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**STAGES OF TORAH**  
A Congregational Guide to Bibliodrama

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for Rabbinic Ordination

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To my Mom and my Dad  
For always believing in my dreams,

And to Melyssa  
For helping me realize that dreams do in fact come true.

## **STAGES OF TORAH: A CONGREGATIONAL GUIDE TO BIBLIODRAMA**

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To offer thanks and praise.

How necessary

And how neat.

That is kind of what prayer is like.

We say thank you to God for all the blessings in our life.

But we also take time to say thank you to certain people who are blessings in our life.

For helping

And guiding

And encouraging.

Laughing and loving.

I am honored to have as many blessings as I do...

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To Mom and Dad

For always believing in every dream I have ever had.

And to Melyssa,

For helping me realize that they do in fact come true...

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **What is Bibliodrama?**

You are in the story. You are the character that you read about. You are Eve contemplating not listening to the serpent and not eating the fruit. You are Abraham afraid of killing your son and of how your wife may react to that. You are Jacob struggling. You are Joseph in Egypt. You are Moses wandering. You are you, standing at Sinai. Hearing the words. Experiencing the moment. Being the story. You are in a Bibliodrama.

The Torah is an unfolding drama. It is full of intrigue, character development, intricate plot lines and subtle allusions. It is rife with action, exposition and questions. "Torah is a book about what is happening, not about what has happened."<sup>1</sup> It is a book about experiences and it is a book about living. As a result, the Torah should be studied as such. Bibliodrama, the following method to be presented over the next few chapters (stages), allows for just this.

Imagine taking the Torah stories, the ones with which we have grown up, the ones that have united our days in Hebrew school to our children's days in Hebrew school, then take these characters and dramatize them, making them come to life. What if we looked not at the two dimensional character that lives on the page, but at the three dimensional possibility of the character as he or she would have lived in the world? What if we took the Bible – Biblio, and combined it with the dramatic, Drama. What we get is quite simple. It is called Bibliodrama.

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, Temple Beth Am Lecture Series (San Francisco, CA: 2004)

Bibliodrama allows for the story to come alive. It is a method through which we study the Torah in order to gain new meaning and new perspectives. It permits us, as the reader, to experience the text as an unfolding story. We mingle basic textual analysis with our own personal textual comprehension. We unite as a community to create our story based on our ancestor's story. And we uncover new meaning. Bibliodrama is a marrying of character exposition with pedagogic meaning. The result is profound, illuminating and often fruitful.

The Torah as a document is a living book. It is physically crafted from living objects and is seen as a living entity uniting our past to our present to our future. The words and the stories that live within the text have similar characteristics to our contemporary lives. The characters are alive when we allow them to come to life. And we must do this. The characters and stories teach us countless examples for our life if we permit them to. And the character's situations reflect our personal journeys, providing a new window into our own lives and new perspectives on the story's life. "Most simply described, Bibliodrama is a form of role playing in which the roles played are taken from biblical texts."<sup>2</sup>

Bibliodrama is not just a *kitsch* example of staging stories for a fourth grade Hebrew school play. It is not the trivialization of the great Torah narrative. It is quite the opposite. Bibliodrama is a fresh new way through which to study Torah. It is an interpretive playing with the stories where we can become the characters and physically connect with our tradition.

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Pitzele, *Scripture Windows: Toward a Practice of Bibliodrama* (Los Angeles: Torah Aura, 1998) p. 11

The study of Torah is a complex and multi-layered undertaking. There are many lenses through which the text can be seen. As progressive Jews, we frequently straddle the line between "Torah as Faith Text" and "Torah as Literature". This method and manner through which to approach Torah study combines this tension in a unique way. Rather than discussing the historicity of the five books or deciding with which element of the documentary hypothesis you agree, this method allows us to see the characters as characters and to understand their psychology within their literary location, creating our own stories both individually and communally.

Originally created by Dr. Peter Pitzele from methods of psycho-drama, Bibliodrama is a "tool for teaching the Bible and for forming a unique kind of learning community."<sup>3</sup> Bibliodrama allows us to see how each character acts in a particular setting. It allows us to experience what he or she is experiencing, thinking and acting. Using this method we actually begin to understand why each character acts the way he/she does. The Torah is not a hidden a book. The terse-ness of the text gives to us an outline through which we re-create the characters as real people. As a method of Torah study, we are able to experience the story as it is happening. Bibliodrama is to traditional literary and biblical interpretation what avant-garde theatre is to the Broadway stage.<sup>4</sup> Neither is meant to supplant the other, rather they enhance the meaning of both. Bibliodrama becomes for us, contemporary readers, a way into deeper meanings of our traditional texts.

Rather than reading about Abraham attempting to sacrifice Isaac, we are actually able to think about the struggle he went through. We are able to ask "What was Isaac

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<sup>3</sup> Pitzele, p. 14

<sup>4</sup> Pitzele, p. 14

thinking” and answer it based on our constructed scene and our constructed ideas based on our personal and collective observation of the text. Bibliodrama gives to us an alternative scholarly lens through which to see the story and allows us to illuminate some of the previously enigmatic moments of our tradition.

While Bibliodrama is a method of Torah Study, it is also a method of textual analysis and a way of forming a unique kind of learning community.<sup>5</sup> The process used to dramatize the story forces the reader and learner to delve into the deeper layers of the story. Using traditional biblical exegesis, we are able to discover textual nuances. But with Bibliodrama, we are not just stopping at the larger story analysis as a broad method of study, but trying to determine why a character responds in the exact fashion that he or she does. Why do they say what they say? Why does Abraham say “*Hinneni*” to his son when Isaac confronts their silent march to the mountain? What are they both thinking? And what are we thinking as active observers in the story?

This method approaches each story as a living entity, as if it is unfolding right before us. Bibliodrama allows us to see the linguistic choices and character decisions unique to each scene. We question and try to understand what is actually happening from within the story rather than seeing the story as observers from the outside.

Layered further upon these two frames, Bibliodrama is also a method of character analysis. Based on the work of Aristotle and Sanford Meisner, Bibliodrama allows the reader to get into the mind of the character as a way of understanding the story as we will see in Stage I. Delving deeper into the story and the manner of the character, the reader explores what causes and what caused him/her to act in such a way. We look at the back story and try to determine what is actually happening – to determine the subtext of the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

character. While this process allows us to tease out a creative method, it is also fruitful for legitimate and scholarly Torah study. By approaching each character as if he/she is a real person, we as learners are able to attempt to understand their respective psyche and why they acted the way in which they did.

At times attempting to understand the character's psyche can be difficult and strange. But it also allows for creative understanding based on the story. Attempting to understand the "subtext", as Meisner explains, the reader is able to create the back story of the scene under discussion<sup>6</sup>. Rather than just reading the story as a story on the page, Bibliodrama permits the reader to really question what makes the character act the way he/she did. We are then able to determine this and construct a "back-scene" of action. Creatively, then, we as the learners, construct new midrash, new white spaces between the story line to try to understand what is happening.

This method allows us, even encourages us, to try to think as the characters would think. We attempt to enter into the mindset of the characters. Bibliodrama becomes for us a creative expression of the characters and of what we are thinking about the stories themselves. This creative thinking mixed with actual Midrash has the potential to yield unique and interesting *d'verei torah*, communal understanding, discussion and improvisation as well as various creative endeavors (both scripted and otherwise).

These major principles, under the larger guise of Bibliodrama, unite to form a unique and fresh perspective towards approaching Torah study for the twenty-first century. Bibliodrama is both a method of study applied towards approaching text (as we will see in Stage II) and a scholarly/creative interpretation of Torah scenes in an avant-garde play form (as we will see in Stage III). Bibliodrama provides for us an opportunity

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<sup>6</sup> Sanford Meisner, *Sanford Meisner on Acting* (New York: Random House Publishers, 1987) p. 18

to see the Torah in a new light and has the potential to illuminate some of the most enigmatic moments.

"In Judaism we tend to think of Midrash as written or verbal elaborations on the Torah. Indeed, midrash has many roles ... at times it answers implicit questions. Midrashic commentary often adds a dimension or a psychological insight into the narrative. More than anything, it tends to enliven the archetypal stories for successive generations."<sup>7</sup> Bibliodrama allows us to be the makers of modern midrash. We become the creators of new stories and new perspectives on old stories. We are the ones who are empowered to understand the stories as they unfold in our lives. Life reflects art and sometimes art reflects life. The paradigm is never really clear. The same is true with Bibliodrama and life. What is clear, however, is that Torah is a reflection of and a projection towards what has and will come to be. Torah is a live performance. It is up to us to understand its message. This method is a way which allows us to do just that.

Over the next few pages you will enter into the scriptural windows of Bibliodrama. Stage I will begin by presenting the theory behind this work. We will examine Aristotle's notion of character and action and learn about Sanford Meisner's understanding of subtext. These ideas will ground our understanding of this method in concrete scholarly terms.

Stage II will then provide us with a step-by-step process towards using this method. This chapter will begin to walk you through the thought process and the educational method towards using Bibliodrama in a classroom.

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<sup>7</sup> Ruth Weisberg in *Objects of the Spirit: Ritual and Art of Tobi Kahn* (New York: Hudson Hills, 2004) p. 138

The first story that we will look at is the enigmatic moment involving Aaron's two sons, Nadav and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1-4). We will explore how the Bibliodramatic process is used for such a story, ending at a place where we can then enter into the creative realm. This chapter will also incorporate other methods of Biblical study to both augment and challenge our method, ultimately revealing that neither is supplanted, each only enhanced.

Stage III is the section where we will delve into the texts themselves. Using traditional biblical exegesis we will begin our journey through the texts themselves. We will be exposed to language nuances, key words, structure and setting of each of the Torah texts under consideration. There is an example of a text from each of the five books of Torah, each ending with a play on the scene – a creative interpretation and scripted Bibliodrama.

We will finally conclude our journey with some concluding thoughts about what we have learned along the way.

These texts under consideration are loosely united under the guise of the Bible in general, but specifically connected based on a few key themes which run through each story. These key themes become for us a window into our own lives as they reflect the challenges of our collective ancestors.

There are trials (נסה) through which we all wade; tests of faith which require acts of faith. There is a running theme of what it means to be "holy" (קדש), forcing us to ask the question "is holiness good or bad," and challenging our contemporary notions of holiness. We will be forced to confront our concept of time (יום) and be challenged with

the idea what makes time special. And finally, throughout this whole thesis, we will be forced to make choices.

Perhaps choice is the ultimate theme of the Torah? Perhaps this is just a running theme for our people? And certainly, this is what Bibliodrama ultimately hopes to illuminate. Choice. We make choices as we learn to become the characters. We choose. What does it mean to make it? What does it mean to learn from it? And how do we make them? You will find that Bibliodrama is a way into the wonderful world of Torah.

“... think of the Bible as a strange and holy city. You arrive at the imposing outer wall that girds the city all the way around, and you look for an entrance. You discover this city has gates, many gates. One, for example, is called the Gate of Faith; here people enter because they believe that the city was fashioned by God. There is a Gate of Mind where the scholars and the critics and the historians enter; they believe the city is endlessly fascinating to study. And there is the Gate of the Heart through which the poets and the converts pass; and next to it, just here, is a broad, low door over which the word *Bibliodrama* is inscribed ...”<sup>8</sup>

This is our entrance into our world of Torah. There are many stages through which we get to pass and many revelations we are yet to understand. This is the way in. So, now what? What is your choice?

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<sup>8</sup> Pitzele, p. 217

## **STAGE I - BIBLIODRAMA**

### **What is Bibliodrama – The Specifics**

In order to understand how to use Bibliodrama as a method, we first need to understand the two main ideas which combine to create the method of thought and study itself.<sup>9</sup> These two components unite to create the idea of Bibliodramatic study and are then applied onto the formal elements of Bible study itself. The first idea is that of Aristotle's treatise on dramatic literature, *The Poetics*. The second is the work of Sanford Meisner, the twentieth century acting teacher who developed a notion and method of understanding character. It is this very mixing of these two ideas that enables us to understand the theory behind Bibliodrama as originally set forth by Peter Pitzele. Through the mixing of these ideas, each Biblical scene can be explored in order to give the action more depth and meaning. It is from here that we then apply this method to formal biblical study.

As a way of understanding this method, we must first understand the two main ideas used in Bibliodrama and how they intersect.

#### **Aristotle**

In his treatise, *The Poetics*<sup>10</sup>, Aristotle points out the simplicity of Greek theatre. While Greek theatre, to the naked eye, was not simple, Aristotle's approach and understanding of it made it seem so. It is this idea we take to understanding our work

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<sup>9</sup> This method was originally created by Peter Pitzele based on his work in both psychodrama and literature.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970)

with the Torah. Aristotle himself was a great observer of life and a great thinker. He was also an avid play-goer. But what makes Aristotle unique, and relates specifically to our discussion here, is that he did not just see plays as pure entertainment rather he tried to understand them on a deeper level by teasing out the simple layers of each story.

In his book, *The Poetics*, Aristotle presents his method of dramatic analysis. He begins by pointing out elements of "mimesis", wherein actors and playwrights imitate life. But his major contribution goes beyond this idea.

Aristotle observes that each character follows his/her own path through the story. In his time, it was easy to document or chart, because the major Greek playwrights generally focused the story on one character<sup>11</sup>. But what makes Aristotle unique is that he follows each character from beginning to middle to end, observing the path of the character's action as an arc. This arc of character and their subsequent action shows growth almost as if each "person" were real.

Aristotle knew that theatre was not just *kitschy* entertainment, but rather a teaching tool and a mimetic device. *The Poetics* begins to tease out this idea. But what is unique to Aristotle, and relevant to us in Bibliodrama, is that somewhere along the arc of character, there is a "Character Flaw" that is revealed. Aristotle calls this a "Tragic Flaw", but it could also be seen as a "Dramatic Moment".<sup>12</sup> It is this key moment which ends up changing the trajectory of the story. It is the dramatic moment when the

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<sup>11</sup> For an example of this please consult the text of Oedipus, Antigone or other plays written by Greek playwrights.

<sup>12</sup> In other literary theory, this point in the story is referred to as the "climax". For Aristotle this is the "Tragic Mistake". For the remainder of this thesis, this moment will be known as the "Dramatic Moment" because it does not necessarily mean that a character made a mistake, as Aristotle's nomenclature suggests, the characters just acted in a way which changed them.

character acts in a way that alters his/her place in the story.<sup>13</sup> From this moment, the character is changed and the rest of the story (or episode) is affected.

Simply described, this model can be seen as an arc. The character begins at the base of the arc. The story moves forward with basic exposition, description and plot. Usually, somewhere just past the middle of the drawn arc, the character is presented with a choice. This is the moment Aristotle was speaking about.

This is the moment that Aristotle calls the "tragic mistake" and we call the "dramatic moment". The character acts and makes a choice. The rest of the story then unfolds based on the character's actions rounding out the arc<sup>14</sup> and reflecting the choice.

In this dramatic structure, there is no circular motion. The character ends the story in a different fashion than he/she begins. This is much like our personal lives. We travel along an arc of character year after year, but never return as the same person. Each choice we make affects the rest of our journey. Aristotle's notion that theatre is an imitation of life is correct on this account. Through Aristotle's simple character diagram we can begin to isolate characters in our stories. And begin understand the manner in which they act. It is this very idea that is step one in our process of understanding the method of Bibliodrama.

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<sup>13</sup> Not all "dramatic moments" are tragic in their severity hence the term "dramatic moment". Sometimes they just change a perspective or move a story along, as a result, more modern critics refer to this moment as the "dramatic moment" because it heightens the drama, not necessarily indicates the fall of a character.

<sup>14</sup> These moments, in literary analysis, are known as Dénouement and concluding action. Aristotle does not deal with this as his theory is that the Tragic Mistake is just that, a mistake.

## **Meisner**

With the first step of our method in place and in our minds, we can begin to understand the next one. The next step in understanding Bibliodrama is to address the work of Sanford Meisner, the great twentieth century drama teacher<sup>15</sup>. Meisner's main focus of his teachings concerned character. His unique perspective towards acting did not focus on the formal lines which were to be spoken but rather with the thought process that in turn influenced the lines being spoken.

His method was in direct response to Konstantine Stanislavski's method, known in America as "The Method". While Stanislavski taught that actors should recall a time in their respective personal life that was similar to the character's actions, Meisner taught that the actor had to become the character and try to understand the thought process. Stanislavski taught "emotional recall"<sup>16</sup> while Meisner taught "the reality of doing"<sup>17</sup>. Meisner taught that rather than learning the lines of the character, the actor must learn the thought process which would lead the character to say the scripted lines. The way the character thought and moved was from where success was derived.

Meisner was teaching about the sub-text of the character. What influences that character? What moves that character to say the lines prescribed? What is the history which makes the character act the way he/she does?

The reality about this method is that this is all imagined. This concept of acting forces the performer to "get into" the mind of the character he or she is playing. The result is a logical but imagined process of action – an arc of thought.

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<sup>15</sup> For a detailed biography about Sanford Meisner, see [www.themeisnercenter.com](http://www.themeisnercenter.com)

<sup>16</sup> Konstantine Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* (New York: Routledge, 1989)

<sup>17</sup> Meisner, p. 18

If we think about the idea of mimesis in theatre, this method makes perfect sense. How do we live our lives? We think. We make choices. And we act. We usually act based on our thoughts. And frequently we speak after we think. Sometimes we are moved to speak out. Sometimes we are moved to console or cry or react. All of this is our thought process. Acting is reacting to a situation as it is presenting oneself in a situation. Meisner fully believed this and his method is a testament to what he believed.

Characters are moved emotionally to act a certain way based on their internal action. The action itself becomes a manifestation of their thoughts. Take Hamlet as an example. Hamlet as the character is so moved to kill the King because he is avenging his father's death. His subtext propels his character from the first scene to the last scene based on, among other things, this underlying thought process. Meisner would teach an actor who is playing the part is that to fully understand who Hamlet is the actor must try to understand what the character is thinking. What makes him act the way in which he does? What is the story between the lines that force him to act in the manner in which he does?

Meisner's method very similar to our own lives as well. We act in certain ways. It is only our outward actions that people can see, but there is a lot of inward thinking that goes along with our actions. Think about how many times we have asked "What do you think she means by what she said?" This very question points us to Meisner's basic method – what is meant by the action and the words.

Understanding this literally also allows us to try to construct the characters. It allows us to see how they act, and, moreover, why they act. Meisner's method of reading between the lines forces us to understand the deeper meaning of the character. As a

result we are creating modern midrash based on what we know of the characters allowing the characters to become infused with new life!

## ***Why Bibliodrama***

### ***Where theatre, anthropology and Judaism all meet***

Bibliodrama is presents the future of biblical study. It is a viable method of Torah study for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and should be used as both a formal teaching tool in the sanctuary and as a method of teaching in Torah study classes. The Bibliodramatic method allows us to move beyond the basic idea of the stories and get into the mind of the characters under consideration. Rather than reading the stories as history, we seek to experience the stories as reality. This method allows us to see the characters in action, to determine what they are thinking and to see how they perform, showing how all interactions have both teaching and learning potential. Too many times Torah study becomes stifled by its own grandeur. Bibliodrama allows us to utilize some great elements of theatre text theory and biblical theory to create a truly remarkable method of study.

But more than the study implications this method presents, Bibliodrama also has a direct reflection of some great avant-garde theatre movements. Bibliodrama itself becomes an avant-garde concept of theatre through its creative use of text and its guerilla elements of setting.<sup>18</sup> The method itself lives directly in the middle of formal theatre study and biblical study. Some of the elements at work, which make Bibliodrama so

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<sup>18</sup> Please see stage III's examples of the plays themselves and the author's note at the beginning of each play.

influential, tap directly into some of the great social theatre artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Bibliodrama is not an isolated event. This is not a method that can exist alone. It only lives in a group setting. Much like the basic idea of Shakespearean theory, the play needs to be performed rather than just read in a vacuum<sup>19</sup>. The Bible is the same way. As such, a community becomes involved and ideas are shared.

This shared practice aligns nicely with the concepts presented by Augusto Boal whose treatise, *The Theatre of the Oppressed*,<sup>20</sup> focused on the use of performance as a political tool. He believed that his performances told the true stories of the people he was dramatizing. The result was a strong community brought together by a common story. Bibliodrama accomplishes a similar idea. The use of a text with a rich tradition brings together a community.

Bibliodrama also follows along a similar path of Victor Turner's theory about ritualized behavior<sup>21</sup>, Bertolt Brecht's use of text as a pedagogic teaching tool<sup>22</sup>, and Richard Schechner's use of environment to tell stories relevant to his community.<sup>23</sup> Bibliodrama builds on communal, ritual and anthropological elements which draw out the greater possibilities of this method of study.

Why use Bibliodrama other than as a unique way of approaching the Torah text? There are three main elements to answer this question. Bibliodrama allows us to create

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<sup>19</sup> This is a common explanation John Bard, of the Royal Shakespeare Company, would make in various classes recorded by the BBC.

<sup>20</sup> Augusto Boal, *The Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1979)

<sup>21</sup> Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987)

<sup>22</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957)

<sup>23</sup> Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985)

community through ritualized behavior realizing the ideas of Victor Turner.<sup>24</sup> People come together to create meaning. This action itself begins to create and make ritualized behavior and the communal interaction and understanding of the text creates a level of catharsis. Bibliodrama as a communal means of study then takes people from a liminal moment of discomfort and satiates their desires through unified and created action which by definition, is ritual.

Bibliodrama also permits us to be a Voice of Community. Because the Torah is not a book about what happened, rather a book about what is happening, we are able to realize the Brechtian pedagogic elements therein to teach, convey and reflect our actions in the contemporary world. And Bibliodrama helps to create this community through the collective action of study, performance and realization.

Bibliodrama becomes a viable and academic method through which to explore the characters and the text which provides new insight into the psychology of both the characters and action. The result is the promulgation of new ideas as to the meaning of the stories.

Bibliodrama is a creative way to approach Torah study in general, not specifically the "showy" element of performing. It is ripe with great possibility and is used to help illuminate some of the most enigmatic texts in our tradition.

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<sup>24</sup> See Victor Turner, footnote above, for a longer discussion.

## **STAGE II — BIBLIODRAMA IN ACTION**

Now that we know the basic model of Bibliodrama, we are now ready to begin to apply the method to the Torah text itself. Remember that this method is intended to do two things. First it is a manner in which we can understand the text as it is unfolding in our lives, in an attempt to tease out the psychology of the character. And second, this method is designed to help illuminate enigmatic moments and pose questions which help elucidate the text itself. The results are creative, challenging and courageous. This chapter will walk you through the actual method previously presented in an effort towards understanding some of the more difficult texts of the Torah. We will explore the characters, their thought process and their respective actions on our way towards making “sense” of some challenging stories in the Jewish tradition. By observing the Torah text through the Bibliodramatic lens, we will begin to reveal the characters actions and motivations which in turn will help us construct a more creative analysis and understanding while allowing us to ask serious philosophical and theological questions to otherwise opaque stories.

### **Bibliodrama – The Method In Process**

This model is specific to narrative and dialogue based Torah stories where the goal is to observe them as little scenes<sup>25</sup>. Such scenes have explicit dramatic action, story exposition and frequent actual dialogue. They are any story that does not just present the

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<sup>25</sup> There is another, slightly deeper method of Bibliodrama which helps to create the “back-story” in non-narrative texts by presuming the anonymous narrator is a character. This method will not be addressed and explicated in the scope of this thesis.

legal codes or grandiose descriptions. Once the story has been identified, the goal is to isolate the characters from the actual scene, permitting the reader to observe each specific character's action and trajectory in the larger story. Thus seeing how each character's actions fit in the larger scheme of the story. By doing this, we are extracting the characters and following his or her specific arc of action, using Aristotle's ideas, rather than trying to understand the greater scene and its theological implications in one larger frame<sup>26</sup>.

In order to do this, a group leader or teacher first needs to explain the overall idea of Bibliodrama – that is a dramatic literary lens through which we will open a window into new meaning and questions concerning the biblical text. The teacher or group leader functions in a two-fold manner. On one hand, he/she is a teacher of the text. But on another hand, he/she is a director of the understanding of the unfolding drama. Leaders and teachers oscillate between these two roles while leading the group through the Bibliodramatic method.

Once the text is identified, the leader will then lead the learners through the specific Torah scene by simply reading it. This simple reading is not meant to be anything profound (though often can be), and the leader is not trying to do anything more than teach the basic reading of the text. This process is just a way to familiarize the entire group with what is occurring in the story from a larger perspective<sup>27</sup>. Only after reading the scene on its basic level can we begin the task to determine the characters

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<sup>26</sup> For this thesis, we will be addressing some of the more difficult passages in the Torah. It is important to note, however, that this method can be used for all biblical study as a way of understanding character exposition and communal interaction. The use of character isolation allows us to see the biblical story as a human story and a lived experience.

<sup>27</sup> It is just this very "larger perspective" which Bibliodrama challenges, but the big picture is nonetheless necessary before the details can be illuminated.

involved in the story. We literally ask, "who is involved in this story?" The goal is to answer this question as conclusively and succinctly as possible.

