

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
NEW YORK SCHOOL

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AUTHOR: Thomas A. Gardner

TITLE: מידב and the Transference of Merit

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זכות AND THE TRANSFERENCE OF MERIT

THOMAS A. GARDNER

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion

Graduate Rabbinical Program, New York, New York

2008

Advisor: Professor Leonard Kravitz, Ph.D.

This thesis, entitled זכות and the Transference of Merit, consists of five chapters plus an introduction. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the concept of זכות and other words based on the root כ.ו.ז, especially when they pertain to merit. I have attempted to follow both the word זכות and the concept of merit through selected Biblical and rabbinic works.

This thesis contributes to the literature available in that it examines the concept of זכות in works as late as those of Ramban. In addition, I draw attention to the fact that זכות came to be understood more and more as spiritual currency, even as money became a more important element in Jewish society.

In the introduction, I explain in simple terms the case for reward and punishment, and explain that תוכן came to be a part of this system. I also give a brief introduction to the other chapters, explaining what I plan to show in each one.

In the first chapter, I begin by examining the root מ.ד.נ as it appears in the Tanakh. I look at all of the different uses of this root, not all of which mean ‘merit.’ I used both a regular concordance and a computer search of ...דנ in the Torah, Job, and Proverbs to accomplish this. I then examine the roots of the idea of merit in the Torah, and how this idea is denied in both Ezekiel and Proverbs.

In the second chapter, I examine the root מ.ד.נ as it appears in the Mishnah. Again, using both a concordance and a computer search of ...דנ, I was able to locate almost all of the appearances of this root. Many of them had meanings other than ‘merit,’ and I tried to find connections among the various meanings. I then turned to those appearances that did mean merit, and tried to show how the authors of the material that comprise the Mishnah understood this concept.

In the third chapter, I examined זכות only where it meant merit in the Talmud. I used a concordance and a computer search again. Because of the limitations of the search function on the Bar Ilan Responsa Project, I searched separately for זכות, זכאי, בזכות, לזכות, זכותא, זכה, זכר, זכאי, בזכותא, זכין, זכיתי, זכתה, זכה, שזכה, זוכה, שיזכה, שיזכו, זכותו and זכו.

I picked examples in this chapter that would show the Talmudic concept of זכות. Who could acquire it, how was it acquired, what could you do with it, what were its limits? It was here that the concept of זכות as similar to money began to take form.

In the fourth chapter, I examine how this concept appears in the Torah commentary of Ramban. I searched the Bar Ilan Responsa Project, and also looked at his comments on verses of the Torah that seemed likely to elicit statements about transference of merit. I asked the same questions about זכות here as I had in the previous chapter, and I found that Ramban's view of זכות was slightly more complicated than the views I found in the Talmud. Ramban has a complex and internally consistent theology, and זכות is an integral part of it.

In the last chapter, I look at a few cases of *zechut* as it appears today. Then I take up the theological implications of *zechut*. I conclude that merit is an important part of Judaism and must remain so, if there is to be a difference between Judaism and Christianity.

Introduction

The dictionary defines 'religion' as "Action or conduct indicating a belief in, reverence for, and desire to please, a divine ruling power."¹ Any religion must establish a means for communicating with the divine ruling power, a means for revering the divine ruling power, and a means for pleasing the divine ruling power. The means by which Judaism pleases the Divine is by following the *mitzvot*, the commandments of the Torah. After the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 C.E., the *mitzvah* system, with its focus on sacrifice at, and pilgrimage to the Temple, shifted to the halakhic system devised by the new religious elite, the rabbis.

Whether before or after the destruction of the Temple, certain statements can be made about the tenets of the Jewish religion: The Creator finds certain actions desirable and other actions undesirable. Human beings have been informed which actions are desirable and which are undesirable. Human beings in general, and Jews in particular, are able to choose between the desired actions and those which are not desired. Finally, since the Divine is just, there must be some system of reward for those who perform desired actions and punishment for those who perform undesired actions.

In Judaism there is an assumption that the Divine will grant proper rewards and punishments to those who deserve them. In the Tanakh we are told that reward and punishment will occur, but no more detail than that. The Judaism of the Mishnah and beyond sets up a system by means of which the Eternal keeps track of those deserving

1. OED, definition 3a, p. 569.

of reward. This is the system of זכות, or merit. As Philip Birnbaum describes the system, "The Jewish idea of merit is closely connected with that of good deeds. The ethical idea of merit, according to Jewish thinking, implies the existence of three things: 1) a moral law under which man is placed, 2) a free will which enables him to obey it, and 3) a system of rewards and punishments by which obedience or disobedience to the law is stressed."²

Merit, in Judaism, has often had the extraordinary characteristic of being transferable. That is, one person will acquire merit, and then that merit will be transferred to another person. The second person will then receive the reward of the first person's meritorious action. I propose to examine this concept and attempt to see what conclusions can be drawn from this theological view.

The concept of merit is implicit in the system of reward and punishment of the Torah. However, merit is not explicitly mentioned in the Torah, and the root ז.כ.ו had a different meaning in the Tanakh. In the first chapter, this paper examines what ז.כ.ו means in the Torah and how the meaning changes in the later books of the Tanakh. It also looks at the concept of merit in the idea of reward and punishment in the Tanakh. Here we will find the roots of the system of זכות as it developed later. Hopefully, by examining the root ז.כ.ו, we will understand why זכות came to mean merit. By examining the concept of merit and whether or not it was transferable, we will gain a greater understanding of the system of זכות as it came to be.

2. Birnbaum, pp. 191-2.

The second chapter turns to both the root ז.כ.ה and the concept of merit as they can be found in the Mishnah. זכר had acquired a number of meanings by this time. I will speculate on the connection among these meanings, and attempt to see how 'merit' came to be one of them. I will point out a few cases in which the root seems to mean a combination of 'merit' and other things. The important concept of זכות אבות, the merit of the patriarchs, makes its first appearance in the Mishnah.

The third chapter will look at the concept of merit and its transference as it appears in the Talmud. The transference of merit had become a mainstream Jewish concept by this time. Therefore, I will look at a number of specific questions about merit as it is seen in the Talmud: How is it acquired? Who can acquire it? How is it used? To whom can it be transferred?

In addition, I will speculate on the relationship between societal changes and changes in the concept of זכות. The fact that money had become much more common than it had been in the Biblical era may have contributed to the importance, and uses of זכות. Specifically, זכות in this period takes on many of the characteristics of money. I will show how זכות can be saved, stored, spent, used up, and especially transferred to others. My contention is that the ubiquity of money as a means of transaction in this period caused the rabbis to see זכות as a spiritual currency. זכות comes to function as if it were money, and therefore becomes as flexible as money.

In an attempt to see if the concept of זכות endured, I decided to examine the works of one of the *Rishonim* and see if merit was a part of his understanding of Judaism. I

chose the Ramban, Rabbi Moses b. Nachman Gerondi, the thirteenth century rabbi, kabbalist and commentator. I chose him specifically because, unlike some of the *Rishonim* and *Achronim*, Ramban was open to supernatural and mystical answers to religious questions. I chose to look at Ramban's commentary on the Torah, rather than any of his other works, both because of the greater length of the commentary, and because I wanted to see if the concept of merit would come up, not when he specifically discussed the messiah or ethics, but when he approached Judaism as a whole.

In this chapter, I will attempt to show that the **זכות** system has become part of the framework in which Judaism is seen, even elements of Judaism, such as the Torah, that do not mention **זכות** specifically. In this chapter, I will examine how Ramban understands merit by addressing the questions asked in Chapter Three— that is, how merit is obtained, who may acquire it, what it is used for, how is it used, and to whom can it be transferred. I will also look at the question of whether **זכות** functions like money in Ramban's system.

In the fifth chapter, I will look at the implications of the system of **זכות**. What are the problems with this system, and what problems does it solve? In addition, I will look at a few places in which this system appears today, both in mainstream Judaism and in Judaism that diverges from the mainstream.

This paper will limit itself to the specific texts as mentioned above. There are a great many other mentions of **זכות** in other texts. The midrash collections in particular have a great many statements about **זכות**, and no doubt midrashic explanations of Jewish texts

had a great deal to do with זכות becoming a mainstream Jewish belief.

In addition, there are many Jewish statements about merit and the transfer of merit that do not use the root ז.כ.ה. The word מעשה often indicates deeds of merit, with the assumption of merit stored up.³ The words בצדקה, בשכר, and בשביל have all been used to indicate merit.⁴ In addition, there are a great many instances of the appearance of the concept of merit without the use of a key word indicator. These aspects of merit are essentially beyond the scope of this essay, except as they are touched upon in Chapters One and Five.

As I hope this introduction has shown, this essay will take a somewhat idiosyncratic look at the concept of זכות. For a more in depth look at זכות in early Rabbinic Judaism, I can highly recommend Chapter 12, "The Zachuth of the Fathers, Imputed Righteousness and Imputed Sin," in Solomon Schechter's *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*.

3. Marmorstein, pp. 10-11.

4. Ibid., p. 11.

Chapter One: The Tanakh

The title of this essay is “זכות and the Transference of Merit.” Although this title refers to a single idea, when we look for the sources of the concept in the Tanakh, we are forced to look at two separate elements. Both זכות and the transference of merit can be found in the Tanakh separately. However, the word and the concept are not yet connected. I will therefore examine זכות, as it is found in its various forms, and then examine the concept of the transference of merit. Hopefully, an examination of the word זכות and its root ז.כ.ה will give us some insight as to why this word later became associated with merit. The second part of this chapter, when we look at the first unsophisticated statements about the transference of merit, may give us deeper insight into the idea as it becomes fully developed.

The root ז.כ.ה⁵ appears in the Tanakh twenty times, in forms such as זך, זכה, והזכה, and הזכה הזכו, תזכה, יזכה, זכיתי, זכו. The meaning in the Tanakh is ‘pure,’ or ‘clear.’⁶ The Torah itself uses the word only in a concrete, physical sense. Characteristic examples include שמן זית זך כתית, which is translated in the JPS as “clear oil of beaten olives.”⁷ or לבנה זכה, for which JPS has “pure frankincense.”⁸

In the Prophets and Writings, the root takes on the meaning of ‘pure’ or ‘clear’ in

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5. According to some scholars, the root may actually be כ.ז. or perhaps כ.כ.ז
 6. The word זכוכית, meaning glass, is also connected.
 7. Exodus 27:20, Leviticus 24:2
 8. Exodus 30:34, Leviticus 24:7 Or, as the Septuagint has for Exodus 30:34, “transparent frankincense.”

the abstract sense. In the JPS, we see it translated into such words as 'right,'⁹ 'pure,'¹⁰ 'blameless,'¹¹ 'cleansed,'¹² 'clean,'¹³ 'guiltless,'¹⁴ 'cleared of guilt,'¹⁵ 'innocent,'¹⁶ and 'acquitted.'¹⁷ None of these words are far apart in meaning. In many cases, the translator could have used the word 'pure,' in place of 'blameless,' 'clean,' and so on. **ה.כ.ז** is used in parallel with such words as **צדק**.¹⁸ also **בר**.¹⁹ and **ישר**.²⁰ By the Tanaitic period **ה.כ.ז** will have come to mean 'cleared of guilt,' 'innocent,' and 'acquitted' in a technical legal sense. However, the word we see in the Tanakh has not yet taken on that meaning.

