crucial component of the tractate and thus worth mentioning even in a short summary. It is not merely the fact that Honi's story occupies considerable space in the tractate (it is almost an epic by the

[20] Strack 41

Talmud's standards). It is a prominent component of the tractate because of what his story stands for, the way that story changes, and the various messages it conveys for readers at the time as well as now. With its inclusion the editors attempt to bring a human voice to the lengthy legalistic (or quasi-legalistic) discussions preceding it.

As the story goes. during a period of drought the people come to Honi HaMaggel and beseech him to pray on their behalf so that rain will fall. Who is this curious Honi HaMaggel? Presumably community leaders already undertook the necessary series of fasts, which culminate with the sounding of an alarm, the *shofar*. Bereft of alternatives, their lands drying further, it is understandable that the people resort to less-than-conventional methods. In approaching Honi, they seek out alternative solutions to their on-going dilemma.

Responding to the pleas of his neighbors, Honi instructs them to bring inside all ovens for the Paschal sacrifices. This way the ovens will not dissolve in the deluge of rain that will surely come following his supplications. This short episode is an early indication of Honi's boastful, even egomaniacal methods. That he instructs the people this way and that already paints him as a pretentious individual, bandying about whatever authority he is granted, positive the Almighty will fulfill his wishes.

When readers hear these instructions they observe not only Honi's nature, but the two-fold nature of rain. Simultaneously there are

intimations of potential devastation brought on by its paucity and potential destruction brought on by its abundance. In our own time, one need only recall televised images of drought in Colorado, Arizona, and southern California with the unthinkable flooding that ravaged Florida. One led to the burning of countless trees. The other led to the drenching of countless homes. (The High Holiday prayer book likewise captures this dichotomy when, in the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, it asks: "Who by fire? Who by drowning?")[21] It appears as if Honi stands to move his community from desiccation to hydration and the narrative apparently buttresses his position of apparent clout. That is, others characters in the narrative, God included, do not yet rebuke him whatsoever, but simply allow him to proceed.

The suspense builds as Honi sets out to pray on behalf of his community. The voices of the many become the voice of one with the single term, התפלל, "he prayed."[22] It is not the group beseeching the Almighty, but a שליח ציבור in every sense, a messenger of the people, for the people. Honi's prayers, at least those voiced, prove unsuccessful, however. At first no rains fall. The text editors thus ask, as if addressing the enthralled audience directly, what Honi did in response to this apparent lack of response or, perhaps, straight rejection. They report that he proceeded to draw a circle around himself and thus receive the enduring moniker, Honi the Circlemaker. Rav Tzemah Goan argues,

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[21] *Gates of Repentance* 313
[22] Taanit 19a

however, that the name can be attributed not to the direct act of circle drawing, but to Honi's native town, Megalo, which contains the same Hebrew root word. Others claim that the name may stem from the idea that Honi's occupation consisted of plastering local roofs with a roller (מעגילה), which also stems from the same Hebrew root word. With regards to the very act of circle drawing, Green notes: "Circles were solar symbols in Hellenistic magic, especially in magical rites practiced by members of the mystery cults."[23] In this vein Joshua Tractenberg adds:

> The invocation of demons is a dangerous business, and the magician must take steps to protect himself in the event that his spirit adjutants get out of hand. What simpler or more obvious device than to exclude them from his immediate environment? By the magic act (of enclosing oneself in a circle) the ground surrounding the magician became a private, forbidden precinct.[24]

Green and Trachtenberg's arguments already clarify why the rabbis and certainly the God to which the rabbis prayed, did not look favorably upon Honi's early supplications and, more specifically, the avenues of supplication he traveled. The circle drawing, insofar as it brings to mind the occult and Hellenism, stands in clear opposition to Judaic practice and culture. This comes after Honi's first display of hubris, when he

[23] Green 634
[24] Green 635

asked for everyone to remove the Paschal ovens. Both that request and this circle drawing contradict sanctioned rabbinic practices. In abandoning conventional Jewish rites and behaving in the manner of a Hellenistic miracle worker, he is also detaching himself from the Jewish people. As *Pirke Avot* teaches: "Do not separate thyself from the community."[25] Without moving from his circle he manages to trespass in all of these areas of wrongdoing concurrently.

When inside his circle Honi declares the following: "Master of the Universe! Your children turned their faces to me as if I am a member of Your household. I swear upon Your great name that I will not move from here until You take pity on Your children."[26] The short speech casts him in the role of dignitary or intercessor before God. In these terms one wonders if he is not unlike an Isaiah or a Jeremiah. With Honi's tale, however, contrasting most biblical accounts of prophecy, the protagonist is elected by the people, not the Eternal.[27] With the assistance of his neighbors he effectively invents his own prophecy and then proceeds to put great personal stock in the invention.

When drops begin to fall from the heavens, Honi responds, to none other than God, that these are not the types of drops he desires, but drops that will fill pits, ditches, and caves. While the prophet may conventionally direct his wrath toward the people in defense of God, Honi

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[25] *Pirke Avot* 2:4
[26] Taanit 19a
[27] Though an exception to this may be the story of Devorah. See Judges 4:4-6, for instance.

directs his rage to God in defense of the people. Moreover, he does so without any recognition of his own trespassing in Divine territories. He is thus quite unlike Isaiah or Jeremiah, or even Amos, who cried:

> Hear this word, O people of Israel, that the Eternal has spoken concerning you, concerning the whole family that I brought up from the land of Egypt. You alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth. That is why I call you to account for all your iniquities...when I punish Israel for its transgressions, I will wreak judgment on the altar of Bethel, and the horns of the altar shall be cut off and shall fall to the ground.[28]

Honi's energies, however, are not directed toward "the people of Israel," not toward those potentially deserving drought, but to the presumed creator of this drought. What is more, he does so in a most unapologetic manner. In this sense the circle surrounding him is fraught with not only cultic implications, but militant ones as well. Without remorse or anything akin to veneration, Honi declares battle with God, challenging God with his words.

When the rains fall more heavily, far heavier than Honi requested, he again admonishes the Divine. Once more he claims that these are not the types of drops he desires. These rains are too excessive, damaging

[28] Amos 3:1-2,13-14

the land, destructing rather than constructing. Honi desires in their stead rains of גשמי רצון ברכה ונדבה, rains of benevolence, blessing, and generosity. Subsequent rains fall in a more manageable manner and continue to do so until even the steadiness turns excessive and the people of lower Jerusalem must flock to the Temple Mount for safety. The Temple thus becomes a sanctuary in the most literal sense. As with the *shofar* earlier, here too religious/secular distinctions are less clear. What Honi does not realize, still in his circle of dissatisfaction, is that God responds to each of his requests, but responds in a manner meant to teach Honi he cannot affect Divine proceedings. In fact, regardless of what Honi asks for, he receives the opposite, though he still does not realize it.

The people cry out again, not to God, but to Honi, beseeching him to pray for the cessation of rain. He in turn instructs them to examine whether the אבן הטוענין is covered. Rashi explains that this אבן הטוענין was an object located in ancient Jerusalem. It was a large stone, the Stone of Strayers or Claimants perhaps, which served as a sort of pre-modern lost and found. *Bava Metzia* 28b likewise refers to it though in this case the Hebrew spelling is somewhat altered. There too, however, the context is indicative of a stone that marked the place in Jerusalem where claims were put forward for lost objects. Rashi, Rambam, and Meiri explain that when this stone is covered with water, one is to cease supplication

for rain.[29] Thus it was not merely an antiquated lost and found, but an early weather vain as well. The Yerushalmi also questions the purpose of this curious stone and responds that it is in fact a locality for the return of missing objects. Within the Yerusalmi, however, Honi himself adds that just as the stone will never be blotted out by rain so will he never find success in attempting to halt rainfall.[30] This is a lone gesture of modesty in a tale otherwise saturated with bravura. For once, though this is hardly detected in the Bavli, Honi recognizes his own shortcomings and decidedly earthly abilities. Unlike the Yerushalmi, the Mishnah in the Bavli will persist in its portrayal of Honi as more caricature than character, more a hopeless eccentric than a man with a family, an ability to reason, and an existence of his own.

What both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmud stories do share is a subtle linguistic play, one that is addressed by the text itself at a later point. The Hebrew term in question, מתחטא, also contains the Hebrew root word for "error" or "mistake." Embedded within the narrative itself, therefore, is something of a satirical attitude. Whereas Honi's requests continually elicit alternative responses with rain falling either too heavily or not heavily enough, now the Mishnah subtly invokes this Stone of Those In Error. In this sense, even if the reference is to a Stone of Strayers, an early brand of lost and found, one wonders whether the rabbis are commenting on one who has lost his way, lost the way of

[29] Steinsaltz Notes to Taanit 19a, 66
[30] PT Taanit 3:9

rabbinic Judaism, and must be returned to the Temple. (This is not to suggest that the rabbis and the priests, who oversaw temple proceedings, were always at peace with one another. What cannot be argued is that the rabbis and the priests, however, stood at the forefront of their respective institutions). A final possibility lies with the people, for they too have become lost, tempted by Honi's charisma and flashy displays of fanaticism. Here they are at last returned to the Temple Mount, brought back to where they belong.

The following verses in the Mishnah display the first suggestion of communal revolt against Honi HaMaggel. Shimon Ben Shetah declares that, if this were anyone but Honi, he would decree a ban upon him. Numerous sources indicate that this Shimon Ben Shetah was very much an embodiment of institution. He served as head of the rabbinical court in Jerusalem, where his reputation was one of almost unprecedented austerity and rigor.[31] He is said, for instance, to have hanged eighty women in a single day upon convicting them of witchcraft.[32] He is also the presumed author of the following from *Pirke Avot*: "Ask many questions of the witnesses, but be very careful what you say, lest from your words, they learn to perjure (themselves)."[33] Post-70 rabbis, descendants of the Pharisees, regarded Shimon Ben Shetah as a "founding father" who served "as the representative of rabbinism in

[31] Mishnah Hagigah 2:2
[32] Mishnah Sanhedrin 6:4
[33] *Pirke Avot* 1:9

traditions about the Destruction era."[34] In this context readers can view Shimon Ben Shetah's statement to Honi as representative of a clash between rabbinic institution and less-than-sanctioned miracle working.

To his dismay, what Shetah must acknowledge is that Honi's proclamations were successful, his mutterings influential. As he continues: אבל מה אעשה לך שאתה מתחטא לפני המקום ועושה לך רצונך. Translated: Yet what am I to do to you? You act like a spoiled child before God and he does your will for you. Shetah persists: כבן שהוא מתחטא על אביב ועושה לו רצונו. Translated: You are like a son who misbehaves with his father and the father still does what the boy wishes. The most troubling of the terms in the verse is, once again "מתחטא". Some maintain that this usage is based on the Hebrew root, חטא, which is again suggestive of sin or err. Others, however, make the case for the Arabic root, חטי, which refers to "obtaining things by imploring for them, in which case תחטא would mean 'to beg, implore, indulge oneself.'"[35] That both explanations are plausible shows that the narrative hinges on quieter explications of Honi's actions. Whereas the Hebrew connotes a child misbehaving, the Arabic connotes the selfishness often characteristic of young ones. Ultimately Honi does not speak in terms of the people as a whole, but in terms of his personal desires and ego. (These are not the types of drops *I* desire...). The dual nature of the story, epitomized by double-voiced language, suggests that Honi's actions are simultaneously blameworthy and laudable. On the

[34] Green 637-638
[35] Steinsaltz Notes to Taanit 19a, 67

one hand, he is innocent, almost childlike, simply extending himself for the sake of the needy all around him. On the other hand, he is in vast defiance of convention, infringing upon sacred territories and cultural norms, and thereby endangering not only himself, but the entire community. Furthermore, just as Honi's story straddles two linguistic meanings, so too does he stand between the people below and God above, a stance which the rabbis were exceedingly suspicious of and eager to annul.

The rant of Shimon Ben Shetah continues: It is about you that the verse says: "The father of a righteous man will exult; he who begets a wise son will rejoice in him. Your father and mother will rejoice; she who bore you will exult."[36] The concession by Shimon Ben Shetah, invoking these parental images, acknowledges Honi's apparent capabilities. In previous verses the father stooped to the inclinations of his son in spite of the son's insolence. Here Shetah casts Honi as a most righteous son and catalyst for his parents' delight. Of course, Talmudic times or not, certain unconditional support can be expected from parents of even the most spoiled children. Shetah's first comparison in particular causes readers to recall children who, in spite of their deplorable actions, manage to evade punishment. Honi, in the end, is not at all similar to this brand of child. That is, he never receives what he desires. What is more, punishment will in time to come to him. Then, with the second

[36] Proverbs 23:24-25

statement, taken from Proverbs, one realizes the breadth of irony in Shetah pronouncements. Not only is Honi rather akin to a child *denied* his whimsical wishes, he is hardly the "righteous man" who will cause his parents to "rejoice" or "exult," as the verse suggests. In that he does not receive precisely what he wishes and he fails to please all around him, in both cases he is very much an embodiment of the contrary.

The extensive Mishnah concludes by returning to the theme of fasting and its presumed connection to natural world orders. As the text relates, when fasting resulted in the desired rainfall, Rabbi Tarfon instructed the people to eat and drink, to observe a festival day, orders the people eagerly followed. The final line of the Mishnah notes that, at the end of the day of merriment, the community recites the great *Hallel* to thank God for answering their prayers and giving "bread to all flesh, for His loving-kindness endures forever."[37] That this Talmudic pericope ends with systemized ritual underscores the textual message and apparent denunciation of Honi HaMaggel. In these terms, the text leaves the reader not with a ranting Honi, but a people invested in Jewish rites. Another reading of Tarfon's declaration, however, might actually frame Honi as one also able to give of this "bread to all flesh," thus granting him the highest of honors. After all he seems to operate very much in the image of a divine being, claiming he can alter the state of nature, a move that borders on blasphemy. The Gemara will explore not only

[37] Psalms 136:25

those options documented above, but likewise present additional depictions of Honi that harmonize with and deviate from those already introduced.

The Gemara of *Taanit* 19a, presumably attempting to elucidate the Mishnah, commences as did the preceding Mishnah, by quickly attaching insufficient rainfall and necessary fasts. This leads to an extensive discussion of the topic. The result is that Honi HaMaggel enters as late as 23a, at which point the text begins to explain some the *aggadic* materials in the Mishnah. It does so by essentially retelling the Mishnah's story, carefully altering certain motifs and ideas while still paying homage to the sacred Mishnah text.

The Gemara notes that the community sent for Honi in the month of *Adar*, another month typically associated with the late winter rainy season. As Green argues, this narrative decision already serves to reduce Honi's prowess. In this way, rain will fall not as a result of his miraculous doings, but by the very nature of the season. Indeed, placing the story within *Adar*, as opposed to the midst of Passover for instance, already creates a different context. If the Mishnah revolves largely around satire of Honi, it is possible that the Gemara, a later document, one composed after exile from Jerusalem, views Honi in less threatening ways and even seeks to rehabilitate him to a certain degree.