Once the leader has received the responses, he/she will then compile a list of characters involved. This does two things. On one hand it shows the learners what we are talking about. And, on the other hand, it is a physical way of actually isolating the characters. It is important to remember that sometimes very active characters may not be concretely seen. There could be a narrator of the story, whose perspective and action is important. There could be angels (מלאכים) who see what is happening in the story, but only make one comment or appearance at the end. There could also be objects or other non-specified people who have some element of importance to the larger story. In the isolation of character section of this exercise it is important to think carefully about what is going on and to begin to ask questions about the action of the story. A leader or a learner should not be afraid to keep looking at the simple story for clues to other characters. And all potential answers should be discussed. No person's idea should be eliminated because it seems outlandish and off the wall. Frequently it is through these questions and deeper probing that we can uncover new characters involved and illuminate new meanings otherwise not seen.

While on the surface this question of "Who are the characters" may seem easy, determining who the characters *are* can be a difficult task. The basis of Bibliodrama is to understand both the action and the psychology of the characters involved in the respective stories as they act together to make the larger Biblical tradition.

Once the characters are all identified and isolated, we can begin to explore the story. This process is as if we are looking from the inside out. And, in so doing, we are

looking at the layers of the text itself to begin to determine who are the actors in the Torah drama.

Once these actions are completed, we can begin to apply the Bibliodramatic method presented in the first chapter by formally amalgamating both Aristotle and Meisner into our discussion. Once the characters are determined, the group will begin to plot and think about each character on the Aristotelian character arc. Where does the character begin in the scene? What action does he or she participate in? What is the pivotal moment for the character (the tragic mistake, in Aristotle's terms)? We are basically asking the question – "What happened to the character in this scene?" We then try to answer it and chart the action on the arc of character.<sup>28</sup>

By placing the characters on the character arc, we begin to see the actual action of the character as a forward movement. As the Torah text is mimetic in many ways to our contemporary lives and, equally our lives move along a forward path, all action that occurs in Torah can be seen this way as well. By isolating each character, we can see their specific action as if they are living and experiencing the drama of the Bible. And, just as we make mistakes in our lives, so too do the characters under consideration. It is now our opportunity to figure out why they acted the way in which they did. We are probing the story and the actions to determine the sub-text of the characters actions. It is from there that we begin to explore the scenes creatively.

After the questions of "what" was the action are answered, we begin to ask "why" did they occur. Just as we are layering the characters onto the story under consideration, we are layering our questions upon our analysis of each character. We begin with the

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<sup>28</sup> It is important to note that this method forces the student to think outside of the box and to challenge themselves. This process can be scary because it is new but prove to be fruitful because of its creative implications.

questions of “what”. What is the basic action of each character which we can follow through based on Aristotle’s ideas. We then move to asking the question of “why”. Why did the characters act the way that they did. This is the basic question where we begin to determine the Meisner based sub-text of the character. These are the two major elements used in Bibliodramatic exploration.

With this the learner can now begin to answer the question of why did the Biblical character act in that specific way? What led this character to do what he/she did? And how can we imagine the character’s thought process? And in turn begin to discuss or to create creative interpretations answering these quandaries.

Rather than just seeing the story as a story, we are entering and imagining the story as a living entity and approaching the text as if we are the drama that is unfolding right before us; personally, psychology, and sometimes even physically. This imagined enactment happens both actually in the process of staging and scripting, and imaginatively in the process of study.

The “mistakes” (as determined based on Aristotle’s theory) that the characters make are not intentional, rather they are purely by choice. The characters act as human beings and, as such, make decisions which effect their respective lives. While in some circles of biblical and religious philosophy there is the notion that all action is fated and pre-determined by God, here this is not the case. This is an important distinction to bear in mind through understanding this process of Bibliodrama. Each character behaves the way we know humans to behave – through elements of free will and choice. As a result each character acts humanly and is human. While there could be a divine plan, we as progressive Jews and modern critics of the Bible have to dispel that notion as fact and see

the text as unfolding before us as our lives unfold before us as well. As we learn from the Torah text mimetically, we also learn from the character's mistakes, and we learn from our mistakes and actions as mirrors to the characters. Through the explicit dialogue and implicit action, the learner can construct his/her own opinion and reason as to why this action occurred<sup>29</sup>.

These elements towards understanding the text are the actualized rubric of Bibliodrama. Once the learner has begun to understand what the action is and why the action occurred, he/she can begin to derive meaning in some of the difficult texts. Step by step, the learner takes the character and, by applying the Bibliodramatic method to it, is able to probe deeper questions of why certain action occurs. Rather than theologically simply saying it is the "way of the Torah", this method permits creative thinking based on presumed fact, our own thoughts and our own imagination.

In the actual process of enactment and study, the group leader periodically stops the process and to ask more questions about each specific character. It is important to have students respond as the voice and mind set of the character and not in the way they individually feel. They use the first person voice of the character, not the third person voice of them explaining the character. They can channel how the individually feel, but they should channel it into the form of the character themselves. For example, if the character under consideration is Moses, then the student should respond "as Moses" imagining if they themselves were in the moment. Bibliodrama tries to understand the

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<sup>29</sup> The construction, or project, that the reader can create are both in the form of actual staged scripts similar to the ones found in Stage III of this thesis, or they can also be the creation of a thought process based on this method of thinking and communal playing.

psychology of the character, and provide for active participation in the “acting” out of the stories and understanding of the sub-textual elements therein<sup>30</sup>.

There has been enough explaining about how the process works. The best way to understand this explanation is to jump right in and to follow the aforementioned process step by step. We begin with a text and exegetically expand our understanding. We begin with the simple reading of the text for language and story. We then begin to look at the key words, motifs and characters, the history and finally what we think it all means.

To walk through this method and to specifically see an example, we need to find a short narrative which would be rife for exploration. Perched in the middle of the legalistic mindset of the book of *Vayikra* is the perfect story. Leviticus 10: 1-3 will provide for us a model of seeing how to apply this Bibliodramatic method as we walk through the process step by step.

The text of the story is this<sup>31</sup>:

1. And now Aaron's sons, Nadav and Abihu, each took his fire pan, put fire in it and laid incense on it; and then they drew near before YHWH an *aish zara* which had not been commanded upon them.
2. And fire came forth from YHWH and devoured them; and they died before YHWH.
3. And then Moses said to Aaron: “This is what YHWH spoke, saying ‘Through those

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<sup>30</sup> Bibliodrama as method was originally created by Peter Pitzele who crafted the idea out of concepts of psychodrama. Please refer to the introduction for a longer discussion.

<sup>31</sup> My translation.

who draw near to Me I will be made holy and will gain glory before all the people.' And Aaron was silent.

Here is the enigmatic story. On the surface it is a story about Aaron's two sons who are devoured by a fire. Moses talks to his brother Aaron either in reproach or confusion or sympathy, and Aaron is silent. That is all. There is a tremendous amount of action for only a few short verses, making this story a very interesting one to look at, ripe with Bibliodramatic potential and short enough to walk through as an explanation.

We have already begun. We have read the text. If you need to read it again, it is above. And we have determined the basic action. Now we must ask our first set of questions – "What?"

What do we want to know about this story? We want to know why Nadav and Abihu were consumed by fire. We want to know where was God in this situation. We also do not know why Moses spoke in the manner he did to his brother. And most importantly, why was Aaron silent? What was he thinking while he was not talking? And from whose perspective do we hear about the story? Who is the narrator? These, as well as many others, are some of the initial questions that arise when we look at this text.

Now let us apply the Bibliodramatic method. As was explained in the earlier section, we first we need to determine who the characters are in the story. They are:

Nadav and Abihu

God

Moses

Aaron

Narrator (who conveys the story to us)

With the characters set forth, rather than look at the entirety of the story, we must begin to look at the specificity of each character, taking each character as a separate entity acting in the story. What questions do we have for the text? What do we already know about the story and the characters from any past action<sup>32</sup>? What can we assume? What actions do the characters take? And so forth.

Let us first look at Nadav and Abihu. They are the central characters of the story who will be first plotted on the Aristotelian arc. We observe where they begin in the story and begin to determine what we know about them. We then ask questions about their action in this moment.

We know that Nadav and Abihu were sons of Aaron (Exodus 6:1). We know that they were in the priestly class as a result of their family line. They were the ones who knew about sacrifice and how to sacrifice (Exodus 24:1). Later on in Exodus 24, however, Nadav and Abihu are specifically called to accompany Moses and Aaron to make an offering to Adonai. They are again specified in Exodus 28 where Nadav and Abihu are to be cloaked in "holy"<sup>33</sup> garments marking them as different<sup>34</sup>. And right before this incident, in *Parashat Tzav*, Aaron's sons are called to make a specific offering. It is only they who make the offering and for the offering they are sanctified

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<sup>32</sup> For this we need to consult other Torah stories to see where else the characters appear. This way we can create the back story of the characters.

<sup>33</sup> I have chosen to keep "holy" in quotations because this word in Hebrew and this concept figures largely in the story under consideration and it how the word קדש is most commonly translated. However, it is important to note that this word is not solely defined by our contemporary notions and concepts of holiness.

<sup>34</sup> This is a conscious word choice as well. The word קדש can mean holy, separate, distinct and otherwise. This word figures largely in the discussion at hand.

(Leviticus 6: 7-11). Then we have the situation and the story at hand. We know who Nadav and Abihu are and we know about their role in the community. This is all the textual information that we know. What we do not know is what Nadav and Abihu were thinking in this specific situation.

Normally when we do not know the answer to textual questions, we look to see what our tradition says, using Midrash or the Talmud to clarify. Rather than running to the tradition and reading what other people think, Bibliodrama allows us to begin to see for ourselves, to use our collective thoughts in a communal discussion to create our story and our understanding based on our questions<sup>35</sup>.

If Nadav and Abihu are the characters, we now ask, "What do they do?" They offer up an *aish zarah*, a strange or foreign or alien fire. They are consumed and they die. This, quite simply, is their arc of character. This quite simply leads us to many questions about the text.

Where was their dramatic moment? Their dramatic moment (or tragic mistake in Aristotle's terms), it seems at first glance, was offering the *aish zarah*. Had they not offered this up, they would still be alive, and the rest of the Torah would perhaps be really different! We are left with the questions of why did they do it? What did they actually do, meaning what was the *aish zarah*? And what did they actually do to deserve such a harsh response? If they made a mistake, why were they not reprimanded but rather consumed?

Now that we have looked at the characters through the arc of their specific action, we now try to determine "why" did they act in the way that they did. We are now trying

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<sup>35</sup> It may be helpful to consult traditional and contemporary Midrashim on the story but I believe that this should only be done as a supplement to the Bibliodramatic exploration.

to understand what compelled the characters to act in the manner they acted. However, here we are not looking at the text as purely faith based, rather specifically character based, as if we are the characters themselves, devoid of any theological assumptions or preconceived notions. It is from this perspective that we can begin to address the difficult issues inherent in the story and the psychology of the characters themselves.

When we try to become the characters of Nadav and Abihu in order to determine why they acted that way, we use the Meisner method of understanding the character thought process in order to understand what caused them to act in the way that they did. Using the back story from previous events we know of, we can begin to construct the thought process of the characters themselves. We are introduced to Nadav and Abihu in the book of Exodus, chapters 6, 24, and 28 (as seen above). And since their introduction, they are important members of the priestly class. But what compelled them to act in the way they did at this moment in Leviticus?

Perhaps they had gotten into the ritual wine and got a little drunk, since they were some of the only people who had access to the ritual wine, despite the specific instructions about its usage? Perhaps they abused their power as priests and wanted to offer sacrifices themselves rather than being just conduits for prayer? Perhaps they wanted to show God they were more pious and pray more, after all they were two important leaders in the community and they were privy to the special sacrifice in Leviticus 6: 7-11? Or perhaps they were so consumed with the idea of prayer as fire that they were physically consumed by their desire? And countless other questions as well.

No matter what we perceive as the reason for Nadav and Abihu's specific action, the fact that they offered the *aish zarah* is their Aristotelian dramatic moment. It is the

moment when the trajectory of their story changes. How we deal with this issue of the “mysterious” offering and what the *aish zarah* itself is is up to the dramatic, and psychological imagination.

All that we know is that an *aish zarah* is some sort of fire. It is usually translated or rendered as “strange<sup>36</sup>” or “unfitting<sup>37</sup>” or “alien<sup>38</sup>” or “outside<sup>39</sup>”. The curious feature of this story is what was “*zarah*” about it the fire. What was “strange”? In other chapters of the Torah, from Exodus onward, fire is a sign of God’s blessing and presence. Beginning in Exodus 3 with the burning bush, the guiding fire at night in Exodus 13 through the moment of Revelation at Sinai (Exodus 19) and beyond, fire is a controlled connection to God’s presence.

But also, as Levinas explains, fire is an elementary force to which other elementary forces will add themselves, multiplying damages beyond any rational conjecture.<sup>40</sup> Meaning perhaps that the “*zarah*” element of Nadav and Abihu’s offering was not anything that they knew was wrong; it was just compounded by other components like time or place or intention since these too are important elements in regards to making a proper sacrificial offering. While the fire offering is the way of worship in the biblical culture, it also carries the connotation of a specific group of people, the priests, who have more of a direct access to God.<sup>41</sup> This could be the reason that Nadav and Abihu offered up their sacrifice in the first place – because they knew how.

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<sup>36</sup> *The Soncino Chumash*, ed. Rabbi Dr. A. Cohen (New York: Soncino Press, Ltd, 2001)

<sup>37</sup> Richard Elliot Freidman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001)

<sup>38</sup> *JPS Hebrew-English TANAKH* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985)

<sup>39</sup> Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995)

<sup>40</sup> Levinas 1990c: 185

<sup>41</sup> Tod Linafelt “Damages due to Fire” *Levinas and Biblical Studies*, (Society of Biblical Literature: 2003)

Footnote 3

What would then make the "*aish*" that they offered "*zarah*" is either the time or the intention of the offering. Nadav and Abihu are consumed by a fire that they knowingly offered. While not all scholars can agree on how to translate "*zarah*" because of the multitude of interpretations it espouses, we can only begin address the multiple possibilities as to what Nadav and Abihu did, and ask the question, "Was this *aish zarah* wrong?" And "What were Nadav and Abihu thinking when they offered it up?"

Whether or not we understand the offering as wrong, the death of Nadav and Abihu is no less scary or horrendous to us in the scene. The reality is that we have to rely on our dramatic imagination and constructed subtext to attempt to understand this reality. Nonetheless, reading this passage as a "punishment in search of a crime,"<sup>42</sup> interpreters have gone to great lengths to try to explain the consuming of Nadav and Abihu<sup>43</sup>. Our Bibliodramatic method lets us try to figure out what in fact was the problem. What is the unspecified crime that is committed? Is it a crime to begin with? "Many interpretations center on the meaning of *aish zarah* as the key, variously taking it to represent pagan incense...from outside the altar area and Zoroastrian cultic practices."<sup>44</sup> The problem with such an interpretation is that this places the sole blame on Nadav and Abihu themselves, saying that they did something wrong. This interpretation both negates the individual action of the characters and infuses the enigmatic story with elements of theodicy which would justify the expense of the two priests according to God's actions. But what if God is a character as well? This is a unique element of Bibliodrama. We can consider God as an actual character who acts, chooses and has dramatic moments.

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<sup>42</sup> Greenstein, p. 56

<sup>43</sup> Linafelt, p. 118

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

Theologically this could pose a problem, but one that through our Bibliodrama we can attempt to alleviate. Here we do not try to justify God, rather we question God. What was God's action in all of this? It is from here that we begin to address our next character.

The next character in the story is God. We need to remember that in Bibliodrama, God functions as an actual character who acts similar to the way humans act, and, as such, is fallible. In this scene the character arc of God looks like this. God begins, it seems, by watching Nadav and Abihu. God then sees Nadav and Abihu take the fire-pan and prepare the offering. God then observes Nadav and Abihu offer the *aish zarah*. Finally, God's fire smites Nadav and Abihu devouring them along with their offering.

Where is the dramatic moment? And why did God act this way? It seems that for God there are two dramatic moments. One where God does smite Nadav and Abihu – the result of the story. But the other moment is when God does nothing to stop Nadav and Abihu from offering the *aish zarah* in the first place. Perhaps God's tragic mistake was not the consuming of the Nadav and Abihu in fire, but rather not stopping them from offering up this sacrifice? To whom was the "*aish*" "*zarah*"? Was it God who knew something was wrong? Or was God trying to make an example of them?

With these questions, our Bibliodramatic method turns to trying to understand the subtext of God. What was God thinking? Did God see the Nadav and Abihu acting the way they did? Did God plan on using them as a teaching tool? Was this a punishment for Aaron for the Golden Calf<sup>45</sup>? Or moreover, did God not see anything wrong and that

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<sup>45</sup> A claim that many midrashim in *Vayikra Rabbah* make as well as David Damrosch in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. (p. 70) See below for full citation.

is why there was no intervention? And still, what if this was not a sin or even something pre-ordained, but just an honest mistake on the part of Aaron's two sons?

If God's dramatic moment was the actual killing of Nadav and Abihu, what was God thinking? Rather than consuming them in fire, could God not have reprimanded them? Could God not have been more compassionate to the high priest's sons?

And what if the tragic mistake was not intervening before Nadav and Abihu offered the *aish zarah*? What then would happen? In this section of the scene's character analysis, what does it mean for us to ascribe a subtext to God? Devoid of theodicy, how does God act? The reality is that God is silent until the actual killing of the boys. And then, after the act of killing Nadav and Abihu, God also remains silent. What are we to make of this? Not much, it seems, until we layer some other characters on our story.

Following along in our layering of the original story we come to the character of Moses. Moses in this scene can be seen on the arc of character as an observer. The scene begins without Moses present. He only comes into the scene after his nephews are killed. However, while his arc of character is not big in this scene, he does have a dramatic moment. How that dramatic moment influences him becomes bibliodramatically very interesting.

Moses responds to Aaron. Quite simply that is his dramatic moment, his response to his brother. He says: "This is what YHWH spoke, saying 'Through those who draw near to Me, I will be made holy and will gain glory before all the people.'"<sup>46</sup> But what kind of response is this? Is Moses reprimanding his brother rather than consoling him? Or is Moses trying to rationalize what happened by being logical? Or is Moses so shocked that he marvels at HIS realization as to "this is what YHWH spoke"? While

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<sup>46</sup> Leviticus 10:3, My Translation. The whole passage is cited above.

Moses may have been in the periphery of the story, his dramatic moment leads us to understand a bit about how we tend to react to the story itself.

Perhaps there is no set answer as to how Moses responded. Perhaps it is all of the options mentioned. Perhaps it is a matter of a line reading, with different emphasis on different parts of Moses' response. This example mimetically relates to our lives in the way we communicate our responses and are both heard and understood.

Moses' response could be read and understood as a personal realization with the emphasis as: "*THIS* is what YHWH spoke, saying...". By placing the emphasis on the first word, Moses marvels at his personal understanding of the laws.

But the line could also be read as a reprimand: "*THIS IS WHAT YHWH SPOKE, SAYING...*". Reading the line as a colloquial nagging of "I told you so – this what God said...".

And still further, Moses' response could be delivered as consolation. Moses could be teaching his brother Aaron, and rather than trying to make sense out of a difficult situation, he tries to help Aaron derive meaning despite the tragedy. This line reading would be more consolatory and calm. Moses' enigmatic response both speaks for God in the divine silence and adds mystery to what can be considered to be one of the most interesting moments of non-dialogue in the entire Tanakh, that is Aaron's response to the whole situation and to Moses.

After Moses responds to Aaron, Aaron just plain has nothing to say. He is silent! He says nothing out loud. This moment is ripe with the possibility of Meisner subtext exploration. What causes Aaron to be silent? Why does he say nothing after he just saw two of his sons devoured by fire? How does he respond to his brother in whatever

manner he was responded to? What is he thinking? The idea that sometimes silence speaks more than words truly relates to this moment. And only through this method of questioning and understanding can we begin to realize.

Aaron's dramatic moment is his silence. It changes the trajectory of the story. Had he actually said anything we would know more. The subtext as to why he was silent or what his silence actually says is where this Bibliodrama method becomes so interesting. Aaron's actual silence speaks volumes to the creation of contemporary midrash. We ask the question not just why he did not speak, but also what was he thinking while he was not speaking? Was not his silence a direct response? He was both speechless and choosing not to speak in stoic acceptance. Similar to a story recounted by Elie Wiesel as told by Rabbi Levi-Yitzchak of Berdichev:

"Once he [the Rabbi] remained standing in his pulpit from morning until night without moving his lips. Earlier he has issues a warning to God: 'If you do refuse to answer our prayers, I shall refuse to go on saying them.'"

Tod Linafelt, in his article, "Damages due to Fire,"<sup>47</sup> offers the explanation that a post holocaust reading of Leviticus 10 suggests a similar understanding of Aaron's silence. Instead of stoic acceptance, it [the silence] signals anger and unwillingness to acknowledge the decree of Moses<sup>48</sup>. He is so struck by both the magnitude and seeming illogic of the situation that he is just plain shocked. From here, however, we can begin to create Aaron's internal monologue to try to understand his subtext. What is compounded to his shock? Is he surprised? Is he hurt? Or perhaps this is the beginning of his

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<sup>47</sup> Tod Linafelt "Damages due to Fire" *Levinas and Biblical Studies*, (Society of Biblical Literature: 2003)

<sup>48</sup> Linafelt, p. 121

grieving process where the first stage is “shock and surprise”. The possibilities are endless.

Now that we have briefly explored each character individually, we conclude our exploration of the text by re-layering the characters and our understanding of the thought process back onto the original story. But before we conclude our exercise we must also look at one of the most important hidden characters, the narrator. The story is told from a very specific and unique perspective, that of a silent onlooker. While we attempt to construct the actual responses of the actual characters, we also have to take into account the reality of the perspective through which the story is being conveyed. The narrator offers us a window through which we can begin to understand the larger picture. What story is being told here? What mimetic qualities does the larger story convey to me? How is this perspective unique? How is the action combined, understood and conveyed?

From here we can either discuss our findings or we can script and stage them. We can address the story from a dramatic and psychological perspective and ask really tough questions about each character. No matter what the choice, the outcome and process is Bibliodrama and will teach us about life, about what it means to be Jewish, and connect us personally to our ancient tradition continuing the mimesis of the Torah narrative.

## **What does Bibliodrama mean?**

Bibliodrama is not only a fun way to explore Torah text and create community, but it also gives us legitimate tools through which we can explore some of the most difficult passages in our Torah. The story of Nadav and Abihu is a troubling one. Its terseness is confusing and its story is troublesome. But Bibliodrama allows us and forces us to unpack some of these difficulties as if it is unfolding our lives. We wrestle, imagine

and create something new. Doing this individually and in a group, the text itself becomes illuminated and sometimes even altered based on the group understanding of this visceral and cerebral method. Bibliodrama is dynamic, challenging, and creative – both in the guise of its scholarly implications as well as its performative ones.

Viewing this method, and our reaction to the simulated exercise above, we can see how Bibliodrama differs from other forms of Biblical criticism. Pitted against Robert Alter and Frank Kermode's book, *The Literary Guide to the Bible*<sup>49</sup>, we can see how Bibliodrama can both infuse and invigorate traditional biblical study and not just be performed as alternative sermons and d'verei torah.

David Damrosch, in Alter and Kermode says in regards to this scene, in light of Bibliodrama:

"Here [Leviticus 10:1-3], the narrative details drop out as unimportant to the purely ritual message, which refers to the inherent structure of divine human relations rather than to anything specific to the historical incident."<sup>50</sup>

He is essentially saying that the message of this text is not about the action, but about the theological and ritual meaning implied by the direct action. By citing the power of God's fire and using the Rabbinic notion that Nadav and Abihu's death is Aaron's punishment for the Golden Calf, Damrosch uses this text didactically rather than mimetically.

Bibliodrama forces us to look at the text mimetically. This method allows us to negate any forced didactic readings while also creating a modern personal connection to a specific biblical incident. Bibliodrama allows the reader to apply their own thought

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<sup>49</sup> Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, ed., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987)

<sup>50</sup> Alter, Kermode, p. 70

process to the story. It teases out the "specific historical action" as it relates to the individual person. It allows the reader and the learner to get inside the head of the characters and the story<sup>51</sup>. By getting into the story, we become critics who are permitted to explore the process of action rather than just seeing it as a literary construction.<sup>52</sup>

We ask the question of whether or not God should have stopped Nadav and Abihu from offering up the *aish zarah* and if this was a tragic mistake. We even attempt to determine why and what was the meaning of Aaron's silence which is a different approach from Damrosch. For us the narrative details do not drop out, rather they provide a launching point of information for the understanding and exploring of the subtext.