Nor has **ה.כ.ז** yet taken on the meaning mentioned above, that of transferable merit. Of course, a person who is pure, blameless, innocent, or guiltless, has merit, or at the very least, a neutral status. That is, to be cleared of guilt means to have no negative marks upon one's record. Although positive marks are not implied, such a person is rare and may indeed be thought of as a **צדק**.

The concept of a record upon which there may be positive or negative marks, does

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- 9. Proverbs 16:2, Psalms 51:6.
 - 10. Psalms 73:13, 119:9, Job 11:4, 16:17.
 - 11. Proverbs 20:11, 21:8, Job 8:6.
 - 12. Proverbs 20:9.
 - 13. Isaiah 1:16.
 - 14. Job 33:9.
 - 15. Job 15:14, 25:4.
 - 16. Daniel 6:23.
 - 17. Micah 6:11.
 - 18. Job 15:14, 25:4, Psalms 51:6.
 - 19. Job 11:4.
 - 20. Job 8:6, Proverbs 21:8.

not appear in the Tanakh. What does appear is the idea of positive or negative things that will happen to people in the future. In a way, most of the narrative of the Torah may be seen as the story of the Eternal interacting with the descendants of Abraham, to whom the Eternal made a promise. That promise was to make the name of Abraham great. In the Biblical world of tribe and family, this cannot occur without the descendants of Abraham becoming a mighty nation.²¹

In Genesis 26:4, the Eternal makes a promise to Isaac. וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק בְּלִילָהּ הָהוּא וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אָבִיךָ אֵל-תֵּיכָא כִּי-אַתָּה אֲנִי וּבְרַכְתִּיךָ וְהָרַבִּיתִי אֶת-זֶרְעֶךָ בְּעָבוּר אַבְרָהָם עַבְדִּי Even the second patriarch is only made a participant in the covenant בְּעָבוּר אַבְרָהָם, for the sake of Abraham. There is no mention of Isaac's willingness to be sacrificed or his obedience to the Eternal in Genesis 26. Rather, the Eternal makes a promise to Isaac to bless him and make his descendants numerous וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת-הַשְּׁבָעָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְרָהָם אָבִיךָ, because doing so fulfills the promise made to Abraham.²²

The promise to Abraham is one that will benefit his descendants. Moses reminds the Eternal of this promise in Exodus 32:13: זָכַר לְאַבְרָהָם לִיצְחָק וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַבְדֶּיךָ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לָהֶם בְּךָ וַתְּדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אַרְבָּה אֶת-זֶרְעֶכֶם כְּכֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכָל-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתִּי אֶתְּנוּ לְזֶרְעֶכֶם וְנָחֳלוּ לָעָלָם. The Eternal must keep His promise

21. As we see in Genesis 15:2.

22. Ibid., 26:3

to the ancestors by rewarding the descendants with land.

The promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob may or may not have been made as a result of any merit the patriarchs possessed. Nonetheless, the Israelites in Exodus 32:13 are only accidental beneficiaries of those promises. Not only are they spared through no merit of their own, they are not spared for their own benefit. They are spared because to have many descendants who will inherit the land of Canaan is part of the package of benefits promised to their ancestors.

If a reward is promised to a man because of his merit, he receives the reward and the transaction is done. But if the nature of the reward is that his descendants will be rewarded, they receive their reward because of the merit of their ancestors. It is as if the merit has been transferred from the ancestor to the descendant.

In Exodus 33:18 the Eternal makes a statement in response to the plea of Moses,

יְהוָה | יְהוָה אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנוּן אָרְךְ אַפַּיִם The Eternal says הִרְאֵנִי גַּם אֶת-כְּבוֹדְךָ
וְרַב-חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת: נֹצַר חֶסֶד לְאַלְפִים נִשָּׂא עוֹן וּפֶשַׁע וְחַטָּאָה וְנִקְּהָ לֹא יִנְקָה פֶקֶד
23: | עוֹן אָבוֹת עַל-בָּנִים וְעַל-בְּנֵי בָנִים עַל-שְׁלִשִּׁים וְעַל-רַבָּעִים

The statement נֹצַר חֶסֶד לְאַלְפִים is particularly fascinating. The JPS translates this as "extending kindness to the thousandth generation." לְאַלְפִים can have many meanings. For example, it may mean that the Eternal will extend kindness to or protect thousands of the Israelites currently alive, or even that the Eternal would protect the

23. Exodus 34:6-7.

troops. Most commentators take their lead from Rashi, who writes “לאלפים: לשני” Rashi may have taken his lead from Onkelos, who translates this as “נטר טיבו לאלפי דורין”.

If we view these words as a parallel to **פָּקֵד | עוֹן אָבוֹת עַל-בָּנִים וְעַל-בָּנֵי בָנִים** then it makes sense that this refers to **חֶסֶד**, kindness or mercy, shown to the descendants of a person who did the opposite of **עוֹן**, some righteous act. In fact, the root **נ.צ.ח.**, according to the BDB, means to watch over, or guard. So this may not be a case in which the Eternal awards kindness to a person who may not deserve it, but whose ancestor deserved the kindness. Rather, it may be a case in which the original kindness is preserved.

The Book of Deuteronomy both affirms and denies the idea that merit may pass from one generation to another. Deuteronomy 7:12 has **וְהָיָה | עֲקֵב תִּשְׁמְעוּן אֶת הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים הָאֵלֶּה וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְיָהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ לָךְ אֶת-הַבְּרִית** **וְאֶת-הַחֶסֶד אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאֲבוֹתֶיךָ**; “The result of keeping these laws is that the Eternal will keep the covenant and the kindness which He swore to your ancestors.” The implication is that if you do not keep the laws, the Eternal will not show you the kindness He promised to your ancestors. You can receive a reward, and perhaps be treated with the kindness you deserve in addition to the kindness your ancestors merited, if and only if you are yourself deserving of some level of kindness.

On the other hand, Deuteronomy 9:5-6 seems to indicate that the Israelites deserve no kindness; they will inherit the land only as a punishment to the current residents and

לא בצדקתך ובישר לבבך אתה. as fulfillment of the promises made to their ancestors. בא לרשת את-ארצם כי ברשעת | הגוים האלה יהוה אלהיך מורישם מפניך ולמען הקים את-הדבר אשר נשבע יהוה לאבותיך לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב: וידעת כי לא בצדקתך יהוה אלהיך נתן לך את-הארץ הטובה הזאת While 7:12 implies that Israelites without merit will receive no reward, 9:5-6 announces that they are to receive a reward based solely on the righteousness or unrighteousness of others.

These two positions can be reconciled only if we presume three different categories of righteousness. A person at the highest level is righteous enough to produce merit. Perhaps he or she may be considered a צדיקה or צדיק. The merit that he or she produces may therefore be given to others. A person at the middle level will, at the least, obey the laws of the Eternal. This person does not produce merit, but can receive the merit of his or her ancestors. Below a certain level, one may not even be the beneficiary of the merit of others. Thus, 9:5-6 reminds the Israelites that they are not in the highest category, but the middle category, dependent upon the merit of others. 7:12 warns the Israelites not to fall into the third category, at which point they would no longer qualify as beneficiaries of the covenant made with their ancestors.²⁴

This system reconciles the different claims about merit made in the Torah. I do not claim that this was the intention of the Biblical author. Yet without this system, the

24. Marmorstein concurs when he writes "Among Jews themselves there were three groups, often differentiated in the sources: righteous, men of the middle way, and wicked." Marmorstein, p. 24.

Biblical verses are in conflict. I believe this mirrors the conflict between the desire to insist that the Israelites act meritoriously and the fear that they would take credit for the good that befalls them. The middle path is that the Israelites will receive good based on merit, but not on their own merit. Thus this idea of **נָצַר חֶסֶד לְאֲלֵפִים** became extremely useful.

We can see that the concept of receiving a reward because of the merit of one's ancestors appears in the Torah. Still, a more common notion is that one will receive reward or punishment based on one's own merit. As it says in Deuteronomy 11:26-28,

רָאה אֲנֹכִי נָתַן לִפְנֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה: אֶת-הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמְעוּ
אֶל-מִצְוֹת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מִצְוֶה אֹתְכֶם הַיּוֹם: וְהַקְלָלָה אִם-לֹא
תִשְׁמְעוּ אֶל-מִצְוֹת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְסָרְתֶם מִן-הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מִצְוֶה אֹתְכֶם
הַיּוֹם לָלֶכֶת אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַעְתֶּם
There is no mention here of the merit of others mitigating against the curse that one will receive for disobeying the commandments.