As the text notes the people implore Honi, even beg Honi: התפלל וירדו גשמים. "Pray (!) and surely rain will fall."[38] He does so and no rain comes. He thus replaces prayer of the lips with prayer of action, prayer of writing, drawing a circle and standing within it. The text relates this to Habbakuk, who declared: "I will stand on my watch, take up my station at the post, and wait to see what He will say to me, what He will reply to my complaint."[39] The context surrounding Habbakuk's vow concerns the future redemption of Israel. As observed in the Mishnah, Honi casts himself similarly: "Master of the Universe! Your children have turned unto me (literally: they have put their faces to me), for I am like a member of Your household."[40] He then pledges not to budge from his circle until God shows mercy upon His children. At this rain begins to fall in drops, גשמים מנטפין. That rain falls at all is significant. What is remarkable, however, is that the text pairs Honi the Circlemaker with Habbakuk, a late prophet, and canonized figure of the Hebrew Bible. By placing Honi's circle alongside Habbakuk's, the editors ground Honi's actions not in defiance, but a particular brand of defiance rooted in proto-Judaic and Judaic tradition.

What is likewise remarkable is the response Honi's actions elicit from his students. They remark: "Master, we have seen you. Let us not

[38] Taanit 23a
[39] Habakkuk 2:1
[40] Taanit 23a

die."[41] Their quaking lips can be imagined even now. Their reaction frames Honi as a character altogether divine or at least capable of divine achievement. Whether this actually expands earlier representations, which the Gemara might be expected to do, is unclear. Green argues that the Gemara actually seeks to reduce the story's charismatic facets.[42] Adding students and a classroom, casting Honi as a רבי, even placing him within a rabbinic house of study, locates him within the rabbinic world, and thus outside of realms alien or outlandish. Nevertheless, that the students, most likely been adults in advanced standing, are this awestruck by Honi's doings conjures, albeit anachronistically, visions of Superman, Peter Pan, even Harry Potter, beings who are no doubt alien and outlandish vis a vis surrounding civilization. Now, however, Honi's charisma is at least housed within the study halls. Would-be powers are thus associated with the rabbis, their institutions, and daily practices. They are thereby conveyed to their students in more traditional and acceptable manners.

The students soon note that these rains may be falling solely to free Honi from his oath and thus allow him to escape his circle. Honi, however, is not placated by the drizzle. He yearns not to leave his circle, but to provide the surrounding area with rain that will fill pits, ditches, and caves. The issue therefore is not absolution of his oath, but the well being of his community. Here Honi is very much of the people, standing

[41] Taanit 23a
[42] Green 628

not within the heavens, but inside his own circle, upon the still-dry ground. The rains in turn fall with greater intensity, in drops no less than a *log*, the sages say.[43] Honi's disciples again plead: "Master, we have seen you. Let us not die."[44] Now their comments might be attached to the potentially destructive nature of the rain. As the students say: כמדומין אנו שאין גשמים יורדין אלא לאבד העולם. Honi responds to their skepticism by turning to the Almighty and clarifying: "I did not ask for this, but rains of benevolence, blessing, and generosity."[45] The rain thus begins to fall in its normal way until the people are forced, as they are in the Mishnah, up to the Temple mount for shelter and respite. Again, the Temple serves as sanctuary in the widest sense and the people flock to it. Honi, without fully realizing, has sent them away from his arena, and toward the arena of God and prayer.

What remains is the theme of communal supplication to Honi. This is a communal urging of him to put an end to the rains: "רבי כשם שהתפללת שירדו כך התפלל וילכו להם."[46] Hardly does this version of the text equate Honi with a spoiled child, however. Honi, as teacher, calmly instructs the group as follows: "מקובלני שאין מתפללין על רוב הטובה".[47] That he "received" such a credo effectively places him too as a student of rabbinic thinking. He is here passing such thinking to another generation in rather

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[43] One *log* is the equivalent to the volume of six eggs according to Steinsaltz's *Reference Guide*, 208
[44] Taanit 23a
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

conventional format. The "nevertheless" immediately following presents yet another departure from rabbinic behavior as Honi next instructs them to bring him an offering so that he might lay his hands upon it and enunciate the following:

> Master of the Universe! Your people Israel who you brought out of Egypt are unable to accept neither too much of the good nor too many of the hardships. You became angry with them. They cannot stand it. You bestowed good upon them. They cannot stand it. May it be Your will that the rains cease and there be relief in the world.[48]

At this, for Honi, the rainfall stops, the sun finally shines, and the people return to their fields.

Shimon Ben Shetah appears in the Gemara as well though his diatribe here does not fully mirror that which he delivered in the Mishnah. He again proclaims that if Honi were not Honi he would decree a ban upon him. Shimon Ben Shetah now introduces a new element, which will complicate the narrative, but ultimately help Honi: "If the years were like the years of Elijah when the rain keys were in Elijah's hand, would the name of the Heavens not been desecrated by your

[48] Taanit 23a

hand?"[49] It may be that the comment is in conversation with I Kings 17:1 in which Elijah swears upon the name of God that "there will be no dew or rain except at my bidding." Honi is here re-contextualized, placed alongside another character of biblical history who behaved with certain irreverence and yet did not abdicate his portion of Jewish tradition. Honi is permitted his fits of peculiarity because Elijah, none other than the presumed harbinger of redemption, displayed similar, if not more severe fits. The analysis cannot end there, however. On the one hand, Honi may be far less brazen than Elijah in that Honi is asked by the people to intercede on their behalf whereas Elijah first declares a drought and then demands it outright of God. On the other hand, Honi may be more brazen than Elijah the Prophet in that Honi demands not only rain to come, but the cessation of rain, almost in the same breath. *Beresheit Rabbah*, taking another stance, places Elijah and Honi on a nearly even plane, noting that "no man has existed comparable to Elijah and Honi the Circlemaker."[50] Shimon Ben Shetah in effect praises Honi with his comment, even if he does so without realizing.

In the following verses Shetah again refers to Honi as a small, spoiled child whose father categorically fulfills each of his wishes: "'Father, take me to wash in warm waters, rinse me in cold, give me nuts, almonds, peaches, and pomegranates,' and the father gives him."[51] Once

[49] Taanit 23a
[50] Beresheit Rabbah 13:7
[51] Taanit 23a

more, however, Shimon Ben Shetah must concede Honi's achievement, concluding his declarations by again quoting the Proverbs verse in which parents display joy over their accolade-worthy son.

Added to this portion of the narrative is not only the verse that appears in I Kings 17, but Genesis 9:11 and Isaiah 54:9.[52] Arguably these verses suggest that demanding rain profanes the Eternal name. So, within the Elijah comparison there is another element at work. In "Rain Men" David Eli Stern writes: "If Honi were to have issued his petulant challenge before God during the time of Elijah's decree, he would have caused profanation of the Name by creating a situation in which God would either have appeared unable to respond to Honi's prayer, or would have undermined Elijah's oath."[53] That Honi is of course guilty of this and thus subject to excommunication harmonizes with Shimon Ben Shetah's earlier desire to excommunicate him. The Gemara, by including gestures to Elijah the Prophet, blunts such desires and does so without renouncing a man of Shimon Ben Shetah's stature. Honi eludes the punishment he may have been due.

The text then address a selection from the Book of Job, which itself holds significance for a character such as Honi. Most likely a full comparison of the two is possible, two individuals outcast and

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[52] Genesis 9:11: "I will maintain My Covenant with you. Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."
Isaiah 54:9: "For this to Me is like the waters of Noah. As I sore that the waters of Noah nevermore would flood the earth, so I swear that I will not by angry with you or rebuke you."
[53] Stern 84

overburdened. In full the biblical verses quoted in *Taanit* read: "You will decree it and it will be fulfilled, and light will shine upon your affairs. When others sink low, you will say it is pride; He saves the humble. He will deliver the guilty; He will be delivered through the cleanness of your hands."[54] The Bavli divides these verses into parts. "You will decree it," readers learn, now refers to Honi declaring a need for rain from below and the Eternal responding from above. "Light will shine upon your affairs" refers to a generation residing in darkness being illuminated by the prayers of Honi. In the Yerushalmi Rabbi Hiyya notes that this illumination refers specifically to rain. There, another verse from the Book of Job is subsequently added in support of this.[55] The Yerushalmi also notes that the idea, "He saves the humble," speaks to Honi rescuing the lowly, which Honi at least attempted to do. "He will deliver the guilty" refers to Honi bringing about the redemption of those previously lowered by iniquity. At first glance it seems as if, not for the first time, Honi is very much cast in a Divine role. He, like Elijah, stands as potential savior. Whom or what brings about salvation becomes somewhat less clear, however. Excessive drought stands to plague the people, and Honi's prayer at first seems to release them of such, yet it remains a possibility that his prayers inflict more damage than blessing. As stated earlier, his requests bring either a droplet or a deluge, neither of which redeem or raise up the lowly. The Gemara suggests that, "He

[54] Job 22:28
[55] Job 37:11: "He loads the thick cloud with moisture, the clouds scatter his lightning."

will be delivered by the cleanness of your hands" potentially refers to Honi's deliverance of the people vis a vis his deeds of purity. That is, it is through his changed character and move away from earlier activities that the people surrounding his circle can realize salvation. In this way not only is Honi delivered, but they are as well.

Discussion soon moves from one rabbinic staple, the Book of Job, to another, Psalms. Rabbi Yochanan asks: "All the days of that same righteous man, he was distressed by the verse: 'A song of ascent: When the Eternal brought back the captivity of Zion we were like men in a dream.'"[56] The statement serves as a bridge to the next portion of the Honi tales, those relating to his excessive sleep, dreaming, offspring, and eventual demise. As his powers have been presented within other arenas, now it is noted that Honi sleeps seventy years, a mythical concept not unfamiliar to historical literatures, particularly those constructed by more than one western-world author.[57] As the 23a text continues:

יומא חד הוה אזל באורחא חזייה לההוא גברא דהוה נטע חרובה אמר לה דאי עד כמה שנין טעין
אמר לה עד שבעין שנין אמר לה פשיטא לך דחיית שבעין שנין אמר לה דאי גברא עלמא בחריבה
אשכחתיה כי היכי דשתלי לי אבהתי שתלי נמי לבראי יתיב קא כריך ריפתא אתא ליה שינתא נים
אהדרא ליה משוניתא איכסי מעינא ונים שבעין שנין כי קם מלקט מינייהו אמר לה את הוא
דשתלתיה אמר לה בר בריה אנא אמר לה שמא מינה דניימי שבעין שנין.

[56] BT Taanit 23a and Psalm 126:1
[57] Such as Washington Irving

Translated:

> One day he (Honi) went along on the road and saw a man planting a carob tree. He said to him: 'In how long will this tree bear fruit?' The man answered: 'Seventy years.' The other said: 'Is it obvious that you will live seventy years?' He said: 'I found a world with carob trees. Just as my father planted for me, I plant for my sons.' He (Honi) then sat down to eat bread and he fell asleep. A cave formed over him and he remained hidden. He slept for seventy years. When he awoke he saw a man out picking. Honi said to the man: 'Are you the one who planted it?' The man said to Honi: 'I am the grandson.' He said to him: 'Conclude from this that I have slept seventy years.'

The Honi of this latter portion of the story is not the same outspoken protagonist of the earlier, rain-related tales. While this episode is still in conversation with themes of charisma and bravado, it is also in conversation with escapism. The very presence of the carob tree recalls the well-known *aggadic* tale in Shabbat 33b-34a of the Bavli, in which Shimon Bar Yochai and his son cloister themselves within a cave, burying themselves to the neck so as to focus solely, if not foolishly, on their studies. There, the tree is likened to Torah, as it may be here as well insofar as it can be thought of in terms of a life-giving and sustaining entity perpetually expanding, perpetually taking on new

colors and forms. Like water itself and therefore rainfall as well, the tree comes to represent Torah.[58] Moreover, just as the carob in Honi's tale is passed from one generation to another so are the seeds of Torah planted in the mind of one generation for the next to harvest. That Honi sleeps seventy years suggests that not only an entire generation has passed, but that his name has survived, salvaged, as it were, by his students and the rabbinic network. This is evidenced by Honi returning the House of Study in time to hear the rabbi teach his pupils that a figure named Honi HaMaggel formerly resolved any difficulties the students had. Such a declaration also seems to be commentary on de facto myth making. Honi, who was not held in the highest regards in his own day, has since become something of a hero, a move not altogether unlike that which the Gemara performed on the text of the Mishnah. Of course when Honi lets his identity be known to the students he is not believed, even disrespected, as if he could not reside in the physical world, but only one of legends. It is at this point that he perishes. That is, when he attempts to raise his own voice, as opposed to a voice granted him by rabbinic institution and Talmudic editing, the text silences that voice at once.

The bottom portion of 23a, in accordance with the tale relayed above, presents the succeeding genealogy of Honi, beginning with his grandsons, Abba Hilikiyyah and Hanan HaNehba, both of whom rabbis approach when desperate for rainfall. However, Abba Hilikiyyah, like his

[58] See, for instance, Deuteronomy 32:2: My doctrine shall drop as the rain.

grandfather, experiences certain friction when encountering the rabbinic class. For instance, when rabbis visit his home in order to appeal to him for rainfall, Hilikiyyah does not invite them to enter first, as would have been customary, and simply understood by a majority of the community. Instead they are made to follow Hilikiyyah and his wife. Though he does not draw circles in the manner of his Honi, he does take up less conventional means in an attempt to bring about the rain they request. He climbs to the roof of his home with his wife and together they pray for rainfall. While he as well as Hanan HaNehba possess a brand of humility never fully expressed by Honi, certainly not in the Bavli, they share with their grandfather the status of intermediary. They, like Moses and a figure such as Serah Bat Asher, who will be discussed in coming chapters, attempt to locate themselves between God and the people, between powerlessness and sanctity, between agenda-heavy literary representation and a more textured historical existence. A summation of these dichotomies and others is captured by Abba Hilikiyyah ascending to the roof of his home with not only his wife and the rabbis, but with recognition of his latent ancestry. It is indeed a fitting final image. The grandson of Honi the Circlemaker climbs closer to the heavens in an attempt to converse with the Eternal One while the rabbis can only look on with certain puzzlement.

It is the Talmud's story of Honi, beginning with the Mishnah in 18b, which is cast and recast over the course of subsequent centuries.

Midrashists around the globe, through history, re-imagine Honi the Circlemaker, his story and the story of his community. Authors, poets, songwriters, essayists, they all turn to him. In this sense his circle grows wider with every generation. It takes in new themes and players, new foci and ideals, and those who hear the story perpetually gain new insight, and with regards to more than prayer.