As a result, the story of Nadav and Abihu becomes a mimetic one rather than a didactic one,<sup>53</sup> and a model for us for the larger idea of Bibliodrama. Rather than taking a simple way of understanding the divine wrath of God, the text reflects our contemporary life because of the contemporary thoughts we put into it. In addition to the exegetical Biblical reading, the text also becomes one of dealing with premature and tragic death which has no rational meaning (understanding the way Aaron was silent). It also becomes a text which reflects the danger of leaders becoming too strong and taking advantage of their social situation (Nadav and Abihu's offering of the *aish zarah* simply

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<sup>51</sup> The process of "getting into the head" of the characters aligns nicely with Meir Sternberg's theory of Gap filling in the Bible where he proposes that there are moments in the text that are left intentionally "blank" which forces the reader's mind to fill in the wholes. For a longer discussion on this please see: Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987)

<sup>52</sup> This statement is not to belittle the didactic reading of the Bible, in fact, I believe that both readings can prove to be very fruitful. This statement aims to prove that Bibliodrama's method allows for more of a personal and therefore mimetic response to the text and in no way is meant to detract from the brilliant work of traditional biblical scholars.

<sup>53</sup> Because of the story's biblical book location, it is frequently thought of as didactic – why else would it be in the legal book of Leviticus?

because they could). It can also reflect the power of interpretation of a response (Moses' response to Aaron, what was he saying). Or it can explain to us what the larger story means from the perspective of the narrator. And it could be all of these compounded onto each other! No matter what venue in which this method is used, new insights will flourish. Communally, individually and scholarly, Bibliodrama allows the mind to metaphorically run wild creating new meaning towards difficult texts.

The Torah unfolds before us as our lives unfold around us. Bibliodrama allows us to consider the subtext of the characters as a way to understand how they live and how they think. It also allows us to not just explicate what we already have textually in front of us, but provides us with the potential to illumine the inexplicable. It is a method and process which addresses the tough and deeper questions of some of the theologically difficult texts of our tradition. By approaching the story step by step, and character by character, we explore the many possibilities of understanding. We are forced to consider the mimetic subtext of our own lives as we attempt to understand the mimetic subtext and some of the difficulties of the lives of our ancestors. It is from this point that we can begin to understand and to construct our own creative explorations to some of these texts themselves as a means of explicating the inexplicable and bringing multi-layered meaning to our textual tradition.

## **STAGE III – EXPLICATING AND CREATING**

In this section we will begin to look at the Torah texts themselves and follow them through towards seeing their creative implication. This section is designed to provide you with tools to critically view the biblical texts in preparation of our Bibliodramatic exploration and to see a creative analysis of the texts therein.

Bibliodrama itself functions exegetically, psychologically and creatively. This stage of this thesis will allow us to exegetically observe the texts. We will be addressing four key enigmatic and potentially difficult moments in the Torah representing the four other books which frame Leviticus.

In Genesis, we will look at the *Akedah* story, in *Parashat Va-yera*, (Genesis 22: 1-19) in order to try to understand what each character must be thinking in this situation. In Exodus, we will look at the Revelation at Sinai, in *Parashat Yitro*, (Exodus 19-20) in an attempt to hear the voices of the community who are about to accept the teaching. In Numbers, we will look at the moment when Moses hits the rock, in *Parashat Hukat*, (Numbers 20:1-15) as we attempt to determine why Moses was punished and what the people were complaining about. And in Deuteronomy, we will look at *Parashat Nitzavim* (Deuteronomy 29: 9-14, 30: 11-20) and think about what it means for the people to hear these last words directed towards them. Each of these texts present theological and narrative questions for us as contemporary readers which can be illuminated through this biblical method.

Each sub-section of this stage will familiarize the reader with the text itself; exegetically providing *tachlis* and critical information about it<sup>54</sup>. The reader will be exposed to the nuances of the textual language, begin to see key-words and moments important to the passage, and understand the narrative and literary setting; all of this information enhancing our Bibliodramatic pursuit.

Following each exegetical section you will find a creative interpretation or “play”. The plays themselves are Brechtian style performance pieces designed to be performed by three or more people or read as an educational set-induction. Each play is based on the ideas of Bibliodrama and is designed to illuminate confusing moments in the text, make audible previously silent characters,<sup>55</sup> and give voice to the community witnessing these events.

We now begin our journey through the various “Stages” of Torah.

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<sup>54</sup> I thank Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Dr. Adrienne Levine for teaching this method to me.

<sup>55</sup> Please see “author’s note” before each play.

## **Genesis**

### **Introduction**

The *Akedah*, Genesis 22:1-19 is considered by some to be one of the most theologically demanding and enigmatic texts in the Jewish tradition. It forces us to confront problems and to dispel blind notions of character perfections. It poses acute questions of faith and the nature of God's relationship with humans,<sup>56</sup> as well as forcing us to see God as an active character in our drama. Erich Aurebach, in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, explains that this text is "fraught with background and is presented to permit free play of interpretation."<sup>57</sup> The intent of the story itself is not clear. It is up to us, the reader, to discern meaning. We are forced to confront this text each year, not only during our regular Torah cycle, but also on Rosh Hashanah morning when we symbolically embark on another divine test like Abraham. Perhaps this text provides meaning to us as we are tested? Perhaps this story teaches us about family? Or perhaps this text allows us to see part of Abraham's confusion and struggle in his life.

The following is a traditional exegetical interpretation designed to illuminate and elucidate the text in order to better understand its Bibliodramatic potential. Following the exegesis is a scripted Bibliodrama utilizing the aforementioned theory.

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<sup>56</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) p. 185

<sup>57</sup> Erich Aurebach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968) p. 12

## Translation

### Genesis 22: 1-19

1. And sometime afterward<sup>58</sup>, God tested<sup>59</sup> Abraham, and said to him<sup>60</sup>: "Abraham!", and he said: "Hinneni<sup>61</sup>".
2. [God]<sup>62</sup> said: *TAKE*<sup>63</sup> your son, your favorite<sup>64</sup> one, the one whom you love, Isaac<sup>65</sup>, and go-go forth<sup>66</sup> to the land of Moriah<sup>67</sup> and offer him there as a burnt offering<sup>68</sup> on one of the mountains that I will tell to you.

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<sup>58</sup> This could also be rendered, "After these events", which is the way Everett Fox translates it or "And it came to pass after these things," which is the way Soncino Press translates it. I have chosen this rendering because it seems to indicate that the previous "challenges" of Abraham were purposeful and lead up to this great and last trial. I have chosen to follow more literally what the text says and the NJPS version which keeps the story trajectory intact, forcing us to see this "challenge" (or trial) as part of the larger Abraham picture. This idea is also influenced by Dr. Lewis Barth in both class and conversation.

<sup>59</sup> נִסָּה - This is the word for "test" but biblically it is a specific divine test. "In general these tests are designed by God so that He might come 'to know' or 'to see' what is in the heart or mind of the person or group being tested, or so that God may learn how the individual or group will act. There are several biblical examples of this, in each of which the root נִסָּה (to test or to try) appears." (Lewis Barth, "Introduction to the Ten Trials of Abraham", *unpublished paper*)

<sup>60</sup> The text makes clear that what follows is a divine test (NICOT - Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* [Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995] p. 101). נִסָּה as a verb, with הָאֱלֹהִים as the subject does not occur again until Exodus 15:25 (and thereafter). The wilderness experience for the people is a divine test of faith. This use of this subject and verb structure with Abraham specifically serves as a microcosm of the action and meaning found in the later narrative relating Abraham's test to the test of faith of the people at Sinai and ultimately to us.

<sup>61</sup> The word הִנְנִי here function on multiple levels. Firstly, הִנְנִי indicates true present-ness and readiness from the character. It is as if Abraham is saying "Yes, I am right here, ready". But also, this word, since it is a biblical contraction of הִנֵּנִי and אֲנִי functions as a focalizer. The word הִנְנִי in the Bible is as if a movie camera zooms in on the character. The text will be dealing with Abraham and he is the important character.

<sup>62</sup> The verb וַיֹּאמֶר is in the third person masculine form but is vocalizing God. Since God has no gender I have chosen to reflect the ambiguity with brackets.

<sup>63</sup> Emphasis added by author. קַח-נָּא is frequently translated as "take, I pray thee", but it seems that the נָּא here is more for emphasis (the enclitic tense - BDB p609). Following NICOT's explanation (p. 102), קַח is used more than 60 times in the book of Genesis but only in with God as the subject 5 times in the entire Tanakh. Each time God is asking the person to do something staggering or rationally unexplainable. This indicates, perhaps, a little about the subtext of God saying that the divine knows that magnitude of what Abraham is about to do. It also functions more as a command of request not anything direct.

<sup>64</sup> There are many options for this translation. The word יָחִיד can indicate "only son, favored son or special son." I have chosen "favorite".

3. And Abraham arose early in the morning<sup>69</sup>, and saddled his donkey,<sup>70</sup> took two of his servants and Isaac, his son; he split the wood<sup>71</sup> for the offering and went forth to the place that God had told him about.

4. On the third day<sup>72</sup>, Abraham looked up<sup>73</sup> and saw the place from afar.

5. And Abraham said to his servants: "You remain here with the donkey, and the boy and I will go up there, worship<sup>74</sup> and we will return<sup>75</sup> back to you.

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<sup>65</sup> We know that Abraham has two sons and intereligiously (and as indicative in the Koran Sura 2) Abraham loves both. Saving Isaac's name for the end of the phrase builds suspense, allowing the reader to feel like they are hearing God's cryptic command to Abraham.

<sup>66</sup> This is the same wording as Abraham's first command from God and his first *נס* found in Genesis 12:1.

<sup>67</sup> The only other mention of this exact place is found in 2 Chronicles 3:1 but not as reference to this scene. There it appears as the place where Solomon's temple stood. The Rabbis and scholars attempt to figure out the etymology of the place as an indicator. Perhaps it is *ראו* (to see) that this is the place of God's seeing? Perhaps it is related to *מורה* (to learn) since ultimately this is the place where God learns about Abraham's faith (and is a mirror for the people's collective revelation)? Or perhaps it is *ירא* (to fear) because there was fear in Abraham and Isaac, and maybe even God since actually killing Isaac would end the progeny and the covenant just forged between God and Abraham. The location is as enigmatic as the text itself.

<sup>68</sup> *עלה* is a key word in this passage because it indicates a whole burnt offering to be consumed entirely. The use of this word intensifies the command. The word also relates to "lifting up" which is an image important to the rest of this story.

<sup>69</sup> This is the same time of day that Abraham sent away Hagar and Ishmael before they were tested in the desert.

<sup>70</sup> *המר* in relation to *המריה* has an interesting aural relation which adds to the ambiguity explained in footnote above.

<sup>71</sup> This poses an interesting character question. Why would Abraham himself split the wood when he has two servants with him? Rashi states that it is because it shows that Abraham was ready to carry out God's command. But modern commentators offer that the Abraham was delaying the inevitable and working off his emotional state, respectively. (Louis Berman, *The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac* [Jerusalem: Jason Aronson Inc, 1997] p. 15)

<sup>72</sup> Maimonides notes that this is for Abraham's personal introspection and reflection. It is also interesting to note Robert Alter's concept of type scene (*The Art of Biblical Narrative* [Basic Books, 1981]). Abraham's ascension up a mountain involves three days in preparation. The Israelite's also prepared for three days before the Revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai. This idea is reflected in the play which follows.

<sup>73</sup> I have chosen to follow the NJPS translation here because it indicates more dramatic action. A more literal translation, however, would read "Abraham lifted his eyes and saw".

6. And Abraham took the wood for the offering and placed it upon Isaac<sup>76</sup> his son, and he took with his hand the fire and the knife. And the two of them went forth together.

7. And then Isaac said to Abraham his father, and he said "Daddy...<sup>77</sup>"; and Abraham said "Hinneni, my son". And he said "here<sup>78</sup> is the fire and the wood, but<sup>79</sup> where is the sheep for the offering?"

8. And Abraham responded: "God will see that there is a sheep for the offering, my son." And the two of them went forth together<sup>80</sup>.

9. And when they came to the place which God had told him of<sup>81</sup>, there Abraham built and altar. And he laid on the wood in place. And he bound<sup>82</sup> Isaac, his son, and laid him upon the altar and upon the wood.

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<sup>74</sup> Abraham here is being consciously ambiguous. He knows what he is about to do, but does not seem to let onto to anyone because he simply says "worship and return". What kind of worship is the ambiguity.

<sup>75</sup> It is interesting to note that this sentence appears in the plural. If Abraham knows that he is going to sacrifice his son Isaac, why does he say "we will return"?

<sup>76</sup> This image foreshadows the reality of the offering itself. Isaac is the intended offering to which he will be bound. Now, the wood for the offering is bound to him as he walks.

<sup>77</sup> I have chosen to place an ellipses here because it seems that Isaac wants to continue his thought but wants to make sure his father is listening before he does, and I have also chosen to use an informal paternal address which reflects both the Hebrew construction and the scene exposition.

<sup>78</sup> הנה is used here as a focalizer again bringing the reader's attention to specific moment of intrigue which follows (see footnote above)

<sup>79</sup> Literally "and".

<sup>80</sup> Here remains an interesting moment of silence in the Torah. What are the two thinking? What would the subtext of this scene be?

<sup>81</sup> This wording unites this scene with Genesis 12 where God is also showing Abraham a specific place. This wording also indicates both a test of faith and that Abraham is not acting out of his own will but rather following God's words.

<sup>82</sup> *Hepax Legomenon*. A unique and enigmatic word for a unique and enigmatic moment. It is interesting to note that up until this point, the offering was referred to as an עולה which relates to the עולה in Leviticus 1:3. However, following that logic, the same verbs surrounding preparation should be used, while here it is

10. And Abraham then stretched out his hand and picked up the knife to slaughter<sup>83</sup> his son.

11. And then an angel<sup>84</sup> of YHWH called out from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!"<sup>85</sup>, and he said "Hineni!"<sup>86</sup>.

12. And he said "Do not stretch out your hand against the boy<sup>87</sup> and do anything to him because now I know<sup>88</sup> that you fear God since you have not withheld your son, your only one<sup>89</sup>, from me<sup>90</sup>.

13. And when Abraham lifted his eyes<sup>91</sup>, and he saw a ram<sup>92</sup> trapped in the thicket by its horns; Abraham went<sup>93</sup> and took the ram and offered it as an offering<sup>94</sup> instead of his son<sup>95</sup>.

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not the case. It is from this word עקד that we get the word *Akedah* which is traditionally the name of this section of Torah.

<sup>83</sup> שחט – See Jeremiah 52:10.

<sup>84</sup> This could also be a messenger.

<sup>85</sup> The double call indicates the urgency of the plea by the angel to stop Abraham. This enigmatic moment, where we do not actually know how close Abraham got to actually sacrificing his son, is the genesis of many midrashim which discuss blood in relation to this scene.

<sup>86</sup> Again, focusing the scene on Abraham and his dialogue.

<sup>87</sup> A Young-man, literally – someone close to marriage age (BDB p. 654)

<sup>88</sup> This is the "solution" or answer to the נסה of Abraham as explained in the footnote above.

<sup>89</sup> The is almost an exact repetition of verse 2, however here "the one you love" drops out of the list.

<sup>90</sup> It is interesting to note that there is no mention of Isaac's release from being bound or any mention of Isaac in connection with Abraham in this scene. What could be Isaac's subtext here?

<sup>91</sup> This is another realization moment similar to that in v. 4a when Abraham looks up from his present task to see something beyond the immediate. It also indicates how important sight is in the scene. The Akedah is as if Abraham's eyes are being opened to the nature of God and the nature of experience. (Berman p. 17) See also verse 4.

<sup>92</sup> רמני again is used here as a focalizer drawing the readers attention to what catches Abraham's attention, the ram. Due to translation constraints, this is lost.

<sup>93</sup> Another moment in this story (and the entire Abraham narrative) where he "goes" forth to do something.

14. And Abraham called the place YHWH-Yireh<sup>96</sup>, as it is said until today “On the mountain of YHWH there was a vision.”

15<sup>97</sup>. And the angel of YHWH called from the heaven to Abraham for a second time.

16. And he said: “By myself alone I have sworn, thus says YHWH<sup>98</sup>, because you have done this and not withheld your son, your only son, your favored one,

17. I will bless you and will make you a blessing, and your descendents will be more numerous than the stars in the heaven and the sands on the sea shore and your descendents will possess the gates of those who are against them.

18. And all the nations of the earth will bless themselves by your descendents because you have obeyed my command.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> לעלה – the infinitive for the term used up until now for Isaac. It is interesting that this verse serves as the Dramatic moment in the story.

<sup>95</sup> Why did he offer any sacrifice at all? This action could be similar to that of Noah’s who, after leaving the Ark, offered a sacrifice in gratitude to God.

<sup>96</sup> See footnote 9. Here the root ירה is used (to see/provide). This is usually saved for when God appears to humans (Genesis 12:7, 17:1, 18:1, etc) thus backward linking Abraham’s past experiences and forward to Israel’s collective experience on the mountain of God (Exodus 3, 16, etc). (Berman, p. 111)

<sup>97</sup> Verses 15 – 18 are integral to the scene as they function as the *Nechemtah*. Without these verses, Abraham’s trial would have done him no good. Theologically this is interesting because it forces us to ask the question whether we do things for rewards or not. Nonetheless, these three verses re-introduce the covenantal relationship and relate this נסה with others coming for the people in future Torah stories.

<sup>98</sup> יה-אני – a prophetic construction and the only divine oath found in the patriarchal narrative.

<sup>99</sup> Following the NJPS translation to remain consistent with the translation found in the Bibliodrama following this section. Also this construction reaffirms Abraham’s meritoriousness in his actions.

19. And Abraham returned back to his servants<sup>100</sup>, and they rose up and went<sup>101</sup> together<sup>102</sup> towards Beer-Sheva, Abraham stayed in Beer-Sheva<sup>103</sup>.

### Key Words

נסה Literally “to test” or “to try”. This is the word for a biblical trial. According to Rabbinic tradition, this scene was the last of Ten Trials that Abraham waded through. “In general these tests are designed by God so that He might come ‘to know’ or ‘to see’ what is in the heart or mind of the person or group being tested, or so that God may learn how the individual or group will act. There are several biblical examples of this, in each of which the root נסה (to test or to try) appears.”<sup>104</sup> This word also connotes a sign or a miracle – something elevated as a model.

הלך-הוא Literally “go, you go”. It is interesting to note the use of these words in this section. Continuing the theme of “10 Trials” of Abraham and how each one of Abraham’s moments is connected as a test of faith, this word functions as a bookend to Abraham’s journey. In Genesis 12 he goes forth to a land that God will show him (trial 1) and in Genesis 22 he goes forth with Isaac to another land that will show him (trial 10). Here, however,

<sup>100</sup> The ancient question is “where is Isaac?” There are many traditional comments on this. Ibn Ezra believes that Isaac was in fact killed, while others do not discuss his exact whereabouts.

<sup>101</sup> The last moment in the Abraham trial trajectory where he “goes”, this time, however, it is finally in the plural וילכו rather than the individual command הלך. Perhaps the individual trials of Abraham are now completed with this moment.

<sup>102</sup> Still there is no mention of Isaac, this “together” refers to Abraham and his servants.

<sup>103</sup> This verse concludes the scene, but leaves many questions unanswered. Where is Isaac? How does Sarah feel about all of this? It are these questions and more that are used to illuminate the enigmatic scene through our bibliodramatic method.

<sup>104</sup> Lewis Barth, cited above.

while the key word points to a faith based trial, the ramifications are much larger. Abraham's entire journey and life is framed by the repeated command לך-לקח

הפניה

This is a key word for a unique reason. Brown-Driver-Briggs explains this to be מריא הר – the place of sacrifice (p. 599). But what makes this word unique are the roots that can be derived. The ambiguity and relationship to these roots bring out a unique perspective to the text. ירא (fear). תורה (teaching) מורה (to see).

עלה

Literally “A complete burnt offering”. Similar to the enigmatic actions which come later in the Torah's Levitical laws, this word indicates the intensity of the test and also relates to the action of lifting up. This word gives the scene a sense of elevating – going up towards the mountain and the offering itself both of which figure prominently in the text. It refers to a sacrifice that is completely consumed by fire.

עקד

To bind/be bound. While this word is a *Hepax Legomenon* it is very important to the text. Nowhere else is there a detailed description of a child being offered up as a sacrifice, so a unique word must be used. The uniqueness of the word is in how descriptive it is. עקד means “to bind” not sacrifice – reflecting that Isaac was bound to the altar and not actually sacrificed. Any other word choice would have other didactic implications.

## Structure

The scene of the *Akedah* is just that, a scene. It seems quite simple. It has a beginning, middle and an end which can very neatly be looked at through Aristotle's arc of character. But there is more. Abraham's hears a divine test, he listens, he follows the orders, he is interrupted and he returns back to where he began the story. But what occurs goes deeper than this understanding.

The best way to comprehend the structure of this story is through its thematic exposition. This way of looking at the text enables the reader to understand the flow of the story in light of the structural elements that are present within. The following are two explanations of the structure of the story. The first is a linear (line by line description) while the second is a thematic structure based on a character exploration, reflecting Aristotle's perspective. The former is present to help show the line by line trajectory of the story, while the thematic analysis helps us understand the character's actions in the language of Bibliodrama.

### Linear<sup>105</sup>

v. 1a	Introduction
v. 1b-2	God's command to Abraham (נסה)
v. 3	Departing on the journey (Abraham goes to the place)
v. 4-6b	The Third day
v. 6c-8	Ascending the Mountain

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<sup>105</sup> This structure is based on Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary v. 2 – Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word Books Publisher, 1994).

- v. 9-10        Preparation for sacrifice
- v. 11-13      The Akedah itself and divine intervention
- v. 14         Concluding the journey (Abraham names the place)
- v. 18- 19     Conclusion / Epilogue

Thematic<sup>106</sup>

- A. Beginning Exposition (Leaving Beer-Sheva) – 22:1a
  - B. Inciting moment (A test and a promise) – 22:1b-2
    - C. Plot Development/Character journey – 22: 3-10
      - D. Dramatic Moment/Mistake (The Akedah) – 22:11
        - C<sub>1</sub>. Ramification and Result – 22: 12-14
          - B<sub>1</sub>. Resulting Moment (A resolution and promise revealed) – 22: 15-18
- A<sub>1</sub>. Conclusion (Returning to Beer-Sheva) – 22:19

Imagine the story as a single unit plotted on an arc. The story begins with Abraham leaving Beer-Sheva (22:1a) and concludes with him returning to Beer-Sheva (22:19). While he begins and ends seemingly in the same place, the trajectory of his character shows forward motion. Using these plot points with their appropriate verses sheds light on the character of Abraham in a very Bibliodramatically beneficial way. We are able to better see the dramatic moment and the action which leads up to and follows that dramatic moment.

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<sup>106</sup> This structural analysis is reflective of Aristotle's character arc.

## Setting

On the simple level, this story under consideration is a narrative, and as such, we are dealing with this one particular scene. But Genesis 22:1-19 also is set in a wider context which helps to elucidate some of the textual mysteries and infuse the story with thematic meaning.

The story is set between the casting out of Abraham's other son and handmaid, Ishmael and Hagar, respectively (Genesis 21) and the death of his wife, Sarah (Genesis 23). Similarly the stories deal with action towards Abraham's loved ones and involve an element of "leaving", divine intervention and eventual compassion. It seems that Abraham finally learns compassion in dealing with the death of Sarah (Chapter 23) but only after the trial of the *Akedah* (Chapter 22). This compassion comes from learning from his mistakes he made with Ishmael and Isaac and the inter-relatedness of the three chapters.

It is best to fully see the *Akedah* story as contextually related to the previous one<sup>107</sup> and the following one. Abraham has lost one child, Ishmael, and now there are questions about whether or not he will lose his other son, Isaac. Many character-based questions arise from this contextual relationship. Is Sarah's "get rid of Ishmael" of Chapter 21 now replaced by God's response "get rid of Isaac" in chapter 22?<sup>108</sup> There are common themes and language to point to this possibility.

But this story is also contextually related to what follows in Genesis 23. While there are some who hold to the documentary hypothesis and claim that these three

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<sup>107</sup> NICOT (Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* [Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995]), p. 99.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid

chapters are written by separate authors<sup>109</sup>, the thematic similarities are too close to believe. Both chapter 22 and 23 are concerned with the death of someone close to Abraham (Isaac's presumed death and Sarah's actual death). Sarah is textually absent from the Akedah story and Isaac is conversely absent at the death of Sarah. At the end of each story Abraham is left alone in an important sense. The difference in Chapter 23 is that he acts compassionately towards Sarah, affording her a proper burial, while there is no mention of how Abraham acted towards Isaac after the Akedah story. Abraham moves from the actual loss of one son, Ishmael, to the presumed loss of his son Isaac,<sup>110</sup> to the actual loss and burial of his wife Sarah. In each scene we see Abraham act and react differently towards similar circumstances showing the inter-relationship of the three stories and showing growth on his assumed character arc.

Bibliodrama teaches us to see the Torah as mimetic. The literal understanding of this scene makes that difficult because of its gory and horrific implications, but if we see the scene in its larger context, we are able to observe differently. We rather use our mimesis as metaphor to comprehend the scene at hand. This idea leads us to begin to understand the setting of the text itself. It is best for us to understand this text as layered with possible meanings in order to allow many windows through which we can begin to elucidate the character's meanings and explore its bibliodramatic potential.