In later books of the Bible, we see a different paradigm. According to Ezekiel 16, the covenant between the Eternal and Israel was never based on merit at all. As we see in 16:6-8, the covenant was based on grace. **וְאָעֲבַר עָלֶיךָ וְאָרָאךָ מִתְבּוֹסֶסֶת בְּדַמֶּיךָ**
וְאָמַר לָךְ בְּדַמֶּיךָ חַיִּי וְאָמַר לָךְ בְּדַמֶּיךָ חַיִּי: רַבְּבָה כְּצִמְחַת הַשָּׂדֶה נִתְּתִיךָ וְתִרְבִּי
וְתִגְדְּלִי וְתִבְאִי בְּעֵדֵי עַדִּי שְׂדֵים נִכְנוּ וְשַׁעֲרֶךָ צִמַּח וְאֶת עֵרֶם וְעִרְיָה: וְאָעֲבַר
עָלֶיךָ וְאָרָאךָ וְהִנֵּה עֵתָךְ עַת דָּדִים וְאֶפְרַשׁ כְּנָפֵי עָלֶיךָ וְאֶכְסֶה עָרוֹתָךְ וְאֶשְׁבַּע לָךְ

וְאָבּוֹא בְּבְרִית אִתְּךָ נָאִם אֲדֹנֵי יְהוָה וְתִהְיֶי-לִי

Perhaps more interesting is Ezekiel chapter 18. Ezekiel holds that the covenant is in effect. Those without merit of their own, however, will be punished. The effect of the covenant is that those who sin will eventually be forgiven. As is written in 16:59-60, כִּי כֹה אָמַר אֲדֹנֵי יְהוָה וְעָשִׂיתָ [וְעָשִׂיתִי] אוֹתְךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֲשֶׁר-בָּזִיתָ אֶלֶּה לְהַפֵּר Even בְּרִית: וְזָכַרְתִּי אֹנִי אֶת-בְּרִיתִי אוֹתְךָ בִּימֵי גִעוּנֶיךָ וְהַקְמוּתִי לְךָ בְּרִית עוֹלָם so, chapter 18 states that no one will be punished for the sins of others, and no one will be rewarded for the righteousness of others. The Eternal admits that this concept existed in Israel. מֵה-לָכֶם אַתֶּם מַשְׁלִים אֶת-הַמֶּשֶׁל הַזֶּה עַל-אֲדָמַת יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אָבוֹת. ²⁵יֹאכְלוּ בֶסֶר וְשָׂנִי הַבָּנִים תִּקְהִינָה

Yet if a sinner has a son who is righteous, that son will be rewarded for his righteousness, and not punished for his father's sins. More to the point of this essay, if a righteous man has a son who is a sinner, the son will die for his sins, and not benefit from any of the merit accrued by his righteous father. וְהוֹלִיד בֶּן-פְּרִיץ שֹׁפֵךְ דָּם וְעָשָׂה אָח מֵאֶחָד מֵאלֹהִים: וְהוּא אֶת-כָּל-אֱלֹהִים לֹא עָשָׂה כִּי גַם אֵל-הַהָרִים אָבֵל וְאֶת-אִשֶׁת רַעְהוּ טָמֵא: עָנִי וְאֲבִיוֹן הוֹנָה גְּזֵלוֹת גָּזַל חֲבֵל לֹא יָשִׁיב וְאֵל-הַגְּלוּלִים נִשָּׂא עֵינָיו תוֹעֵבָה עָשָׂה: בֶּנֶשֶׁךְ נָתַן וְתִרְבִּית לָקַח וְחֵי לֹא יִחְיֶה אֶת ²⁶כָּל-הַתּוֹעֵבוֹת הָאֵלֶּה עָשָׂה מוֹת יוֹמָת דָּמְיוֹ בּוֹ יִהְיֶה

25. Ezekiel 18:2

26. Ibid., 18:10-13

For Ezekiel, the value of the covenant is that the people as a whole will not be wiped out, that they will eventually be forgiven. Yet only those individuals among the people who repent of their sins will be forgiven. The covenant is like a business transaction. A deal has been made with the people as a whole. Those members of the people who keep their end of the bargain will receive the rewards promised in the covenant. Those who do not, will not. People will receive rewards for the merit of their own righteousness, and may be forgiven their sins through their own repentance. That a person can receive merit from others is emphatically denied.

Proverbs, a book which directly addresses the question of how one should behave, agrees with Ezekiel. In 11:4b-7, it is clear that a person will be punished or rewarded based on his own behavior alone. וְצִדְקָה תַצִּיל מִמָּוֶת: צִדְקַת תְּמִים תִּישֶׁר דְּרָכָו. וּבִרְשָׁעָתוֹ יִפֹּל רָשָׁע: צִדְקַת יֹשְׁרִים תַצִּילֻם וּבִהְיוֹת בְּגָדִים יִלְכְּדוּ: בְּמוֹת אָדָם רָשָׁע תֵּאבֵד תִּקְוָה וְתוֹחֶלֶת אוֹנִים אֲבָדָה:

The only place in Proverbs in which people are seen as inheriting anything from their fathers is 19:14. The inheritance is a physical one of house, or family name, and wealth. No special connection with the Eternal is implied. In fact, Proverbs specifically notes that sinners may amass money and property, but only to eventually pass them on to the righteous.²⁷

There is in Proverbs a single exception to this view of the world. 14:26 has בִּירְאָתָא יְהוָה מִבְּטָח-עַז וּלְבָבִיו יִהְיֶה מַחְסֶה: This may be translated as "Fear of the Lord is

27. Proverbs 13:22b.

a stronghold/ A refuge for a man's children."²⁸ This verse may indicate a link between an earlier time in which children were rewarded for the righteousness of the father, and a later time in which this view would become even more prevalent. It may be that the refuge, מַחֲסֶה, is a physical one based on the financial benefits the father has received as a reward for his righteousness. However, given the uncertain status of worldly wealth in Proverbs, the plain meaning of this verse seems to be that there is some spiritual benefit that may pass from father to children. This idea existed in the Torah, but seems to have disappeared in the later books of the Bible except as a general sense that the covenant between the Israelites and the Eternal still exists. Yet this idea will make a reappearance in later Jewish literature, and perhaps this verse in Proverbs is a hint that the idea remained somewhere below the surface.

While a search for this idea of transference of merit in every book of the Bible is beyond the scope of this paper, mention must be made of the book of Job. The book of Job squarely addresses the question of why we receive reward or punishment from the Eternal. If there was any sense that the merit of one's forebears could tilt the balance towards reward, surely it would be mentioned in this book.

In fact, such is not the case. The book casts doubt even on the idea that one's own merit will determine reward or punishment. This idea, put forth by Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu, is vehemently denied by the Eternal.²⁹ The author of Job does not go so far as to claim that all good comes from the Eternal through grace alone. Rather, it

28. As per the JPS.

29. Job 42:7-8.

seems as if there is a system of reward and punishment, and that this system is infected by a certain capriciousness.

As in the book of Ezekiel, there is no question of the transference of merit. Job questions the justice of the Eternal when he suffers physically. When his children are killed in 1:18, Job mourns, but the idea that his merit should have saved them from death does not appear. In the famous phrase, Job says **יִהְיֶה נָתַן וַיִּהְיֶה לָקַח יְהִי שָׁם** **יִהְיֶה מִבְּרַךְ**³⁰

Even Bildad the Shuhite, whose character represents an orthodox view of reward and punishment, states **אִם-בְּגִיךְ חָטְאוּ-לוֹ וַיִּשְׁלַחם בְּיָד-פֶּשַׁעם**: The death of Job's children is acceptable if they have sinned against the Eternal. Although Bildad believes that Job has sinned,³¹ there is no suggestion that Job's children have died for his sins, or for any cause other than their own sins. In the next verse but one, Bildad goes on to say **אִם-זֶךְ וַיִּשָּׁר אֶתָּה כִּי-עֲתָה יַעֲרִיךְ עָלֶיךָ וְשָׁלֵם נֹת צַדִּיק**: The word **זֶךְ** here is, of course, used to mean 'pure,' or 'upright,' in parallel with **יִשָּׁר**. Still, the meaning 'meritorious' is not far from the surface.

30. Ibid., 1:21b.

31. Ibid., chapter 18.

Chapter Two: The Mishnah

By the time the Mishnah was redacted, the idea of transference of merit had returned to the mainstream of normative Jewish belief.³² By this time, the idea of merit had become associated with the root ה.כ.ז. The root had also taken on a number of other meanings, possibly connected through association. One of the new meanings of this word, connected to its original meaning, to be 'pure' or 'clear', was to be 'found innocent' in a court of law. The term was often used in civil cases to mean the party in whose favor the judges found, as the opposite of חייב. See, for example, M Bekhorot 4:4, which begins מי שאינו ממחה ורצה את הבכור ונשחט על פיו. הרי זה

32. One might therefore expect to see hints of this idea in intertestamental literature and, we find, such is indeed the case. Particularly in the case of more literary works, we see the idea that reward and punishment come to children based on the merit or wrongdoing of their ancestors. Tobit, of course, is a story about the good that comes to Tobias because of the piety of his father, the eponymous Tobit. The book shows that this concept is assumed to be standard in a number of specific instances. One such instance is Tobit's prayer in 3:3, when he asks the Divine not to punish him for the sins of his ancestors. The prayer continues (New American Bible Trans.) "Yes, your judgments are many and true in dealing with me as my sins and those of my fathers deserve" (3:5). Merit is assumed to be transferrable in Tobit 13:9, in which Tobit, in the course of a longer prayer states "O Jerusalem, the holy city, he afflicted you for the deeds of your hands, but will again have mercy on the children of the righteous." (NRSV) Even wisdom books, which one might assume would be close in theology to Proverbs, hint at the idea of transference of merit. In The Wisdom of Solomon, 3:16, we find "But children of adultery will not come to maturity, and the offspring of an unlawful union will perish." (NSRV). The same idea is repeated in 4:3-5. Ecclesiasticus 4:16 states that not only will those who are faithful to Wisdom inherit her, "their descendants will also obtain her." (NRSV) 23:24 agrees with The Wisdom of Solomon that not only will an adulteress be punished, but "her punishment will extend to her children."

יִקְבֵּר, וישלם מביתו. דן את הדין, זכה את התיב וחיב את הזכאי, טמא את
הטהור וטהר את הטמא, מה שעשה עשוי וישלם מביתו. Here to judge someone
as זכה is as much the opposite of חייב as טמא is the opposite of טהור.

Another meaning of זכה often found in the Mishnah is 'acquire.' No doubt there
were cases in which a person was found pure by a court of law and therefore won a
court case, acquiring property as part of the legal decision. It is pure speculation to
suppose that this might have been a reason that זכה came to mean 'acquire,' yet in M
Nedarim 5:5 we see an interesting use of the word. The mishnah discusses a case in
which a person has sworn a vow not to benefit from items held jointly by all the
townspeople. If he wants to use these items, he can write his share over to the head of
the court. If one were to ask "Why only the head of the court?", the reply is given that
the head of the court does not acquire the title. וְהַכּוֹתֵב חֵלְקוֹ לְגִשְׁיָא, רַבִּי יְהוּדָה
אוֹמֵר, אֶחָד כּוֹתֵב לְגִשְׁיָא וְאֶחָד כּוֹתֵב לְהִדְיוּט. מַה בֵּין כּוֹתֵב לְגִשְׁיָא לְכּוֹתֵב
לְהִדְיוּט.³³ שֶׁהַכּוֹתֵב לְגִשְׁיָא אֵינוֹ צָרִיךְ לְזַכּוֹת.

The word זכות here means 'acquire,' but in a specific legal way. The acquisition
here is of title only, not acquisition of the object itself, which in fact the original owner
will keep. זכה also refers to the more common type of acquisition, but it could have

33. An example of this might be a person who vows not to take benefit from any item
he owns jointly with others, but then finds that he wishes to read from the Torah
scroll. He can give his share of the scroll to the head of the court, and then read
from it, because he is no longer a part owner.

first appeared in this sense in law.³⁴ The meaning of the word זכּה may have shifted in meaning from pure, to innocent, to acquisition by means of being found innocent, to acquiring title legally, to meaning any kind of acquisition. This is a matter of speculation, but it does follow logically.