III. The Serah Bat Asher of the Babylonian Talmud

Translation of selections from Sotah 13a-b:

How did Moses know where Joseph was buried? They said that Serah Bat Asher remained from that very generation. Moses went to her and asked her: 'Perhaps you know where Joseph is buried.' She replied: 'The Egyptians made a metal coffin for him and placed it in the Nile River so that it would be blessed from it.' Moses went and stood at the shore of the sea. He said: 'Joseph, Joseph, the time has arrived of which God promised that I will redeem you and so has the time of the oath you made the Jewish people swear. If you show yourself, it is for the good, but if not, behold, we are absolved from your oath.' Immediately the coffin floated...Rebbe Natan says: 'In the royal catacombs was he buried.' Moses went and stood by the royal catacombs. He said: 'Joseph, the time of which God swore that I will redeem you has arrived and so too has come the time concerning the oath that Israel swore. If you show yourself, it is for the good, but if not, behold, we are absolved from your oath.' At that moment the coffin shook. Moses took it and brought it with him and all the years that Israel was in the desert there were two arks: One of a dead man and one of the Divine Presence. There were those who would ask: Is it proper for the dead to travel alongside the Divine Presence?

(13b)
They told him that that which is in here upheld all that is written within this one. If Moses had not attended to it would Israel not have done so either? It is written though that Joseph's bones, which the Children of Israel had brought out of Egypt, they buried in Shechem. Moreover, if the Children of Israel had not attended to him, would his own children not have attended to him either? It is written: 'They buried the bones in Shechem and it became a heritage for the children of Joseph.'[59] They said: 'Let his honor be served by the many rather than the few.' Moreover, they said: 'His honor is better served by the great than by the lowly.' 'Buried in Shechem.' Why Shechem? From Shechem Joseph was kidnapped and it is to Shechem that we return this lost object.

[59] Joshua 24:32

The portion of *Vayiggash* truly is one of approaches or, more accurately, revelations. Without realizing, Judah reveals his identity to Joseph in an attempt to locate the lost brother. Joseph reveals his identity to his still unsuspecting band of brothers. They in turn reveal to Jacob that Joseph still lives. Egypt itself is revealed to Jacob, as it were, while he and his descendants approach from the north. Of the two daughters noted in the subsequent list of these descendants, one is Dinah, whose story has received considerable attention by way of *midrash* and feminist schools in recent years in particular. The second woman is Serah, the daughter of Asher. At the end of Genesis Serah is presented to readers as the sister of Imnah, Ishvah, Ishvi, and Beriah.[60] Later, in the Book of Numbers, it is reported that the population of Asher's clan in leaving Egypt stands at fifty three thousand four hundred, at which point Serah's name is noted once more. These two accounts refer to "two censuses that occurred hundreds of years apart. The first...is of those people who went down to Egypt with Jacob. The second is the census of the Children of Israel in the desert as they are about to enter the Land of Canaan."[61] Considering standard biblical proceedings, in which the likes of even Miriam is largely denied attention, that Serah is mentioned at all seems to carry certain significance. After all, who can count the women who go unnamed in the Bible? Nahum

[60] Genesis 46:17
[61] Adapted from Passover study guide found at www.hillel.org

Sarna's comment in the Jewish Publication Society's Torah Commentary on Genesis speaks to this:

> It is inconceivable that Jacob's twelve sons, who themselves had fifty-three sons in all, should have had only one daughter. In light of the general tendency to omit women from the genealogies, there must be some extraordinary reason for mentioning her in this particular one, although no hint of it is given in the text.[62]

Similarly, Jacob Milgrom's commentary on Numbers mentions that, even there, upon second mention of her, Serah "remains a mystery."[63] What can be said is that her making it to the page already establishes her in a way myriad women never were. The question, then, is why exactly she makes it to the page. Why her and not another daughter? As Milgrom noted there must have been others. Hardly do the rabbis overlook these quandaries, eventually responding to Serah as they do with Dinah, with considerable intrigue and scrutiny. Attracted either to the mere mentioning of her or to her name itself, the root of which poignantly suggests acts of sprawling, stretching, or extending, *Sotah* 13a-b provides Serah with far more of a biography than she is allotted by the authors of the Torah. The rabbis and the eventual editors of the

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[62] Sarna 315
[63] Milgrom 226

Talmudic text indeed go to great lengths in an attempt to explain her presence and its significance.

The Book of Genesis, which begins with creation, concludes symmetrically with ultimate finality in the form of Joseph uttering his last words and being placed "בארן במצרים".[64] The import of the Hebrew terminology here should not be lost. Indeed Joseph's coffin in time becomes an ark, a holy enclosure toted from the darkness of slavery toward the light of redemption. This oath, this notion that, "when God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here," forever ties Joseph to Egypt. Not only will he be the first to go down to it, he will later be carried away from it by his own offspring. Professor Mark Bregman relates the legend that, with the oath, Joseph spoke "not to any of his sons, but to his daughter Serah. And wisely too, for as we have learned it was Serah who survived into the generation of Moses."[65] In these terms his posthumous redemption can be attributed to Serah. Just as Joseph was a man of thought and dreaming, it makes sense that the one eventually responsible for his body is a character also invested in thought, imagination, and memory.

Generations after Joseph's death, Moses will be unable to flee with the Children of Israel until he can locate the bones of Joseph. Joseph, in keeping with his very name, will once more become an addition, added to those of the living even as he resides with those long departed, and

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[64] Genesis 50:26
[65] Bregman 4

added therefore to those who manage to escape eternal bondage in Egypt. Before his passing Joseph stated: "פקד יפקד אלהים אתכם והעלתם עצמתי מזה". Translated: "When God has taken notice of you, you shall surely carry up my bones from here."[66]

For Moses, the difficult task of locating these bones is surpassed only by the earlier task of approaching mighty Pharaoh on behalf of the Israelites and their God. This generation attempting to escape slavery has lost connection to previous generations. The beginning of Exodus indeed suggests a community not bound by commonality or familiarity, but one of exceeding abundance and heterogeneity.[67] Moses, as leader of this variegated group, must locate the bones before the people can flee. The *midrash* proceeds to connect the assignment with Serah Bat Asher. The rabbis, as noted in *Sotah* 13a, bring Moses to Serah by way of the necessity to imbue her with a grander role in the biblical narrative due to the attention its authors paid her previously.

To start the Gemara asks: "מנין היה יודע משה רבינו היכן יוסף קבור".[68] How did Moses know where Joseph was buried? The Bavli follows the apparent narrative fissure by relaying the tale of Moses approaching a woman by the name of Serah Bat Asher who remained (stretched, extended...) from that very generation, the generation of Joseph and conception of Hebrew

[66] Genesis 50:25
[67] See Exodus 1:7, for instance
[68] Sotah 13a

slavery. Due to her age she alone will be able to point Moses in the direction of Joseph's remains.

In earlier biblical terms this kind of longevity coincides with such characters as Adam, who lived beyond nine hundred years, and Noah, who lived to be over six hundred. Though the lifespan of biblical beings shortens with ensuing portions, Serah seems to defy this tendency, in various ways aligning herself with these monumental characters. Louis Ginsberg comments that Serah, raised in the house of Jacob, "walked in the way of pious children" as God had given her "beauty, wisdom, and sagacity."[69] He associates Serah's longevity with devoutness, still a common association in numerous cultures both eastern and western.

Serah proceeds to inform Moses that, years ago, the Egyptians made a metal coffin for Joseph and placed it in the Nile River so that it might be blessed or plentiful (כדי שיתברכו מימיו). The double meaning, on the one hand, connotes the coffin irrigating the surrounding riverbanks. That is, when it was immersed the rising water nourished the surrounding Egyptian soil. Hence the dead managed to cultivate the living. On the other hand, it can be said that the waters themselves were blessed by the presence of the coffin. Just as those who encountered Joseph while he lived were blessed by his doings, from the baker and butler to his own children, his own parents, and his once-conniving

[69] Ginsberg 38

brothers, the very waters in which his body now dwells are likewise sanctified by his proximity.

Following Serah's advice Moses ventures to the shore of the Nile and states: יוסף יוסף הגיע העת שנשבע הקב"ה שאני גואל אתכם.[70] That he stands at the shore aligns him not only with Serah Bat Asher in various ways, but Honi HaMaggel, insofar as Moses is here found at a precipice, not quite within the water and not quite outside of it. He also connects not only water and land, but past and future. In time he will also bridge slavery and freedom for his people. His ensuing conversation with Joseph reads: "Joseph, Joseph, the time has arrived of which God promised that I will redeem you and so has the time of the oath that you made the Jewish people swear (concerning your bones)."[71] That Moses is in dialogue with Genesis 50:25 and thus Joseph on his deathbed harkens to the living conversing with the past. Moses continues: "If you show yourself it is for the good (and we will carry your bones out with us as instructed), but if not, behold, we are absolved from your oath. Immediately the coffin of Joseph floated (to the surface of the Nile)."[72] In these episodes Moses remains true to his Talmudic title, *Moshe Rabbienu*. His invocation of the Genesis text renders him a prototypical reader/interpreter of the Bible. In these terms he is a forbearer of and for Talmudic rabbis, utilizing past text for the sake of the present-day.

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[70] Sotah 13a
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.

A number of lines down the page Rebbe Natan presents an alternate version of the tale, noting that Moses found Joseph's bones not in the Nile, as Serah suggested, but in the royal catacombs, another holy site for the Egyptians. The catacombs nod proverbially to the position Joseph achieved among Egyptian dignitaries as a result of his dream interpreting abilities. Another possibility is that the Nile-based explanation grants too much honor to Egypt itself, the original home of Jewish maltreatment. By placing Joseph among Egyptian royalty, respect is bestowed to the Jew, rather than Egypt, the place and people. Nevertheless, once again Moses approaches the place to which he is directed and declares, again, that the time has arrived for Joseph to reveal himself. If he does so, Moses will escort the bones into the wilderness. If not Moses will consider himself absolved of the oath. At that very moment, as the text reads, נזדעזע ארונו, his coffin shook. Twice now the coffin has responded to Moses' invocation. What remains true in each of the scenarios is the idea that each time the past is summoned it responds promptly, coming to our aid each time we choose to refer to it.

The text reports that Moses took the coffin from the catacombs and brought it with him into the wilderness. The result is that Israel carried not one, but two arks while en route to the Promised Land. One contained a dead man. The other contained the (Law of the) Divine Presence. According to the Bavli, many asked if it was proper for the dead to travel in such close proximity to the Divine. After all, a corpse

ritually defiles the bearer while the ark of the Eternal affords guidance and sanctity. The beginning line of *Sotah* 13b reads: "קיים זה כל מה שכתוב".[73] A translation of the line in full indicates that everything in one ark upheld everything written in the other ark. Rashi, citing the *Mekhilta*, attempts to list the commandments Joseph upheld, the Ten Commandments in particular, from listening to his father to not killing Potiphar when he could have, to not coveting Potiphar's wife. One wonders, however, if the Talmud's line could also be read as קיים זה, this one lives. The implication in this is that Joseph's story, with its themes of faithfulness and perseverance, will forever exist, just as the Law will forever exist. Furthermore, just as all that is essential and sacred can be found within Torah, so too can it be found within the story of Joseph.

(Here we have a pre-modern example of lives as Torah, each containing a distinctive sense of sacred narrative. Torah comes to reside within us just as we come to reside within Torah.)

The following query, in a text very much interested in questions, is one with regards to responsibility: "If Moses had not attended to it (the ark containing the bones) would Israel not have done so either?"[74] Are they obligated by this oath simply by way being a part of the group? The text deals with the issue by indicating that ultimately the Children of Israel, not Moses, carry Joseph's bones forward, out of Egypt, burying

[73] Sotah 13b
[74] Ibid.

them later in Shechem.[75] They literally carry further what had earlier been initiated. The text's next question, far more specific, explores whether Joseph's own children would have carried his bones out had the Children of Israel not done so. This points to the finer issue of why the Children of Israel toted the bones when it was technically Moses' duty. Yet just as the Law will be passed from the hands of Moses to the hands of innumerable subsequent generations (as the opening of *Pirke Avot* attests) so are the bones of Joseph passed throughout the Jewish people one age at a time. These bones, in a way not entirely unlike those referenced in Ezekiel, indeed come to possess a life of their own. They become part of Jewish heritage.

The children of Joseph assert that Joseph's honor is better served by the many than by the few, a notion not surprising in a tradition that values community. The Children of Israel in turn argue that his honor is better served by the great than by the lowly. Their argument upholds the notion that Moses, ever holy, was most suited to attend to the bones in his time. Following Moses' death, however, the aforementioned heritage must be carried forth by another. Carrying the bones unequivocally stands as metaphor for the carrying of tradition itself. It represents a sustained allegiance to the original oath in spite of potential burdens. With images such as this it is as if the editors direct their readers to perform in the way of Serah, actively linking the previous to the future.

[75] See Joshua 24:32

The final question addressed by the Gemara concerns why Joseph's bones are ultimately relocated to Shechem. Why Shechem? As the translation of the line in the Bavli reads: "From Shechem Joseph was kidnapped and it is to Shechem that we return this lost object."[76] What is of immediate note is that the topic of memory is again brought to the fore here. The opening chapters of Joseph's story have not been forgotten. The story itself recalls its own opening. What is more, with burial in Shechem, Joseph's own beginnings have not been overlooked. Genesis thirty-seven notes that they threw him to the pit, which was empty and without water.[77] However, just as Moses needed the help of others in order to ensure upkeep of the original oath, so does Joseph require others for his own redemption to take place. True symmetry for Joseph, though, may have resulted in his bones being returned to the Shechem pit into which his brothers plunged him. In *Sotah* he does not land in the dreaded pit, but finds himself elevated. Even in burial he is raised up, lifted from the pit both proverbially and in actuality.

Within the text in *Sotah* is not only Joseph's end, but Serah's beginning and yet somehow, in a brief Talmudic passage devoted to her, she is still overshadowed by Joseph. Even there her story remains very much beneath the surface. However, it is true that the Talmud grants her more than the Torah did. Readers learned little of Serah in the Torah, only her name in fact. The Bavli surrounds her name with an

[76] Sotah 13b
[77] Genesis 37:24

identity, a being capable of speech and memory. Later literatures will confer even more than this. Serah will continue to stretch and extend in keeping with the meaning of her name. Now, however, she will stretch into poetry, into *midrashim*, into liturgies, and folktales read and rehearsed by a Jewish community drawn to her, her name, and her story.

IV. Narrative Bridges from Talmudic Times to Our Own

Professor David Stern, a teacher of *midrash* at the University of Pennsylvania, writes that prior to the twelfth century the Hebrew language did not contain a specific word for "imagination."[78] Of course it is not that imagination itself did not exist in Jewish communities of antiquity. This fact is evidenced by a wide cannon of artistic works of *midrash* and *aggadah*. One could turn to numerous examples of rabbinic ingenuity, such as Shimon Bar Yochai dwelling, naked, studying Torah in a cave with his son for twelve years, with sand surrounding them up to their necks, and a dire shortage of food.[79] Moses is likewise able to assume a seat in the classroom of Rabbi Akiba. With the very title of his book, *Rabbinic Fantasies*, Stern gestures to a brand of literary terminology that frames these fantastic stories. Though the rabbis were familiar with Greek and Roman fantasy tales, many did not know the terminology for such, certainly as invoked by contemporary scholars like Stern. Their intention was generally to teach, not entertain per se, and this often required reaching beyond the limits of the natural world as they sought out hopefully enduring messages.