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid, p. 125

<sup>110</sup> It is interesting to note that Ibn Ezra actually claims that Isaac was killed in this scene. This is a medieval claim that is both supported and refuted.

## A Play on Genesis and the Akedah

*Author's Note: Each line of this piece is intended to be read by a different voice. This piece can be performed by as many as twenty people and as few as five. It is intended to be staged in the manner of guerilla/environmental theatre (ala Richard Shechner, Bertolt Brecht and Jerzy Grotowski), and as a result should be imagined with performers surrounding and integrated into the performance space. There is conscious ambiguity in some "characters" and conscious specificity with others – there is no set determination as to who delivers what line.*

### I

This is a test.

These are the tests

Sometime after, God put Abraham to the test.

The world was not considered to have any worth until Abraham Avinu came and was Tested

The testing of Abraham.

There were ten.

TEN?!

How would you do?

How did he do?

A hero's welcoming?

Or some pedagogic teaching tool?

Are we talking about some sort of cross cultural unconscious?

There were ten...

But then what...

So, how did he do?

What do you think?

Did he pass?

No, silly it was not that kind of test

Or was it?

It could have been

I think at least one of them was.

What do you mean?

Did he have to study?

Well, he did go through a lot.

But did he learn?

There were times I thought we would have altered his path.

קושרין קטאגור

But didn't seem to convince him

קושרין קטאגור

I wonder what this all means...

He went through ten.

Or was it 11  
Or nine.  
Well, that depends on what script you are looking at.  
Was it ten in one?  
Or one in ten?  
Was it all one big trial?  
Is the number really the point after all?  
I don't think so.  
What matters is his faith.

It was by his faith<sup>111</sup>  
Clearly he believed in something...  
But he never really questioned  
Shouldn't he have at least questioned  
I don't think he passed.  
But he surely showed some faith  
So...Did he pass?

He left behind his worldly understanding and took with him his faith<sup>112</sup>  
Faith alone has helped me pass some tests...  
I DO think he passed.  
Do you?!

What do you think God has to say about all of this?  
Were we allowed to interfere in the way we did?  
In honoring one who honors me, I become honored<sup>113</sup>.  
Sarcasm...  
Or truth?  
Perhaps he was just reminding us.  
I don't know...  
There is truth in it  
Should we all revere Abraham...?  
He is the great Avinu

I hope I don't have to endure God's wrath.  
Or tests  
Is there really something deeper in the idea of "pass/fail"?

I believe with perfect faith...  
Or something like that...  
The point of the trials?  
Perhaps  
Perfect faith?

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<sup>111</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 50

<sup>112</sup> Ibid

<sup>113</sup> I Samuel 2:30

Or trying to find greatness in the impossible?

*II*

Sometime afterward.

Abraham...

Sometime afterward

Abraham

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַהֲנִי־לֵהִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם

Abraham

Sometime afterward, God tested Abraham...

Again...and again...and again...

God tested me

הִנְנִי

And still, I AM right here.

I am ready...

Is there more?

Wait, was that right?

Is that the right thing to say?

...how many of these things do I have to wade through?

Abraham...

These tests that were before you. How did you fare?

I don't know.

I survived,

Is that not completing?

לְבַרְכּוֹ בִּרְכַּה שְׁלַח הַקְּבֵה בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וְעוֹלָם הַבָּא

After all, I did receive an eternal blessing of love.

*III*

The tests...

A test...

Did he do it right.

Are we able to see?

Are we able to know?

What is in the heart or the mind of him?

Testing with our hardships

Knowing with your heart

What is in your heart...?

For both

To know and to see

To challenge and to test.

נִסָּה

נִסְיוֹנוֹת

Trials

To Try  
Trying...

Should we assume he passed?  
You could – if you wish.  
He survived.  
He didn't falter  
    Much  
The tasks were completed.  
We see  
    We know.  
But what...what does that mean?  
    THAT is the point of the trial...

But should he be lauded?  
Isn't he meek?  
He never questioned.  
    Where is the sheep?  
    Who is the sheep?

*IV*

God,  
I am not sure what the point of all of that was.

Now I know.

Now you know what?  
    That I can trick my wife into being my sister.  
    That I can escape from fire.  
    That kings of nations are threatened by me  
    That I can come really close to sacrificing my favorite son.  
What do you know from this?

You will be a great nation.  
Your progeny will inherit the earth...

And....

Perhaps these lessons will be seen for a great many in the future.  
Lessons.  
Launching points.  
Examples.

    You are an exemplar!  
Martyrs will memorialize you...  
Soldiers will see your bravery  
    But why didn't you choose life?

רמז לו...רמז לו...רמז לו...

I am not a martyr.  
I am just a simple guy.  
Who listens to God.

There is no song of lament  
You didn't complain.  
It is greater to have faith  
And more blessed to behold the believer!<sup>114</sup>

Behold Abraham Avinu...  
The survivor of the trials...

You made my name great among the nations.

But now my son won't talk to me.  
And my wife thinks I am crazy.  
I have no idea what is going on with her.  
I told her I was taking him to learn.

There was great fear in me  
ירא  
Fear, once I realized that I was actually on a path towards something.  
Great  
Greater than I could fathom  
A trial  
An adventure.  
A trap?  
Something was trapped...

Was this a trap?  
ירא  
My body shivered.  
What if I don't do it...  
What if I DO do it?  
How am I going to get Isaac away from Sarah?  
תורה  
That's it. He has not learned anything.  
תורה  
It is my job to make sure he learns...I AM his father.  
תורה...מורה...  
Fight the ירא...  
Sarah, Isaac and I are going to learn.  
Where are you going?

---

<sup>114</sup> Kierkegaard, p. 51

Where are you taking this beloved son of yours...?

מורה... תורה..... ירא...

Mt. Moriah.

The place of great learning.

Or a place to draw near.

(Satan) Isaac will draw near...

Here we will become closer than ever.

Here we will bond.

Together we will be bound

Bound...

עקדה

The word

עקדה

עקד

עקדה

Go Kill me a Son...God said to me

Man, you must be puttin' me on – I said back<sup>115</sup>.

But I will do it anyway...

Father and son bonding...

This can't be a trap.

Does anyone know what is going on?

V

The rewards are coming.

We will all receive...

Who receives...

What?

This lesson...

For what?

Killing your son?

Who chose life?

Isn't that our inheritance?

I guess this only applies to Moses

Ah ha – Martyrdom

But I am not a martyr...

He doesn't kill him

That is the test

What is the test?

Killing

Or the absence of it

---

<sup>115</sup> Bob Dylan, "Highway 61 Revisited" (*Highway 61 Revisited*: Columbia Records, 1965)

But there is blood  
    But blood is also good  
It saved us  
    One night  
That night  
    Is this that night?  
The night blood ultimately saved  
    Like here...  
A drop never killed anyone  
Don't we always sacrifice our children to what WE believe in?

*VI*

On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar<sup>116</sup>  
Revelation?

    That took three days, too  
Smoke...fire...  
    Drawing near?  
Hold your son close to you  
    Draw him near  
Korban...?

ויאמר

Isaac says

ויאמר

Says Isaac

Hey Dad – where is the sheep for the offering?

Since you have asked this of me  
    I am going to reveal this to you

אני מגלה לך

מגלה

A revelation

Mt Moriah

    The revelation

Know that God desires you

חפץ לך

חפץ לך ואתה חשה!

And you are the sheep...

Who is the sheep?

    Who is the one who follows blindly what he is told?

Isaac is the sheep

    According to the script

But he questions...

Where is the sheep...

---

<sup>116</sup> Genesis 22:4

Bound  
Trapped  
But questioning

This can't be a trap  
No - This is the greatest trial...

Piety versus Conformity  
Life versus death

I think the sheep is the real hero of the *Akedah*<sup>117</sup>.

Aren't we all sheep when we listen to God?  
Perhaps this is the greatest trial...  
And this is how Abraham completed all of them  
He listened  
He heard  
He obeyed  
And he did...

He showed faith.  
And did not doubt.  
"Who gave faith to Abraham's arm  
And kept his right hand from helplessly falling down"<sup>118</sup>  
That would be faith  
That is faith

He believed with perfect faith  
אני מאמין  
I believe in perfect faith.  
But I also question...

Faith in the impossible.  
Greatness is not expecting the possible  
Or from expecting the eternal  
True greatness comes from expecting the Impossible<sup>119</sup>.

And Abraham, you did the impossible.

"In these similar ways, this man of whom we speak thought about those events. Every time he came home from a journey to the mountain in Moriah, he collapsed in weariness, clasped his hands and said:

"Yet no one was as great as Abraham; who is able to understand him?"<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Yehuda Amichai "The Real Hero of the Akedah" in *A Life of Poetry, 1948 - 1994* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 345

<sup>118</sup> Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003 Edition)

<sup>119</sup> Kierkegaard, *Ibid*

I want to understand.  
I want to know.  
That is the purpose of these trials.  
    To know  
That is the purpose of all trials  
    נסיונות  
To know  
    And we know about Abraham...  
The real story

*VII*

And now, Abraham  
    You can be at ease.  
אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹלִי<sup>121</sup>  
    My voice and command you have heard.  
This will be your inheritance.  
    All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants<sup>122</sup>

Now we know  
    And now we understand.  
Faith in something greater  
    The dream of the impossible...

Abraham  
הנני ...  
    How do you think you did?

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, p. 48

<sup>121</sup> Genesis 22:18

<sup>122</sup> Ibid

## **Exodus**

### **Introduction**

The Revelation at Mount Sinai, Exodus 19-20 specifically, is a pinnacle moment in the Torah narrative. It is the moment the people begin to take on the responsibilities of a nation and become “a treasure”<sup>123</sup> in the eyes of God. The event is magical. The event is scary. And the event, it seems, is deliberate. But what is actually going on during this powerful moment of our collective history? And what do the people who are receiving Torah feel? What follows in this section is first an exegetical attempt to elucidate the text, then a creative approach with the same goal in mind. Each section helps us enter into the world of the Revelation at Mount Sinai and helps reveal the possibilities of interpretation therein.

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<sup>123</sup> Verse 19:5b

## Translation

### Exodus 19:1-24

1. <sup>124</sup>On the third<sup>125</sup> new moon after the children of Israel went out from the land of Egypt, on that very day<sup>126</sup>, they came to the wilderness of Sinai.
2. And they traveled from Rephidim and came to the Wilderness of Sinai, and encamped in the wilderness. And Israel encamped there opposite the mountain<sup>127</sup>.
3. And Moses went to God, and YHWH called to him from the mountain<sup>128</sup>, saying:  
"Thus you will say to the house of Jacob and tell to the children of Israel:
4. <sup>129</sup>You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt<sup>130</sup>, how I bore you on eagles' wings<sup>131</sup> and brought you to me.

---

<sup>124</sup> The Hebrew omits the usual connecting  $\text{ו}$  which signals the start of a new narrative (Fox)

<sup>125</sup> This introduces the trope and theme of three. We will learn that it takes three days to prepare for the specific moment of revelation, perhaps the three months also served as a preparation period. Also we are in the seventh week after the actual Exodus from Egypt. Since seven was considered a number of perfection in the ancient east (and for the Israelites) this time was ripe with possibility. And, just as the seventh day of creation brought rest and enjoyment, so too does the seventh week after the Exodus (or creation of a new nation) bring a moment of excitement and exaltation. (U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* [Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1967] p. 224).

<sup>126</sup> This seems to emphasize the new location of the Israelites. They are actually somewhere, not just wandering in between.

<sup>127</sup> Cassuto: "This clause is seemingly redundant, at least in part, since it was previously stated that they encamped in the wilderness (v2a). But the import becomes clear when we pay attention to the continuation of the passage, which puts the subject Moses before the predicate "went up", the sense being that the people rested at the mountain while Moses did not, making him the mediator for the forthcoming instructions." (Ibid)

<sup>128</sup> If you notice the action in this section of the verse, there are two things occurring simultaneously. We have Moses coming up the mountain, and we have God calling out to Moses, almost as if Moses is being called while he is ascending the mountain. This could point to the character of God who is seemingly really excited to tell Moses the instructions.

<sup>129</sup> What follows from in verses 4-6 is a poetic summary of covenant theology. (John I. Durham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Volume 3 – Exodus* [Waco: Word Books, 1987] p. 261)

5. And now, if<sup>132</sup> you will *listen*<sup>133</sup> to my voice and keep my covenant<sup>134</sup>, you will be a treasure<sup>135</sup> to me from among all peoples, for indeed all the earth is mine.
6. And you will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation<sup>136</sup>. These are the words that you will speak to the Children of Israel<sup>137</sup>.”
7. And Moses came<sup>138</sup> and called the elders of the people and put set before them all these words that YHWH had commanded him<sup>139</sup>.
8. And all the people answered together, and they said: “All that YHWH has said, we will do.<sup>140</sup>” And Moses brought back the people’s word to YHWH<sup>141</sup>.

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<sup>130</sup> Literally “You have seen with your own eyes, I do not need to tell you.” Rashi: “I do not have to tell you what I have done, you have seen it”, meaning: the people need not question if this God (with whom they are entering into relationship) is real and powerful.

<sup>131</sup> A common metaphor usually intended to mean an element of strength and power, but here it also seems as if it intends compassion and comfort. Rather than the metaphor of eagle’s wings being strong, they are also seen in their magnitude as a blanket. This image is also revisited in Deuteronomy.

<sup>132</sup> This construct, in Hebrew and rendered in English, sets the frame for YHWH’s covenant expectations. This is the beginning of the explanation of the covenant relationship.

<sup>133</sup> Emphasis added to reflect the double use of the verb שמע. The italics reflect Friedman’s translation, follows Fox’s intention and tries to remain true to the text while being rendered coherently in English.

<sup>134</sup> This is significant because this is the first time in the book of Exodus we come across ברית.

<sup>135</sup> This word סגולה points to the uniqueness of this moment for the Israelites. It also relates to the verse above where God says “you yourselves” (v.4a)

<sup>136</sup> This proclamation does not elevate the Israelites as better than other nations, rather is related to the end of the previous verse where God says “...from among all the peoples”. This means that the Israelites, by accepting this special discipline will be a nation dedicated to God and to facilitating God’s laws through the world – similar to the role priests have as conduits and aids of prayer.

<sup>137</sup> A somewhat solemn ending (Cassuto, p. 227) but it also seems to function as punctuation. Now the scene will progress to Moses explaining to the people.

<sup>138</sup> Note the movement of Moses, he is now down talking to the people.

<sup>139</sup> Enter Moses as the Messenger. In the following verses he will explain to the people what they have to do. What he says we are not exactly sure. Presumably everything that YHWH has just told him, but there is not mention of this dialogue.

<sup>140</sup> The people are accepting God’s proposal and basically saying “we are prepared to do whatever we are called upon to do”.

9. And YHWH said to Moses: "Here<sup>142</sup>, I am coming to you in a thick cloud<sup>143</sup> in order that the people will hear<sup>144</sup> when I am speaking to you<sup>145</sup> and also that they will believe in you as well forever." And Moses told the words of the people to YHWH<sup>146</sup>.

10. And YHWH said to Moses: "Go to the people, make them holy<sup>147</sup> today and tomorrow – and they will wash their clothes<sup>148</sup>.

11. And be ready for the third day<sup>149</sup>, for on the third day YHWH will come down before<sup>150</sup> the eyes of the people, upon Mount Sinai.

12. And you will set boundaries for the people<sup>151</sup> all around saying: 'Watch yourselves about going up the Mountain or touching its border!<sup>152</sup> Anyone who touches the mountain will be *put to death*<sup>153</sup>.'

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<sup>141</sup> Moses then reports back to YHWH. Rashi suggests that Moses' actions are seemingly redundant because YHWH's omniscience would know what the people said. Moses then becomes a model as a literal go-between and messenger.

<sup>142</sup> The word *hineh* functions as a focalizer for the story which conjures up the scene for Moses.

<sup>143</sup> See 20:15 for the actual moment this occurs.

<sup>144</sup> Now hearing since they have already seen (v.4)

<sup>145</sup> The exact revelation will happen in ear-shot of the people, it will only be Moses who encounters God. This is why God appears in a thick cloud.

<sup>146</sup> We presume that the people accepted this proposal because the next verses begin preparation for the event itself.

<sup>147</sup> This is the first mention of Moses active action of "making the people holy". This is a common trope that will be carried through the rest of the Moses narrative and specifically be seen again in verse 14.

<sup>148</sup> This command points to the people's actual action in verse 14b and becomes a symbol for their inner purity (Cassuto, p. 229).

<sup>149</sup> A biblical motif which marks an indeterminate short period of time (Durham p. 264) but also is used as a prelude to a great moment of anticipation and revelation. (see previous discussion on the *Akedah*)

<sup>150</sup> This could also be translated as "to the eyes of the people" reflecting the *ל*. The Hebrew reflects the true closeness that God gets to the people during this moment. It is this closeness that perhaps is what frightens the people in 20:15-16.

<sup>151</sup> The result of Moses "making the people holy" or separating them.

<sup>152</sup> Following Fox's punctuation adding emphasis to the command.

13. A hand will not touch him, but he is to be stoned or shot – whether animal or person will not live<sup>154</sup>. At the blowing of the horn they will go up to the mountain<sup>155</sup>.

14. And Moses came down<sup>156</sup> from the mountain unto the people and made the people holy<sup>157</sup> and they washed their clothes<sup>158</sup>.

15. And he then said to the people: “Be ready for the third day<sup>159</sup>! Do not go near a woman<sup>160</sup>.”

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<sup>153</sup> Emphasis added to reflect the Hebrew which reads מִמֶּנּוּ יָמָת. This could also follow the Fox translation of “Die, yes, Die”.

<sup>154</sup> This is based on the belief that holiness, like uncleanness, was infectious through physical contact (Durham, *Touch, Taste and Smell*, p. 108-22 cited in Durham, p. 265)

<sup>155</sup> It is important to note the people only go to the base of the Mountain, to the boundary or separate place set forth by Moses. It is Moses who is the only one who goes up and down the mountain.

<sup>156</sup> The motion of Moses is reflective of his position as leader and mediator of the ensuing event. Rashi, citing the *Mechilta*, says that the seemingly superfluous הָעַם אֵל really indicates that Moses went directly from talking to God to talking to the people. This shows us that Moses was really the intermediary.

<sup>157</sup> Literally “sanctified” or “made sacred”. This is a key word for both this passage and for the larger Moses character arc.

<sup>158</sup> Not only were the people supposed to be clean, but their whole being and body as well. Now the people do what they have heard – a microcosm of what is about to occur when God speaks and they do.

<sup>159</sup> This is a reference to the amount of time it biblically took to become fully clean and pure. The repeated mention of this in the text builds in anticipation. It continues the trope of “preparation time” which runs throughout the TANAKH (T.C. Eskenazi in conversation). There is some discrepancy, in this scene, though as to when the third day begins. Whether or not it is three days from when Moses gives the command or the three days include the day he gave his command, the inherent ambiguity points to the “liminal” and non site specific concept of Revelation and theophany.

<sup>160</sup> Sexual relations were prohibited as they were believed to make people unfit for sacred duties (cf. I Sam. 21:15). The use of the word גִּישׁ is a euphemism for sex. Rashi elucidates an interesting description about how this instruction is both to allow for a man to be pure, but also to allow time for a woman to be pure. This is an interesting idea to ponder in relation to what is about to happen. Revelation is a personal act and personal preparation should be taken, sexual relations are inherently with someone else. The only problem which arises, and unfortunately has to just be acknowledged, is the inherent gendrefication of this passage. It is addressed only to the males and could imply that only males prepared for revelation, I believe that this is not a comment on women, but rather the only use of a gendered language for a personal command. Further, this command is given by Moses as a human and not by God. There is no basis for saying that God is gender biased. This image, however, becomes a launching point for feminist dialogue. It also is an introduction to the common metaphor of revelation being entering into a relationship between the people and God.

16. And as the dawn came on the third day<sup>161</sup>, there was thunder and there was lightning and there was a heavy<sup>162</sup> cloud upon the mountain<sup>163</sup>. And a very strong blast of the Shofar<sup>164</sup>. And all the people trembled<sup>165</sup> in the camp<sup>166</sup>.

17. And then Moses led the people out of the camp towards God<sup>167</sup> and they took a stand<sup>168</sup> at the foot of the mountain<sup>169</sup>.

18. Now, Mount Sinai was entirely covered in smoke because YHWH had come down upon it in fire<sup>170</sup>. The smoke rose up like a kiln<sup>171</sup> and the whole mountain trembled greatly<sup>172</sup>.

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<sup>161</sup> More third day motif again building in excitement simply because we have to ask "from when do we begin to count?" Bibliodramatically this is an interesting question of preparedness and readiness.

<sup>162</sup> Reflecting Friedman's translation, here the word refers to the Divine.

<sup>163</sup> There is a lot of scholarly and scientific explanation as to whether or not this moment being recounted is a thunderstorm. It is hard to make a claim, based on the actions of the people, that this is the case. Though the description certainly reflects it. Some reasons which discount this theory is that a thunderstorm would not have provoked such a "fear-based" response or the movement of the people towards the foot of the mountain. Whatever reason for this phenomenon, the response of the people to is ripe for Bibliodramatic exploration.

<sup>164</sup> The presence of the Shofar blast indicates that God is present in their actions (cf. 2 Sam. 6:15; Ps. 47:6) but it could also be a textual emendation reflecting cultic practices because after all the Israelites at this point of their journey only know "pagan/Egyptian" prayer. The feature of the Shofar could be a cross cultural aural element of prayer. (Durham, *Ibid*)

<sup>165</sup> It is as if they are "shaking" which gives the action more of a present nature rather than the past tense which is reflected in the translation. I have chosen to keep "trembled" as the translation because it works more grammatically.

<sup>166</sup> This scene is scary and shocking and the people act accordingly. Tradition indicates that the people in fact shook with fear, I have chosen to keep the ambiguity of the moment by translating "trembled" because trembling can include both fear, anxiety and excitement – all emotions which were present at this moment.

<sup>167</sup> Rashi: "This tells us that the Shechinah went out towards them (the people) like a bridegroom who goes out to greet his bride. This points to the marriage metaphor of the Revelation moment between God and the people. Also, "at times we must leave the familiar places and habits with which we have grown comfortable, as Abraham did at the beginning of Israelite history, to grow to become the people we are capable of becoming." (*Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* [New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2001], p. 440)

<sup>168</sup> This translation reflects the idea that the people had a choice as to whether to stand there or not. This both has great Bibliodramatic potential but also points to *Parashat Nitzavim* where the people again take a stand right before they accept and choose.

<sup>169</sup> The lowest part on level ground where the people will be witness to God's revelation. Also, the people are being drawn closer and closer to the actual presence of God. This perhaps points to the people's great dread and fear reflected in 20:18.

19. And as the sound horn was growing<sup>173</sup> louder and stronger – Moses kept speaking and God kept responding<sup>174</sup> in thunder<sup>175</sup>.<sup>176</sup>

20. And YHWH came down upon the Mount Sinai<sup>177</sup>, on the top of the mountain, and YHWH called<sup>178</sup> Moses to the top of the Mountain. And Moses went up<sup>179</sup>.

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<sup>170</sup> With the people in place, the experience intensifies. The entire mountain smokes from the Divine presence descending in fire – the most frequent symbol of theophany. (Durham, p. 271)

<sup>171</sup> BDB p. 461 – A Kiln is a hot stove which both cooks and emits smoke and fire from its canonical chimney (R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary* [Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973] p. 147). But this image of volcanic action is also reciprocally reminiscent of the God's destruction of Sodom by volcanic activity. This word appears four other times in Torah but each time to refer to destruction. The use of the word as a prelude to Revelation speaks to the fear the Israelites may have had.

<sup>172</sup> Mimetic to the people trembling greatly, this action still continues the intensity of the event. Revelation is a multi-sensory experience. However this line sometimes has a variant reading because it is hard to imagine the mountain trembling. Scholars relate this to other locations of inanimate objects trembling (Isaiah 41:5 and Ezekiel 26:18) where they metaphorically infer some level of fear.

<sup>173</sup> חוֹלֵךְ – Reflecting on-going Revelation (Dr. Adrienne Levine, HUC Bible I Class notes, 2002). This also reflects the second sounding of the Shofar perhaps providing a dramatic moment, an alarm clock, if you will, to the people that this “event” they are witnessing is not just “bad-weather” but in fact God's presence, since v. 9 suggests that the people will hear God call to them.

<sup>174</sup> Because the Hebrew reflects two verbs in the prophetic imperfect, I have chosen to reflect this continuing action of God and Moses. It is almost like Disney's Sorcerer's Apprentice with constant flow between God and Moses. The purpose of this scene and description is to present an atmosphere that is electric with God's presence and energy.

<sup>175</sup> Literally “in a voice” but thunder is often considered to be the voice of God (Ps. 29:3-5,7-9; 46:6; Job 37:4; et al)

<sup>176</sup> This verse forces us to ask the question “where is Moses actually during this event?” Was he at the foot of the mountain (Ibn Ezra)? Was he on the mountain? (Nachmanides) or was he traveling back and forth? No matter where he was the action itself, that God was talking with Moses is clear – but what was said? More bibliodramatic potential!