זכּה also has the meaning of acquiring the right to perform an action. This form of legal acquisition is dissimilar to the kind of acquisition we saw in M Nedarim 5:5. In that case, a person loses physical possession, thereby gaining the right to use an object. In other cases, a person gains the right to perform an action, and there is no question of transference of property. One case of this kind of acquisition can be found in M Gittin 8:8. This mishnah states לא כל הימנו מן הראשון לאבד זכותו של שני. In the case of a woman who marries twice, even if the *get* was originally given to the wrong person, once it is given to the right person, it is a legal *get*. Therefore, the first husband cannot abrogate the right of possession of the second husband.

More commonly, however, the right acquired is the right to perform a meritorious action. In M Tamid, the right to perform a meritorious action comes with winning a lottery. In 1:4, for example, the mishnah begins מי שזכה לתרום את המזבח. הוא. This could be variously translated as “Whoever had *won the lottery and gained the right* to clear [the ashes] from the altar would clear [them].” “Whoever had *acquired the right* to clear [the ashes] from the altar would clear [them].” or even “Whoever

34. For זכּה as acquisition in terms of simple purchase, or, more usually, in the sense of becoming the owner of a found object, many examples are found throughout the Mishnah. See especially Eruvin 4:8, 7:6, 7:7, 7:11, 8:3, Baba Kamma 3:3, Baba Metzia 1:3, 1:4, 8:4, et passim.

merited the right to clear [the ashes] from the altar would clear [them].”³⁵

“Whoever [won the lottery and thereby] *acquired* [the right] to clear [the ashes] from the altar would clear [them].” might be the most accurate translation, but in any case, there seems to be a blurring of the distinction between winning (a lottery or a court case), acquiring (an object or the right to perform a meritorious action), and deserving (to win a court case, or being pure/having merit).

In M Tamid 1:2 the mishnah may be clearer. This mishnah is also about determining who can perform the meritorious action of cleaning the ashes from the altar. When the person in charge comes, *הִפְסִיחוּ זָכָה מִי שֶׁזָּכָה*.³⁶ The Neusner translation has “They cast lots. Whoever won, won.” This translation would have been more appropriate had the mishnah read *הִפְסִיחוּ וּמִי שֶׁזָּכָה זָכָה*.

The Neusner translation is not the only possible interpretation. Philip Blackman has “They cast lots, and he that succeeded obtained the privilege.”³⁷ It might also be translated as “They cast lots, and the right was acquired by he who won.”

If we presume a world view in which all things are controlled by the Divine, there may not be a difference between having merit and winning a lottery. That is, to win a lottery such as this indicates the possession of merit. Admittedly, this is only conjecture. If, however, we presume a world view which holds that nothing happens that is not controlled by the Divine, it seems logical to assume that the priest who wins the right to

35. This confusion appears in similar statements in M Tamid 3:5, 3:6, 3:9, 4:1, 4:2, 4:3, 5:4, 5:5, 6:1, and 6:3.

36. The same terminology appears in 3:1 and 5:2.

37. Blackman translates 3:1 and 5:2 the same way.

perform a meritorious deed does so because of his merit.

Whether or not this is so, we see at least that זכָה here functions in a positive way. More than the opposite of חייב, it has the sense of a good thing happening. Whether it is clearly to win, to acquire, or to deserve, or whether it is some combination of all three, may not be determinable in this case.

Other uses of זכָה in the Mishnah clearly indicate merit. In a discussion of wealth and poverty, Rabbi Meir in M Kiddushin 4:14 says לֹא עֲנִיּוֹת מִן הָאֲמֻנּוֹת וְלֹא עֲשִׁירוֹת מִן הָאֲמֻנּוֹת. אֲלֵא הַכֹּל לְפִי זְכוּתוֹ There is nothing upon which poverty or wealth could be based here but merit, or lack thereof. Although most uses of זכָה in M Sanhedrin indicate 'not guilty,' in 1:4, referring to court cases involving dangerous animals, we have רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר אוֹמֵר, כָּל הַקּוֹדֵם לַהֲרֹגָן, זָכָה. This could mean whoever kills them first is meritorious, or whoever kills them first acquires merit.

Another example can be found in M Sotah 1:9. The mishnah discusses the fact that a person receives reward not only to the proper extent, but that the form of the reward corresponds to the meritorious action for which the reward is given.³⁸ In this mishnah we see יוֹסֵף זָכָה לְקַבֵּר אֶת אָבִיו. Because Joseph had merit, he was awarded the opportunity to bury his father. Here "זָכָה לְקַבֵּר" is used as a compound verb, 'to merit burying.' We see the same concept later in this mishnah, without the compound verb. מֹשֶׁה זָכָה בְּעֲצָמוֹת יוֹסֵף. Here we see that Moses, who of course was not able to

38. As we see in M Sotah 1:7, בְּמִדָּה שֶׁאָדָם מַחֲדֵד, בָּהּ מַחֲדִּין לוֹ. The discussion of reward follows a discussion of similarly appropriate punishments.

bury Joseph in the Promised Land himself, still 'merited' Joseph's bones.³⁹

Interestingly, this mishnah seems to indicate a chain reaction of merit. Because of Joseph's merit, he was able to bury his father, thus acquiring more merit. Because Joseph was meritorious, to receive his bones was an honor. Moses received this honor because of his merit, and because of this meritorious deed, he received the honor of having the Eternal bury his bones.

M Sotah 3:4 continues to use זכה to indicate merit. The mishnah states that if a guilty woman is made to drink the bitter waters, and does not suffer from it as the Torah says she will, it is because the merit she has stored up. אַם יֵשׁ לָהּ זְכוּת. הִי־תֵהָ תוֹלָה. לָהּ. יֵשׁ זְכוּת תוֹלָה שָׁגָה אֶחָת. יֵשׁ זְכוּת תוֹלָה שְׁתֵּי שָׁנִים. יֵשׁ זְכוּת תוֹלָה שְׁלֹשׁ שָׁנִים. In fact, depending on how much merit she has stored up, she can delay the ill effects as much as three years. In the following mishnah Rabbi Simeon and Rabbi debate whether or not merit will actually delay the effects of the waters. They do not debate whether there is such a thing as merit which can be stored up, nor can זכות as it is used in this mishnah mean anything but merit.

In M Kritot 6:9 there is a discussion as to whether one member of assorted pairs is greater than the other. The pairs in question are goats or lambs, pigeons or doves, and father or mother. Although one opinion states they are all equal, another says that the father is greater than the mother, for both the son and the mother must honor the father.

39. There is an interesting parallel between this and the equally vague concept in Christianity of the merit of possessing relics of saints.

The mishnah goes on to say that so it is with the rabbi and the father, for **אם זכה הבן** **לפני הרב**. קדם את האב בכל מקום. מפני שהוא ואביו תיבין בכבוד רבו. This statement, **אם זכה הבן לפני הרב**, could possibly mean ‘the son acquires [teachings] before the rabbi,’ but also could mean ‘the son acquires merit before the rabbi.’⁴⁰ I believe that this is a transitional phrase, a blurring of the two meanings of **זכות**, to acquire, and to have merit.

In M Makkot 3:16 we also see an unambiguous use of **זכה** to mean merit. **רבי חנניא בן עקשיא אומר**. **רצה הקדוש ברוך הוא לזכות את ישראל לפיכך הרבה** **להם תורה ומצות**. According to Rabbi Chanaiya b. Akashiya, the Torah and its mitzvot were given to Israel for the sake of the merit of Israel. By performing mitzvot, Israel is able to acquire merit.

We see some interesting uses of **זכה** in Pirkei Avot as well. In 1:6 Rabbi Joshua b. Perahiah states: **הוי דן את כל האדם לכף זכות**.⁴¹ This is certainly connected to the idea of **זכות** as innocent, on the other side of the scales of justice from **חייב**. Yet surely Rabbi Joshua b. Perahiah does not mean that every trial should end with acquittal. Rather, the intention seems to be that we should look upon all people as if they were meritorious.⁴² This seems to be another transitional phrase, connecting the two

40. As, indeed, Neusner translates it.

41. This idea is repeated in Avot 6:6. See note 43.

42. Both the Artscroll Siddur and Kravitz and Olitzky have “...judge everyone favorably.” Neusner has “...give everyone the benefit of the doubt.”

meanings of innocent and meritorious. Certainly they were never far apart in meaning, but in this mishnah we see the place in which they meet.

M Avot 6:1 includes the statement **מִרְחֻקָּתוֹ מִן הַחֵטָא, וּמִקְרִבָּתוֹ לִידֵי זְכוּת**, indicating that **זְכוּת** here is the opposite of **חֵטָא**.⁴³ Another place in which **זְכוּת** is used in this way is M Avot 5:18. This mishnah begins **כָּל הַמְּזַכֶּה אֶת הָרַבִּים, אֵין חֵטָא** in this way is M Avot 5:18. This mishnah begins **כָּל הַמְּזַכֶּה אֶת הָרַבִּים, אֵין חֵטָא**. Just as above, **זְכוּת** is used in parallel with and as the opposite of **חֵטָא**.⁴⁴ The opposite of sin is a good deed, a meritorious deed. **מִזְכָּה** here is to cause merit to arise, to create or acquire merit. The mishnah goes on to say **זְכוּת הָרַבִּים, זְכוּת הָרַבִּים**. **מִשָּׁה זְכָה וְזָכָה אֶת הָרַבִּים, זְכוּת הָרַבִּים**. **תְּלוּי בּוֹ**.

This is an unambiguous use of **זְכוּת** to indicate merit that can be obtained by one person and used by another. The reward for a person's good deeds will be enjoyed by someone other than the person who performed the meritorious action. This idea, which we saw in Exodus 34:7 but which seemed to disappear in the prophetic books, has made a reappearance. This mishnah does not suggest that this would be a surprising concept, or one which needs explanation or excuse. It is simply accepted that one may bring merit to many.

43. Chapter six of M Avot is not actually part of the Mishnah, but a collection of baraitot usually appended to the tractate. Because of this, the dating of these statements is a little less certain.

44. Kasovsky, in **אֶצֶר לְשׁוֹן הַמִּשְׁנָה**, gives "The opposite of **חֵטָא**" as his first definition of **זְכוּת**.

There is no way of knowing how this idea returned to normative Judaism, or even if it had ever fully left. We cannot say for certain what the religious elite in the post-Biblical era truly believed. All the more so are we unable to determine what the beliefs of the general Jewish population might have been. It seems clear that a reader of Deuteronomy might expect rain in return for sacrifices and observance of the festival days. Whether a farmer of the fifth century B.C.E. would expect successful crops because of his lineage of pious ancestors, we can only speculate.