It could be said that these narratives did not represent imagination for its own sake. Hardly were they akin to the free-wielding poetic styling associated with the likes of, say, the Beat poets and writers such as

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[78] Stern 4
[79] See Shabbat 33b-34a

Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs or modernist authors such as Joyce and Woolf more likely concerned with art itself than moral message. With certain irony, then, Stern reports that opposition to imaginative narration "has been the rule more often than the exception. Although narrative prose pervades Jewish literature, it has generally not been recognized as such, and when it has, its status has typically suffered diminishment."[80] Though the so-called Jewish masses found themselves attracted to fantastic kinds of writing, in the form of *midrash* for instance, "the more serious legal and philosophical writings...dominated the higher canon."[81] To a great extent, this remains so today as Jewish publishers concern themselves with pragmatic issues pertaining to a Jew's day-to-day existence: dietary laws, lifecycle events, holidays, and Israel. Of the nineteen books displayed at the front of the URJ Press website, for example, all deal with Jewish holidays, Hebrew language, Jewish identity or lifecycle issues in some form or another.[82]

What must no doubt be incorporated within this storytelling dialogue is the Jewish cultural devotion to storytelling. That is, Judaism like other cultural groups, insists on the passing of stories from generation to generation as a kind of crucial religious principle. Consider the most consecrated Jewish document, the Torah, re-read and rehearsed on a week-to-week basis since the Masorites decoded not only

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[80] Stern 5
[81] Ibid.
[82] See www.urj.org/press for a list of their 2003 publications

its individual verses, but also chapters and books. Every פרשה, every segment, therefore folds into the larger document and the wider narrative. One can then think of the Torah service as a sacred conveyance of sacred stories. The community consistently hears its broader story and learns it (as Ezra noted, "לדרוש תורת יהוה").[83] Moreover we vow daily to teach the story and its messages to our children. As is stated in the first blessing surrounding the *shema*, "ושננתם לבנך", we are commanded to pronounce these words bi-daily as a credo and relay them repeatedly to our children.[84] Such commandments ensure cycles of telling, as round and continuous as Honi's circle.

Regarding the on-going relation of tales is the notion that over the course of centuries, the manner of telling changes, as do the tellers and the tales. The aforementioned Masorites essentially instituted an interpretation of the Hebrew Bible by way of their attempted elucidation of it. They affected future renderings by the ways in which they situated emphasis. More than one biblical scholar has pointed to contradicting folios, inconsistent spellings, and altogether dissimilar articles from one version of the text to another. What is more, within the text itself, disharmonious episodes have always existed, such as two creation stories and two presentations of the Decalogue. Yet these too become part of the tale. In this way inconsistency and variety, differing accounts

[83] Ezra 7:10
[84] Deuteronomy 6:7 and Birnbaum 76

and images become part of the sacred narrative, told and re-told. In the end the tale becomes tales.

With Honi the concept of the changing tale exists still within the Talmud itself. The Gemara, in attempting a recapitulation of the Mishnah, presents a series of events that do not match or harmonize with those of the Mishnah. The heavy rains of *Taanit* 23a, for example, appear far heavier than the heavy rains of 19a. Likewise Shimon Ben Shetah's statements in the Mishnah do not mirror the statements he makes later in the Gemara. What is more, in the Gemara Honi is likened, briefly, to Habbakuk and Elijah, never so in the Mishnah. These are but a few instances of this narrative not only changing as time progresses, but presenting a tale wrapped up in change. Put otherwise, the narrative ultimately operates much like one of its characters, undergoing alteration with the passing of time. Thus the story itself, like Honi himself, evolves as time goes by. Just as an older Honi at the end of *Taanit* 23a is an unmistakably changed character, so is his story different not merely from Mishnah to Gemara, but Gemara through to the literary topography of Judaism's contemporary community.

So it is with Serah Bat Asher who, in leaving Egypt, is not the same character she was in entering Egypt. The bones of Joseph are said to be in one place, then another, and each of these arenas proves to be the right one. The text has different versions of itself, therefore, and Serah's story, her literary home, much like Honi's, Moses', Dinah's, or

Jonah's to name a few, likewise evolves as it is perpetually told and re-told, on the page and by way of mouth, considered and re-considered over the course of history.

What follows is an analysis of the ways in which authors of recent decades have re-read Honi and Serah and reshaped their tale by integrating new backdrops. This is Honi and Serah not as constructed by the rabbis of the Talmud, but as imagined by poets and authors of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century in places like Persia, Tel Aviv, and America. The goal is to present not only an analysis of these new works, but the ways in which they spoke and continue to speak to their audiences. What might Honi mean now? What has he become? What does Serah represent today? Why do these particular writers utilize these particular characters?

In the end what matters most is not how foci change and new themes emerge, but the fact that these stories contribute to a much broader story. It is inside this broader story, constructed of countless interacting stories, which ultimate meaning exists. What is Judaism if not a tradition of mingling legends, practices, and ideas?

V. The Honi and Serah of Today

At the back of *The Defiant Muse*, a book that catalogs selected works by Hebrew feminist poets from antiquity to present, the editors provide an extensive biography of Rahel Bluwstein, generally referred to as Rahel. During her life, and all the more so following her death, Rahel was esteemed in various circles, feminist and otherwise, for her boldness, her conversational style, and her musicality. Followed closely by Yokheved Bat-Miriam, Anda Pinkerfeld-Amir, and Leah Goldberg, Rahel, due in large part to those of her poems which were made into song, is among the most recognized Israeli poets even today.

Rahel was born in 1890 and grew up in the Ukraine, where her father served in the czar's army for twenty-five years before he became a prosperous businessman. Rahel's mother was "well educated, corresponded with Tolstoy, and devoted herself to the education of her children."[85] Rahel received a Jewish education, studying at a Jewish school while also learning Hebrew at home with a tutor. Rahel began "writing poetry in Russian at the age of 15."[86] Four years later, at the age of 19, she immigrated to Ottoman Palestine where she worked in various agricultural capacities, perfecting her spoken Hebrew in the process. She then moved briefly to France in order to study agriculture at the University of Toulouse. By the time she wished to return to

[85] *Defiant Muse* 251
[86] *Encyclopedia Judaica* 1516

Palestine, however, World War I had broken out and she was at least temporarily unable. She therefore returned to the place of her birth, the Ukraine, where she taught Jewish refugee children and awaited the first opportunity to return to Palestine.[87] This came in 1919. She was aboard the first boat there.

Life did not become easier upon her return to Palestine, however. Already diagnosed with Tuberculosis, she settled in Deganyah. Rahel later moved to Tel Aviv and it was there, with her strength waning and her days numbered, that she wrote a majority of her poems. Many of these were published in the labor movement's daily newspaper, *Davar*. Only two collections of Rahel's works were published during her lifetime, *Safiah* (1927) and *Mineged* (1930). While her popularity in her lifetime was considerable, it grew many times over following her death, in 1931, due largely to works such as "Kinneret," which was put to music and "widely sung."[88] As Kaufman, Rokem, and Hess note, the popularity that she did enjoy

> might account for the scorn and condescension held for her by major figures on the literary scene at the time. Her early death of Tuberculosis contributed to the construction of her fragile and overprotected literary

[87] *Encyclopedia Judaica* 1516
[88] *Encyclopedia Judaica* 1517

> persona, in contrast to that of (Esther) Raab, whose very strength probably kept her out of the canon.[89]

The illness and her certain air of mysteriousness has drawn more than one comparison to Emily Dickinson, who shrouded herself in white and remained indoors much of her life. In many ways Rahel's fame, like Dickinson's, can be coupled in part with her own character. This character, of not only talent, but distress made for public intrigue during her life and all the more so after it was over.

Many works by Rahel were published posthumously. In time her poems infiltrated popular culture. Her works managed to speak directly to a young generation of enthusiastic Zionists:

> Her critical writing was charged with modernist values – what she called 'simplicity.' Outstanding in their prosody, many of her poems were set to music and are still among the most popular Israeli songs.[90]

Her poem, "Honi the Circlemaker," is an example of Rahel bringing her own idealism to an ancient story. It likewise reflects her affinity for literary characters whose voice has largely gone unheard. In "Rachel," written in 1926, she proclaims that "דמה בדמי זורם", that the blood of Rachel

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[89] *Defiant Muse* 12
[90] *Defiant Muse* 254

"flows in my blood."[91] A translation of that poem appears as such in *Defiant Muse*:

Rachel, Mc ther of mothers
Who shepherded Laban's sheep –
It is her blood that flows in my blood,
Her voice that sings in me.

Therefore is my house narrow
And the city strange
Because her scarf once fluttered
In the desert wind.

Therefore do I make my way
Unswervingly
Because my feet remember
Her path of then, of then.[92]

Here, she aligns herself with the matriarch who "shepherded Laban's sheep," and was denied love before she could escape Laban's precincts with Jacob.[93] Within the poem Rahel essentially cries out to Rachel, her

[91] *Defiant Muse* 85
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.

predecessor and namesake. Evidently, Rahel not only understands the story of Rachel, but wishes she could alter it in some way vis a vis her poetry. In the work she makes her way "unswervingly" back to the maltreatment and essential tragedy latent in a story never fully told. The very fact that she is able to proceed "unswervingly" also indicates that she can operate in a manner that the matriarch never could. Rachel, whose path was never straight, but constantly swerving due to relational and personal obstacles in her path, is here redeemed by Rahel who grants herself, and thereby Rachel, the position of active protagonist. This is not to say that Rahel would not encounter similar trials, relational and otherwise, but she can at least provide Rachel, and thereby herself, with a forum for airing these trials. Rahel indeed recalls Rachel's path "of then, of then," as if to say she not only remembers the path, but seeks to finally set it straight, as it were. She does this by way of her own rising, but also by way of her own seeking, and certainly her telling, now, now, and in a place not far from Rachel's trials.

"Honi the Circlemaker" (1930) likewises gestures toward liberation. A translation of the poem reads:

The sorrow of Honi's fate
darkens my spirit even today:
"A man met him on his way
and did not greet him with peace."

Is this generation not that generation?

Could it be foreign to all?

Beneath the weight of the burden

Of rebellious loneliness he will fall.

Here I too am certain

I slept by a secret wall:

Thus in going along my path

I shall hear no greetings of peace.

Here in my dreams they became estranged

Acquaintance and friend alike.

Honi's gloomy shadow

Has spread over my path.

Here again Rahel returns to traditional literature, this time the Talmud. The version of Honi that she claims is the Honi of rebellion, the Honi who seems the quintessential loner in a time of communality and conformity. (Perhaps Honi the Circlemaker might be compared in some sense with Rachel, also a rebellious figure, one who stole Laban's idol). Considering the poets' background it is likely that she studied the story of Honi, if not directly from the Talmudic text, then as folklore passed through Israel's

generations. Even if it was not part of a "curriculum" it is possible that Rahel sought out Honi narratives, considering the way in which her own life was unfolding in the 1920s: her isolation, her grappling with illness, and her inevitable bouts with depression. The Honi story is a story that would certainly resonate with her for all of these reasons and others. The hasty conclusion calls for a comparison of the literary Honi and the poet Rahel, two figures surely bound in various ways, yet such conclusions will have to wait until an examination of her "Honi the Circlemaker" is complete.

The poem begins with depression, Rahel noting that Honi's story, particularly his story's end, depresses her. What she is referring to is Honi's fate of solitary death, of finding oneself entirely isolated following years of, at the very least, recognition (though not always positive recognition) and, at the very most, fame. Most of his peers are long dead and those who are not no longer recognize him. This ending indeed alarms Rahel. To her too it seems that the familiar are hardly so anymore: "Acquaintance and friend" have become strangers to her. Honi's fate has evidently become hers. The shadows from his caves have fallen over her too, evidenced by the dark, "elegiac and nostalgic" tone of this poem and others by Rahel.[94] Outspoken, well meaning, of apparent ability, Honi dies alone nevertheless and Rahel must wonder if the same

[94] *Encyclopedia Judaica* 1517

awaits her. Will she die not only in solitude, but, like Honi, entirely unrecognized in an arena in which she was once recognized widely?

In his fictional novel, *The King of Flesh and Blood*, Moshe Shamir likewise dwells on the attention Honi received. Shamir paints Honi as little less than a cultural icon. There he becomes something of a Talmudic celebrity, but a discussion of this novel and its treatment of the Circlemaker will come later. What is clear is that Honi's end hardly uplifts Rahel, certainly not in 1930, a year prior to her own death, when she wrote the piece and certainly had such questions on her mind. Ironically it is the "pessimism of a young writer on the brink of death," however, that made her so popular in later years with disillusioned "younger Hebrew readers" in particular."[95]

It is the heaviness of rebellion and loneliness, which weigh on not only Honi, but Rahel. In the Gemara's version, by the end of Honi's tale he is not recognized by those of his town, the students in the Study House, nor even his own kin. The Bavli indeed comes as close as it ever does in relaying deep sorrow. Honi's palpable emotion, the hurt he feels with regards to these truths, is nearly as evident on his pages as Rahel's is on hers. Would-be acquaintances fail to contact Rahel, who likewise claims secret lodging, juxtaposing her indoor existence with Honi's extended sleep in *Taanit.*

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[95] *Encyclopedia Judaica* 1517

In contrast, Dan Pagis' 1964 poem, "Honi," presents the Circlemaker not as bound to the indoors, to caves and unwelcoming Study Houses, but to the side of the highway, where he stands alone, "wrinkled up in his old coat."[96] Pagis, born in Radautz (Bukovina) in 1930, survived internment in a Ukranian concentration camp. Following the Holocaust he immigrated to Israel, where he taught medieval Hebrew literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Tragically, Pagis died of cancer in 1986. Over the course of his career he drew "explicitly" on his "European experiences," which made for a series of poems, anthologized widely, which spoke largely, though not exclusively, to survivors of the Holocaust.[97]

Pagis depicts Honi as homeless. At first glance this Honi is a dreamer in a land lacking dreamers, an image shared by Rahel. Pagis' Honi "returned and opened his eyes and stood, uninvited / at the sides of highways, wrinkled up in his old coat."[98] This image of a wandering Honi "at the sides of highways" has Talmudic underpinnings, if not biblical as well. The idea of a lost individual caught between past and future recalls not only Honi emerging from extensive slumber, but Israel in the wilderness. Along these lines John Hollander argues that, like Yehuda Amichai, Pagis writes in a modern Hebrew "that is still the

[96] Bargad and Cheyet 106
[97] Carmi 143
[98] Pagis 15

biblical language."[99] Pagis' poetry, not only composed in fine-tuned Hebrew, remains aware of biblical and Judaic history. That he writes about Honi at all indicates that, like Rahel, he knew the basic Honi story and could relate to it. This is likely the result of Honi's folkloristic existence more than his Talmudic one. Also like Amichai, Pagis' intention was to reinterpret, even parody biblical figures, "very often deheroizing the major figures of the biblical epic."[100] This act of "deheroizing" is evident even in decisions to remove Honi from *Taanit* and its milieu outright. Pagis, however, is not the only writer to make such decisions. Rahel, Pinkerfeld-Amir, Shamir, as well as the Gemara itself grant Honi a human existence that his striving for prophecy, even godliness, would have never allowed him.