<sup>177</sup> God's movement down upon the mountain reflects many things, though none of them explicit. First, God's presence on the Mountain indicates that God may descend on many places and that Sinai is not the specific abode (or throne) of God. Second, this movement introduces the dialogue between Moses and God indicating that Revelation, the covenant for the people, is a complex relationship, as Walter Brueggemann explains, it is a metaphor of dancing where a couple is moving in relation to each other and helping each other move (Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. P. D. Miller. [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995]. p. 135-137). Third, this scene gives God more character qualities because of the movement towards Moses, which also teases out the aforementioned dance metaphor.

<sup>178</sup> Literally “summoned”, I have chosen to use “call” because I feel it is more informal and reflects the conversational relationship God and Moses have in this scene.

<sup>179</sup> Moses is the only one privileged enough to actually ascend the mountain towards God but everyone will witness the theophany.

21. And YHWH said to Moses: "Go Down!"<sup>180</sup> Warn the people not to break through to YHWH to see<sup>181</sup>, or many of them will surely die.

22. And also the priests, those who come near to YHWH will be made holy lest YHWH break forth against them.<sup>182</sup>,

23. And Moses said to YHWH: "The people will not come up the mountain. You warned us saying set a boundary around the mountain and make it holy<sup>183</sup>."

24. And YHWH said to him: "GO DOWN!"<sup>184</sup> And then come up, you and Aaron with you. But do not let the priests or the people break through and come up YHWH<sup>185</sup>, lest (he) break forth upon them.

25. And so Moses went down to the people and said this to them...<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> This indicates more movement of Moses up and down the mountain.

<sup>181</sup> Only Moses can "see" God. And the people need to remain in their own "sanctified" area which was set out before them.

<sup>182</sup> "Contact with the holy is predicated on conditions. The degree of holiness is not everywhere the same. Its intensity determines who may come in contact with the holy and which conditions he has to meet."

(Cornelius Houtman, *Exodus vol. 2* [Kampen: Kok Publishing House, 1996] p. 458)

<sup>183</sup> The concept of "making holy" is fascinating. Literally and colloquially it means to separate and make distinct but it connotes much more. Perhaps here, following the previous verse, the boundary which was made creates gradations of holiness for the people. Everyone has access to God and to revelation but with specific instructions and specific separation. This whole idea of "making holy" in relation to Moses is interesting (see Numbers 20 specifically).

<sup>184</sup> My emphasis, again reflecting the movement of Moses, but also attempting to indicate the building emotion of the theophany itself.

<sup>185</sup> This is confusing, and scholars do not agree with how to interpret this verse. It seems that Aaron, who will become the high priest later, is privy to some direct access to God. Whatever the specific indication is, it seems that this verse points to the justifying the people's response in the following chapter (v. 18)

<sup>186</sup> There is great midrashic potential to this verse and its textual location.

## **Exodus 20: 15-18**

15.<sup>187</sup> And now all of the people were seeing thunder-claps<sup>188</sup> and flashing-torches<sup>189</sup> the call of the Shofar and the smoking mountain. And the people saw<sup>190</sup> and they swayed<sup>191</sup> and stood away<sup>192</sup>.

16. And they said to Moses: "You speak with us, and we listen<sup>193</sup>. But do not let God speak with us, lest we die."<sup>194</sup>

17. And Moses said to the people: "Be not in awe<sup>195</sup>! God has only come to test<sup>196</sup> you in order to be in awe upon your faces<sup>197</sup> before God so that you do not go astray<sup>198</sup>."

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<sup>187</sup> Why does this section of text not immediately follow the end of Chapter 19? What is the significance of the Ten Commandments "intermezzo"? Many question the textual placement of this text. Perhaps the intermezzo of the Ten Commandments is intended to be heard by everyone. The rest of revelation is to be taught through Torah. There is a lot of scholarly discussion about the writing of the text based on this.

<sup>188</sup> This translation was chosen to reflect the sensory elements of the event. The word קול is specific to an aural relation. The drama of this scene is that the people are actually seeing sounds.

<sup>189</sup> Following Fox's translation perhaps indicating a poetic description of lightning or specific type of lightning.

<sup>190</sup> ראה – Literally "To see", but here I think there subtly of the root ירא also comes into consideration. The moment is experienced and truly "awesome".

<sup>191</sup> Following T.C. Eskenazi's translation in conversation.

<sup>192</sup> Literally: "They were unstable". This reflects the trembling uncomfortable dissonance of the situation. They are having a collective liminal moment, as Victor Turner would explain.

<sup>193</sup> A prelude to נעשה ונשמע. The people are ready to accept what is coming next as they said they were in the preparation moments for this event.

<sup>194</sup> The people realize the power of God's presence. They are fully accepting of Moses' mediation.

<sup>195</sup> A key word ירא – the English translation does not do justice for the subtly of meaning inherent here. It could mean "fear" or "awe". I have chosen to keep the word as awe because it better reflects the magnitude of the event itself. Perhaps the moment was not scary, but rather truly awe-inspiring? The ambiguity is prime for Bibliodrama.

<sup>196</sup> ניסה – A biblical test of faith. See Translation of *Akedah* in the previous section for more explanation.

<sup>197</sup> This translation reflects a more literal approach, but it also makes this moment very personal. The face is the window into a person's soul. A Levinasian approach could be taken here, but for the sake of this thesis, only mention will be made.

<sup>198</sup> Following NJPS translation. This reflects both the idea of breaking the commandments but also straying away from the covenantal relationship.

18. And so the people remained at a distance<sup>199</sup> and Moses approached the fog where God was...<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> This is an indication that the people have accepted the test put forth by God. It also creates a distance between the people and Moses and God. This moment sets up the Moses as the mediator of God's words.

<sup>200</sup> Reminiscent of Moses approaching the burning bush (Exodus 3) which was his own personal revelation. Here Moses approaches the fog/smoke of the mountain as mediator of the people symbolizing the human acceptance of God's words.

## **Key Words**

- קדש**      The verb literally means, “to make holy”, “distinctive” and “separate,” these are some ways to understand the word. This word in this section is very important because of what it begins to symbolize. The people are being made holy by God’s actions through revelation. They are also being made separate and distinctive. But what is the power of this holiness? Countless comments expand the idea of the “chosen” and “distinctive” nature of the Israelites due to this Revelation moment. And still further, the process of making קדש is very important to the Moses narrative as well as the people’s. Repeatedly people are told through the Torah to make God holy or make the people holy. Here is the first time this action occurs in relationship to God. Later, in the Torah, specifically in Numbers 20, the same word will play an important role as Moses’ ultimate leadership demise.
- קול**      Literally “voice”, this word plays an important role in the aural sensation of the event being recounted. But, as is reflected in 20:15, it also implies the visual. Usually קול refers to a human voice which calls out, but here the קול is the voice of both the Shofar and God.
- עלה**      Literally “to go up”. The process of revelation involves a spiritual and physical ascension. Many moments of Divine speaking involve the

character ascending to a higher place. This passage is no different. This key word allows the reader, specifically in this passage, to follow the path of Moses up and down the mountain as a way of understanding revelation. This word also demonstrates the active nature of revelation – it is not a passive moment. It is interesting to note the action of Moses in this moment. His movement reflects his role as messenger/mediator and his excitement for what is about to happen.

ירד

Literally “to go down”. This word, coupled with the word above describes movement in the passage. This word describes God’s movement down onto the mountain during the actual moments of Revelation. There are many commentators who posit the idea that God dwells on Mount Sinai or that God descended on Mount Sinai for this moment. These comments are matters of opinion as to where God “lives”. What is nonetheless clear is that God comes down in order to meet the people half way (and Moses is the only one who is actually going up – see above). This motion of back and forth can be seen as a biblical example of Kabbalistic Tzim-tzum and be seen as a metaphor of dancing.

ראה

Literally “to see”. This word demonstrates the sensory elements of Revelation, but also is ambiguous because of its root relationship to ירא (see below).

יָרָא      Literally “Awe” or “Fear”. This word describes the feeling of the people at the truly awesome moment. They seem to be straddling the line between fear and awe, which is what this word intends. This word, while not mentioned as a description in Exodus 19 is related to that experience when it appears in Exodus 20. For this reason, and many others, scholars wonder if these sections of verses were intended to be together.

נִסָּה      While this word appears only once, it is very important. It relates an act of faith to the action of the Israelites. They are not just accepting God’s words but they are having their faith tested. Revelation is a biblical test of faith, similar to that of Abraham’s. Please see explanation of this word in the *Akedah* section of this thesis.

## **Structure**

To better understand this section of the Torah, we need to break it down into a structural form. The scene under consideration is complex and confusing but also profound and beautiful. There have been copious amounts written concerning this, both in forms of concrete scholarly inquiry and in metaphoric explanation. The prevailing idea, however, is that while there is certainly structure in this passage, there is very little, if any, chronological order involved; as Rashi indicates in his comment to 19:11, “there is no earlier and no later in scripture”. This adds to the profundity of the text. The complexity of what seems like a jumble of many textual traditions actually can be revealed quite interestingly Bibliodramatically by imagining what the community itself felt and thought. Before we can approach the text from the creative perspective, we need

to address its critical structure and meaning. The following is first a linear structural description, which is then followed by a thematic outline of this scene.

Linear<sup>201</sup>:

19:1-2	Presentation of Setting
19:3-6	A proposition to the people with Moses as Messenger
19:6	The Covenantal Formula
19:7-8	Moses as mediator – People respond to the proposition and say yes
19:9	God's directions and instructions
19:10-13	The people prepare based, on the instructions
19:14-15	The people execute instructions
19:16-19	Description of the Scene/Setting – first response of the people
19:20-25	God and Moses finalize the “deal” – people wait with anxiety
20:1-14	God gives the Ten Utterances/Commandments <sup>202</sup>
20:15-16	People react and interpret
20:17	Moses responds to people and to God
20:18	Conclusion of the Dialogue – God and Moses
20:19-23	Further stipulation of the covenant

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<sup>201</sup> This structure was created with the help of Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi in conversation.

<sup>202</sup> This is not reflected in the above translation.

Thematic:

A. Opening (19:1-2)

B. Moses as Messenger – Deal Proposed (19:3-6)

C. Moses as Mediator – Details of deal presented (19:7)

D. Deal Accepted – People accept (19:8)

1. Preparation (19:9-15)

E. People Encounter God

2. Meeting (19:16-19) – people are terrified

3. Final Instructions (19:20-25) – people are assured

4. Revelation of Law (20:1-14)

D<sub>1</sub>. Revelation Intensified – People reject (20:15-16)

C<sub>1</sub>. Moses as Mediator - Deal Facilitated (20:17)

B<sub>1</sub>. Moses as Messenger (20:18)

A<sub>1</sub>. Closing (20:19-23)

In this scene the “revelation” focus turns from the micro paradigm of a revelation moment (Moses’ personal revelation in Exodus 3) to the macro paradigm of revelation with the people and Moses serving as the mediator. Up until Exodus 19, every time God speaks to a person, it is to an individual. This moment marks a change of that. The goal of this revelation, however, is not the nice neat arc that is reflected in the structure above, but rather for the people to have received all of revelation personally and not had Moses as the intermediary (C<sub>1</sub>). God’s character intended all of the teaching to be revealed to the people directly. This is the move from the microcosmic revelation with Moses

individually to the macrocosmic revelation at Sinai. However, this does not occur however (D<sub>1</sub>). The people make a choice to reject the direct contact with God, the people's dramatic moment in 20:15-16. The people are ready and willing to receive the teaching, but not directly. They still need Moses to be the messenger and mediator. Moses then becomes the permanent mediator and messenger for the people. Perhaps it is the intensity of the message that scares them. Perhaps it is the physical confusion of the senses. Or perhaps they are not ready for the intensity. No matter the case, the reality is that 20:15-16 serves as a turning point in the story where the people take a step back, foil God's intention, and make Moses intercede and mediate the direct revelation. He becomes, once again, the literal "go-between," marking the switch from the personal revelation (20:1-14) which was intended to be for everyone, to the mediator of the greater revelation of the people themselves (20:15 – 24:18). After 20:14 God once again only talks directly to Moses and Moses conveys the words to the people reflected above.

## **Setting**

The genre of literature under consideration here is narrative, and a layered one at that<sup>203</sup>. It literally tells the story of God, Moses and the people at Sinai from each of these characters' perspectives. There is not one character at whom we can directly look at as the main character in the story. Therefore only discussing the potential documentary hypothesis is both one sided and not fruitful for our exploration through Bibliodrama. In fact, the multilayered elements of this text are perfect for Bibliodramatic exploration as they reveal internal tension of the text itself. The enigmatic moments

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<sup>203</sup> Durham, p. 268

(hearing smoke and seeing thunder), the confusing time table of action (from when do we count three days), and the people's interruption (v. 20:15-16), are perfect for us to ask the sub-textual questions involved in Bibliodrama.

The setting is composite and layered. The Sinai periscope stands at the very center of the book of Exodus<sup>204</sup> and rhetorically influences the rest of the Torah narrative. It is not solely a story about law being revealed, it is also a story about a community being created. And moreover the story does not end with the text under consideration. The literary setting of this section begins in Chapter 19 and concludes in Chapter 24. Throughout these five chapters there is an oscillation between narrative, revelation, and back to narrative. This larger context can be loosely seen chiastically<sup>205</sup>:

A. Theophany (Chapter 19)

B. Law (Chapter 20:1-17)

C. Mediator (20:18-21)

C<sub>1</sub>. Mediator II (20: 22-26)

B<sub>1</sub>. Law II (21:1 – 23:19, 20:33)

A<sub>1</sub>. Theophany II (Chapter 24)

The larger context is punctuated in a Theophany, the people's acceptance of the law WITH Moses as their mediator. The people receive law and are created into a

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<sup>204</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections" in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 1* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 830

<sup>205</sup> Brueggemann, p. 831 (This is his idea)

collective community<sup>206</sup>. The arrangement of this text, while linearly convoluted, asserts this claim with the juxtaposition of theophany and law.

The people are standing and hearing the direct words of God. But what also is at work in this scene is rhetorical language. The use of language in each section of these five chapters builds on each other. As such, the Sinai sequence is a compilation which must be read as part of a larger sequence<sup>207</sup>. Revelation is not only about the moment of revelation. It is about the people's preparation, the people's response and the people's fear. The scene is also about Moses' role as a leader, both as a messenger and as a mediator. And still the scene is about God choosing the people. The multiple layers of this text have more meaning because of the tension that is being seen trying to discern it. The tension exists literarily and can be exposed Bibliodramatically. Before we can explore the creative implications, we need to observe the scene's specific narrative setting.

Historically this scene is important because of its liturgical and religious implications. This scene is set in the desert. The people have left Egypt three months ago and are somewhere between there (slavery) and here (the Promised Land). This seeming nowhere is scary and anxiety ridden. They are in what Victor Turner calls Liminal space. They are between two places. But it is between these very two places that great things occur. The critical discussion about space, time and action that occurs in these chapters is due in large part because they are trying to cognitively explain a non-concrete scene. It is just this very ambiguous moment in the Torah that is ripe with Bibliodramatic potential.

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid

<sup>207</sup> Durham, p. 268

Seeing the multiple layers of narrative and the many characters involved in the story allows us to begin to explore the text Bibliodramatically. There are many characters through whom we can try to understand their thinking. How does God feel about giving the law to this people? How does God know there is trust? What about Moses? Why is he literally running back and forth between the people and God? What about the people themselves? Tradition says that everyone stood at the base of mountain and received Torah. What kind of event was it? How scary was the preparation and anticipation? What did everyone feel?

All of these questions and many more which can be asked as attempts to illuminate this enigmatic lead us to fully exploring this scene Bibliodramatically. Bibliodrama lives in liminal moments of text as characters move from one action to the next. There are many layers of dialogue and many thoughts of each character. The physical setting, imagined somewhere in the Sinai desert, points us to trying to understand the thoughts of the people. This becomes the window into our text as we try to illuminate and reveal the proceeding action.

## A Play on Exodus and Revelation

*Author's Note: Each line of this piece is intended to be read by a different voice. This piece can be performed by as many as twenty people and as few as five. It is intended to be staged in the manner of guerilla/environmental theatre (ala Richard Shechner, Bertolt Brecht and Jerzy Grotowski), and as a result should be imagined with performers surrounding and integrated into the performance space. There is conscious ambiguity in some "characters" and conscious specificity with others – there is no set determination as to who delivers what line.*

### I

Where are we?

What time is it?

Does it matter?

Yeah, I want to know.

So, where are we?

My goodness this journey is long.

Is this a test?!

My feet hurt.

I thought we were going to stop.

What happened to the water?

Are we there yet?

No

We are here.

Are we there yet

Who even knows where we are going?

To a mountain, it looks like

This mountain is no ordinary place.<sup>208</sup>

Not another mountain to climb...

I thought this was just a metaphor...

I hope I can stay at the bottom this time.

What time is it?

Ugh, I think it is like three months after we left that place.

בְּחֶדֶשׁ הַשְּׁלִישִׁי

The third month.

Who is counting?

I have no idea.

God...

Are we there yet?

On that day they entered the wilderness of Sinai<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Brueggemann, p. 837

<sup>209</sup> Exodus 19:1

Oh, if only we could go back  
    I am sooo hungry.  
If only we knew where we were  
    I am sooo confused.  
If only...  
That is it.  
    I am going to talk to Moses.  
Slavery was fine compared to that water we crossed over and through  
Or the lack of anything real to eat.  
    Where are the cucumbers  
    Where is the fish  
What is going on with this heat...  
Is he bringing us out here to die in the wilderness...  
    What, were there not enough graves for us in Egypt...

Just get it over with.  
What are we doing out here...

Moses...  
He can't hear you, we're all the way back here.  
Moses...  
I am sure he is just off in his own world...  
I bet he listens to inanimate objects...  
    Look, I bet that bush is talking to him  
Ha – I bet the mountain calls to him...  
    Moses,  
    Moses...

## *II*

I hear you...  
What already...

Is that a way to talk to the one who helped lead you out of Egypt?  
Come here...

I'm coming, I'm coming...  
    I'm coming up

Ah ha, another "mountain top experience"  
    I think this is becoming a motif...  
Or a type scene.  
    Should I have a sense of what is to come?  
    Perhaps something will be revealed to me if I wait a little longer.

Where is he going?

How could he be leaving?  
Great, he is going to leave us here  
Fine, my fate is sealed, I know it.  
Kill me now  
I am going to talk to Aaron about this.  
I want to rebel.  
He is going up the mountain...  
Aaron...  
We gotta do something

Relax.  
Who cares where he is going  
At least we are sitting  
For once.  
Perhaps even for twice.  
I bet we will be here for three days.

Any takers?  
I bet you my manna that it will be three days...  
(I just have a hunch)  
No, you are crazy.  
This is just a little stop on our journey...  
While Moses goes up the Mountain.  
Nothing is really going to happen.  
I'll take that three day bet...  
You're on – I'll make the preparations.  
Three days...for...

Moses, tell this to the people...  
You want me to tell them more?  
Remind them how they soared on eagles wings.  
That was good metaphor wasn't it?!  
I am pretty proud of that one!

Remind them of the great wonders in the land of Egypt.  
That Nile thing was a pretty neat trick...  
So where the frogs!  
Tell them that I will be their God.  
And that if they will be mine...I will be their's.  
Say to them...

This sounds a lot like what you said to me  
By that bush.  
That holy place  
Is this place too holy?  
Does that make this place holy too?

It is...

And this way you will remember  
And you will do.

What if they do not do what you say?

They will...

וְאֶמְרוּ כָל אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר יְהוָה נַעֲשֶׂה

And I will sell it to them with some spectacle

Like the bush...but for more people...

And, if they obey and keep my covenant  
הַבְרִית

They will be my treasured people.

אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תְּדַבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
בְּרִיתִי

My treasured people.

### III

Why is God telling him this.

The people won't do it.

No one will obey.

They are just tired.

No, I don't think so.

Perhaps

Perhaps this is a good thing.

What is

This conversation.

They are bonding.

It seems like a trick.

What if God is binding them to something unreasonable.

Like law

Didn't they just leave slavery...

No they left three months ago...

This is a different kind of bond

Whose servant are they now?

עבדי יהוה!?

Is this going to be some sort of trial.

Seems more like a dance to me.

An eternal partnership moving back and forth

A great superstructure of practice and belief...<sup>210</sup>

Not a trial

<sup>210</sup> Ronald Hendel. "The Exodus in Biblical Memory", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120/4 (2001) p. 601

More like an act of faith

A trial like it is trying...

An experiment.

With acts of faith.

I am ready to try

It sure will be trying

I believe...

Will it work...

I do not know if that is the point.

Why this people?

Because they accepted.

Accepted what?

But they don't even know what they are accepting.

They accepted because there was a mountain over their heads...

Oh, that is just a silly story.

Not according to the script

Which script, not the one that I have!

They are going to do what God says...

That is what the script says...

But Blindly?

Or were they stunned...

Or separated?

Or were they made holy?

In order to be separated?

That is why they didn't respond immediately.

Wouldn't you be

Stunned

Think of the eagles wings...metaphor or reality...which is it here?

The water...

That fire...the plagues...the desert...

Such wonders...

They are no longer in harms way

It is a good thing that they waited a little bit of time since they left that place.

Which place.

That narrow place

מצרים

Egypt

The place of blindly following many Gods.

To come to this place

But aren't they going to blindly follow one God?

It is not that kind of story

Really – from עבדות to עבדות?  
It is not that kind of relationship  
Rather there is a partnership.  
There is no autocracy.

They are ready...  
I don't think so,  
God will give them more time to prepare.  
They need a few days to get ready...  
They are about to hear what Moses heard.  
Or at least what he tells them.

חרות  
Freedom  
בחר  
At the Mountain  
The mountain of freedom...  
Trembling with fear of this freedom.  
The freedom is difficult  
If this is freedom, how come it is binding...  
חרות אל הלכות  
Inscribed...

חרות  
Is engraved?  
Fixed?  
Set in stone?  
But חרות  
Is freedom...

The engraved makes us free  
The tablets are our ticket...

This is not blind acceptance.  
It is just a little scary...  
We are trembling before God...  
Our chains of slavery are now irrelevant.  
It is our time to break from the past and understand and accept our own freedom.

But why?  
They are accepting that they will be a holy nation.  
גוי קדוש  
קדוש

Holy  
Special  
So this is saying we are better

I do not think that I am so comfortable with that.  
No, just saying we are different...  
קדוש  
Separate  
קדוש  
Separated  
Special  
Dedicated  
Connected<sup>211</sup>  
Things become holy when they are connected to something holy...  
The power of connection  
But things also become separate when they become holy.  
Separated from what?  
We are nowhere  
We have to be separated from something in order to be separated or can we just  
Be holy?  
It is relational.  
Isn't this whole scene relational?

This whole relationship just that  
...what  
Relational.  
A covenant  
A connection  
A promise?  
A Brit...  
That is the first time I have heard that word in this book.  
Where have I heard it before?  
What can we learn...  
You will be a great nation.

Those words have been spoken to our ancestors.  
Are we like Abraham here?  
We are at the base of a mountain and we are waiting...

Or Isaac  
Passively bound to the will and whims of God?

Or are we like Jacob  
...I know I am struggling...

Perhaps we are just Israel  
And this is all a coincidence  
No, this is God.  
With God, there are no coincidences...<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> I thank Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi for this insight.

But what does this all mean?

Perhaps the meaning is deeper.  
Perhaps the meaning is all around.  
And it needs to be defined.  
Or revealed

There is something about to be revealed  
A greater truth.

Is that why we need to separated?  
For Meaning?

Or something...  
Or nothing?  
Or someone?

וְהִגְבַּלְתָּ

Make a boundary  
Separate!!  
Perhaps we are placing a boundary around ourselves.  
Like a force-field?  
Or a fence  
Or perhaps we are just replacing our chains of slavery with chains of law?  
A boundary of separation  
A holy boundary  
Are we making a fence around us  
Or chains?

Is there any danger in this holiness?  
Yes, but there is also a greatness...  
Can anyone make us holy?

Do you think we are ready for all of this?

Now that they are re-invigorated  
They are ready to receive...<sup>213</sup>

Yes.  
I think we have waited long enough...

#### *IV*

But now we have to wait some more.  
For how long?

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<sup>212</sup> I thank Rabbi Richard N. Levy for this insight.

<sup>213</sup> This is a reference to *Kohelet Rabbah*. The idea is cited, the quote is not exact.

Three days.

Be ready for the third day<sup>214</sup>

THREE DAYS more

What is going to happen then?

I don't know.

All this waiting.

This better be worth it...

Why three?

I told you we would have to wait for three (more).

You are right – you win.

Three more days in this “nowhere” place.

But maybe we really are somewhere.

And that place is special?

So where are we?

Separated...

And Moses came to the people and told them to make themselves holy  
And to wash their clothes.<sup>215</sup>

How are they going to make themselves holy?