It is not impossible that the appearance of scholars of the Torah might have brought this idea back into currency. The appearance of the Pharisees and a valuing of Torah study apart from Temple service might have led to the reappearance of ideas inherent in the Torah. Certainly a close reader of the post-Genesis Torah might come to the conclusion that all of the merit of the Israelites depended upon Moses.⁴⁵

Marmorstein suggests that the idea of the transference of merit reappeared because of the social and political situation in mishnaic times. Because the Jews in Roman Palestine were politically powerless, they felt a strong desire to connect with the ancestors who had been so close to the All Powerful One. Teachings professing that the people were still the beneficiaries of their ancestors' merit would have therefore been popular.⁴⁶

45. See Numbers 14:1 for one of several instances in which the entire community is seen as lacking merit.

46. Marmorstein, pp. 42-43, 49, et passim. Marmorstein also suggests that the rabbis may have been influenced by Persian theology, specifically the concept of a 'storehouse of good deeds.' Ibid. pp. 20-21.

In Avot 2:2 we see the phrase זכות אבות, the merit of the fathers, for the first time. This is the best known type of transference of merit. זכות אבות became an extremely important concept in Judaism. Many Jews felt that although they deserved no reward from their own actions, they would be rewarded in this world or the next because of the merit acquired by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In 2:2 the idea is already fully developed. שְׂזִכּוֹת אֲבוֹתָם מְסִיעָתוֹ וְצַדִּיקָתָם עוֹמֶדֶת לָעַד. This follows a statement that those who work for the community must work for the sake of heaven. If they do, then the merit of their fathers will be with them. זכות אבות, as we will see, remains a part of mainstream Judaism to this day.

If we return to Makkot, we can find perhaps the best example of transference of merit. M Makkot 3:15 states that a person receives a reward for avoiding blood. Rabbi Simeon b. Rabbi states that if those who avoid blood, which is distasteful, receive merit, then much more merit must be acquired by those who avoid robbery and sexual misbehavior, which are attractive. שִׁיזְכָּה לוֹ but he goes on to say, וְלְדוֹרוֹתָיו וְלְדוֹרוֹת וְלְדוֹרוֹתָיו עַד סוֹף כָּל הַדּוֹרוֹת.

So a person can receive merit, not only from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and not only from his own ancestors. A person, it seems, can receive merit from someone in his own generation, someone to whom he is not even related. As we have seen in M Avot 5:18 above, Moses was able to give merit to his own generation, to the entire community around him. Few of us are the equal of Moses, yet with M Makkot 3:15 there is a sense that anyone performing even a single mitzvah, acquires merit that lasts

forever. For the first time we get a sense of the existence of a point system, in which merits and demerits become permanent marks on a board. The positive points, the זכות, are available for others.

The root זכה, which meant physically pure in the Torah and metaphorically pure in the later books of the Bible, has taken on a number of other meanings in the Mishnah. While some of these meanings are closer in meaning to 'pure' than others, it is not too difficult to make a logical connection among them. A person who is pure will be found innocent in a court case. If it is a civil case involving property, he will acquire the disputed property. If an earthly court decides in a person's favor because of his purity and innocence, surely it follows that a heavenly court will also decide in his favor if he is religiously pure and innocent. If he acquires property in the first case, he must also acquire something in the second case. While he may acquire a reward, by winning a lottery for example, he may also acquire merit, which can be stored up for later rewards.

At the same time, we see a reappearance in the Mishnah of the concept of the ability to transfer merit to be transferred to other generations. This concept is taken a step further with the idea that the merit can be transferred even to others of one's own generation. While rooted in Torah, this idea was disparaged in prophetic works with an emphasis on personal responsibility. As we saw in this chapter, the rabbis who revolutionized Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple embraced the idea.

Chapter Three: The Talmud

In Chapter Two, while we did not examine in detail each of the more than two hundred and fifty instances of the use of the root זכה, we gave at least one example of each type. Since the Talmud is larger than the Mishnah, so too there is a corresponding increase in the number of instances of the root. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the appearance of the root זכה in the Talmud in any comprehensive way. We will limit our examination of the more than seven hundred appearances of the root to those cases in which the root has the meaning of 'merit.'

One such instance occurs in Berachot 6b. This tractate discusses the proper way to pray. Rabbi Chelbo quotes Rabbi Huna on the importance of the afternoon prayer, which leads to another quote from the same rabbis on the importance of making the groom happy at the bridal meal. If a person does not make him happy, the person has done wrong to the five voices mentioned in the wedding blessings. The question is then asked: if a person does gladden the groom, what is his reward? Rabbi Yehoshua b. Levi answers, אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: זוכה לתורה.

It is difficult to say whether this means 'He acquires the Torah,' 'He merits the Torah,' or 'He merits the acquisition of the Torah.' Nonetheless, it is significant that זכה is mentioned in context of a reward. While זכה can mean to acquire in a purely physical sense, as we have seen in the Mishnah, the meaning commonly shades into 'acquiring merit' or 'acquiring because of merit.' While one can 'זכה' Torah, or the

right to clean the ashes from the altar, one cannot 'זכר' something negative.

If זכר in Berachot 6b means some combination of 'merit' and 'acquire,' the meaning seems elsewhere to mean some combination of 'merit,' and 'acquit.' Shabbat 127b might at first seem to be such a case. A careful reading, however, clarifies the meaning. The folio quotes a baraita, saying ת"ר הדן חברו לכף זכות, echoing 1:6 of Pirkei Avot. In Pirkei Avot, it was not clear to what extent the term זכות was intended to mean 'acquit.' The Talmud continues, דנין אותו לזכות. This is followed by three aggadot in which a person who seems to have committed a sin is judged to be meritorious. In each case, the person turned out, in fact, to be meritorious. The third aggadah may be translated as follows:

Our rabbis taught: Once they wanted a thing for the scholars which was with a noblewoman, and all of the great men of Rome went to her. They said 'Who will go?' Rabbi Joshua said to them, 'I will go.' Rabbi Joshua and his students went. When he approached the door of her house, he removed his *tefillin* when he was four *amot* away, and he entered and shut the door before them. After he came out he went to the bath and bathed,⁴⁷ and then studied with his students. He said, 'When I took off my *tefillin*, what did you think of me?' They said 'That our teacher thought he should not bring holy words into a place of uncleanness.' 'When I shut [the door], what did you think of me?' They said 'Perhaps there were affairs of state between him and between her.' 'When I went down and bathed, what did you think of

47. As if he had had an emission of semen.

me?' They said 'Perhaps some saliva came from her mouth and landed on the clothes of our teacher.' He said to them 'By the Worship Service! Thus it was! Since you thought of me with merit, the Divine will judge you with merit.'⁴⁸

It is clear that the judgement here is not a legal judgement. The decision that is made is whether a person is righteous. In the example above, the students are judging whether their teacher has sinned or is pure. Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, they have judged him to be pure. As he was pure, they have acquired merit by their favorable judgement, and will themselves be judged favorably. The other two aggadic stories in this folio are more or less identical in intent.

The Talmud also embraces the concept of זכות אבות, the merit of the ancestors helping their descendants. An example can be seen in the story of the deposition of Rabban Gamliel, which is found in Berachot 27b. When Rabbi Joshua is rejected as an alternative, the rabbis turn to Rabbi Akiva. However, there is a fatal flaw in his candidacy. נוקמיה לר' עקיבא דילמא עניש ליה דלית ליה זכות אבות. According to some stories, Rabbi Akiva is descended from converts to Judaism. It is not clear at this point if Akiva lacks זכות אבות because his direct ancestors lack merit or because the merit of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob cannot be transferred to a descendant of converts. Yet the Gemara goes on to choose Rabbi Eliezar b. Azariya. One of Eliezar's qualifications is זכות אבות. הוא עשירי לעזרא דאית ליה זכות אבות. If Eliezar's זכות אבות

48. ואתם כשם שדנתוני לזכות המקום ידין אתכם לזכות.

comes from Ezra, ten generations back, then Akiva's lack of זכות אבות comes, not from the lack of a connection to the three patriarchs, but from the fact that there were no great scholars or righteous people amongst his ancestors.

This shows that זכות אבות is the stored up merit of all of one's ancestors, not only Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The merit this gives the descendent is more than the respect one might give to a man of good family. The spiritual power this gives Eliezar will protect him from any curse that Gamliel might call up against him.⁴⁹

In Berachot 27b we were concerned with merit that had been transferred to Rabbis Akiva and Eliezar by their ancestors. We also find a clear case of the transference of merit in Yoma 87a. The Gemara states: אשריהם לצדיקים לא דיין שהן זוכין. "The righteous are happy, for it is not enough that they have merit, but they give merit to their children and their children's children, until the end of the generations." This sentiment is very similar to what we saw in M Makkot 3:15 above. The difference is that here in the Talmud, the acquisition of merit itself is the goal. The righteous should be happy because they acquire merit, for themselves and others. The Mishnah merely states that the performance of a mitzvah gives one (and others) merit. Merit, in the Mishnah, had not yet taken on a value of its own.

When we examine the difference between the concept of זכות in the Mishnah and the Talmud, it is clear that the latter has a more complex view. Not only has זכות take

49. As per the Soncino translation, Akiva's lack of זכות אבות leaves him open to such curses.

on a value of its own, but it is a much more flexible concept. זכות has gone from an idea of righteousness that affects others to more or less a point system, in which those with points can use them in many different ways, both for themselves and others. A clue to the reason for the change in meaning can be found in Kiddushin 40a.

Shabbat 127a states: ששה דברים אדם אוכל פירותיהן בעולם הזה והקרן קיימת לו לעולם הבא ואלו הן: One of the things that provides both fruit in this world and lasting capital in the world to come is to הדן את חברו לכף זכות. This is the statement which gave rise to the discussion of the value of judging one's fellow on the side of merit and the accompanying aggadot in Shabbat 127b as mentioned above. However, Kiddushin 40a interprets this statement differently. This folio states הזכות יש לה קרן ויש לה פירות.

The meaning of this statement is critical to the understanding of what the word זכות came to mean. Here זכות itself has both capital and fruit, that is, a principal which will be of value in the future, as well as interest which is can be received now. The interest brings rewards now, in this world, while the capital will bring reward in the World to Come.⁵⁰

The concept of an afterlife, a World to Come, had been in Judaism for some time.⁵¹

50. We know that זכות is used to 'purchase' entry in to the World to Come through association. In some cases, such as in Rosh Hashanah 4a, which reads האומר סלע הבא ובשביל שאזכה בה לחיי העולם הבא ... זו, the connection is made much more explicit.