"Oh to be Honi the Circlemaker" – Anda Pinkerfeld-Amir

Oh to be Honi the Circlemaker

And to believe.

That when I awaken

Only flowers will bloom

From the hearts of all mortals, my peers.

Perhaps the entire world will awaken then

[99] Hollander 44
[100] Shaked 106

From nightmares of its slumber.

And we will discover, like sucklings, in purity, that which is blocked,

And be no more like Adam and Eve,

In the garden of their pleasure with its sly temptations

And be no more like Cain and Abel –

No.

And when it comes to pass, that I might awaken –

And perhaps it is better not to awaken,

Just to dream, and dream...

Anda Pinkerfeld-Amir (1902-1982), after studying natural sciences and microbiology in Poland, resettled in Mandatory Palestine in 1924. From the beginning, what separated her and poets such as Esther Raab from others, aside from gender, was a lack of allegiance to literary convention. Both Elisheva and Rahel praised Amir for her poetry's free meter and absence of rhyme. This no doubt differentiated her "from the major trend of Hebrew modernism at the time."[101] Rahel in particular was able to relate to Pinkerfeld-Amir, therefore, particularly the space she made available in her poetry for women to insert their own experiences.

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[101] *Defiant Muse* 250

This openness expands into her wider literary portfolio. Amir wrote in Polish and Hebrew, invoked "a wide range of personae, from biblical characters to Japanese geishas."[102] In fact, her poetry career was generally ignored in favor of her children's stories, for which she won the Bialik Award in 1936 and the Israel Prize in 1978. Pinkerfeld-Amir's varied resume, however, is not merely impressive for its own sake. That she continued to produce quality works, and think about different forms of expression until her final year, when she was nearing eighty, further accredits her unending desire to speak to and speak for the women of her era and those who lived in eras prior to her own.

With "Oh to be Honi the Circlemaker" the poet who operated in so many arenas wishes to become the legendary Talmudic charismatic who, among other things, once slept seventy years only to awaken in an environment altogether foreign to him. Here, the most attractive metaphor for Pinkerfeld-Amir is that of awakening. She yearns to awaken and she yearns for the world to awaken, to leave its presumed state of slumber, to at last exit the realm of Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel. Whether this is an escape from gender politics and anti-feminist rhetoric incessantly paired with Eden or an escape from the realm of one-ups-manship, jealousy, and murder epitomized by their children, what is clear is that the poet believes that these behaviors have not ceased with the simple passing of generations. Hardly. Amir wrote some

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[102] *Defiant Muse* 251

of the earliest Holocaust literature in Hebrew and a great deal of her poetry responds to her own experiences working in DP camps. Thus she knew first hand that these hateful behaviors continue to exist. It is fitting that she hoped to "awaken" from them, finally move beyond them. In no longer castigating an other, whether that other be Eve, Abel, or Woman at large, let alone the Jews, society will likewise awaken to a new, more compassionate world.

The poet must also wonder if in the end it may not be better to simply sleep and thereby continue to dream. Is it not better to just dream as Honi did for seventy long and peaceful years? Was it not better for him to remain removed from the society that ostracized him so? In his cave he was sheltered not merely from potential rainfall; he was also sheltered from those who came to him with supplications, objections and moaning. Buried in his cave, sleeping, maybe he even attempted to hide, like Adam, from an angry God. That the poem comes as late in Amir's career as it does, as close to her own death as it does, adds another layer of meaning to the notion of extended sleep. In these terms extended sleep connotes eternal peace and lasting rest.

What the Poets Share

Pinkerfeld-Amir brings all of these images to the fore. By poem's end she is almost willing herself to sleep, half asleep already perhaps, in hopes that she will soon begin "to dream, to dream..." This could serve to introduce Rahel's Honi poem too. Pinkerfeld-Amir stands to inaugurate her dreaming whereas in Rahel's work Honi, as well as Rahel, was just emerging from those dreams. Not merely emerging, but emerging with the realization that the problems existent when the dreaming began are still existent, more than existent, and now even more confounding. What the poets share, however, is a considerable lack of optimism. A sense of deep solitude resonates with the poetic voice in Rahel's work. For Pinkerfeld-Amir she yearns for this solitude, a healing, dream-filled solitude, even if this is not akin to what Honi experienced. She believes that this could resolve her hurt in a way that his isolation, nor Rahel's, ever could.

What is most significant, other than the fact that certain elements of Honi's story survive at all, is that the story discovers new life in the mind of poets in particular. So, on the one hand, emphasis shifts from rainmaking to extended sleep and dreaming. Whereas most of the rabbinic commentary focuses on Honi's controversial attempts to influence the Divine, modern poets choose the latter portion of the story. They choose the episode within Honi's tale that endures as exceedingly implausible and fantastic. Though he is unable to control the rain in the

end, he is able to display an element of himself that is decidedly unnatural. His extended sleep, his separation from his home and his society, his isolation, and his subsequent attempts to re-make himself seem to resonate with Rahel, Pinkerfeld-Amir, and Pagis. More than one of these writers gestures to a metaphor that would paint Israel as Honi, Honi as Israel. There seems to be substance to this indeed: an individual attempting unlikely feats while surrounded by those who, at best, mock him and, at worst, seek his very destruction.

On the other hand is the specific point that the Honi story has been co-opted not by modern rabbinic thinking, Jewish academia, or contemporary historians, but Zionist poets and artisans or, even more poignantly, feminist Zionist poets. The dreamers inherit a story of dreaming. As Saul Bellow once stated: "Poets have to dream."[103] With the Honi tale comes a literary artifact that is in many ways devoted to dreaming, in literal and figurative ways. The community dreams of rain. Honi dreams of influence. The rabbis dream of an end to his tirades. In the end Honi dreams for seventy years, only to awaken in a sort of dream world where he goes unrecognized, carob trees abound, and his own grandchildren are grown adults. Indeed in many ways the ending of his story reads like a fantasy:

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[103] *Dictionary of Quotations* 338

Rabbi Yochanan stated: 'Over all the days of this righteous man he was distressed by the following verse: A song of ascent: When the Lord brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like men in a dream.'[104] He asked: 'Is there anyone who sleeps seventy years in a dream?' One day he went along on the road and saw a man planting a carob tree. He said to him: 'In how long will this tree bear fruit?' The man answered: 'Seventy years.' The other said: 'Is it obvious that you will live seventy years?' He said: 'I found a world of carob trees. Just as my father planted for me, I plant for my sons.' He then sat down to eat bread and he fell asleep. A cave formed over him and he remained hidden. He slept for seventy years. When he awoke he saw a man out picking. Honi said to the man: 'Are you the one who planted it?' The man said to Honi: 'I am the grandson.' 'Conclude from this that I slept seventy years.' He saw then that his donkey had given birth to many descendants. Honi went to his old house and asked if his son was still alive. They told him that only the grandson. Honi said: 'I am Honi the Circlemaker.' They did not believe him however. He went to the House of Study and heard the rabbi saying: 'Our decisions are as clear as in the days of Honi who, when he entered, resolved any difficulty that the rabbis had.' Honi said: 'I am he,' yet they did not believe it and they did not respect him as he was due. He was distressed, sought compassion, and died.

[104] Psalm 126:1

It seems to call out for a poetic voice, if not to rescue Honi, then locate a place beside him in his cave. The story also leaves ample room for *midrash* and alternate endings. Poets such as Rahel and Pinkerfeld-Amir, Dan Pagis, and others can therefore operate within these gaps, live within them, contemplate Honi and his story, and bring a version of him to their own modern sphere. In these terms people continue to put Honi to use, not approaching him with supplications, but approaching the legend of him in hopes of adding to it and making his story of unconventionality live again for a land and a people that also defy natural conventions.

The King of Flesh and Blood **– Moshe Shamir**

In his 1954 novel, *Melekh Basar V'dam*, Moshe Shamir "deals with the confrontation pitting the mundane *raison d'etat* of the Hasmonean king, Alexander Yannai, against the values of the Torah as represented by the Pharisees."[105] Translated to English by David Patterson, Shamir's work "outlines the events of the first five years of Yannai's tempestuous reign."[106] Yannai, who ruled from 103-76 B.C.E., presided over the Jews in Second Temple times, in the period of Jewish history when, in

[105] Miron 109
[106] Patterson 5

Patterson's words, "law was forged into a tough, impenetrable shield, strong enough to fortify the national ideals against many centuries of savage buffeting."[107] So, as Patterson continues, "it is not unnatural...that a young Israeli writer, who has himself experienced the resurgence of Jewish nationhood, should have turned for inspiration to such a vital epoch in the nation's history."[108] Shamir's approach however separated him from other writers of the time. As Dan Miron notes Moshe Shamir chose to focus not on the "freedom fighters of the last days of the Second Temple," but "their opponents, the custodians of the Law."[109] Consequently by identifying with "the spiritual contenders in Jewish history" the author opened "the way for other Israeli writers to realign themselves with tradition."[110] The subversive act of allying oneself with essential traditionalism is most poignant because it occurs in a time of national inauguration. It returns readers to Jewish history as they set out to fashion a new national identity.

Shamir's book seizes history and attempts to breathe life into sections of it previously lacking human voice. While religious law making may have been at its height, our texts, texts such as the Bavli's *Taanit* and certainly other tractates, tractates such as *Sanhedrin* or *Yoma*, largely omit the faces behind those laws, the people who are merely names, denying rabbis and community members their rounded

[107] Patterson 5
[108] Ibid.
[109] Miron 110
[110] Ibid.

identities or fully tangible existences. Shamir lifts characters such as Absalom, Eleazar, Judah Ben Tabbai, and Shimon Ben Shetah from their tractates and vague historical texts and relocates them within a novel which, like Milton Steinberg's integral work, attempts to g ant them individual stories and far more complex and complicating lives.

Also worth noting is that none of this occurs in Rabbinic Aramaic, certainly not in the Yiddish of Eastern European *yeshivot*, but in modern Hebrew. Ruth Wisse points out that, as a native Israeli, Shamir, like "S. Yizhar, Benjamin Tammuz, Aharon Megged, Natan Shaham, David Shahar, Hanoch Bartov and Shulamith Hareven wrote in the emerging local idiom."[111] He did so, moreover, even as the time period he focused upon did not know the language in this form. That he frames Jews of Second Temple times with the language of 1950s Tel Aviv and Haifa represents the simultaneous existence of what was and what is. In these terms Shamir's novel is a literary portrayal of the dichotomy played out on the streets of everyday Israel even now (and certainly in the 1950s). Another idea is that even as Shamir's novel presents the past, it makes a strong case for the present. Shamir, like Yitzhar Smilansky, Yigal Mossinson, and others was a bona fide member of the so-called *Palmach* Generation, born and raised in the country, writing during and about the State's official birth. For them there was no question that "Hebrew was the mother tongue" and their prose, "lean and straightforward," reflected

[111] Wisse 330

a new literary dynamic as much as it did new social and political circumstances."[112] The style of Shamir's novel is just that, "lean and straightforward." He refuses to turn away from or add layers of nicety to the gore, strife, and tribulation that characterized the era.

One of the figures who supposedly lived in the time period about which Shamir writes is Honi the Circlemaker. So Honi's story is here reworked and re-contextualized once again. Whereas the Mishnah carried one representation of him, the Gemara another, and later Israeli poets yet another, Shamir presents another version of the Honi tale. Though writing in the same general era as many of the Zionist poets discussed, Shamir's work is far more expansive and set within an entirely different framework, certainly literarily, but also historically. His five hundred and forty page novel is not Rahel's short poem nor does the pre-modern world of the Second Temple period resemble the twentieth century Israel Rahel and Pinkerfeld-Amir use as backdrop. Shamir was forced to go to great lengths in order to present readers, far removed from such a world, with its political and geographic layout. Put otherwise, his novel, unlike Pagis' poem or Rahel's, is not set against the realm of pioneers, immigration, *kibbutz* living, or secular Judaism as understood today in Israel. It brings readers to another time and place entirely. On the other hand, what aids Shamir in these respects is the fact that 1950s and 60s Israeli readers were looking to reconnect with their own

[112] Sachar 593

forbearers. (Patterson called it a "resurgence of Jewish nationhood"). After all, Moshe Shamir was writing at a time when Israel, a newly minted independent state, was seeking out its own identity and attempting to root itself in its own history, while diligently paving what would hopefully be a lasting national existence.

One of Honi's first appearances in the novel is as a soldier in Yannai's army. Shamir depicts the ruler as stern, with a reputation that intimidated not only opposing forces, but his own men as well: "The whole day he gave his men no rest...Whoever appeared to him deceitful, overproud, insolent or too dispirited he ordered to be withdrawn from the ranks."[113] While most men feared the leader, who "called for ropes and chains" in order to punish dissenters, Shamir immediately casts Honi as the most daring of the lot.[114] During an inspection of his troops Yannai finds Honi not only not in formation, but actually sleeping on the ground (as if to say, perhaps, here we reconnect with the sleeping Honi from the Gemara). Upon awaking Honi explains to the outraged Yannai that he is from Modiin in Judea and that he wishes to return there, "if my Lord will help me."[115] Yannai, enraged that Honi answers to this Lord, vows to punish him by binding his hands and knees and thrusting him into a fire, which he does for all to see. Next, with Honi badly burnt, Yannai paces around him and then etches a circle on the ground. He declares:

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[113] Shamir 166
[114] Ibid.
[115] Shamir 167

"Whoever enters this circle shall die."[116] None of Honi's peers were permitted to assist him therefore. If Honi, answering not to Yannai but God, desired freedom he would have to pursue it on his two scarred feet. He does just that as the others can only marvel at his determination.[117]

The episode sets the tone for the way in which Shamir will treat Honi throughout the novel. First, that he is a soldier paints Honi as a citizen much like the other citizens. That he desires his freedom paints him as a human much like other humans. Here the circle is created by Yannai, not Honi, and it becomes Honi's challenge to emerge from it. One possible implication is that history has drawn a sort of circle around Honi, which he has struggled to escape. Nevertheless Shamir's Honi still possesses unique abilities to be sure. In this initial anecdote these capabilities are not of the superhuman variety, but of determination, which may have impressed Israeli readers in the 1950s more anyhow. This is still the Honi of the Talmud, as can be seen in such motifs as his sleeping and finding himself inside a circle, yet this is also a newer Honi, a reinvented Honi. The new contexts and circumstances denote the simultaneous telling of a new story and a move away from older ones.