I thought only God did that...

Apparently also Moses can...

Can anyone?

We have to make ourselves holy.

...but wait, aren't we going to become a holy nation?

קדוש

The act of becoming holy...

That is what we are preparing for.

So how to we become holy to become holy?

Now that is something...

How do we deal with our own holiness?

Too much can kill us

But just enough makes us special

This is some pretty serious stuff...

Not just a spectacle of God's relationship...

The place is holy

And we are holy

Therefore we are holy in that place.

Even though we may feel like we are nowhere special.

Which is itself separate

And therefore holy?

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<sup>214</sup> Exodus 19:15 NJPS translation

<sup>215</sup> Exodus 19:14, My translation

This is all very confusing...  
    This is all very cleansing...  
Our rite of purity making<sup>216</sup>  
    Our reality of holy-making  
This meeting is an entry into holiness<sup>217</sup>  
    The purpose of our relationship  
    The purpose of our worship  
A moment cast in a liturgical setting?  
    What?  
We are about to receive...

תורה

For us to learn

תורה

For us to fear?

We will listen

And we will do

This is all very awesome

ירא

This is all very angst ridden

Are you ready?

Go down Moses

And bring up our prayers

We are ready

We are clean and washed

ניקבס

I feel like priests preparing for an offering.<sup>218</sup>

We are offering ourselves to the altar of God...

We are like Isaac

Separated at the mountain – ready...

No, we are Israel

Individuals

Clean...Pure...Ready...

Are you ready?

It is time...

All we have to do is wait for the call

V

<sup>216</sup> Anthony Burgess, *Moses: A Narrative* (New York: Stonehill Publishing, 1976) p. 101

<sup>217</sup> Brueggemann, p. 830

<sup>218</sup> This is a reference to the only other use of the Hebrew כבס found in Numbers 8:21. The analog infuses this play with both an image and textual reference.

What is that sound?

A horn

A blast

A shofar

A ram's horn

From atop the mountain.

That sound

Louder

And louder.

That blast

My body hears

And Moses talks.

Seeing Moses go up for some reason makes me feel safe.

He'll protect us.

He will never let us down.

We will follow him to our places at the foot of the mountain.

אֲנִכִּי יִהְיֶה אֶלֶיְהִיד...

I'm scared.

I don't know if I even want to do this?

Stand still

To hear the voices

Stand still

To see the moment.

Stand still to hear what is said.

And to see

Stand still for the voice.

A still small voice?

I don't know.

What does God sound like?

I figured it would be large...

Were we told not to look...?

But I see thunder.

We were told not to touch.

Standing still I see and I hear

I am free to make my own choices

Then why can't I touch?

To decide whether or not to accept or say "yes"

Will you accept these words of the covenant...

You said you will do what I have said...

Will you?

I...I...I...

Will YOU accept the covenant?

Covenant

ברית

ראשית

Our beginning

The beginning of our Covenant...

Everyone is standing here.

Echoes

Bouncing

Echoes

Thundering

Echoes

Burning

A passion within me

A fire which burns but does not consume

God's words to me

To us

The weight is heavy as stone.

Echoing and bouncing all along the valley

With tablets in his arms...

For us to see the words God utters.

And then Moses went up again.

Till Moses was lost to view...<sup>219</sup>

Wait, where did he go?

I can't do this without him

I am backing up.

This is too much for me.

This is a lot heavier than I thought

Yeah – is this really what we signed on for.

It sounded so much better coming from Moses...

We'll tell him we are not ready...

I don't think he will be too happy.

I am scared...

Who, Moses or God?

We are supposed to be God's chosen people...

Are we not choosing to be chosen?

No we are just choosing to have a translator.

---

<sup>219</sup> Burgess, p. 102

To mediate between  
Ah, like Aaron is for Moses,  
Moses is for God...?  
We will still hear  
And we will still do...  
That was just a little too much...

*VI*

Was that too much?  
Yeah, a little too much like Steven Spielberg.  
But didn't it take a visual spectacle to catch your attention...  
Since that was just for you,  
I figured I had to go bigger and better...for the larger group of people...

But I wasn't completely scared.  
Just a little apprehensive.  
Maybe that is what is going on right now with the people?  
Maybe they didn't fall back in fear, but rather in apprehension?

ירא

Awe

Which leads ever so closely to apprehension  
And wonder.  
Will it ever lead to holiness?

Was this some kind of test?  
Or were you trying to scare them...

נסה

It was trying  
That is for sure.

Were you trying...  
Or testing

נסה

This is a test.  
To see if they believe.

But are you sure that they do?  
The event was cast in a liturgical setting...<sup>220</sup>  
There was a calling  
There should have been some responding...

But

But there was just falling off.  
In apprehension.

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<sup>220</sup> Brueggemann, p. 833

The fire that burns.  
I guess consumed too?!

Can you feel it?  
The passion  
The covenant is more than just words.  
It is an experience.  
Can you remember?  
I think we all can

*VII*

Here are the people,  
Waiting  
Ready to accept.  
Eager to dance.

What would you say if God asked you?  
What would you hear?

Upon us all is a thick cloud of compassion  
And we are ready to receive  
“We bring Torah into the world when we seek to sanctify the times and places of our lives”<sup>221</sup>

...קדוש

“And we mark milestones of our personal journeys...  
Which reveal holiness in each stage of life...”<sup>222</sup>

To be or not to be...

Holy...

Is that really the question?

Is that my choice?

Is this that stage?

Is this that time of revelation and holiness?

Are YOU ready...?

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<sup>221</sup> Richard N. Levy, *The Future of Holiness* (New York: URJ Press, 2005), p. 138

<sup>222</sup> Ibid

## **Numbers**

### **Introduction**

As readers of the Torah, we all know that Moses does not get to enter into the Promised Land. There are great ways to interpret this as we believe the journey is paramount over the outcome or that he was just a great a leader. What is important to discuss is how and when in fact Moses learns that he will not enter the Promised Land. And, what, if anything, did he do to warrant this punishment.

The text under consideration here addresses these questions and attempts to answer them. The reality, after much scholarly discussion, is that we do not know exactly why Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land. The only conclusive thing that we know is that through Numbers 20:1-13 he is told that this will be his fate.

The following is an exegetical explanation of this text followed by a creative interpretation as to what happened and why. We always use Moses as a paradigmatic leader, what else can we learn from him, and his followers and those who observed this scene?

## Translation

### Numbers 20: 1-13

1. And so came all<sup>223</sup> the children of Israel, the entire congregation<sup>224</sup> to the wilderness of Zin<sup>225</sup> in the first month. And the people remained<sup>226</sup> in Kadesh<sup>227</sup>. And Miriam died there, and was buried there<sup>228</sup>.

2. There was no water<sup>229</sup> for the community<sup>230</sup>. They<sup>231</sup> assembled<sup>232</sup> against Moses and Aaron.

---

<sup>223</sup> It is not so strange to see the word כל in relation to the words that follow it, but here כל is used in addition to the word עדה. This is a rare phrase that is found both here and in Leviticus 19:1-37 where it is believed the emphasis on the entire congregation indicates the presence of the entire congregation at once – perhaps an expansion of the moment of revelation. Further, Rashi indicates עדה כל is actually עדה שלמה – a complete community, meaning that everyone was involved.

<sup>224</sup> Note the words that seem to be synonyms that will be used throughout the passage. Both קהל and עדה are used to describe the Children of Israel, and here עדה is used first. According to the concordance, עדה is used more frequently in Numbers than in any other book. קהל indicates a gathering of people, while עדה seems to indicate a working group. I have chosen to translate עדה as congregation because a congregation is “an assembly of people met for worship or religious instruction” (Webster’s 9<sup>th</sup> Dictionary), and have chosen to translate קהל as community because a community is a “unified group of individuals” (Ibid) (as the Hebrew root infers a “coming together”).

<sup>225</sup> The Etz Hayim commentary places this location in the Sinai area, the BDB however, states that Zin is in a South Canaan location, where Kadesh Barnea lay (BDB, p. 856), and the Maps that appear in Milgrom’s Commentary on Numbers support both of these ideas (Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990]). Nonetheless, the area of that the people arrived at is clearly outside the borders of Canaan, otherwise the story would not make sense. Further, despite the geographic discrepancy, however, it is the same location as Exodus 17 and the “other” rock story (Discussion of this parallel scene will be addressed later in this thesis). It is also interesting to observe the use of קדש, as this root will pre-figure an important element to the story. Maybe the actual location is does not completely matter rather the use of the word infers all that we as readers need to know.

<sup>226</sup> This also could be translated as “settled” there.

<sup>227</sup> A specific location, south of Judah, on the West border of Edom (BDB, p. 873), but also the same root as Holiness (קדש). Perhaps a premonition of something to come with the exposition of the story. An inference to the Frame of Holiness that runs throughout this passage and in the Moses character arc. As a result, this will remain untranslated throughout the passage to add to the ambiguity of the text.

<sup>228</sup> There is great importance and significance to Miriam’s death AND the fact that her death was even mentioned without any mourning. This marks the death of a “leader” as well as the mention of a specific act happening in a specific place.

<sup>229</sup> The basis and crux of the story within this scene is water. Immediately after the death of Miriam, the Israelites cry out for water. The scene continues under the guise of this desire for water. Water becomes

3. And the nation<sup>233</sup> quarreled<sup>234</sup> with Moses and they said, saying: "O<sup>235</sup>, if only we had expired when our brothers had expired before YHWH<sup>236</sup>.

4. Why have you brought the assembly of YHWH to this<sup>237</sup> wilderness, to die THERE<sup>238</sup>  
– us and our cattle?<sup>239</sup>

5. And why did you bring us up<sup>240</sup> from Egypt to bring us to this<sup>241</sup> bad place? – It is not a place of seeds or figs or vines or<sup>242</sup> pomegranates<sup>243</sup> – and there is no water to drink!

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the reason for the quarreling. It comes as a manifestation of sustenance for the Israelites. And it is ultimately the latent cause of Moses' punishment.

<sup>230</sup> Midrash relates this verse to the previous one claiming that Miriam must have been a "water giver" and now with her death, there is no water (*Bemidbar Rabbah* 20:11)

<sup>231</sup> Specifically plural while, as will be seen later, the "congregation" is referred to in the singular.

<sup>232</sup> Verb root – קהל (see footnote above)

<sup>233</sup> העם – another term for the Children of Israel. This is the only use of this nomenclature in this story and, coincidentally, this sentence begins exactly the same as Exodus 17:2. The difference here is that the people's quarreling is more of a complaint about their death while in Exodus 17 they are merely demanding water.

<sup>234</sup> ריב – Literally: "To quarrel" – this word is only used three other times (before this story). Genesis 31:36 (Jacob quarrelling with Laban), Exodus 1:20 (the empowerment of the midwives in Egypt) and Exodus 17:2 (The "first" rock story – where the people quarreled with Moses because they were thirsty).

<sup>235</sup> Reflecting the difficulty in translating the nuanced Hebrew and attempting to present the emphasis conveyed in the text.

<sup>236</sup> Rashi: This is the wish of the people. Read, rather, "we wish we died when our brothers died."

<sup>237</sup> Reflecting the emphasis of the site of this story.

<sup>238</sup> The text says "Sham" meaning the specific place. Milgrom also notes that according to the ancient tradition, Miriam died on the tenth day of the first month, which is also indicated by the word שם.

<sup>239</sup> Livestock in some translations. According to the BDB, this refers to the general notion of cattle (p. 129). It also relates to the Israelites' existence and livelihood.

<sup>240</sup> עלה rather than יצא – I point this out because it is interesting to see how the liberation from Egypt is retold. In this passage there is no reference to מצרים, rather, here it is the turn עלה. Further, in following verses the word יצא will be used to refer to the taking out of water, in some microcosmic way, related to saving the children of Israel. I think the physical acts related to these words is also interesting.

<sup>241</sup> See footnote above.

<sup>242</sup> The insertion of the word "or" reflects the placement of the ו in the verse. This translation choice addresses the crescendo nature of the Israelites' complaint. This litany of woe (that these items are not actually present) is the pinnacle of the Israelites complaint.

<sup>243</sup> Memory of what they were promised in the New Land. This reflects a big change from before where they only remembered the food of Egypt.

6. And then Moses and Aaron came to face<sup>244</sup> the assembly at the opening of the *Ohel Moed*<sup>245</sup> and they fell upon their faces<sup>246</sup>. And there appeared<sup>247</sup> the glory of YHWH to them.

7. And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying:

8. "Take the staff and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron, your brother<sup>248</sup>, and speak to the rock<sup>249</sup> before their eyes<sup>250</sup> and it will give its water. And you will bring out<sup>251</sup> to them<sup>252</sup> water from the rock and you will water the congregation and the cattle."

9. And Moses took the staff from in front of YHWH, as he was commanded<sup>253</sup>.

10. And Moses and Aaron assembled the assembly facing<sup>254</sup> the rock and said to them: "Listen, now, the ones who are rebelling<sup>255</sup>, from this rock shall we<sup>256</sup> bring out water for you?"

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<sup>244</sup> Could also be translated as BEFORE. This translation reflects Fox and keeps with the physical act that follows later in this verse.

<sup>245</sup> I have chosen to keep this untranslated because the other locations mentioned in this passage have a nuanced Hebrew basis. This keeps with the flow and the ambiguity of the text.

<sup>246</sup> Internal reference to Moses and Aaron "facing" the assembly, but I am not sure before whom they fell; was it to God or to the assembly. The conclusion of the verse adds to the confusion, but it seems as if they fell before God *because* of the community.

<sup>247</sup> This is the imperfect tense – reflecting the present unfolding of the story.

<sup>248</sup> Why is Aaron referenced here as Moses' brother? Don't we already know this? Perhaps it is God being really serious about calling them like a parent who is stern will call the child by his/her full name. It certainly links Aaron directly to Moses as they both will be linked in punishment.

<sup>249</sup> Literally "crag" (BDB, p. 700). This word only appears 5 times in Torah, and all in this chapter. While there is great similarity between this rock/water story and the one in Exodus, here the rock is a rock (סלע)

<sup>250</sup> Could also be translated as "in their presence"

<sup>251</sup> Refer to footnote above – this use of יצא perhaps is a literary reference to the saving nature of the water from this rock much like the יצאת מצרים was a saving nature.

<sup>252</sup> Note the plural here, presumably referring to the same group as above.

<sup>253</sup> Literally, "As YHWH commanded him"

<sup>254</sup> Reflecting the Fox translation and also a reference to Moses and Aaron facing the assembly.

11. And Moses lifted his hand and struck<sup>257</sup> the rock with his staff, twice<sup>258</sup>, and a lot of water<sup>259</sup> was brought out<sup>260</sup>. And the congregation and the cattle drank.

12. And YHWH said to Moses and Aaron: "Because you did not believe in me<sup>261</sup> to make me holy<sup>262</sup> in the eyes of the children of Israel, so<sup>263</sup> you will not bring this assembly to the land which I have given them."<sup>264</sup>

13. These are the waters of *Meribah*<sup>265</sup> where the children of Israel quarreled with YHWH and he<sup>266</sup> was made holy<sup>267</sup> among them.

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<sup>255</sup> Note the participle form of רִיב. It has an aural quality of what they are about to receive, namely מִים רַבִּים

<sup>256</sup> Also possibly, "Can we"

<sup>257</sup> Literally "smote" (BDB, p. 645), but the notion of striking relates this story back to Exodus 17, even though the words are not the same.

<sup>258</sup> I have chosen to separate this word to emphasize that Moses did in fact hit the rock twice, which seems to be the genesis of his punishment.

<sup>259</sup> The word here is מִים רַבִּים. Literally it can mean "a lot of water" but it also connotes "big water" or "primordial flood water." (Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977]).

<sup>260</sup> See footnote above concerning יצא.

<sup>261</sup> Meaning "trust", following the Friedman translation.

<sup>262</sup> קדש - Refer to footnote above.

<sup>263</sup> Literally, "as a result", "therefore", "so".

<sup>264</sup> Reflecting the Friedman translation.

<sup>265</sup> This is literally the name of a place, but the root indicates this was the place of struggle. See footnote above about רִיב.

<sup>266</sup> The pronoun only reflecting the Hebrew, not the genderfication of YHWH.

<sup>267</sup> This raises the question about holiness - קדש. The name of the place shares the same root. Moses is punished for not making God holy and the people are made holy. I have no answer to this issue, other than wanting to point out that it in fact exists and will be dealt with Bibliodramatically.

## **Structure**

There is much that occurs in this story. As a result a good way to understand the structure of this story is through its thematic exposition. This way of looking at the text enables the reader to understand the flow of the story in light of the structural elements that are present within. Following the linear description of the structure is a thematic description of the text. The former is present to help show the line by line sequence of the story, while the thematic structure shows the development of the arc of character. As is reflected in the structure, the element of "holiness" is presented and re-stated. It seems that while there are many interpretations to the story, and there are many discussions about the relationship between Numbers 20 and Exodus 17, this story is largely about both קדש and the actions involved in making something holy or distinctive.<sup>268</sup> While Exodus 17 presents a similar story, the theme of that passage is not about holiness. The similarities exist in regards to the setting and to the action of the people. In both stories the people quarrel with Moses (ריב), but only in Numbers 20 is the question of קדש raised. This presents both an interesting perspective towards the structure of the text but also in regards to the meaning.

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<sup>268</sup> Specifically related to the previous section of this Thesis, the notion of קדש becomes fascinating. In Exodus, Moses is told to separate the people and make them holy. Here, in Numbers 20, he is punished for not having made God holy in the eyes of the people. In one scene Moses is lauded for his "making holy" in the other scene, the direct opposite occurs and he is ultimately punished.

Linear:

- v. 1. Miriam dies and overall Frame of Holiness initiated.
- v. 2. The community gathers and takes issue with Moses and Aaron
- v. 3-5 The nature and content of the complaint
- v. 6 Moses and Aaron respond and God intervenes and appears
- v. 7 God speaks – God as Arbitrator between the rebels and Moses
- v. 8 The content of God's arbitration and instructions
- v. 9 Moses begins to follow the instructions
- v. 10 Moses and Aaron gather the people and act
- v. 11 Moses acts, Community drinks
- v. 12 God punishes Moses and Aaron
- v. 13 Conclusion – The overall Frame of Holiness revisited

Thematic:

- (A) Frame of Holiness introduced and the Death of a Leader (v. 1)
  - (B) Community and Leaders – interactions, quarrels and intrigue (v. 2-6)
    - (C) God intervenes and instructs (v. 7)
      - (B<sub>1</sub>) Community and Leaders – action, satiation and condemnation (v. 9-11)
- (A<sub>1</sub>) Frame of Holiness (and quarrel) revisited – condemnation and metaphoric Death of a Leader<sup>269</sup> (v. 12-13)

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<sup>269</sup> Moses does not actually die in this passage, but his fate is sealed.

**Key Words:**

סלע – Literally “rock” this word is a deviation from the word used in Exodus 17 where the story is similar. This word indicates the difference in this scene but is really the only difference in the scene.

קדש- This word and root infuses the passage with the interesting idea (and Frame) of “making oneself holy” or being “holy”. The story begins in Kadesh as a name of a place (20:1a); God’s punishment is because Moses did not make God holy in the eyes of the people (20:12a), and the people make God holy in the end (20:13b).

עדה vs. קהל

The altering between the two words unites this keyword with the idea of gathering, community and witness.

ריב- Literally “quarrel”. This word is only used three times before this story (see footnote above). The action of quarreling is the set induction of the scene (20:3), forcing the community to come together in their frustration. Then forcing Moses to take action, and for God to intervene.

יצא Literally “going out”. This word indicates the presence of Moses and Aaron coming before the people to hear their grievance as well as to provide water. It also indicates the past and the motif of memory when

the Israelites question why they have been “brought” here, and the nature of the leaders’ punishment, that they will not be able to bring the people into the promised land.

מות- The presence of death among the Israelites at this point in their journey seems to be palpable. Miriam’s death marks the beginning of the death of the Leaders. The complaining for death indicates the pervasiveness of the subject among the Israelites and the preparation for the new generation that will enter the Promised land.

### **Structure Analysis**

The overall structure of these thirteen verses can be plotted linearly as an arch. The passage begins (20:1) with the introduction of the Frame of קדש and the death of a leader, Miriam, and ends (20:13) with the revisiting of the Frame of קדש. The events that transpire in between the beginning and ending of this passage fill in the arch.

After the Death of Leader (I), Miriam, the community comes together to quarrel with Moses and Aaron (20:2b). They take issue with their lack of water (20:2a), their wish that they had died when their brothers had (20:3b), their desire for the promised fruits of the Land (20:5b), and their general frustration with the journey (20:4-5a). This quarreling of the Community is met by an intended response of the leaders, Moses and Aaron (20:6). These four verses, 20:2-6, represent the first point on the structural arch of the passage. Here the community confront the leaders and the leaders “respond”, albeit not very successfully.

God's intervention and instruction, which follows the leader's "response" (20:7) is the fulcrum of the structural arch. In 20:6b-8, God instructs the leaders in what to do for the people. God tells Moses and Aaron, his brother<sup>270</sup>, exactly what to do in order to quell the people's quarrelling.

In verses 20:9-11, Moses "does" what he is commanded, but along the way transgresses in the eyes of God because in some unspecified way (20:11). As a result, Moses is punished (20:12b). Nonetheless, the people's quarrelling is quelled as they receive, not only water from the rock, but an abundance of water from the rock (20:11b).

The revisiting of the coming together of the community and the leaders in verses 20:9-12, mirrors the coming together of the community and leaders in verses 20:2-6. In the first section the community quarrels (20:2), in the second, the community is satiated (20:11). The first time Moses and Aaron "respond" by falling on their faces (20:6), the second time Moses and Aaron take a different action (20:10). At the mid-point of this structural arch is God who intervenes. God's arbitration is what allows the quarrel to be quelled and the leaders to take action (20:6-8).

The climax of this section occurs in verses 20:11b - 12. After their quarrelling, the Israelites' receive water, a premonition of the final verse where it is declared that these are the Waters of *Meribah*, and where Moses and Aaron are punished. The motive for the punishment is not clear in the text, though a subtle revisiting of the Frame of קדש leads to the possible intent of their punishment. What is clear is that Moses and Aaron are punished for having not made God holy in the eyes of the Israelites (20:12a). What is not clear is which of their actions could have or should have been correct.

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<sup>270</sup> A specific mention of Aaron's connection to Moses rather than merely calling the two by name. This will figure into the subtextual analysis of God in the story.

The final element of this specific passage concludes in a similar fashion to the way it began. Verses 20:12-13 wholly revisits the Frame of קדש now that the Israelites have their water. This time, though, there is no specific mention of the place, קדש, rather the frame is revisited by people's affirming of God's "holiness" in their specific location, the Waters of *Meribah* (20:13b and a, respectively), the place where they struggled with God for water.

## Setting

The literary unit of Numbers 20 is situated between the Korach rebellion (Numbers 16) and the Israelites' arrival at the banks of the Jordan River (Numbers 33) as they journey. It also follows immediately after Chapter 19 where water as a purifying element figures prominently. The current passage (20:1-13) is tempered with these elements; the potential seeds of another rebellion, the revitalizing power of water<sup>271</sup> and the eventual events that will take place at the banks of the Jordan River.

Numbers 20 opens in the wilderness of Zin, which is a place the Israelites have been before. Kadesh, too is place the Israelites have been before<sup>272</sup>. Despite the contemporary geographic discrepancies of specific location, the textual references indicate this place is of importance. For this specific situation, the intent of the passage's location lies in the name Kadesh (קדש).

It marks a turning point in the overall Numbers narrative. As Jacob Milgrom explains, the march from Sinai to Kadesh, the journey up to this point, (Numbers 10:11-

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<sup>271</sup> See Numbers 19:1-22 and Ilana Pardes, *Counter-traditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; 1992), p. 48

<sup>272</sup> See Numbers 13:26 and Milgrom, p. 104

14:45) "began in high spirits and ended in disaster. This final phase of the wilderness trek begins in gloom and ends in jubilation."<sup>273</sup>

However, the gloom which precedes this passage is very much present. God and Moses have weathered the wraths of rebellions from Chapters 12, 14, 16 and 17. The sentiment of rebellion and quarrel pervades the actions of Moses when he is confronted by the quarreling community of Israelites. Could there be another rebellion on the horizon? Does he have the strength to weather more resentment? How much longer does Moses need to stand up for God's doings before they reach the Promised Land? These are the elements that influence Moses' actions within this passage. He is afraid of the potential. The seeds of rebellion have been sown in Moses. It is how the passage and story unfold that is truly fascinating.

The effect of the prior rebellions is death. Death, while bad, can be seen as a cleansing. As punishment for rising up against God, the Israelites are sentenced to die in the wilderness. This divine generational purging leads the way from the older generation, who once knew of non-liminal living, to the new generation, pure and ready to inherit the land they have been promised.

While death seems to be the overt weeding out of the older generation, it is the motif of water that functions as the purifying agent. Immediately preceding this return to the narrative exposition of the story, Numbers 19 elaborately discusses a water purification ritual, a premonition to the meaning of the story that follows. Numbers 20:1-13, then, functions as a purification rite for the "new" community; the ones who will be entering the Promised Land.