51. See, for example, Pirkei Avot 4:16: "Rabbi Jacob says 'This world is like an foyer before the World to Come.'" Even earlier the idea of an afterlife had become central to Pharisaic thought, as we can see not least from the importance of this

Whether we can enter the World to Come or not is the decision of the Divine Judge. The metaphor of the Divine as judge is found as far back as the Tanakh.⁵² Yet by the time the Talmud appears, a different guiding metaphor seems to be in place. Rather than a judge who makes difficult decisions on the basis of his superior knowledge, we see here a mercantile metaphor. A person earns so much credit for his actions. These credits are saved up. They may earn interest that he can withdraw, but he must maintain a certain amount of capital if he wishes to use the credits to purchase the main reward, in this case entry into the World to Come.

In Biblical times, the structure of Jewish society dictated that the patriarch of a tribe, clan, or family made the decisions. By the time of the Mishnah, and certainly by the period in which the Talmud came together, the power of the patriarch had faded, while the power of money had grown a great deal.

Despite a few mentions of money in the Torah, there was probably very little opportunity for the average person in the Biblical era to use money.⁵³ Although the first coins may have been produced in about 700 B.C.E.,⁵⁴ their use was uncommon in what was still a largely agricultural society. By the end of the Second Temple period, a more

idea in early Christianity.

52. חָלָלָה לְךָ הַשֵּׁפֶט כָּל-הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט Genesis 18:25, as well as Psalm 7:9, 9:9, 35:24 et passim.

53. For example, Abraham's purchase of the Cave of Machpelah in Genesis 23:4-18, the purchase of food by Jacob's sons in 42-44, Balaam's rejection of Balak's silver and gold in Numbers 22:18, et passim. On the other hand, there are a number of places in which one might expect money to be mentioned, and in which it is not. For example, when the four kings seize the wealth of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 14, or when Jacob receives payment for his work for Laban in Genesis 29 and 30.

54. 687 B.C.E., according to the historian Herodotus.

urban population probably used money a great deal more often. In the Roman world, services, goods, and people were bought and sold, loans were common, and interest was paid. It is logical that one of the metaphors used to describe how the world functions was based on the concept of money.

Indeed, to return to the Mishnah, there are a number of statements in Pirkei Avot which can be seen as using business as a metaphor for our relationship with the Divine. In M Avot 2:16, the study of Torah is likened to a job with high wages, and the Divine to an employer paying the wages.⁵⁵ אִם לַמִּדָּה תוֹרָה הִרְבֵּה, נוֹתְנִים לָךְ שָׂכָר הִרְבֵּה. M Avot 3:16 has “The shop is open and the Shopkeeper extends credit. The ledger is open, and the hand writes.”⁵⁶ הַחֲנוּת פְּתוּחָה, וְהַחֲשׁוּבִי מְקוּי, וְהַפִּנְקָס פְּתוּחַ, וְהַיָּד כּוֹתֶבֶת.

If the metaphor to which the early rabbis turned was business, that business required money. זְכוּת was the money of that system. שָׂכָר, the word for reward, is often used in these early rabbinic texts to describe what the righteous person would receive.

However, שָׂכָר could actually be a financial reward. Only זְכוּת could clearly be the merit points that one could acquire from the ‘Divine Employer.’ As Stewart wrote, “On this view, every action which is not ethically neutral must increase either the credit or the debit balance in a man’s heavenly bank account, and a man stands finally judged by whichever happens to be in excess of the other.”⁵⁷

55. As translated in Kravitz and Olitzky, p. 30.

56. Ibid., pp. 46-47.

57. Stewart, p. 128.

It is a short step from the idea of זכות as money to the idea that these merit points can be given away to others. Of course, as shown above, this idea was not new to Judaism. However, the fungibility of money had not previously been connected to religious merit. Furthermore, the discomfort that the prophets felt with the idea that people would not be rewarded or punished on the basis of their own actions seems to be largely forgotten by this point.

In Baba Batra 119a we see an example of זכות acting very much like money, being transferred from parent to child. The זכות in this case is being used to acquire land. In fact, this Gemara seems to say that one can only acquire land through the זכות of one's parents. After a discussion of the acquisition of land and the merit of the daughters of Zelophehad, the Talmud reads אמר מר והבנים נטלו בזכות אבי אביהם ובזכות אבי. Not just the daughters of Zelophehad, but all children who receive land do so on the basis of the merit of their father's father and their mother's father.⁵⁸ The fact that the discussion goes on to say והתניא בזכות עצמן is not important. Although the Gemara goes on to reconcile the two positions, the important thing is that the land can only be obtained with זכות. Whether the זכות used in this case is זכות that has been transferred or not is besides the point. The concept that merit is transferable is not called into question.

One of the Talmud's strongest statements on the transfer of merit can be found in

58. The property here discussed is the property given to the Israelites upon their entrance into the Promised Land.

א"ר יוחנן משום ר' יוסי בן Berachot 10b. There we find the following statement: זמרא כל התולה בזכות עצמו תולין לו בזכות אחרים וכל התולה בזכות אחרים תולין לו בזכות עצמו משה תלה בזכות אחרים שנא' זכור לאברהם ליצחק ולישראל עבדיך תלו לו בזכות עצמו שנאמר ויאמר להשמדם לולי משה בחירו עמד בפרץ לפניו להשיב חמתו מהשחית חזקיהו תלה בזכות עצמו דכתיב זכר נא את אשר התהלכתי לפניך תלו לו בזכות אחרים שנא' וגנותי אל העיר הזאת להושיעה למעני ולמען דוד עבדי.

We see from the above paragraph that some say there is a good deal of flexibility in the זכות system. Points can be taken from one's own merit or from the merit of others, and one has no control over which. As above, in Baba Batra 119a, there is no doubt that the merit is transferable.

In Berachot 10a we see a case in which merit is truly fungible. This folio contains a story about Isaiah son of Amoz visiting the ill King Hezekiah.⁵⁹ Isaiah informs Hezekiah that he will die because he has not had children. Hezekiah replies that he has not had children because he foresaw they would not be righteous. Isaiah reprimands him. He tells him that it is the king's responsibility to busy himself with being fruitful and multiplying, and the Divine will decide what the children will become. Hezekiah replies thus: אמר ליה השתא הב לי ברתך אפשר דגרמא זכותא דידי ודיך. He suggests that by marrying into Isaiah's household, he

59. A midrash on II Kings 20:1-4.

could add his merit and Isaiah's merit together. By virtue of the greater amount of merit, perhaps he will then have children who were righteous.

The similarity of זכות to money in this story cannot be denied. In a society that used a legal metaphor, there would be no question of combining two people who were half innocent to get a favorable judgement. When two people with fifty shekels pool their money, however, it is easy to buy an item worth one hundred shekels.

זכות functions like money. It can be stored up, and it can be transferred to others. We saw in Shabbat 127a that זכות has both interest, which we receive in this world, and capital, which we will use to purchase entry into the World to Come. This suggests that perhaps זכות, like money, can be used up. If we take too much money out of the bank now, we eat into our capital. We use it to buy clothes and food, but when we decide to use the capital to buy a house, we may find there is not enough left. Does זכות function in the same way, or can we use it over and over?

Shabbat 32a has an answer to this question. In this folio, Resh Lakish asks when a man is checked to see whether he is righteous or not. He answers himself that a man is checked when he crosses a bridge. If he is not righteous, the bridge may fall. The Gemara goes on to say that Rav would never cross a bridge upon which an idolator was sitting, for fear that the bridge might suddenly collapse to punish the idolator and Rav be killed along with him.⁶⁰ Shmuel would cross a bridge with a non-Jew on it, but the Gemara goes on to quote Rav Yannai. Rav Yannai, more practical than the others,

60. One might expect Rav's merit to save both him and the idolator, but no doubt bridges were much more risky propositions in those days.

would check the physical condition of the bridge before crossing it. "A man should never stand in a dangerous place and say 'A miracle will be done for me,' lest a miracle not be done for him." Besides, Rav Yannai goes on to say **ואם עושין לו נס מנכין לו** not be done for him.⁶¹ Besides, Rav Yannai goes on to say **ואם עושין לו נס מנכין לו**. Even if a miracle is done for him, credit will be deducted from his **זכות**.⁶¹

A righteous person is righteous, and the righteousness is not decreased when rewarded. Merit, on the other hand, if it is like money, can be used up. The association of **זכות** with money may well have been subconscious, but there are many parallels between the two.

In Avodah Zarah 4a, the Divine functions like a money manager. The Eternal brings suffering upon people in this world so that they will have enough **זכות** to enter the World to Come.⁶² Rav Abba would explain the verse "For I was their Redeemer, yet they have plotted destruction against Me," as meaning **אני אמרתי אפדם בממונם** **בעוה"ז כדי שיזכו לעולם הבא**.⁶³

It is clear that **זכות** has taken on a life of its own. It is not only a metaphor, but the

61. This concept is repeated in Ta'anit 20b. Rav Chuna has a house that is about to fall down, in which he has stored wine. He convinces Rabbi Adda b. Ahava to study in the house until he can remove the wine. After the wine has been removed, and Rabbi Adda b. Ahava leaves, the house collapses. Rabbi Adda b. Ahava is angry for, quoting Rav Yannai in Shabbat 32a above, he says **כי הא דאמר רבי ינאי** לעולם אל יעמד אדם במקום שכנה ויאמר עושין לי נס שמא אין עושין לו נס ואם תימצי לומר עושין לו נס מנכין לו מזכיותיו.

62. Suffering in this world means not using up any **זכות**, which might otherwise have been used to acquire financial success, physical health, or family happiness. There is, however, an idea that the endurance of suffering itself produces merit. This idea will be come more prominent later.

63. Hosea 8:4.

system by means of which our deeds generate reward and punishment. A frugal man, Rav Yannai wisely chose not to spend his זכות if he does not have to do so. Later in tractate Shabbat, on page 55a, we see a case in which merit is seen as having been depleted. In this folio, there is speculation by a number of rabbis as to why, in Ezekiel's vision, a "ת" is written on the foreheads of those who are to be spared from death.⁶⁴

Shmuel's speculation is תמיה זכות אבות. That the merit of their ancestors is depleted is not the only suggestion offered, but the concept that merit may be used up is accepted. In fact, according to Rabbi Chanan b. Rava, the deleterious effect of leaving the land of Israel will always cancel out the merit of one's ancestors.⁶⁵

We know that merit can come from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We also know that it can come from our own, more recent אבות. The word אבות is sometimes translated as 'ancestors,' and sometimes translated as 'fathers.' If there is any question as to whether women also produce merit, we need only look at Rosh Hashanah 11a. In interpreting the verse קול דודי הנה זה בא מדלג על ההרים מקפץ על מדלג על ההרים בזכות אבות מקפץ על הגבעות.⁶⁶ Rabbi Eliezar says נשים במאי זכין באקרוי בנייהו לבי. In Berachot 17a, Rav says to Rav Chiyya, נשים במאי זכין באקרוי בנייהו לבי.

64. Ezekiel 9:4.

65. קמ"ל שאפי' מי שיש לו זכות אבות אינה עומדת לו בשעה שיוצא מארץ לחוצה. Baba Batra 91a.