Later, readers experience the wedding of Honi's daugher, Naomit. Shamir thus presents not only the daughter, who is absent from historical or *aggadic* literature, but the mother of Naomit and presumed

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[116] Shamir 168

[117] The episode can be compared to one mentioned earlier in which Antiochus was also circumscribed as punishment by a foreign leader. In that tale, as reported by Goldin, as in this one, the circle is less an ennobling sign of rebelliousness, more the potential result of such rebelliousness.

wife of Honi. This too helps bind Honi to *this* world, where he lives and serves and is a member of a family. During the wedding celebration, however, the joy that spreads through the community barely reaches Honi. Shamir reports that he still suffers as a result of his damaged feet and lives in dire poverty. "Hobbling forward, leaning heavily on his stick" to glimpse the proceedings, this Honi is hardly the grand presence encountered in *Taanit.*[118] Nor does this Honi complain, not over his health, not over his poverty, and not over the state of the land. This is not an outspoken Honi or the Honi with a fiery temper and propensity to shout at man and God alike. Rather this Honi is "renowned for long silences," even at his daughter's wedding and thus in the midst of presumed celebration.[119] In this way he remained consistent with "the spirit of the Maccabees," by which the "qualities most highly valued were uprightness and probity and truth."[120] This move serves to connect Honi to a group. He is not a renegade, but part of a socio-political organization. To a great extent this new depiction actually harmonizes with the Gemara in *Taanit* 23, a text which nearly embraced Honi, framing him in more rabbinic terms and practice, pairing him with past prophets and charismatics. Shamir's Honi is one of traditional Judaism as well. He offers himself and his hopes to the "Father in Heaven," rather than engage in battle with Him. By describing Honi as feeble and placing

[118] Shamir 251
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.

him at his daughter's wedding Shamir presents sides of Honi that the Gemara omits. He is human, almost exceedingly human. His eccentricity, his otherness, comes in the form of a quiet, pious nature in times of vast upheaval and noise.

Shamir's Honi is indeed a figure of modesty. He is very much of the people. No indication is give that he is above them or separate. When a conglomerate of farmers seek him out during *Shevat* and beg him to pray for them his answer to them is a simple: "Your prayer is more important than mine."[121] This is not the response of an all-powerful holy man, but one who recognizes his own limitations and understands that the prayer of those truly in need may carry more weight than his own virulent utterances. Later, upon leaving the village "in the company of a vast multitude," he makes no "attempt to shake them off, but walked along as if he were just one of the crowd, almost as though he were accompanying them rather than the other way about."[122] In this same vein Honi "got to know the humble folk – the obscure, unlearned men without property or possessions – shepherds and smallholders, drovers and watchmen."[123] Further along on his journey he meets other "hermits, fugitives and all sorts of victims of oppression" and becomes "friends with them."[124] Along these lines, Honi's actions speak not to egomaniacal behavior, but humility and evident

[121] Shamir 362
[122] Shamir 366
[123] Shamir 362
[124] Shamir 480

compassion. Whereas he once enclosed only himself in his circle and operated as an elitist he here welcomes all within it and extends a hand to the most lowly in particular. His successes, whether in the town of Beth-Horon or Kfar Shalem, are less grand successes, dealing not with great masses, but few individuals. Now he generally speaks not with God, but with the people of the land. Once militant, defying God with lines such as, "I did not ask for this, but for the type of rain that fills pits, ditches, and caves!" Honi is here much more reticent, less prone to dramatic bellowing and far more committed to those who have become his own peers.

It is true that Shamir's Honi is a Honi of compassion, proactively so. Not only does he not seem to take a combative stand against either God or surrounding individuals, he now embraces both, displaying almost excessive empathy with regards to both. One husband, believing he and his wife have been cursed, beseeches Honi to pray for them. Honi's response reads: "God forbid...that the Lord should lay a curse upon His creatures. He is all blessing and goodness."[125] This does not harmonize with Honi's position in the Mishnah, in which he engages in unabashed battle with God, challenging God to bring the proper rains and placate the people. In *The King of Flesh and Blood* Honi acknowledges God's supremacy, but he is not merely acknowledging that God is more powerful than he is, he perceives God as "all blessing and

[125] Shamir 361

goodness." It is God who created and continues to create. It is God who decides, and decides with benevolence, the way in which world events will unfold.

Honi concedes that he cannot be of help to the ailing couple, but he can promise them that the Hebrew God is not a God of curses. Such sorcery is nonsense, Honi argues, striving to undo previous representations of his own self. Moreover, when he hears of a mendacious miracle worker who roams the country and actually goes by the name of Honi, readers witness Honi declare how he deplores "these wonder-workers." The text continues: "Clearly, then he ought to bear a grudge against the thief who was making use of his staff and has assumed his name."[126] This display of animosity against the thief (who may also be Honi's alter ego) stands as a clear and concrete renunciation of unconventional Judaic methods. When he encounters another sorcerer, a usually kind Honi declares: "Let him die...rather than live by witchcraft."[127] Such an outburst, surely memorable, remains with the reader. The line is as coarse and outstanding as some of his Talmudic declarations. Honi is as adamant now that sorcery is falsehood as he once was that he could influence God's decision-making. When the sorcerer's snake murders the sorcerer Honi exits the scene without so much as "a backward glance."[128] This exit symbolizes not only a lack of

[126] Shamir 371
[127] Shamir 364
[128] Shamir 374

remorse, but an earnest willingness to depart from depictions that pair him with snake charmers and wonder-workers surely destined for downfall.

Not only is Honi now opposed to witchcraft, he also favors more conventional means of supplication. Readers learn that upon rising in the morning he "blessed his Creator for returning him to life and for bringing back the sun to shed its light upon the earth and all mankind."[129] This resembles to a great extent the blessing still traditionally stated upon awaking: "I gratefully thank You O living and eternal Ruler, for you have returned my soul within me with compassion – abundant is your faithfulness!"[130] Shamir here represents Honi as nothing short of a devout Jew, one whose prayer methods are entirely traditional. He rises with God on his mind and in so doing again acknowledges God's (*and not his own*) sovereignty. When he prays for others his prayers are not as much haughty demands as they are more established requests. Praying for rain he states: "Look down upon our affliction, Father in Heaven, and grant us a complete and speedy redemption for the glory of Thy name, for Thou art a mighty and redeeming God."[131] If this redemption will come it will come only from God due to God's might. This can be paired with the line in the Mishnah in which Honi fails to show any respect for God's grandeur. In the

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[129] Shamir 370
[130] Adapted from *Artscroll* 3
[131] Shamir 360

Mishnah, when requesting rain he declares: "I will not move from here until you show mercy upon Your children." This is not conventional prayer structure and its tone is one of clear antagonism whereas, in the novel, the opposite is the case. He invokes more acceptable prayers and in the process distances himself from earlier displays of enmity.

In *The King of Flesh and Blood* Honi's entreaties contain a great deal of longing. He prays for the sake of his people, truly yearning that rain will come, that help will come, that redemption will come. He "murmurs sounds" that emanate "from the depths of his soul."[132] It is possible that, at least in the Mishnah to *Taanit*, his supplications were not really for the sake of the community's bettering, but for the sake of his own sense of self. By engaging in battle with God he attempted to display his own might, rather than turn his energy to those truly in need. Now he is not guided by his own desires alone, but by the desires of the people. In responding to them and praying fervently to God for them their wishes are granted, as are his.

[132] Shamir 360

Trying to Right His Own Story

A memorable line in Shamir's work comes near the back of the back book when the narrator mentions: "Anxious to prevent his fame running ahead of him, Honi tried to reach each successive place in advance of his reputation."[133] In these terms the novel stands as an attempt to present modern readers with insight into a pre-modern era particularly intriguing to the Jewish community. What also might be said is that it stands to return a dollop of individuality to numerous pre-modern characters, like Honi, whose story has been re-worked, even manipulated, by passing generations. It is true that Honi has come to embody defiance. He is rebellion. There is a sense, however, which Shamir alludes to in the above quotation, that Honi, if there ever existed a Honi, was more than that or, put otherwise, much less (and therefore more?) than that. For Shamir he is less legend, more individual. Less icon, more self. Knowing his Israeli audience perhaps Shamir intended to remove some of the romanticized luminescence from history just as pioneers had recently peeled away some of the legendary status of the land itself. This new Honi, the one anxious to "prevent his fame running ahead of him," is indeed less a single dimensional Talmudic character, less a lesson, more an embodiment of the wide-ranging struggles of post-1948 Israel. It is no surprise that readers resonated with a potential

[133] Shamir 363

rebel, a figure grappling with his own needs, the needs of his community, and scrutinizing his relationship with God.

Serah Bat Asher in Modernity

There is irony in the fact that Serah Bat Asher, a figure of astounding memory, has largely fallen away from the annals of literary history. Where her name does survive, however, following her scant biblical and Talmudic appearances is within folklore and *midrash*. These are perhaps fitting homes given her earlier story, which itself rings of folklore, perhaps even more than the early Honi stories do. Indeed the text found in *Sotah* in particular, with its myriad supernatural elements, from Serah's excessive age to the miraculous uncovering of Joseph's bones, hardly carries the tone of a history book. It is thus clear why Serah has been adopted by this group almost exclusively.[134] After all, the early material, such as *Sotah* 13, is itself folklore, a *midrashic* compilation constructed by rabbis in order to explain her, her name, and her role in the biblical text. In keeping with this the quest to explain Serah continues in such renowned *midrashic* works as *Midrash Ha'Gadol, Otzar Ha'Midrashim, Yalkut Shimoni,* and *Pesikta D'Rav*

[134] See *Honi the Circlemaker* by Barry Schwartz for an example of Honi in folklore

Kahanah."[135] These works, as well as tales that arose in the Persian Jewish community, the American Jewish community, and Israel each attempt to address questions she raises regarding memory, the importance of the past, and lasting heritage.

Professor Marc Bregman of the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion is perhaps the preeminent scholar on Serah Bat Asher-related materials. His 1996 Bilgray lecture, "Serah Bat Asher: Biblical Origins, Ancient *Aggadah* and Contemporary Folklore," which he delivered at Temple Emanu-El in Tuscon, details the literary evolution of Serah. Bregman points out that, following *Sotah*, folktales abound with regards to the life of Serah Bat Asher. This is evidenced by the cultural construction built up around her story in certain eastern communities in particular:

> Despite the Talmudic tradition that Serah was granted immortality, the Persian Jews of the city of Isfahan believed that Serah Bat Asher actually lived among them, until she died in a great synagogue fire in the 12th Century CE. This synagogue and its successors were subsequently known as the Synagogue of Serah Bat Asher. In the Jewish cemetery of Isfahan, there was to be found, at least until the end of the 19th century, a gravestone marking the final resting place of 'Serah the daughter of Asher the son of our Patriarch Jacob'...the gravesite of Serah Bat Asher

[135] See most recent Passover study guide as found on www.hillel.org

> marked by a small mausoleum known as *heder* Serah, 'Serah's room,' remained for centuries one of the most well known pilgrimage sites for the Jews of Persia.[136]

These practices, probably more than the existence of some of the actual folktales, attest to Serah's iconic status in certain sectors. It might also be said that such entities as her *heder* and the pilgrimages to it are themselves extensions of folklore. They are folklore, that is, insofar as folklore is more about the telling of myths and perpetuation of stories than an actual recounting of facts.[137] It is likely that a pilgrimage to the supposed grave of Serah meant one thing in one generation, something else in another or even meant one thing to one family line, something else to another family even in the same time period. So it is with folktales, whose meanings are fluid, altering with the times and the tellings.

During Bregman's lecture he related actual tales that he too learned by way of storytellers. This itself is an example of Serah transcending natural limits and surviving, even centuries later, vis a vis story. Bregman presents two tales in particular, one as told by a *darshan*, Mulah Shmuel Shammai of Yazd, Persia, another as told by Hakham Eliahu Mudgukshvili, originally from the village of Kolashi in Gerusina, resettled in Ashkelon. The first tale begins with a blind

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[136] Bregman 8

[137] *The Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines "folklore" thusly: Customs, beliefs, stories, and sayings of a people handed down from generation to generation.

Persian boy, Hayyim. In time his doctors abandoned all hope and conceded that they would not be able to cure him of his blindness. Hayyim's neighbors, however, instructed him to visit the tomb of Serah Bat Asher and there pray "in supplication to the Heavenly Healer."[138] The storyteller continues as follows:

> Young Hayyim prayed and fasted so that he would be found worthy to enter the room and in the evening he went to the room of Serah in Isfahan and the doorposts of the entrance opened wide before him. He entered and spread out his hands before the Heavenly Healer. He cried with a broken heart and offered his petition: O Heavenly Healer, return to me by the merit of this righteous woman the light of my eyes. But if you say: I have promulgated an irrevocable decision and I cannot repeal it, then be it known to you that my soul longs for Torah. Give me, then, my father and my king, the light of Torah. Give me wisdom to understand Your teaching. When Hayyim had finished his prayer, he fell asleep. At midnight, while dreaming, there appeared to him a woman, whose face was like the face of an angel of God. She said to him: I am Serah Bat Asher. I have joined in your prayer. Behold I bring you good tidings that God has had mercy on you and has granted your second petition. Hayyim was happy that his prayer had been answered and awoke from his dream much encouraged.

[138] Bregman 9

> As time went on, Hayyim learned Torah. He knew it and the *Siddur* and the *Mahzor* by heart. As Hayyim grew, his dream was fulfilled. He immersed himself in the depths of Torah. He became a much sought after *Hazan*, well-known preacher and a famous *Mulah*. Behold, he is none other than the *Mulah*, Hayyim Rushan ('the blind' in Iranian) from Isfahan. May his merit protect us![139]

Here the legendary status of Serah is still very much in tact. That others pray by her tomb like one might pray before the tomb of the matriarchs places her on par with them. While some may pray to Rachel for fertility, Hayyim prays to Serah for not merely sight, but insight. Where the doctors are unable to cure him physically, Serah is able to provide him with a unique ability to see, see in particular his own tradition as found in its holiest documents.

While Serah's powers remain she has also attained a distinctive air of modesty since her biblical existence. She now extends herself to all people in need and thus not Moses alone. In availing herself to young Hayyim students of her story find a Serah of compassion, a Serah who is even more than longevity and memory. Like the new Honi, this new Serah is very much of the people. This is evidenced in her simple declaration: "I have joined in your prayer." Such sentiments as "I bring

[139] Bregman 9

you good tidings that God has had mercy on you," also cast Serah as an ambassador of God, joining in the work of God, for the sake of the Children of Israel. Over time she has thus drawn not only closer to the people, but closer to the Divine, even becoming a Heavenly Healer of sorts.