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<sup>273</sup> Milgrom, p. 163

The appearance of water in Numbers 20 serves as the people's biblical *Mikevah*. Further evidence driving this point can be found in verse 20:8b. The word God uses to tell Moses about the water coming from the rock is יצא. The form is a covert reference to the Exodus proper, but moreover an inference to the saving power of the water. The older generation was "brought out" from Egypt and passed through water to be saved. Here, the new generation has water "brought out" to them so they can be "saved" and continue with the journey. The Waters of Meribah, function, on one hand, as an understanding of the quarreling of the Israelites with the focus on the ריב inherent in the root. But also, on another hand, where the water serves as a re-affirmation of the ברית or covenant, lending some deeper explanation to the ambiguity of the indication of "God being made holy among them" (20:13b).

The placement of Numbers 20:1-13 functions as a final turning point for the Israelites in the wilderness and begins to change the role of Moses as the leader. It is one of the last major events before the end of the journeying<sup>274</sup>. And it symbolizes the change from a cantankerous group of people potentially brewing a rebellion to a new generation, sanctified by God to inherit the Promised Land. It also begins the fall of Moses as the leader of the people. Along the Aristotelian arc, Moses and Aaron make a tragic mistake. We do not know conclusively what the mistake was, however, the entire rest of the story is playing out the reality of a mistake. As Moses begins to take a back seat, a new generation of the people begins to rise and take prominence. The role of Moses as the mediator begins to change.

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<sup>274</sup> The Israelites' remain stationary in Moab while they hear the Deuteronomic orations of Moses.

The physical setting, Kadesh (קדש), sets the tone for what transpires. The people were originally made holy by Moses in order to receive revelation at Sinai. Now, they are made holy by God in order to receive their inheritance.

Water here functions as both a force of life and destruction. The water functions as a cleaning agent for the people, but also signifies the eventual result of Moses. The death en masse of the previous generation marks the beginning of the move from gloom and frustration to jubilation and exaltation. The result is a budding group of sanctified Israelites.

But what comes after in 20:22 when the people leave the place קדש? Does this mean that they leave holiness? What does it mean to become holy? This distinction and question relates to many key moments in Torah and bears great Bibliodramatic potential. What really happened to Moses in Numbers 20? Perhaps our method will help us understand.

## A Play on Numbers and Moses hitting the Rock

*Author's Note: Each line of this piece is intended to be read by a different voice. This piece can be performed by as many as twenty people and as few as five. It is intended to be staged in the manner of guerilla/environmental theatre (ala Richard Shechner, Bertolt Brecht and Jerzy Grotowski), and as a result should be imagined with performers surrounding and integrated into the performance space. There is conscious ambiguity in some "characters" and conscious specificity with others – there is no set determination as to who delivers what line.*

### I

What did he do?

What did YOU do?

No, it was not us...

    This time it was he himself who did it...

Are you sure?

    We had nothing to with it?

No...

I think this time, actually it was us...

Doesn't it seem like he was framed?

I don't know?

Perhaps it was not his intention

    It was just his actions...

So, what did he do?

    What was it exactly...

Don't you remember...

    No...clearly...it is really complex and tricky to begin with...

The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin...<sup>275</sup>

    Where are we?

Weren't we already here...

    נִשְׁבּ הָעַם בְּקֶדֶשׁ...<sup>276</sup>

And they stayed in Kadesh?

    Or they stayed there קֶדֶשׁ

Separated?

    Separated from what?

No, I think this was really a place...

Or are they really somewhere different?

    Kadesh

---

<sup>275</sup> Numbers 20:1, NJPS translation

<sup>276</sup> Numbers 20:1

Distinct...

From the other places.

But this place is special.

I feel it!

Something holy

Something big

Is about to happen...

We should make this holy

But not necessarily for the good reasons.

וַתָּמָת שָׁם מִרְיָם וְתִקְבָּר שָׁם<sup>277</sup>

And Miriam died there and was buried there...

(Pause)

I am thirsty...

Me too...

My goodness, it gets hot on this long walk

I feel like I am walking in a big circle.

Ugh...

Why?

That is all I have to say...

Why?

Why this place?

Why this journey?

Why didn't I join the others and speak up before it got like this...

"If only we had perished..."<sup>278</sup>

Perished

נָפְעָנוּ

Perished when our brothers did.

נָפְעָנוּ בְּגִנָּה

Perish, yes, I said perish...

This is worse than death...

I am actually dying here...

No you are not

We have to talk to Moses...

Aren't we supposed to wait?

Wait for what?

To talk to him

Aren't those our instructions?

But I am thirsty...

Aren't we supposed to wait to intervene...

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<sup>277</sup> Numbers 20:1b

<sup>278</sup> Numbers 20:2

This time?  
What happened the last time?  
The last time we rebelled...  
Or the last time we quarreled about water?

No, I think we were supposed to wait to quarrel until now...  
So let's do it...  
Is quarrelling different than rebelling?  
I don't know...  
Yes...  
Quarrelling is WAY different than rebelling.  
We are not Rebels...

This is just a quarrel.  
I am not for the whole rebellion thing  
That is sooo a few chapters ago...  
I have not joined one yet, I am not going to now...  
I will not betray my leader Moses...

I am just thirsty...  
And I am thirsty...  
I'm thirsty...  
Me too  
I am parched...

## *II*

Moses,  
Moses,

Why are we still walking in circles?  
Where is the fruit?  
Where is the water?  
Why didn't you let us die in the wilderness?  
Why did you bring us here?  
Why won't you listen?  
Why?  
Why?  
Why?  
I want water...

I feel like there may be too much complaining going on?  
Isn't it enough that we brought them here.  
We are at least safe...  
What is the cause of all this unrest?

God...  
Ya gotta help...  
This is getting outrageous!

You ask and you shall receive...  
Just listen closely to what I have to say to you...

Great...  
I want water.  
I want to give these people water.  
There seems to be another rebellion on my hands and I am just getting tired...  
I can't weather another rebellion...  
The people are not satisfied...  
I need your help...

You asked...  
This is what you shall receive.  
...Take your rod and assemble the people...  
And before their very eyes, order this rock to bring forth water for them...  
וְהוֹצֵאתָ  
Bring forth...

Right  
Got it  
Rod, rock, water...  
It sounds so familiar...  
I just can't seem to figure it out...

Oh, this task has to be easier...

Is this some kind of plan?  
Is this some kind of test?  
נסה

A test of faith?  
That God will really bring forth the water from the rock...  
It happened before,  
Why can't it happen again...  
נסה

A test of Moses...  
Again...  
נס  
A miracle that the people's thirst will be quenched...  
And the quarrelling quelched.  
נסה  
נס

נסיונות of Moses...  
נסים of God...

Who believes  
And who is holy?

Listen you rebels...<sup>279</sup>  
Will we get water from this rock?

I thought this test was of Moses,  
Why is he questioning the people's faith...  
Is this a test or a miracle?

Will we get water from this rock?<sup>280</sup>  
Sarcasm...  
Or feigned omnipotence...  
Whose has the faith here?  
Moses  
Or us...

Is he trying to help  
Or helping with the trial...  
But he doesn't know what is going on...

Do you?

Is Moses being tried?  
Or framed...

...וְדַבַּרְתֶּם אֶל-הַסֶּלֶעַ.<sup>281</sup>  
Speak to the rock...

Maybe I have to hit it twice...  
Why doesn't this ever work right the first time  
God told me to do all of this...  
It is just like before...  
The last time these crazy people whined for water...

Perhaps he thinks this is just like before?  
When he hit the rock...

וְהִכִּיתָ בְּצֹר.<sup>282</sup>  
That was so many years ago  
Collective memory?  
Or collective unconscious?

---

<sup>279</sup> Numbers 20:10

<sup>280</sup> Numbers 20:10, My translation

<sup>281</sup> Numbers 20:8

<sup>282</sup> Exodus 17:6

...וְדַבַּרְתָּם אֶל־הַסֶּלֶעַ.

Speak to the rock...

He hit it twice.

He was called twice

Perhaps he is keeping with the trope of the story...

But

Speaking versus hitting

Passive versus aggressive...

Was this a trial

Or a set up...

Who knows...

The moment is so similar

וַיָּרֹב הָעָם עִם־מֹשֶׁה...<sup>283</sup>

They quarreled

He thought they were rebelling

They distracted him...

He called them rebels?

Because the moment is so similar...

Pent up aggression

Wouldn't you harbor anger after so many years in the dessert?

But it seems so easy.

Speak versus hit

Anger management, perhaps?

Or Moses just not listening...

Who cares...

The people are drinking...

No one is quarrelling anymore...

Let's get on with the story...

### III

Moses

"Because you did not believe in me or make my holy in the eyes of the children of Israel, for this, you will not bring them into the land which I have given

them..."<sup>284</sup>

לְהַקְדִּישָׁנִי

To make me holy

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<sup>283</sup> Exodus 17:2 and Numbers 20:3. The quotes here are identical.

<sup>284</sup> Numbers 20:12-13

To separate.

קדש

The place where separation needs to happen...

Aren't we there already?

Was he being God?

Or not acknowledging God?

To make water from a rock

What about making water from wine?

Bringing forth water...

Helping those in need...

Perhaps he separated himself too far from the community

That was his sin...

Are you kidding?

For this I can't go in?

What did I do?

The script doesn't say I did anything wrong?

Or does it?

I think it does...

But what is it?

He will not go in?

No, he can't go in...

Wait a minute...

This is VERY interesting...

#### *IV*

So what happened...

I don't know...

I will give you ten answers...

Ten?!

I want one.

One of ten

Ten of One...

He gave us the ten commandments...

Ten ways to order our lives...

We gave him ten ways to disorder his...

How kabbalistic to think

How rational to figure out...

Why don't we know?

Perhaps this is deliberate to not detract from the glory of Moses as a leader...<sup>285</sup>

So what happened...

He was framed...

Really?

By us...

With God's help...

But couldn't it be his temper...<sup>286</sup>

After all he called them rebels when they only quarreled...

But a quarrel leads to rebellion

ריב

מריב

מריבה

Wait, that was the place they were in...

The waters of מריבה...

Was the water quarreling?

Or the people over the water...

And that is what was separated them from all the others...

קדש

מריבה

A lot of water...

I think it was his callousness<sup>287</sup>

His sister just died and the people are thirsty

And he is aggressive...

Anger is part of grief

So is frustration

I don't think he did anything wrong?

Who among you is perfect...

Maybe you too should be the one who decides who enters the Promised Land?

What if there was no reason for him to have been punished?

He really only said something potentially troubling...

It is merely a matter of a line reading.

Voice intonation

The placement of a question mark...

Will we get water from this rock for you?

We will get water from this rock for you...

---

<sup>285</sup> Milgrom, p. 448

<sup>286</sup> This is the perspective of Maimonides and Ibn Ezra.

<sup>287</sup> This is the perspective of Yalkut Shimoni

Misconstruing...<sup>288</sup>

Or misbelieving...<sup>289</sup>

What if this is a just a line reading?

Does that mean Moses really did anything bad?

All the more reason to rely on the obscurity...

Ten answers are given as to why...

No one answer works...

Because you questioned...

Because you rebelled against my word...

Because you doubted me in front of the people<sup>290</sup>

That is why...

But what did I do?

נס...?

Trials?

נס...

Or miracles...

A great miracle happened...

But what is the opposite of a miracle when I get punished...

✓

Was it clear that we did it?

Do you think that he knows...

Do you think that anyone knows?

The repeated scene was nice?

Do you think so?

It was not too much?

I changed a few words...

But not so much you would notice...

I noticed...

But it tripped him up.

He was framed...

We did rebel against him after all.

That is what this was...

A ruse.

A trap...

---

<sup>288</sup> This idea is presented by Ramban where he believes that Moses was just misinterpreted.

<sup>289</sup> Deuteronomy Rabbah 19:13-14

<sup>290</sup> Numbers Rabbah 20:11

And he thinks that it was a trial...

Ha...

And we are made holy.

How?

After all of that.

He teaches us how to be holy.

To make things holy.

And is the reason we are separated from the rest...

And then he separated himself too far from us...

The dangers of holiness?

Have I heard that somewhere else?

And look,

He is not separated from us.

קדש

The greatest prophet whoever lived...

קדש

No one will ever rise to be like Moses...

But he messed up...

That is the point.

What is the point.

That he messed up.

We all mess up.

But usually we know what we did wrong...

Sometimes.

But what really happened here...

Is that really important?

What is done is done.

We needed a reason.

What would Moses actually have done in the Promised Land?

He was old.

He knew of slavery.

He knew of being a prince.

How could the people learn to lead if he was still around...

We needed a reason.

The journey is the process

The outcome means nothing...

And for us, our ends justify our means?

That doesn't seem right...

Did he do anything wrong?  
No, we did...  
Or did we?

*VI*

What went wrong?  
Nothing  
This was the plan...  
To frame Moses.  
We were all in on it...

It was finally that kind of trial.  
No, it was a miracle.  
And we were made holy in the long run.

He chose  
Who chose?  
Moses chose...  
He chose not to listen to God  
And he chose to question.  
But did he?

I don't think he questioned...  
I just think that he was burnt out.  
What if he too was thirsty...  
No one ever thinks of Moses' needs.  
If he is the paradigmatic leader  
Shouldn't we also care how he feels?

Whom do you trust?  
Whom do you make distinct and holy?

What would you do if you had to do it over again...?

## **Deuteronomy**

### **Introduction**

The end is nigh for the Israelites and for Moses, but this is a good thing. The last words that are spoken directly to every Israelite, to hear and to listen, offer them choice. What is unique is that they are actually given a real choice and not a prefigured choice. What if the whole Torah, every teaching and story was designed to teach the Israelites (and mimetically, us) to make the right choice.

This section under consideration will allow you to observe if in fact this bold claim is true. We will exegetically walk through this text and then creatively observe what it must have been like to stand and hear these last direct words from Moses himself.

The choice is ours. And that, perhaps is the meaning of everything.

## Translation

### Deuteronomy 29: 9-14

9. You are stationed<sup>291</sup> here today<sup>292</sup>, all of you<sup>293</sup>, before YHWH, your God – your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officials – every man of Israel<sup>294</sup>,

10. your children, your wives, even<sup>295</sup> the stranger within the camp<sup>296</sup>, from woodchopper to water-drawer<sup>297</sup>

11. for you to cross over<sup>298</sup> into the covenant of YHWH, your God, with its sanctions<sup>299</sup> which YHWH is concluding with you today,

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<sup>291</sup> That is “you are presenting yourselves”. I have chosen to translate this as “stationed” rather than “stand” because the Hebrew word ניצב has a more formal connotation than עמד (v. 14) (Jeffery H. Tigay, *The JPS Commentary: Deuteronomy* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996] p. 277) The notion of being stationed also gives the scene a more present feeling. This is not a group that is just standing around, something greater is about to happen, they are expected to take a stand.

<sup>292</sup> This is the only place that this construction occurs which emphasizes the formality and purpose of the gathering but also brings to attention the notion of time. The time is *now* to accept the commandments. This is not looking into the future. This is not waiting for a new generation to be born. This time is now. The use of the word היום introduces the immediateness of the rest of the scene. The word היום appears 13 times in the passage under consideration.

<sup>293</sup> It is interesting that this phrase is here with the specific order of people which follows in the next two verses. It is interesting to note that the word used is כלכם and not כלה. The emphasis it seems is on all of the people present to hear rather than a blanket address to anyone who is listening.

<sup>294</sup> This list, which continues into the next verse, is in an order of social standing. Moses is consciously reading off the people who are present. This could be as a reminder to those who are standing there or out of respect of each person's specific stature in life. No matter what, this list symbolizes that everyone is present in that moment.

<sup>295</sup> It is interesting to note that everyone is present. I have chosen to emphasize this by translating the ו even.

<sup>296</sup> Literally, “the resident alien”. While not Israelites, these people are subject civil law and religious obligations. And they too are hearing this oration of responsibility from Moses.

<sup>297</sup> This list ends with the very specific menial laborers. The construction of “from woodchoppers to water-drawers” indicates that all other menial laborers are included in this list. Moses includes this large group because the words which are being spoken need to be heard individually as each individual will have his/her own role in the Promised Land.

<sup>298</sup> This word usually means to “go over” into the land. The word construction is unique here and may point towards an actual ritual ceremony of entering into the covenant (referring to Genesis 15:17-18) or to

12. in order to establish you today as his people and *he*<sup>300</sup> will be your God just as he spoke to you<sup>301</sup> and promised to your ancestors – to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob<sup>302</sup>.

13. And not with you alone am I making this covenant and this oath<sup>303</sup>,

14. but with both those who are standing here with us today before YHWH, our God, and with the one who is not here with us today<sup>304</sup>...

---

infer that when the Israelites cross over the Jordan they are fully taking on the covenant by themselves as a free people (without Moses as their mediator and leader).

<sup>299</sup> These sanctions (or oath) are literally "imprecations" or curses for those who violate the law. God has presented both blessings and curses, it is up to human beings to make the choice which ones to follow and obey.

<sup>300</sup> Emphasis added following Friedman's translation. I believe that this brings out the covenant relationship which exists between both God and Israel. There is a call to trust and there is cooperation. The emphasis reflects that in this section which Moses' final oration directly to the people. Also, please note that it is not possible to avoid "he." The language of the text is gendered. I am reproducing the Hebrew grammar and that it is important to bear in mind that despite of the gendered nature of the Hebrew language, which makes "he" and "she" out of possessive things otherwise not gendered in English, the biblical God is not to be construed as a male. The use of the "he" pronoun is meant to show the specific possession of what is being described.

<sup>301</sup> This is a reference to the now older generation, those who were children in the Exodus and Leviticus generations. (Tigay, p. 278)

<sup>302</sup> This is a classic use of the covenantal language of relationship.

<sup>303</sup> This is in keeping with the concept that covenants are in principle re-realizable in perpetuity. (J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy* [Leicester, England: Apollos, 2002] p. 416)

<sup>304</sup> That is "the future generations". This is not meant to mean those who are absent, because verses 9-10 makes sure that everyone is present and accounted for. According to *Midrash Tanchumah*, this refers to those souls of the future generations who also will inherit the covenant. This also has practical meaning for us, as contemporary readers of the Torah, that these words are relevant to us as much as to our ancestors.

## **Deuteronomy 30: 11-20**

11<sup>305</sup>. Because this Instruction<sup>306</sup> that I instruct you today is not too wondrous<sup>307</sup> for you, and is not too far.<sup>308</sup>

12. It is not in the heavens<sup>309</sup> that you should say “who will go up for us to the heavens and get it for us and enable us to hear it so we will do it?”

13. And it is not across the sea<sup>310</sup> that you would say “who can cross for us across the sea and get it for us and enable us to hear it so we will do it?”

14. For, the thing is very close to you<sup>311</sup>, in your mouth, and in your heart, to do it<sup>312</sup>.

15. See<sup>313</sup>, I have set before you<sup>314</sup> today life<sup>315</sup> and good, and death and bad<sup>316</sup>.

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<sup>305</sup> This section under consideration moves into the present nature of the people accepting the covenant, and as such, is considered to be a continuation of the Deuteronomy 29: 9-14. This section also deals with the near-ness of the law and the closeness of the covenant.

<sup>306</sup> The word here is מצוה meaning “the Laws and teachings” (Torah) of Deuteronomy.

<sup>307</sup> Literally, “Baffling”. This statement means that what is being presented here is not beyond anyone’s ability to understand.

<sup>308</sup> This could also read “not beyond your reach”. I have tried to keep true to the Hebrew passage itself and leading to the recapitulation of this image in verse 14 where Moses reminds the people that this is “very close to you”.

<sup>309</sup> לא בשמים הוא – Humans’ inability to reach heaven was proverbial (Proverbs 30:4), meaning that only the truly great can elevate themselves to heaven. This comment relates to the grandeur of the Torah, but also to Moses who went up to “heaven” and brought back the Torah. This statement is literally saying both that everything has been revealed and that anyone can access the law. This can also be a reference back to the Revelation section of this thesis where the claim is made that the people were afraid of direct revelation. Further, this quote, לא בשמים הוא is used midrashically and halakahically to mean that the authority to interpret the law is not with God but with humans.

<sup>310</sup> Again, this is a similar metaphoric reference to the previous verse meaning that only the great heroes or God’s can cross the sea.

<sup>311</sup> Moses is reminding the people that everything has been revealed and is accessible. This section is a direct reference to verse 11.

<sup>312</sup> This could be understood as colloquial Hebrew referring to what we know as “by memory” or “know something by heart”.

16. For I command you today to love YHWH<sup>317</sup> your God, to go in his ways and to observe his commandments and his laws and his judgments, and you will live and multiply and bless YHWH, your God in the land you are about to enter and possess<sup>318</sup>.

17. And if your heart will turn away, and you will not listen and you will be driven so that you bow to other gods and serve them,<sup>319</sup>

18. I have told you today that you will perish. You will not extend your days on the land to which you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of it.

19. I call heaven and earth to witness towards you this day<sup>320</sup>: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. And you will choose<sup>321</sup> life so that you and your children may live<sup>322</sup>,

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<sup>313</sup> This is rhetorical but functions as a focalizer for the attention of the Israelites. This word functions in a similar way to *חנני* in previous narrative sections of the Torah.

<sup>314</sup> I have given you the choice. This is not to say that everyone must follow what has been placed before them; God has presented the Israelites with choice. This choice is ripe with Bibliodramatic potential!

<sup>315</sup> The word "life" and the ideas of lengthened days is a dominant theme from verse 15-20.

<sup>316</sup> The Hebrew טוב...רע works better than the English translation of "good" and "bad". What is being conveyed is that with Life comes prosperity, wealth and "all things good", while with death comes the opposite. Ibn Ezra explains טוב as meaning "wealth, bodily health and honor".

<sup>317</sup> This verse is directly connected to the previous one. It is saying "the way to life is to choose to walk in God's ways..." (Duane Christensen, *Word Biblical Commentary: Volume 6b – Deuteronomy* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002] p. 747).

<sup>318</sup> The promise is a recapitulation of that presented in Deuteronomy 4:1, 7:13, 8:1. This is Moses' summation to the people reminding them of what has already been spoken and explained and reminding them that keeping God's command is contrasted with following other Gods.

<sup>319</sup> This verse is a direct corollary to verse 16. Here, the way to death, the opposite of life, is to follow other Gods. It is very clear in these two verses, and what is yet to come that human beings have a choice in the matter. God is only suggesting the right thing to do. This idea allows for a lot of Bibliodramatic potential and questioning.

<sup>320</sup> See also Deuteronomy 4:26 where the created world is also called as witness.

20. to love YHWH, your God, to listen to his voice, and to cling to him<sup>323</sup>, because he is your life and the length of your days,<sup>324</sup> to dwell on the land that YHWH swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them<sup>325</sup>.

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<sup>321</sup> Elsewhere in Torah, the word "choose" is connected to YHWH, as in YHWH chose the people, etc. Here, however, choose is directly connected to human beings. Choosing life is choosing God but also choosing life is now the Israelites final choice before they enter into the Promised Land.

<sup>322</sup> This choice is conditional and very much open to human beings purview. The options (the dichotomy of life and death, etc) is a common trope in wisdom literature as well. (Proverbs 11:19, 14:27, 18:21). As Friedman explains as well, "The theme of the path to life began early in Moses' speech (Deuteronomy 4:1) and culminates here in the last words of his speech. This focus at the conclusion of the Torah returns us to the Torah's opening: the loss of the tree of life. Humans lose access to the tree of life as the price of having gained access to the tree of knowledge of good and bad. Now the people are told that they have to choose between good or bad, blessing or curse..." This is a fitting bookend of the journey of the Israelite people. As they are ready to enter in the Promised Land, their almost "Eden", they are given the opportunity to use the knowledge of good and bad. It is almost as if God is testing them to see if they actually learned something over these past thousands of years.

<sup>323</sup> The "love" and "cling" of this verse reflects a language of personal affection. Accepting the covenant is not a heavy handed order, rather a choice. Following the more stark and adamant call to "choose life", this verse reminds the people what they in fact are choosing, and that the covenantal relationship is just that, a relationship.

<sup>324</sup> This translation reflects the evening liturgy which uses this verse and this idea as comfort to accepting God.

<sup>325</sup> This final verse brings to the fore the prospect of life for both succeeding generations and the present one as well. This is a fitting end to the last great oration of Moses to the people and is a fitting end to the journey of the people as this is the last time Moses addresses every Israelite.

## Key Words

- נצבים      This word means literally “you are taking a stand”. This word is nuanced in this passage because of the immediacy the verb indicates. The people are taking a stand – actively present in the moment, rather than merely standing around. They are ready to hear and receive the words which are about to be spoken. This nuance relates to the following key word.
- היום      Literally, “Today”. This word is important to this passage because it brings in the element of time. Moses is telling the people that this is the time, right now. There is no more waiting, there is no more preparing. The choice is now and the time is now. This word and the frequency with which it appears (13 times in the section alone) focuses the narrative moment to the present.
- ברית      Literally, “the Covenant”. This word is important to this passage because this section serves as both a “renewal of the covenant”, as many scholars suggest, but also this section serves as the time that the Israelites are really given a choice about whether or not to accept the covenant. God has presented everything<sup>326</sup> and it is now up to the Israelites to keep their respective end of the bargain.