66. Song of Songs 2:8.

כנישתא ובאתנויי גברייהו בי רבנן ונטרין לגברייהו עד דאתו מבי רבנן.⁶⁷

The Talmud also tells us that non-Jews also have זכות. Avodah Zarah 4a tells us that Rabbi Alexandri used to interpret the verse "On that day I will seek the destruction of all the nations" thus: ממי אמר הקב"ה אבקש בניגני שלהם אם יש להם זכות אפדום ואם לאו אשמידם.⁶⁸ The non-Jewish nations will be judged at that time as to whether or not they have merit.

Jewish and non-Jewish men and women are not the only ones to have merit. The land of Israel itself has merit, as we see in this line from Rosh Hashanah 16b: זכותא דא"י הוא דאהניא ליה.⁶⁹

We have seen above, in Shabbat 127a, that זכות has both capital to be used in the World to Come and fruit that is produced in this world. The capital seems to be used to 'purchase' entry into the World to Come, and also to determine what kind of experience one will have there. What kind of fruit may we expect from זכות in this world? We have already seen that Rav Yannai suggests that זכות may keep a decrepit bridge from collapsing when a meritorious person is crossing. The same concept appears in other places.⁷⁰ There is also an aggadah in Ta'anit 20b in which Rav and Shmuel would

67. Also, see the quote from Baba Batra 119a above, regarding the merit of the daughters of Zelophehad. In addition, Marmorstein has "The remembrance of the deeds of the Fathers and Mothers of Israel caused Moses' prayer to be heard and answered." Marmorstein, pp. 41-42.

68. The verse, Zechariah 12:9, is translated "On that day I will all but annihilate all the nations..." by JPS.

69. This refers to the merit of the land of Israel which saved Abraham.

70. See note 61.

always avoid walking beneath a wall that seemed in danger of collapse. However, when walking with Rabbi Adda b. Ahava, Rav was sure his merit would keep the wall from falling.⁷¹ Rabbi Yochanan also tells us that it would have been fitting for Jacob to go down to Egypt in chains, but his merit saved him from this humiliation.⁷²

In Sanhedrin 70a Rav Kahana discusses how a word can read 'he will become a leader,' or 'he will become poor,' depending on how it is vocalized.⁷³ The answer, says Rav Kahana, depends on merit. If he has merit, he will become a leader; if not, he will become poor. The same folio continues with Rava commenting on a verse that can either mean that wine will gladden him or that wine will sadden him.⁷⁴ Again, says Rava, it all depends on merit.⁷⁵

Another benefit of זכות in this world is described in Ta'anit 9a. The Gemara tells us that because of the merit of our three leaders in the wilderness, the Israelites received three gifts: the well, the clouds of glory, and manna. The tractate states: באר בזכות מרים עמוד ענן בזכות אהרן מן בזכות משה. While none of us is Moses, Miriam, or Aaron, merit is also valuable in our daily lives. In explaining the verse "He

71. אמר ליה לא צריכנא האידנא דאיכא רב אדא בר אהבה בהדן דנפיש זכותיה ולא מסתפינא.

72. Shabbat 89b, ראוי היה יעקב אבינו לירד למצרים בשלשלאות של ברזל אלא, שזכותו גרמה לו.

73. The word תירש is read תירוש. This word means wine, the subject of this folio, in Jeremiah 31:12.

74. Psalms 104:15.

75. רב כהנא רמי כתיב תירש וקרינן תירוש זכה נעשה ראש לא זכה נעשה רש רבא. רמי כתיב ישמח וקרינן ישמח זכה משמחו לא זכה משממהו.

has not eaten on the mountains.”⁷⁶ Rav Acha b. Chanina explains that it means שלא
אכל בזכות אבותיו.⁷⁷ That is to say, he has not needed the merit of his ancestors in
order to eat. The meaning of this is that our financial security, whether we eat or not, is
dependent upon on merit. If we are righteous, we eat because of our own merit. If we
are less righteous, we need to use the merit of our ancestors in order to eat.

In Ketubot 103a, there is a fear that some might have thought that some of Rabbi’s
students did not have enough merit to live. People might have thought that it was only
the merit of Rabbi himself that kept them alive.⁷⁸ So זכות is not only used to obtain
land, food, and protection from danger. One’s very life is dependent upon one’s זכות.
Interestingly, in Ketubot 103a, it seems that merit transfers automatically, from those of
great merit to those who are close to them.

We find another benefit of זכות in Shevuot 39a. In this tractate, we see that those
who sin may have the punishment for their sin delayed several generations because of
their merit. As the Gemara says, וכל עבירות שבתורה אם יש לו זכות תולין לו.
שנים ושלשה דורות. Note the similarity of this concept to that of M Sotah 3:4,
above, in which a woman’s merit delays the effects of the bitter waters. We also are
reminded of the story of King Hezekiah. In II Kings 20, although he is told by Isaiah
son of Amoz that he will die, he prays and is granted fifteen more years of life.
According to Berachot 10b, already quoted above, this suspension of his sentence is due

76. Ezekiel 18:15.

77. Sanhedrin 81a.

78. הכי דלא לימרו מילתא הואי להו ועד האידנא נמי זכותו דרבי הוא דאהניא להו.

to his merit.⁷⁹

There are many benefits to be obtained through זכות. As it seems necessary for so many reasons, we now turn to the ways in which זכות may be acquired. Generally speaking, זכות is obtained by performing *mitzvot*. This can be deduced from Sotah 21a. The tractate reads זכות דמאי אילימא זכות דתורה הא אינה מצווה ועושה. היא אלא זכות דמצוה. So a person can receive merit for studying Torah, but not if she is female, because she is not required to do it. However, women as well as men receive merit for performing *mitzvot* that they are commanded to perform.

Specific *mitzvot* seem to produce more זכות than others. As already noted above, in Berachot 17a we are told that women receive זכות by sending their sons to the synagogue and their husbands to the house of their rabbi, and waiting, one would imagine patiently, for their husbands to return. In Berachot 47b Rabbi Joshua b. Levi writes that we obtain merit by being one of the first ten men at a prayer service.⁸⁰ Shabbat 23b lists the particular rewards one may receive from the specific merit obtained by putting up a *mezuzah*, wearing *tzitzit*, and saying the blessing for the Sabbath.⁸¹

The rabbis talk about the merit one can obtain by performing *mitzvot* that they wish

79. חזקיהו תלה בזכות עצמו דכתיב זכר נא את אשר התהלכתי לפניך תלו לו בזכות אחרים, as quoted above from Berachot 10b.

80. ואמר ריב"ל לעולם ישכים אדם לבית הכנסת כדי שיזכה וימנה עם עשרה הראשונים.

81. הזהיר במזוזה זוכה לדירה נאה הזהיר בציצית זוכה לטלית נאה הזהיר בקידוש היום זוכה וממלא גרבי יין. Note the similarity between the meritorious deed and the reward.

to stress. Rabbinic literature does not tell us if all *mitzvot* produce merit or if only some do, and the others are merely to be expected. M Avot 2:8 quotes Yochanan b. Zakkai as saying **אם למדת תורה הרבה, אל תחזיק טובה לעצמך, כי לכך נוצרת**. Still, the general assumption seems to be that a life of piety, even performing only those *mitzvot* which are expected, will produce merit.

The זכות system seemed to work well for the Tanaitic and Amoraic sages. Still, any system is imperfect, and can sometimes lead one into an unintended theological position. In Moed Katan 28a Rava struggles against some of the unintended theological consequences of זכות. The Gemara states: **אמר רבא חיי בני ומזוני לא בזכותא תליא מילתא אלא במזלא תליא מילתא**.

An afterlife became necessary to Jewish theology because of injustice in the world. The Torah clearly states that the righteous will be rewarded and the evil punished. If one sees a righteous person suffering, or an evil person who is not being punished, there are a number of options. One may say that the person one thought was righteous must be sinning in secret. Of course, the person suffering knows whether he sins or not. Alternatively, one might say that the rewards and punishments are coming as a result of merit or demerit accrued by one's ancestors. Thirdly, one may say that there is an afterlife, and rewards and punishments will be received there. This became the mainstream Jewish belief in the Rabbinic period.

Rava, in the Gemara quoted above, is dealing with this same problem of injustice. He compares Rabba and Rabbi Chisda. Rabbi Chisda lived to the age of 92, celebrated

many weddings in his household, and was wealthy. Rabba died at forty, his household saw many funerals, and he was poor all his life. Yet one could not say that Rabbi Chisda had more זכות than Rabbah. Whatever the situation of their ancestors, Rabba must have acquired enough זכות on his own to earn him rewards in this life, that is to say, wealth, marriage for those in his household, and a long life. Thus Rava concludes that these things must depend on chance, rather than merit.

This statement is theologically dangerous. Religion must convince people to behave in certain ways. Rewards may be offered for specific behavior, but other than social acceptance, the rewards are seldom seen in this life. Reward and punishment in the Torah is an example of an attempt to have people behave in certain ways. The theory of the afterlife is an adjustment to the theory of reward and punishment. The theory of merit is a further refinement of the same theory, necessitated by the complexities of a more advanced society.

Rava sees the flaws in even the refinement of זכות. At a certain level of righteousness, one would expect a person's merit to bring all of the rewards of זכות in this world that we saw above. In the case of Rabba, we did not. Yet to say that joy in this world depends on luck is to throw the entire system out. It is unlikely that Rava wanted to say that it doesn't matter whether a person performs *mitzvot* or not.

Another important theological point is addressed in Berachot 17b. Here there are two opinions on the meaning of the verse שמעו אלי אבירי לב הרחוקים

רב ושמואל ואמרי לה רבי יוחנן ורבי מצדקה.⁸² The tractate goes on to say אלעזר חד אמר כל העולם כולו נזונין בצדקה והם נזונין בזרוע וחד אמר כל העולם כולו נזונין בזכותם והם אפילו בזכות עצמן אין נזונין. It is unimportant whether the disputants were Rav and Shmuel or Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Eliezar. The critical point here is whether the world is sustained through Divine charity or by the merit of the righteous.⁸³

This is another difficult problem of religion. Should we state that all good things come from the grace of the Divine? If so, there is no reason for us to behave in a certain way. Should we state that what we receive comes from our own merit? If so, we reduce our relation with the Divine to that of an employer and his employee. Besides this, we have the problem mentioned above, that of those who work and do not seem to get paid, and those who are paid without seeming to work.⁸⁴

The pious often deny that their own merit might be enough to get them into the good graces of the Divine.⁸⁵ There is therefore a tendency towards grace and away from merit. Not only does this reduce our incentive for good behavior, as noted above, but it creates a feeling of helplessness. The world can be seen as fundamentally malefic, with no way for people to escape punishment except to be saved by Divine grace. Divine grace, by definition, cannot be earned. A person can receive it only at the inscrutable

82. Isaiah 46:12

83. בצדקה could also mean 'justice' here, but given the rabbinic value system, it is unlikely.