It is not surprising that the Persian Jews who prayed by Serah's presumed tomb and named a synagogue for her, also took such an admiring literary stance toward her. Serah Bat Asher indeed held the potential to connect them to their ancestry just as she did in biblical times and, what is more, do so in times of excessive tribulation. It is well documented that by the 18th century the Jews of Persia, a place that was once a bastion of Jewry, particularly during earlier exiles, were nearing extinction.[140] Once holding the office of the exilarch and abounding in such learning that it fostered the writing of the Talmud, the community had been largely silenced. According to Mehran Lavy-Moheban, author of "A Brief History of Jewish Life in Persia:"

> The second half of the 17th century was a difficult time for the Jews. Shah Abbas II crusaded against Hebrew books and Jews were made to wear special hand and head gear for identification purposes. This was followed by forced conversion especially in the city of Isfahan.[141]

[140] See H.H. Ben-Sasson's *A History of the Jewish People* pages 167-181, 375, 380-381 for more on this idea

[141] Lavy-Moheban 1

The Isfahan mentioned here is also the location for the tale told above where young Hayyim, beleaguered, seeks out assistance from Serah Bat Asher, who also endured dire maltreatment. Hers came in the form of slavery, shackles, and a community's forgetfulness, their proverbial blindness. Hayyim's blindness is literal, yet his shackles are both this blindness and surrounding anti-Semitism. They deny him access to his own tradition. In seeking out Serah he unburdens her of her fears that the Jews have forgotten her just as he wishes to unburden himself of his own anguish as well.

A second tale recounted by Bregman, also with Persian roots, reads as follows:

> Once there was a king who made laws against the Jews so that people would laugh at them. He made them wear funny hats and strange clothes and odd shoes, one red and one black. So the Jews were embarrassed to go out of their homes.
>
> One day the king was hunting in the forest with his soldiers. He saw a doe and chased after it but was unable to catch her. Suddenly the doe stopped, turned, looked straight at the king and charging at him, jumped right on his head. But still the king couldn't catch her. And he was very embarrassed in front of his soldiers. So the king chased after the doe until he had left his soldiers far

behind. The doe entered a cave and the king followed. This cave had a door and the door closed behind the king and he was caught there in the dark. Then the king suddenly saw emerging out of the dark a beautiful maiden, a woman warrior with female soldiers. She called the king to come to her. She asked the king: Do you recognize me. He said: No. She said: I am the doe that you were chasing who jumped on your head and you were unable to catch. I want to know: Why have you made laws against the Jews?

The king then asked her: Who are you? She answered: I am Serah Bat Asher. Joseph was my uncle and my other uncles went down to Egypt and found him alive. When they came back home they told me to play my harp and to sing that Joseph is still alive and rules over the whole of the land of Egypt. The Holy Sprit possessed Jacob our father and he blessed me with immortality. Angles took me to *Gan Eden.*

The king promised her that he would revoke the laws against the Jews and she released him from the dark cave. The king kept his word and gave the Jews beautiful clothes so they could celebrate all their holidays. The king told the Jews what had happened to him and asked them if there was in their books someone called Serah Bat

> Asher. They answered: Yes, sure, she was blessed by our father Jacob with immortality.
>
> Now this king had a certain priest whom he called and told to remove his ceremonial hat and robe. He said to him: You are no longer my priest for what you tell me is lies. The name of the God of the Jews is truth. Then the. And then the king built a big synagogue where he had entered the cave so that the Jews could pray on all their holidays as a memorial to Serah Bat Asher.[142]

On the surface the story provides a less-than-historical framework for the aforementioned Serah Bat Asher Synagogue. Here the popular Serah *midrash* finds a home in local lore, again adjusted for the sake of a fraught Persian community. The Jews, depicted as feeble, finally rise up and encounter an oppressive monarchy head on. The story thereby allows a shamed people to reclaim their dignity, even if only on fictional grounds. It is the king who is in turn embarrassed, placed in the dark, as the doe becomes a beautiful woman, "a woman warrior" even, with a brand of strength about which the Jewish community could only dream.

This woman warrior is of course Serah Bat Asher. Though she had previously been paired with strength of memory and longevity, both of which she refers to in the tale, she is now paired with physical potency as well. After all this is what the Jews of the community, small in

[142] Bregman 10-11

number and influence, likely lacked most. Her might extends well beyond muscle, however, for she also seems to carry a mesmerizing, even enchanting kind of strength as well. It seems as if she hypnotizes the king, leaving such a lasting mark that he eventually reverses his rulings outright. He nullifies the segregating laws Lavy-Moheban referred to and actually agrees to give the Jews "beautiful clothes so they could celebrate all their holidays." He likewise orders "all the shopkeepers to sell to the Jews for less than they had been charging." Serah in effect reverses the Jews' standing in the community.

What is also striking is the king's unexpected admission that "the God of the Jews is truth." Built into the narrative is an attempt to uphold the narrative itself. If Serah, a direct relative of Joseph and Jacob, lives on then so must the Hebrew God. Moreover, the idea that she not only survives, but chooses to rescue this particular group of Jews becomes their validation as well. Their Serah story helps them locate themselves within the cannon of Jewish history and literature (just as the rabbis' Serah story helps Moses locate the bones of Joseph).

Both of the Persian folktales imbue her with even greater powers than the rabbis originally allotted her. Her memory has become stronger. Her longevity has become even more striking. That she now communicates with not only humans, but God establishes her as a de facto prophetess, and not altogether unlike Devorah or Miriam. The irony may be that, in the end, she remains as much a mystery as she

was when dwelling only in the biblical narrative. There, she was merely a name. In these folktales, she is only a folk hero. Without a day-to-day existence little is known of her. Because she still lacks a fully rounded identity she therefore remains obscure. In this vein ample room continues to exist for future *midrashim* and speculation.

Serah in Feminist Midrash

Serah also reappears in the work of various modern-day female authors. This is a slightly different version of her than the ones presented above in which Serah was portrayed as a folk hero, perpetually re-emerging (and just in time) in order to come to the aid of those in need. In the work of Ellen Frankel, for instance, the intention is to provide an essential re-construction of the biblical narrative so to grant women of that narrative more of a say in it. In these terms Serah still comes to the aid of others, but within a different type of framework.

Ellen Frankel received her PhD in comparative literature from Princeton University and is currently editor-in-chief of the Jewish Publication Society. Mira Magen, a contemporary Israeli voice, is also a feminist. She is the author of works such as "By a Hairsbreadth," a story in which "erotica is interpreted in a way that is totally different from the

norm."[143] Magen is a religious woman, lives in Jerusalem, and is admittedly drawn to the idea of viewing concepts from a "slightly skewed vantage point."[144] Thus she is not fully concerned with "what God's earthly agents might say." As she argues, "If I tried to please them, I couldn't do what I'm doing."[145] One of her short story's is titled "I am Serah's Beloved and Rachel is Mine." It effectively reworks the Bible's treatment of Dinah. Magen documents the story's previously non-existent aftermath, finally allowing Dinah to tell her tale from her own point of view. The piece appears in *Readings from Genesis*, a Hebrew anthology published in 1999. Serah's voice becomes another of the voices raised within the work, even if only in passing. As Dinah remarks early on, in her childhood, she was compared to Serah. Like Serah she was in the habit of gnawing, almost banshee-like, at the cloth of her tent. For Dinah, and thus Serah as well, the act is attributed to early frustration, society's constant stifling of their desires, and borderline rage. That the two of them are both literally and figuratively bound to the tent is an enraging reality. It becomes Magen's task, as well as the task of other *midrashists*, feminist or otherwise, to release Serah of her literary confines.

With *The Five Books of Miriam* Ellen Frankel authored an imaginative text that aims to provide myriad women of the bible and

[143] Arts page on www.virtualjerusalem.com
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid.

Jewish history with the voice long denied them. This sounds a great deal like a back-cover blurb and, indeed, Harold Kushner and Judith Plaskow, both of whom appear on the back of the book, make note of the fact that Frankel ambitiously attempted to provide these women, Lilith, Sarah, Hagar, Dinah, Huldah, Esther, as well as others with an opportunity to comment on the story that the bible's authors allotted them. Each of Frankel's characters therefore speaks in the first person, speaking out, as it were, in a way they were never able. Each of them can now become an *I*, a *me*, whereas previously they were only *you, you women, you sisters and wives, you mothers.* In the process they are also granted a more complete identity. Leah is now Leah the Namer. Dinah is no longer Dinah, but Dinah the Wounded One. Esther is Esther the Hidden One.

Included in the narrative is Serah Bat Asher or, as Frankel names her, Serah Bat Asher the Historian, Granddaughter of Zilpah. That she is found on these pages with such luminaries as Eve, Sarah, Rebecca, and Miriam already buttresses Serah's status. Within the Torah, female presence was more often than not overshadowed by men or missing entirely. Serah was mentioned on only two occasions, and thus surely marginalized, but not nearly as marginalized as the countless who never attained narrative status. In *The Five Books of Miriam*, a would-be sacred document of female prophetesses, Serah is allowed to emerge from these few biblical cameos. Her role of historian and keeper of

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ONE WEST FOURTH STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10012

memory, which the rabbis made extensive use of in *Sotah* 13a, is here validated by Frankel. Serah is no longer *utilized*, present in order to fill a literary aperture. She is now in possession of her own identity, her own emotions and passions.

In the commentary Serah's voice is found, not surprisingly, within *Parashat Vayiggash*, as Jacob leads his relatives down into Egypt. Serah's comment on the famous expedition reads as follows:

> I remember the trek down to Egypt – now that was some move! We left so much behind – our family burial place in Makhpelah, all the familiar landmarks, even our neighbors' forbidden gods – to go to a land we did not know. How different for us would Egypt be, where nature was governed not by rains but by the flooding Nile, where sedentary farmers despised shepherding nomads like us, where a single god-king ruled supreme.[146]

Though somewhat hokey, the lines are telling nonetheless. Serah is remembering. She is found literally re-membering the way in which the story appears in the Torah. In Genesis 46 the report is inevitably more succinct and almost entirely bereft of detail. Readers learn that Jacob and his children "took along their livestock and the wealth that they had amassed...thus all Jacob and all his offspring with him came to Egypt. He brought with him to Egypt his sons and grandsons, his daughters

[146] Frankel 84

and granddaughters – all his offspring."[147] Among these "daughters and granddaughters" is Serah, a silent Serah who is part of a list and little more. Not so for Frankel, who allows Serah to point out the hopes she had in going down, the sense she had of her new environs. And yet we are not only given a Serah looking back, recalling the trek, but a Serah of the trek, very much within the trek. That is, she now becomes a biblical narrator. She tells us the story just as she simultaneously looks back upon the narrative, comments on it, and explains it. In this sense Frankel is right in deeming her "the historian." She is communal memory, recalling the location of Joseph's bones within the narrative itself, but also teaching her story to contemporary readers. This likewise places Serah beside Moses, who also managed to address the text from within the text.[148] In so doing Moses became *Moshe Rabbienu*, a prototypical teacher of Torah. By acting similarly Serah makes a case for her own ability to school others in the biblical narrative.

In *The Five Books of Miriam* another place in which Serah chimes in is that of *Parashat Ki Tissa*, Exodus 30:11-34:35. There, once more, she operates as historian. Regarding worship of the goddess Asherah Serah's comment reads:

> Asherah worship probably began among the Israelites when they first settled the land and continued through the

[147] Genesis 46:3-7
[148] As noted earlier, this occurs in *Sotah* 13, at which point he refers to Genesis 50:25.

> period of judges and kings until the Babylonian destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Her cult was particularly strong in the northern Israelites capital of Samaria, where King Ahab and his foreign queen, Jezebel, introduced Asherah worship into priestly worship and ritual.[149]

This is Frankel validating her not by constructing *midrash* around her, as seen in the Talmud, but by granting her more of a comprehensive existence. Here it is clear that Serah does not exist to fill a mere literary gap or even to perform miracles as she did in the aforementioned folktales, but to teach and exist as a more human character. Such a moment occurs in *Pesikta D'Rav Kahana* as well. There, as Rabbi Yochanan "was sitting and expounding how the waters (of the Red Sea) were made into a wall for Israel...Rabbi Yochanan explained they were like opaque walls. Serah the daughter of Asher grew angry and said, 'I was there and they were like nets!'"[150] Here her role of historian is validated once more as she opposes the respected rabbi and teacher, who must acknowledge that Serah's words carry more weight than his in this instance. In these terms Serah becomes more than an exodus or association with Moses. She is an individual in possession of not only longevity, but wisdom and an ability to educate others by way of her tales.

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[149] Frankel 140
[150] *Pesikta D'Rav Kahanah* 11:13

In the above terms Serah Bat Asher draws a comparison to what Tikvah Frymer-Kensky refers to as "the biblical Lady Wisdom of Proverbs 1-9."[151] These early verses in Proverbs depict wisdom itself as female, a concept rooted in the grammatical construction of the text. Frymer-Kensky even suggests a "goddess of wisdom" who may be behind the work, although it is traditionally attributed to King Solomon.[152] Though Serah Bat Asher is likely not this "goddess of wisdom," she might be considered one of them. Verses such as 1:24 sound like a statement she might have made to Moses or all of Israel for that matter: "I did call you but you refused. I stretched out my hand, but no one was listening."[153] So too with: "Long life is in wisdom's hand."[154] Frymer-Kensky argues that, as an extension of the all-knowing mother, the "goddess of the nursery," who regularly transformed grain into bread, wool into cloth, and herbs into medicine, women were often seen as "mistresses of occult and esoteric knowledge."[155] Serah, who magically unearthed Joseph's bones, survived not only the exodus, but into works by those like Frankel, indeed becomes such a figure.

A similar idea appears later in Proverbs as well. A translation of 31:26 reads: "Her mouth is full of wisdom, her tongue with kindly teaching."[156] *Midrash Mishlei* in fact argues that the verse refers to Serah

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[151] Frymer-Kensky 329
[152] Ibid.
[153] Proverbs 1:24
[154] Proverbs 3:16
[155] Frymer-Kensky 329
[156] Proverbs 31:26

Bat Asher, "who saved with her wisdom."[157] Where the rabbinic authors of *Sotah* can only attribute memory to Serah, these laters *midrashists* concede Serah's wisdom as well. This development, though subtle, is significant. For Frankel too Serah is not a mere collection of memories, but a sage, teaching and telling throughout the generations.

Though Frankel's text is unmistakably *midrash*, neither it nor Magen's work nor the classical works of *midrash* should be discredited as lacking historicity or authenticity. What redeems it is what redeems the female characters within it: the overdue presentation of stories long silenced. From this new Serah readers learn history and wisdom itself. Readers learn to remember (re-member). As she moves from the biblical portrayal of her, in which she was a figure of relative passivity, to more updated portrayals, Serah progressively acquires her voice. Authors of these modern texts, both those who are and are not mentioned above, reconstruct her story not merely for Serah's sake, however.[158] They do so with contemporary readers in mind. In this way Serah shares her knowledge with not only Hebrew slaves in ancient Egypt or students in Rabbi Yochanan's classroom or Jews in Isfahan, but present and future readers, present and future generations seeking to learn her story and their own.