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<sup>326</sup> This idea is inferred by scholarly and midrashically by the line “*Lo Bashamayim hi...*”

חיים

This whole section, including the verses not translated for this thesis, fall under the super-heading of “life”. Life is a stream of opportunities demanding choices. This section reminds us of that. Moses is demanding that everyone “choose life” so that they and their offspring may live. It is this very combination of “choose” and “life” that prepares the Israelites for the journey that is about to follow. The choice allows the people autonomy and personal understanding. And the “life” which they are choosing affords them all that is טוב (goodness, prosperity, health, etc). This word is important throughout this section as well serving as a connector to Genesis (for a longer discussion on this connection, please consult footnote above).

ברכה/

קללה

Literally, “Blessings and Curses”. These two words are the result of the choice presented in this section of Torah. Moses has set forth both blessing and curse. It is up to the people, stationed at this moment, to accept. This word choice on Moses’ behalf is also a direct reference back to previous moments in Deuteronomy (namely chapter 28) where Moses also proclaims blessings and curses. These words are key to the subtext of the Israelites in this moment of the Torah.

עבר            Literally, “to cross over”. This word figures prominently in the text as an allusion to the action the Israelites are about to make physically, but also to the immediate action as they “cross over” into the covenant.

## Structure

The structure of much of the second half of the book of Deuteronomy is chiasmic<sup>327</sup> and “mirroring”. I believe the reason for this structure relates to the setting of the book itself. This is the last book of the Torah, and, as such, it serves as a recapitulation of many key moments in the past. Moses is the orator to the people but he is not just re-telling the stories. He is telling the stories didactically. He crafts his words around major themes and begins and ends each section with the same themes. It is for this reason that many key oratory moments in this book, this section of Torah included, reads as if it were a mirror<sup>328</sup>. This conscious structure also points to interesting Bibliodramatic potential in trying to understand the subtext of Moses, as crafter of the speech, and people, as listeners of the speech.

The structure of this passage looks like this. Deuteronomy 29: 9-14 is organized looking like a chiasmic pattern with the covenant formula at the center, serving as the focal point<sup>329</sup> but it really reflects a mirroring moment.

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<sup>327</sup> This is a claim that is made and explained by Duane Christensen, *Word Biblical Commentary: Volume 6b – Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002) p. 708-709.

<sup>328</sup> It is very important to note that “mirroring”, which I believe this passages is, is not the same as “chiasm”. “Mirroring” reflects similarities at the beginning and ending of each passage while chiasm is a “neat” restatement.

<sup>329</sup> This structure is presented by Tigay, p. 277. I have chosen to use it as a model and adapt it based on the direction of this thesis.

A. Those standing this day (v. 9-10)

B. Entering God's covenant with sanctions (v. 11)

C. Covenant Formula – God's People / People's God (v. 12)

B<sub>1</sub>. Concluding covenant with sanctions (v. 13)

A<sub>1</sub>. Those standing this day (as well as future generations) (v. 14)

This structure can be understood as a covenant ceremony. The acceptance of the covenant formula in verse 12 is the ritual moment where God and the people unite in the covenantal relationship. Verses 9-11 serve as the preparation, and verses 13-14 function as the result. In the way this structure is set forth however, the last two verses also function as a recapitulation of the preparation. While the structure appears chiasmic in nature, it is not circular or enclosed, reflecting the mirroring. The people are expected to be challenged and changed by the covenantal moment.

Upon the conclusion of this description, Moses enters into a discussion about the past and the future (Deuteronomy 29: 15 – 30: 10). Here too, the structure is chiasmic as a pedagogic teaching tool. For a wonderful discussion, beyond the scope of this thesis, please consult Jeffery H. Tigay's commentary on the subject<sup>330</sup>.

Deuteronomy 30: 11 – 20 resumes Moses' summoning Israel to the covenantal formula. This section follows in a similar structural form, this time with a call to the people to choose and accept the covenant as the middle point. The structure looks like this<sup>331</sup>:

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<sup>330</sup> Tigay, p. 277

<sup>331</sup> This is my structural analysis based on the ideas of other scholars, mostly Duane Christensen who delineates many chiasmic possibilities towards these chapters. While Christensen finds chiasm in almost everything, I have only used this model as a basis and have found that seeing the structure as a "mirror"

A. Presenting the Instruction (v. 11)

B. The Heavens and Sea and Choice (v. 12-13)

C. Understanding with your heart and your mouth (v. 14)

D. The exhortation to the people to choose (v. 15-16)

C<sub>1</sub>. Realizing with your heart and your mouth (v. 17-18)

B<sub>1</sub>. The Heavens and earth witness the choice (v. 19)

A<sub>1</sub>. Purpose for accepting the Instruction (v. 20)

Deuteronomy 30: 11-20 connects nicely with Deuteronomy 29: 9-14 in this manner. Both are moments of presenting and accepting the covenant between God and the Israelites. Deuteronomy 30 differs not only in the words, but in the use of the language of the body – both physical and heavenly giving the text a cosmic and worldly tone. Verse 11 begins with Moses re-visiting the present time and presenting again the covenant, this time in the form of the “instruction.”<sup>332</sup> Next, Moses invokes the heavenly body as rhetoric. This both is used to point out to the Israelites that there is “no more Torah in heaven” to be revealed, but also introduces the connection between the heavens and the people (which will be revisited in verse 19). The next element of this covenant ceremony is the people’s bodily understanding. With these elements involved, the choice becomes the Israelites’. Verses 15-16 function as this moment of choice where Moses all but says to them “choose”. These verses present the options needed to decide and to accept the Instruction. Verses 17-18 remind the people of their personal bodily

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better reflects the intent of the text. Nonetheless, for his discussion on chiasm, please consult Christensen, p. 746-47.

<sup>332</sup> The Hebrew is *המצוה*, which in this passage, can be understood as “The Instruction”.

connection. And verse 19 calls the heavens as direct partners, to witness the acceptance of the people. Finally, verse 20, rounds out the mirroring with the people accepting the instruction and the covenant which was presented in verse 11. They are now ready to hear Moses' last orations and enter into the Promised Land. What has been presented to them is choice and how to make an intelligent one.

## **Setting**

The narrative and literary settings of this section are almost identical. The narrative setting is the end of the journey. The section of Torah under consideration is Moses' last discourse to the people about the covenant. It is his last time talking to the people about their actions. The entire book of Deuteronomy can be broken into three discourses Moses makes to the people, and then his final oration. This section is the third of the discourses<sup>333</sup>.

The text functions narratively as the last piece of advice given to the Israelites about accepting the covenant. Moses begins by reminding the people of the Exodus from Egypt (29:15). This is the basis of the covenant and a way of uniting the people to what they have already been through, which Moses loosely recounts in verses 15-28. While people and generations have changed since Egypt, by bringing up the past Moses is reminding the people that the decision before them is weighty and important. The review of what has happened is Moses' attempt to help the Israelites realize the wisdom of obeying the covenant, and the converse of disobeying.

And all of this is occurring at the end of the journey. The Israelites are on the cusp of entering into the Promised Land. Perhaps they are getting edgy and anxious and that is why Moses has to remind them of the past? Perhaps Moses is becoming nostalgic because he knows that the end is near for him and he needs to make sure the Israelites can exist without his expertise? The story places this text as a penultimate moment.

Literarily, this is the case as well.

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<sup>333</sup> Tigay, p. 274

Again Moses is presenting the covenant to the people in the book of Deuteronomy and now summoning them to ratify and accept it. He uses the mirror model found in the entire book by reviewing what has happened in the past as a didactic way of reminding the people what has happened and how they have gotten that very place. First he reviews the experiences that serve as the basis for the whole covenant (29:1-8). Then he calls everyone by name and stature to ensure that each person is listening (29:9-14). Once everyone is listening, he reminds the people of the conditions of the covenant (29: 15-28). He then speaks about the "what-if" situation in regards to the Israelites not keeping the covenant (30: 1-10). In the next section he returns to the concept of the covenant, this time bringing time into the discussion (30: 11-14). And Moses concludes this discourse by stating bluntly what is in store for the people when they ratify the covenant, namely life and טוב, and the opposite if they do not, namely death and רע (30: 15-20). But Moses also makes his point by referring back to the Israelites' ancestors as a way of connecting the present and future generations (29:9-13) to the past (30:20) as if to make the past's events the reason for making the "right" choice.

What if the whole message of the journey is about how to make the "right" choice? What questions are running through Moses head as he speaks these words to the people? Why does he have to tell the people for a third time? Does he know that he is about to die? Is he trying to impart some greater wisdom as his life is fading? And moreover, what are the people thinking? They are stationed at this place, everyone, including the menial workers. What are they thinking? What actions have lead up to this? What does it mean to choose life? Does that mean that everything will be good? Or just that we will have choice?

These, and many other questions lead us to begin to illuminate the possibilities in this story. While the story trajectory is rather simple, the sub-text of the characters involved is very unique, perplexing and challenging. What does it mean to choose?

## A Play on Deuteronomy and Choosing Life

*Author's Note: Each line of this piece is intended to be read by a different voice. This piece can be performed by as many as twenty people and as few as five. It is intended to be staged in the manner of guerilla/environmental theatre (ala Richard Shechner, Bertolt Brecht and Jerzy Grotowski), and as a result should be imagined with performers surrounding and integrated into the performance space. There is conscious ambiguity in some "characters" and conscious specificity with others – there is no set determination as to who delivers what line.*

### I

I stand here today.

אתם נצבים היום

I stand here today.

אתם נצבים היום

I am standing here today

Me too

And me.

And me

YOU stand here today.

Not me.

YOU are here...

Why am I here?

I stand here today ready.

אתם נצבים היום בקלכם

We are standing here today, ready

Ready

I am ready.

I am ready.

OK, I am ready...

But for what?

For these things that are before us...

And for that we are all here.

Each one of us here.

Wow

This must be important.

Who are some of these people

I have never seen half of them...

They are everyone who is everyone

Literally.

But I don't like them

What about us...

I don't like to be with that kind of person.

Isn't this day for us?  
Why is everyone here?  
Who is "we"  
Who is "you"  
אני...

Today must be important  
Important enough to bring a laundry list of people.  
When was the last time we were all here like this...  
Never.  
I thought everyone stood at Sinai...  
Isn't this just that?  
No...  
There is something more.

Then there must be a reason.  
Or some significance.  
Or perhaps even a message.

Are we finally going to get the answer?  
The eternal message?  
The meaning of life?  
Isn't that what we seek?  
No, that is futile chase for a grail of understanding...

What then is this whole thing all about?  
Clearly it is important...  
Of course it is.  
But why?

Aren't we are just passing through  
The passers-by...  
In the twilight of our existence.  
Wandering from land to land.  
עבר

עברים

Passing through our history  
...each day God says: "And it was evening and it was morning," but he never says  
"twilight" because twilight is for lovers only...<sup>334</sup>  
עברים...

In eternal twilight  
Lovers looking to choose.  
We are eternal lovers passing through the land...

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<sup>334</sup> Yehuda Amichai, *Open Close Open* (פתוח סגור פתוח) (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc, 2000 *Translation*) p. 20

Looking for our love  
And our dance  
Is this the land?  
The Promised Land  
The land of love?!  
Which we are about to cross into  
I am doubting that ever really exists.

Home seems to be one place that everyone strives to get back to but it never really is the same.

This is a joke!  
What is a joke?  
Or is there something more.  
Of course there is  
We are confronting  
Something big and important  
So what is it already – enough of this waiting...  
We are standing...  
No, you are...

## II

Finally we are standing  
After all that time sitting and walking aimlessly.  
But why are we standing?  
לְעִבְרָךְ בְּבִרְיָה  
Crossing into a covenant?  
I thought one crossing was enough?

What now is going to be revealed to us?  
Isn't that why we stand...  
To be made holy  
Is this finally for us?  
What about Moses?  
No, we are going to be made holy...  
And separate.  
I get it, I get it.  
Type scenes.

Standing.  
Stationed.  
No, now we are stationed.  
Fixed.  
נִצָּבִים הַיּוֹם...  
Standing and ready today...  
But where are we?  
And what time is it?  
הַיּוֹם

Which day?

This day.

היום

Today is the day.

Which is everyday?

For all of us

Here...

You...

...and me...

The power is in the collective.

But the reality is within the individual.

אנחנו נצבים היום

We are standing

We are stationed

We are ready...

But I am a bit scared

לעבור פברית

To cross into

To cross over

To change

To be lovers

To choose

But I am still in the twilight of my own choices...

What do I want?

I didn't know we would be able to choose!

This is so hard...

What if I choose wrong?

Can I?

We each get to choose?

I thought this was binding

We each get to accept.

But with conditions

But also with compassion

The dance of our life.

Partners?

A relationship!

Ah ha...

We are standing here to be revealed something?

Enough with the we...

It is like we are standing again at Sinai

You are standing here...

Unless...

Really there is more?  
What more can we possibly hear  
Hear  
Or accept?!

No, we are standing here to accept.  
There is nothing else in the heavens or the sea for us to know.  
The more is up to us...

לעברך בברית יהנה אלהיך ובאלתו אשר יהנה אלהיך כרת עמך היום

This is the end.  
This is the conclusion.

כרת

Drawn.

Concluded.  
What conclusion have we come to?  
The end?

Really?  
No, it never really ends...  
We keep going.  
And that is our choice.

So what was the point  
This is the point.

To enter.

To pass over

To cross

Into

To choose to keep going in our life...

Is that your final answer?

No, in some sense, that is just the beginning.  
We are about to enter a land of Promise of Possibility.  
Our Garden of Possibility.

But is this just for us?

Or is that why every one of us is here right now?

Hey, I know that guy...I haven't seen him in years...  
Is that really why I have to stand here with that kind of person...

But they aren't even like us?

It is for each of us to hear.

For each of us to know.

כלכם

All of you...

Right...not me!

Where is the individual if we are all here.

Isn't this for me...

And my family.

For our whole family...  
We each hear.  
We each know  
And we each do.

I am standing here  
Ready  
Eager  
And excited.

I too am standing here  
Scared  
Nervous  
Concerned  
And in awe...

What about me?  
Is this only for me too

ולא אתכם לבדכם אנכי כרת את־הברית הזאת ואת־האֵלֶּה הַזֵּאת:  
No  
It is for us all.  
It is not just you...  
We stand here today.

### *III*

Today  
Not another day.  
No longer do we have to wait.  
No more "three days here"  
Or three days there.  
We are ready now  
Hayom  
Today.  
Like any other day.  
But today is a special day.  
היום  
Our day.  
היום  
This day.  
How do we know which day...  
Is it like everyday?  
The day we take a stand...  
Today we stand  
The day we understand.  
Our moment of acceptance.  
We are ready.

We are pure.  
We are charged  
And we are set.  
Stationed in our stations in life.  
נצבים היום...  
When?!

So what is it already?  
What do we have to do  
This section doesn't seem so hard.  
Or enigmatic  
So why the concerns?

The words are so clear...  
But yet  
What does this all mean?  
The eternal meaning is for us to know  
And choose to hear

כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֶנִּי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם לֹא-נִפְלְאוֹת הִוא מִמָּוֶה  
Surely this Instruction that I instruct you today is not too wondrous for you, and is  
not too far from your reach<sup>335</sup>

I am confused...  
What is it that we have learned up until now?  
הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת  
This instruction?!  
Or the stuff leading up to this...  
Is the instruction?  
Or is this the commandment...  
It depends how you understand מצוה

Where does this story fit in?  
It seems like we are reviewing here...  
Haven't I already learned this?  
Or heard this  
That is the pedagogic teaching point.  
To review.  
Again and again.  
Testing  
Again and again.  
But I hate re-runs...  
Let's just get on with the journey  
I hate waiting...  
What else do we have to learn?

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<sup>335</sup> Deuteronomy 30:11, My translation (see above for notes)

There is nothing left to be revealed...  
It is all in your hearts and minds to know and to understand...

לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא

It is not in the heavens.

It is not even in the sea...

It is there.

Here

Today

With you.

In your mouth and in your heart, to do it<sup>336</sup>

We can understand it all.

Simple.

Straightforward

And understood.

Very close

Within your reach

So why can't I yet understand?

So that you may pass through

עבר

Pass through

עברך

לעבר

To pass into...

It is not baffling...

Is it?

We are passing through our lives

But we too are passers in life...

But now with greater understanding.

And little confusion

A little?!

*IV*

I am still confused?

Why then am I standing here today?

Why then do I ask all of these questions?

Is this another one of those tests?

No, this thing is very close to you...

It is literally right in front of you.

וְלֹא־רְחֹקָה הוּא

Within your reach...

I am too short

I give up...

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<sup>336</sup> Deuteronomy 30:14b

Fine...  
    No more magic  
No more hiding.  
    Or smoke  
    Or mirrors  
Or miracles  
Or plagues  
    Or even subtle lessons.  
This is right in front of you...  
    For you to witness  
Right there...  
    It is not too baffling...

A test of great faith  
And reality.  
    Of hope and faith...

This is a test...  
    A moment of truth...  
It is your choice  
    I can't tell you what to do...  
You know...  
    And you can do...  
That is, if you really want to.

V

See, I set before you this day...  
    THIS DAY

This is it...  
    But I am not ready.  
Can we wait a little?  
    No,

היום  
    It is the day

רָאָה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַחַיִּים וְאֶת־הַטּוֹב וְאֶת־הַמָּוֶת וְאֶת־הָרָע

Today is the day  
    Today for good  
Today for bad.  
    הַחַיִּים

וְהַמָּוֶת  
    Life and death.

Today is the day...  
    For what?

For you, not me  
It is right there in front of us.  
    It is not beyond our reach.

For sure.

So now what?

We understand life by knowing death

So we understand death because it is the opposite of life.

Life and death

Seems logical...

No it doesn't...

Now it comes down to life?

It seems too easy

This has got to be a trick.

Why haven't we died yet in the wilderness?

Because we live for something greater.

That is the point...

And now it is within our reach.

What is?

That thing that is greater.

What thing

Enough with the metaphor

Just tell me already.

Five books already I have tried to learn and to figure it out.

I just want to find the ring of truth...

That thing that is set before us.

That is it.

Life or death?

Blessing or curse?

Prosperity or adversity?

Binaries?

Comparisons?

No

CHOICE!

What?

Really?

But I choose all the time.

Who cares what I do.

We all do.

Choice

It is our choice.

But what

And how...

How do we know which is good?

Life and prosperity  
Death and adversity...<sup>337</sup>

Don't we have to listen to God to tell us?  
Isn't that the answer...  
Aye, there is the rub.

It is not just about listening.  
It is about doing.  
What do we do?  
There is nothing that I want to do  
Or can even think of doing

So  
ללכת בדרך  
Walk in the ways...

Trust.  
Follow

Blindly?  
Sounds too fatalistic to me...  
No!

Believe.  
Set before you is life and death  
Blessing and curse.

Sounds so dire?!  
But also kind of comforting.  
If we dance with God,  
God will dance with us?!

Partnership  
Covenant.  
I really want to be in a relationship  
Loving  
Unconditionally.  
Hope and faith  
Understanding.  
Believing.  
Choosing to believe  
But what if I doubt?  
Believe  
I believe.  
I believe with perfect faith.

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<sup>337</sup> Deuteronomy 30:15b, NJPS translation

אני מאמין

This is it.

Today is the day.

This is a test!

This is the final test.

It seems.

The truest test of faith.

Our collective נסה

Learning from our mistakes...

Learning

To choose...

To have the choice

And to make the choice...

But what do we do?

And what if it is wrong.

I can't do it.

I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse...

Choose life, so that you may live.

But how do we know?

And who will know?

Heaven and earth will witness you today.

עדים

Witnesses

עדה

Our community.

We are all witnesses to our own covenant.

העלתי בכם היום את השמים ואת הארץ

And we all know...

So...

## VI

Choose life...

So that we may live

But also so that we may know.

This is the greatest test.

And in some ways this is the first of many tests.

It is always the first test.

The one that leads to the rest.

Life is good

But not always easy.

See, we get to choose life  
Not get to choose "easy"  
Choose life in all of its messiness<sup>338</sup>  
Life in all of its confusion.  
Life  
In all of its living.

וּבְחֵרָהּ בַּחַיִּים  
Choosing to live life.  
Rather than punctuating it with death.  
It is not over...

We are staring down the barrel of a life of happiness and love  
Which is better than falling into easy choices of dying and ending.

We are about enter into our land.  
The dawning of our new morning.  
We are about to enter into our life  
We live  
So that we may endure.  
Promises, promises, promises  
These are our blessings.  
This is our hope  
This is our day...

## VII

The test is now.  
And I think we finally have the answer.

Choice  
That is it.  
To choose.  
When we choose God,  
God chooses us.  
When we know God  
God knows us.  
And we know ourselves...

That sounds so fatalistic.  
If God knows us, why do we choose?  
God knows us WHEN we choose.

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<sup>338</sup> I thank Julie Pelc for this insight.

Omnipotence?

Or understanding...

Or do we hold fast to this teaching

Just in case the choice in fact IS ours to make?<sup>339</sup>

Is that really the point?

Do you understand what is going on?

This is it.

Not only is this the day.

But this is it.

What?

Choice

We know!

Now we know.

We know what?

Now we know how to choose.

And how to make a choice.

But we have been choosing all along.

Is that really the whole point of our journey.

I have waited this long just to learn this?

We chose to follow Moses.

We chose to stand at Sinai...

We chose to...

I want more...

But wait,

We chose to be here, today.

Standing

We stand here today

To choose.

We stand here today

To choose life

So that we may live

And cross into the land

And cross into the covenant.

And cross into our life

We choose our life.

And now we know how

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<sup>339</sup> I thank Sara Mason for this insight.

Our journey is complete.

And our journey is just beginning.

And here I thought it was all settled.

But I never chose.

I was taken

And I was just born this way.

And me too

What about me?

Isn't this for all of us?

The Instruction is upon us.

Our Torah is before us.

מצוה

ותורה...

It is up to you

It is all about choice...

Before us are blessings

(which we have all heard before)

And in front of us are curses

(which we certainly know exist)

Which way do you choose?

Perhaps we have to choose in case the choice in fact is ours!?

What if there is no fate.

What if this is the meaning of life...

Choice.

And making them.

We choose life because we can.

But we also choose life because we should.

Righting the wrongs of our past.

For the benefit of our future.

ויבחרתם בחיים למען תחיה אתה וזרעך

We choose life for ourselves

And for our future.

That is why we stand here today.

We stand for our past.

For the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

And for the choice of each new generation.

## *VIII*

Are you ready?

I have been waiting for this for years.  
Today is the day.  
It is almost over...  
And it also just beginning.  
Now it is our time to stand and confront.  
We are poised and we are ready.

Before us is death or life.  
Hunger or happiness.  
Hunger AND happiness.  
Yearning or compassion.  
But also love and laughter  
Life and living  
And dreams coming true  
And Eden again.

The choice is ours.  
And now we have learned.

Before us is a garden of promises.  
And now we can right the wrongs we have made.  
Adam and Eve chose,  
But they did not know what.  
Now we chose.  
There has got to be some coincidence.  
And now we do.  
Choose

אתם נצבים היום בלכם  
YOU stand here today..  
No...  
We stand here today  
All of us  
Ready to accept what is to come.  
Both blessings and curses.  
Both good and bad.  
Both joy and sorrow.  
There is a time for everything...  
And that is life!

As long as we have choice.  
And choose  
There is no fate – there is just life.  
Messy  
Confusing.  
Beautiful  
And full of faith.

And promise  
And hope

Choose life so that YOU may live...  
Choose today how you will live.

The choice is ours.  
Our dreams are now...

(together) We stand here today...  
(one person) So, now what...?

## **STAGE IV - CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

And so too do I ask that very question,  
So, now what?  
So now what, after we finish reading the Torah?  
So now what, after we finish writing a thesis?  
So now what, after we finish our exploration in Bibliodrama?

And I think the answer for us all is the conclusion of this thesis.  
We choose.

Just like the Israelites did.

We learn to make choices and we make them.

There is no fatalism.

There is just God doing things that we cannot really completely understand.

There is just us doing things that we cannot really completely understand.

There is not set way that life is supposed to happen.

There are just unique stages and trials through which we waltz and play.

We make choices.

And believe in our tests.

Be challenged by our short comings.

And punished by our mistakes.

And learn from our journey.

And most importantly,

Continue...

Continue on so that we can ask...

So now what?

We continue...

Along our way.

Illuminated by our path

Challenged by our journey

And satiated in our ways.

The Torah is truly a mimetic text.

Each step along the way I have found a character to be my guide.

And I have made a choice...

And like the Israelites, after their ultimate great choice in *Parashat Nitzavim*,  
I move boldly into my Promised Garden of Dreams...

...So now what...

I for one can't wait!

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