[157] See most recent Passover study guide on www.hillel.org
[158] Such as Avivah Zornberg

VI. New Fictional Renderings

I view this section of the thesis as my opportunity to add to the cross-generational dialogue and thereby place my own voice beside the voice of past tellers. The story I intend, however, is not a corruption or a manipulative co-option of Honi the Circlemaker or Serah Bat Asher, but an attempt at recontextualizing the two characters for the sake of modern readers. Here the characters are allowed to truly express themselves. They can claim the narrative voice, that is, and thereby live rather than live as mouthpieces, pawns, or teachings. I believe that this strategy harmonizes with the notion that every generation is obligated to interpret its Torah, to turn and turn it, forever reading with fresh eyes, perpetually seeking new questions.

Everything Used To

An Original Short Story

Over her shoulders she wore a wide gray blanket and it trailed down behind her through the leftover city snow, like the train of an old wedding dress. As she went slush connected beneath the threads, like she was clearing a path behind her in case she wanted to turn around. She looked away from the neon of the Tower Records sign, almost laughing that she was still not used to things like this. But then, she never acclimated to anything and she'd be damned if some Tower Records at Fourth and Broadway would change that. Two Latinos in soiled aprons and rubber shoes puffed at their cigarettes and stared at her gait like people always had: as if she were not at all Serah the daughter of Asher, but Old Serah, Old Serah the Banshee.

In the coffee shop she sipped from a mint tea containing no sugar. Her red blanket, now strewn over the empty chair beside her, leaked slush and gray water underneath her table and two others. Her sipping was so slow that entire parades, heading to Wall Street or the Tisch School or home from a night shift, came through the door between the

time she lifted the cup and the time she set it down on its saucer. A boy with his mother gaped at Serah's pace, and her fingernails, which were half as long as her forearms, and her skin, which was yellow under her eyes, almost purple at the back of her hands. Her hair, once blonde, was now the color sand, with some gray, some gold, and a sprinkling of ruby. It hung down past her waist when she unfurled it, which she never did, certainly not in the coffee shop, with all of its ridiculous Christmas music and cheer.

She pulled The Sacred Book of Everlasting Memories from the inside of her first sweater, which was beneath two others, and by now little more than two pockets, shoulder pads to help her appear broader, and the faded picture of a desert scene. The Sacred Book fell open on the table and three pages slipped away from the binding. She nudged them back where they belonged, straightened two others, and turned to her bookmark, a flat stone no larger than an infant's thumb. Serah started to write the day's entry and the boy at the next table, who was fifteen and lived in Rego Park and thought he had seen every language there is, stared at what was neither English nor Spanish, neither Hebrew nor Arabic, but a series of symbols that looked like it mixed all of these, but was none of these.

"Holy..." he managed, with the word falling off his bottom lip as he tried to hide behind his latte.

Serah wrote as slowly as she drank, as if time didn't quite matter, and a staring kid at the next table made no difference at all. Not to her. She finished the entry, only one line today. It read: Maybe Today. Immediately she rubbed her finger over the words, which were actually non-words, and she continued to rub until there was little more than a smooth smear of black ink. The boy watched and noticed that each of her fingertips were black. Today, without thinking, she rubbed with the inside of her left ring finger. Sometimes it was the pinky. Sometimes the middle finger. It was as if the memories she wrote into her ragged book she then rubbed into herself. The memories and the prayers and all of the sadness went into her, back into her, right through her fingers, right into her.

With the Sacred Book of Everlasting Memories back in the pocket in her first sweater, Serah pulled the personals from the front pocket of her third sweater, which was caked with dried mud and smelled faintly of the sea, which she hadn't seen in centuries. She flopped the newspaper open and leaned in so close that her nose brushed the little letters on the page.

The entries all looked the same to her, everyone lying about their height and their abilities. But she too had lied, or at least allowed facts

and stories to dance so closely with each other that the one came out looking like the other, and vice versa. White, male, fifty-five, seeking young woman who knows how to have a good time. Korean man, thirty-five, seeking someone who is considerate and knowledgeable. Serah laughed into the page, a loud HOOT that caused the lady working the register to drop a fistful of quarters. African American man. Polish seeking Polish. Athletic. Affluent. Egyptian man, elderly, looking for an understanding companion. She stared at this one longer than she did at the others, but then continued down the page. Then down the next page as well. On the bottom of the final page, following dozens with a good sense of humor, even more with a good build, and more still claiming to be cultured, she stopped.

What first caught her eye was that the ad did not appear in the standard one-inch by one-inch box, but in a circle, a perfectly round circle, whose circumference was almost as large as that of her teacup. It was black, like all of the print on the page, but it was bolder. Bolder and unashamed, but also with a great deal of white space, which Serah stared at for longer than she realized. She never noticed this ad before, in all the years she looked through the personals. She wondered if she had seen it, but forgotten about it, or maybe even contacted the fellow, this Honi of Circles. No, she would have remembered the name. She was not one who forgot or, at least once upon a time, she was not one who forgot. Besides, she was sure she never contacted anyone,

especially someone pitifully claiming: Lonely, aged, once strong, seeking the same. Maybe he was one of the Goths that lingered outside her building, the kids trying so hard to be different, who poked fun at her, at her blanket, at her fingernails, at her hair, and all of her wrinkles, the millions of wrinkles which were also growing not only their own wrinkles, but their own memories.

That night, lying on the straw mat that served as her bed, in her miniscule studio, in her three-floor walk-up building at the corner of Avenue B and Sixth Street, Serah put down a sketch of a boy she once knew. She mourned him every night, just before sleep came to her, and then she dreamed of not only her short time with him, when they all lived between places, but of the time he actually came to her, for her help. The sketch was ancient, carved into a reed, and no larger than the back of her hand. In it his hair fell across his face in three waves and his face glowed, especially in the cheeks. She closed her eyes and could almost see him again, standing at the shore, with not only her looking up at him, but everyone looking up at him. She turned the sketch over, rubbed her hand over the fading *mem* on its other side. She had managed to rub the rest of the name out over the years, which she wished she hadn't done. All she'd wanted to do was touch him again.

When sleep did not come, she got off of the mat, which usually took between twelve and fifteen minutes. She shuffled to the corner, stepping over a pile of sand, the reed, a tapestry, and two dried out dishes of stew, and she lit the main torch. Pulling her gray blanket over her shoulders she shuffled to the telephone, which was in the apartment when she came to it. She hated that phone. Partially because no one ever called her. Partially because she never had anyone to call. She dialed the number and the ringing sound at the other end of the line startled her. She thought to hang up, but a voice replaced the ringing and she knew it was too late.

"The ad," was all she could muster.

"Yes."

"It's you. From the ad."

"Yes," he said, trying to conceal the weeping that came over him in an instant. "I wrote it for you," he said, his tears falling onto the receiver with such force that Serah felt her own cheeks go moist.

"You know me," she said.

"I know of you," he said.

"People know of me," she said.

"Yes."

"They think they know of me."

"Yes," Honi said. "Me as well," he nearly dropped the phone while clearing away a tear.

"You?"

"I would like to meet you," he said.

"Yes. A meeting." This was happening too quickly. Serah was accustomed to measuring her time, measuring her thoughts.

"I occasionally attend a Seniors Night at the synagogue."

Serah laughed into the phone, a loud HOOT. She could not remember the last time she did this twice in the same day.

"We can meet at the Seniors Night and have a meal if we want. We can talk there."

"You want me to come to your Seniors Night. What kind of place has this Seniors Night?"

"It takes place in the Village."

"I go to a coffee house in the Village," she said. "I live in the Village," she decided not to say.

"I've seen you."

"You are a spy too?"

"I see you when I walk. I walk circles around my neighborhood. It's good for my legs. I don't want the Osteoporosis you know."

Serah stared at the sketch at the back of the reed. In the light of the torch she could see her own breath.

"Tomorrow night at 6:00," Honi said. "I will look for you."

The speaker began with a tribute to all of those who had passed since the last Seniors Night: Mr. Feldman, Mrs. Grossman, Dr. Linderman... The list read like a census and after each name at least some shook their head, others tried to hide their tears. Others cried openly. The speaker looked young, Serah thought, maybe seventy, and far shorter than she. Lingering in the back, she watched as he introduced the evening's topic, Telling Our Stories. She let out another HOOT when she heard this, which caused most everybody to turn around. Many around her already gawked at her nails, her garb, and her hair, and this was in a room of false hips, false teeth, wigs of every color, and wheel chairs as shiny as the cars that zipped past her building every morning.

Of those to turn around one was Honi of Circles, who until then had been warding off the supplications of two women at his table. They wanted to know how he looked so good at his age, not that they knew his real age, and whether he could help them look so young. Honi spotted Serah and stared longer than even the two rabbis at Table A and Mrs. Cahn, who claimed to know everyone, and their story. Honi fought through the crowd, relinquishing his seat in order to get to Serah at the back of the room. The speaker dimmed the lights in order to present a slideshow from his recently completed memoirs. Honi circled nearly the

entire room so as not to obstruct anyone's view of the screen. By the time he was half way to Serah he was crying again.

"Oh enough already," Serah thought to herself, when she saw him coming toward her with the tears flowing over his face. It was like the Nile itself, right there in the *Eytz Chaim* assembly hall. He too was shorter than she was and was too round at his belly and in his face. She considered leaving just before he could reach her.

Reaching her, he took her hand in his and immediately broke two of her fingernails near the base. They weren't accustomed to human touch and snapped under his grip, which was sweaty, but delicate.

"I shouldn't be here," she declared, looking down at him. He appeared even fatter in his face at the close distance.

"We're telling our *stories*," he said, and for a second she thought he was joking with her. When he smiled the layers of skin around his neck circled his chin. He wiped away a tear and continued, "telling our stories," he said again, half to Serah, half into the dark of the room.

She clicked her tongue. "Well I can't tell mine," Serah said.

He nodded.

"Maybe you'd be more comfortable outside," he said, gesturing toward the doorway. Before she could respond he led her toward the lighted lobby. Serah was happy to be removed from the crowd, far happier than she let on, and she paused to brush a lone strand of hair out of her face. She wanted to explain to Honi why she would have to go

home now, how she wasn't ready this, but he continued straight through the lobby, still holding her hand in his, with his sweat rubbing off of him, onto her, over the ink marks on her fingers and the veins crossing her palm.

Suddenly they stood outside, together, and rain fell on them not too heavily, nor too lightly. It wasn't raining only a few minutes ago and Serah, who was rarely surprised by anything, found herself surprised. For a moment, she didn't mind getting wet. Especially if it meant she was closer to home. Honi stood staring toward the sky, at the rain itself, with a hint of an unabashed, even challenging expression on his face. The drops collided with his pudgy cheeks and then bounced away. For Serah the drops remained in her hair and dampened her sweaters until she felt twice as heavy. She worried that the Sacred Book, in her innermost sweater, would be soaked through.

"I have trouble sleeping," Honi said. "I used to be able to sleep and sleep. Now, nothing."

"I used to..." she started, feeling for the book.

"We used to..." he said.

"Everything," she said, hoping she wouldn't cry.

"Everything used to."

"Yes."

"And now," Honi said, "now I don't know who I am. I don't know who I really was. I don't know that either."

"Yes," Serah said.

"I don't know what I'm to do," he said, pushing away what was either a tear or a drop of rain. Maybe it was both somehow, Serah thought, staring down at him as he cried. She worried she would cry too. Her lower lip quaked, a quaking that none had ever seen before, and the fact that it was quaking made it quake even more. She gritted her teeth and she closed her eyes, which Honi now did as well.

When the rain began to fall in torrents, finally, she took him by the hand and they returned to the synagogue and, together, they watched the presentation from a back corner.

VII. Conclusions

In a recent *New York Times* article Amos Oz suggested that in Israel "the lines between fantasy, invention, documentation and confession are not necessarily as sharp as they are in other places."[159] David Stern, author of *Rabbinic Fantasies*, made the same assertion with regards to rabbinic texts, where *aggadot* and *halachot* often appear within the same chapter, even the same line. What Oz and Stern refer to may simply be an extension of a biblical account that also blends history and legend, providing verisimilitude in the form of geography and demography while also relaying far-reaching mythical tales of parting waters and talking donkeys. The ultimate effect from the Torah forward is a wider traditional narrative that tends to mingle all of these methods.

The cross-generational story of Honi the Circlemaker and Serah Bat Asher likewise represents both historical and fictional elements. Though far-fetched in nature and containing numerous elements that defy human ability, where both tales become historical is in their telling. They become part of history insofar as the stories, if not the characters within the stories, become historical entities. The Honi narrative, even with its Talmudic inconsistencies, is as much a part of the Jewish story as any other. Both he and Serah root themselves in tradition and history

[159] *The New York Times* – December 13, 2003

not by way of ritual or liturgy, but in the perpetual telling and re-interpretation of their tale.

Indeed these tales are retold and re-interpreted with such frequency following the destruction of the Second Temple and exile that the stories themselves begin to take on an identity. Changing over time, evolving from unadorned literary artifacts to more elaborate and defining *midrashim*, the stories essentially begin to act as characters. They grow over the ages, developing new traits, more confidence, more of an ability to exist on their own. Serah, for instance, can eventually stand without incessant association with Joseph or Moses. What is more, if these stories are characters, then they are characters within a much broader Jewish story. They assume a place alongside an endless number of rulings, accounts, anecdotes, poems, and fables, all of which also become characters. The result is not a consistent message or theology, but a series of inherent messages and theologies that challenge the community to base their belief on myriad messages and theologies. Judaism becomes Judaisms. As I saw on a bumper sticker in Jerusalem: There is more than one way to be Jewish. So it is with the narrative of the Jews. There is always more than one version, always more than one reading, always more than one interpretation.

What Honi and Serah also share is a willingness to extend themselves for the sake of future generations. Honi encounters the children of his children while they are out planting carobs. They provide

the following explanation for why they do this: "I found a world of carob trees. Just as my father planted for me, I plant for my sons."[160] At the end of the passage these grandchildren also attempt to converse with the Eternal One, yet they do so in more refined forms than Honi ever did. In these ways they reinterpret Honi. With their actions his grandchildren already began the process of re-creating their grandfather and thus re-creating his story. He survived to their generation and would ultimately survive well beyond it. So it is with Serah, who was unequivocally interested in the future, at least according to the rabbis. Like Honi she yearned to connect past to present to future. The daughter of Asher, she became the grandmother of memory, reminding those all around of where they had been. All of these stories, so interested in future, now exist in 2004, in 5764. By inheriting them we become part of Honi's ever widening circle, participants in Serah's mission to remind. Just as past readers managed to become active players, we too join these stories with our own, weaving our own ideals and questions and struggles into them. In this way we further enrich the tapestry of Jewish narrative for not only our sake, but the sake of our children, and theirs as well.

[160] Taanit 23a

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