84. As mentioned above, the afterlife is a solution to this problem.

85. For example, note the אבינו מלכנו אין בנו מעשים line in the piyut.

will of the Divine.

This, of course, resonates with certain Christian theologies. Because humans are burdened with original sin, they cannot be saved except through grace. Some of the negative aspects of this theology are avoided through the doctrine of Divine love. If a person accepts Jesus, he is certain to receive grace, and thereby be able to receive eternal life.⁸⁶ Although there were some similarities between early Christian and Rabbinic thought, this abandonment of the value of merit would never become part of mainstream Jewish thought.

In the Talmudic period, the concept of זכות was widely accepted as given. As money became a major factor in the lives of ordinary people, זכות took on more and more of the characteristics of money. זכות, previously seen as a means to an end, took on a value of its own. Just as money, which only represents wealth, became something of value in its own right, so too did זכות, which represents righteousness, become a value in its own right.

זכות also acquired some of the characteristics of money. It could be saved, it could be spent, and if spent, it could be used up. זכות would pass easily from a parent to a child, a teacher to a student, and a person with a lot of זכות could provide it to the entire community. Two people could combine their זכות to 'purchase' a reward which was too expensive for either of them alone.

זכות could be obtained by performing *mitzvot*, and could be used to acquire

86. See, for example, Romans 5:12-21, 8:31-35, 39, et passim.

entrance to the World to Come. It could also be used in this world for physical protection, to guarantee long life, for financial success, to obtain land, food, or the right to do more meritorious acts. In the Talmudic period, זכות was connected to Judaism in a myriad of ways. Without an understanding of זכות, one can hardly comprehend how the Tanaim and Amoraim understood the practical workings of Judaism.

Chapter Four: The Torah Commentaries of Nachmonides

We have seen above how זכות became important to Judaism in the fifth and sixth centuries of the common era. To get a glimpse of what at least one highly respected scholar thought of זכות some six hundred or so years later, I decided to look at the works of Moses b. Nachman Gerondi, known as Ramban. Specifically, I will look at his last and greatest work, his commentary on the Torah.

Ramban accepted the concept of זכות as a given. This is to be expected, as the *rishonim* based their view of Judaism on the Talmud. We have only to look at a few of Ramban's comments on the Torah to see that this idea was an integral part of his concept of Judaism.

For example, in his comment on Exodus 24:10, Ramban explains how the verse can say the seventy elders "saw the God of Israel." He writes: לומר כי זכות ישראל. Because the term for the Divine used is specifically "God of Israel," Ramban writes that the elders merited seeing the Eternal because of the merit of Israel, that is, Jacob.

According to Ramban, the merit of Jacob was transmitted to the seventy elders. In fact, we often see זכות being transmitted in Ramban's commentaries. In his comment on Genesis 19:29, Ramban indicates where Lot obtained the זכות to be saved by the angels. He writes: היה לו זכות להצילו בזכות אברהם. Merit is transmitted by one of the patriarchs.

זכות אבות, merit of the patriarchs, figures heavily in Ramban's commentaries.⁸⁷

The merit of the patriarchs was boundless, and it gave great benefits to those around them. Pharaoh even wanted to bury Jacob in Egypt for the sake of the merit that would bring Egypt. In his comment on Genesis 47:31, Ramban writes: שיחפץ פרעה שיקבר הנביא בארצו לכבוד להם ולזכות. One of the reasons Pharaoh might have known that Jacob had so much זכות is that the famine in Egypt ceased when Jacob arrived. In his comment on Genesis 47:18, Ramban quotes Ibn Ezra and says: נסתלק הרעב בזכות יעקב.⁸⁸

Abraham's merit may extend as far as the enemies of Israel. In Numbers 21:34, the Eternal tells Moses not to fear Og, the king of Bashan. Why, asks Ramban, would Moses fear Og, when the people had just defeated Jazer, Cheshbon, Chormah, and so on? כי היה משה ירא שמא תעמך לו זכותו של אברהם. When the four kings sacked Sodom and Gomorra, a fugitive escaped and told Abraham what had happened.⁸⁹ According to Rashi, this was Og. For no other reason than this, Moses, according to Ramban, feared that Og would be able to partake of the merit of Abraham, and therefore נתירא משה מפני הזכות שידע לו.

87. Since the commentaries are on the Torah, characters from the Torah would appear frequently in any case.

88. This is also mentioned in Bereishit Rabbah 89:11. In fact, Ramban doubts this is so, for Pharaoh's dream predicted a full seven years of famine. Bereishit Rabbah explains that the famine resumed after Jacob's death, while Ibn Ezra suggests that it continued, but was less severe. Ramban writes that if there were not at least five years of famine, the Egyptians would not have been as desperate as they are in Genesis 47:15-19.

89. Genesis 14:13.

In Ramban's commentary, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were not the only ones who could produce merit. According to Ramban in his comment of Genesis 49:31, a grandson of Esau fought against the grandsons of Isaac when they went to bury their father.⁹⁰ Yet none of Jacob's burial party was harmed. As he writes: **שלא מת אחד מכלם במלחמה ולא בדרך, שעמד להם זכות הנביא וזכות יוסף שעלו עמו.** Both the merit of Jacob and the merit of Joseph are working in this case.

Other biblical figures are also credited with **זכות**. Whether or not Lot's **זכות** arose because of his connection to Abraham, it was his **זכות** that permitted him to be saved when Sodom and Gomorra were destroyed. As Ramban writes in his comment on Genesis 19:17: **והוא הזהיר את לוט לזכותו.**⁹¹ Ramban also ascribes merit to Lot in his commentary to Genesis 19:3 when he writes: **היה ללוט זכות בהפצירו בהם, והיה לו חפץ טוב בהכנסת אורחים, והיו ממאנים כדי לזכותו.**

Ramban comments on Genesis 6:9 that Noah's sons and household were saved by his merit. As he puts it, **גם בניו וביתו ראויים להנצל בזכותו.** Ramban also notes that in Genesis 8:1, the Eternal remembers Noah and the animals in the ark. Why, asks Ramban, were the other people in the ark not remembered? **לא הזכירם כי בזכותו.** **ניצולו.** One might wonder, then, why the animals were mentioned. Ramban anticipates

90. Based on a story in Josippon.

91. Ramban goes on to say that the others in Lot's family did not have merit to be saved, but that if they overheard the angels and acted appropriately, they would have been saved for Lot's sake. He writes: **וכל השומע ונזהר הוא את נפשו הציל.** This is to explain why the death of Lot's wife is not to be seen as an error in the Divine plan.

this question, and answers as follows: שאין בבעלי נפש זכות או חובה זולתי
באדם לבדו.

In Ramban's system, both patriarchs and those connected to them have זכות. This raises the question of who else, in Ramban's system, can acquire merit. We saw, for example, in the Talmud that both women and non-Jews can have זכות. We see that for Ramban, animals do not. One might speculate that his statement באדם לבדו above indicates that all people can obtain זכות. After all, the word אדם is a very general word, usually indicating any human being. In this case, however, one cannot be sure, as it is used to contrast with the word 'animals.'

While Ramban barely discusses the acquisition of זכות by those who are not Jewish, he does mention the זכות of women.⁹² In his comments on Genesis 12:17, Ramban questions why the Torah gives us information that we already know, that is, that Sarai is the wife of Avram. To remind us, he says that the wrong done to Sarai is also a wrong done to Avram, but also to tell us ובזכות שניהם באו עליו הנגעים. הגדולים ההם. Both Avram and Sarai have זכות.

In his comment on Genesis 16:2, Ramban tells us the reason why, when Sarai told Avram to have a child with her maid Hagar, she said אולי אבנה ממנה. Not because

92. One might speculate as to whether Noah and Lot, above, qualify as non-Jews who have זכות. Pharaoh, as we have seen in the comment on Genesis 47:18, hoped to be the beneficiary of Jewish זכות, and if the famine ceased when Jacob came to Egypt, perhaps he was. For Ramban's most direct discussion of the acquisition of merit by non-Jews, see note 108.

she would consider Hagar's son her own, but זכות שתזכה היא לבנים בעבור כן.⁹³

Sarah is not the only one of the matriarchs described as having merit. In his comment on Leviticus 18:25, Ramban explains that Rachel died so that the merit of Jacob would not suffer from being married to two sisters in the land of Canaan.⁹⁴ However, Rachel died within the land, rather than outside, due to her own merit. As Ramban puts it, כי בזכותה לא מתה בחוצה לארץ.⁹⁵

Another person described by Ramban as having merit is Moses. It is not surprising that Ramban depicts Moses as a man of great merit. Ramban quotes earlier rabbinic literature when he says that it was on the basis of the merit of Moses that the people ate manna.⁹⁶ The purpose of the census of males in Numbers Chapter One was to present them before Moses and Aaron. A person can acquire merit merely from having Moses and Aaron know his name, and by being counted in the census a man could further be included in the merit of the community.⁹⁷ In fact, according to Ramban's commentary

93. This idea is found in Bereishit Rabbah.

94. ובזכותו לא ישב בארץ עם שתי אחיות. Although the Torah has not yet been given, the patriarchs and matriarchs are assumed to have followed its mitzvot. It seems that it was more important to keep the commandments in the land than outside of the land. Ramban goes on to explain that it was Rachel who died, because she was the second wife, and therefore the forbidden one: והיא היתה הנשאת באיסור האחורה.

95. These three mentions of the matriarchs Sarah and Rachel are among the very few mentions of the זכות of women in Ramban's commentary on the Torah.

96. בזכות משה הייתם אוכלים המן, Ramban's commentary on Deuteronomy 8:3. Possibly based on Ta'anit 9a.

97. כי הבא לפני אב הנביאים ואחיו קדוש, Ramban's commentary on Numbers 1:45. והוא נודע אליהם בשמו יהיה לו בדבר הזה זכות וחיים, כי בא בסוד העם ובכתב בני ישראל זכות הרבים במספרם, וכן לכולם זכות במספר שימנו לפני משה ואהרן כי ישימו עליהם עינם לטובה.

on Exodus 34:3, it was because of Moses' merit and his prayer that Israel received the second set of tablets.⁹⁸

In Ramban's system, not only individuals produce merit. According to the commentary on Leviticus 25:1, the Eternal was able to send Moses כדאי השליח לשולחו את משה אל בני ישראל. זכות ישראל גרמה. It is not clear if this is a case of all of Israel pooling their individual merit, or merit that they hold as a group. Nor is that same question any clearer in Ramban's commentary on Exodus 32:27. The verse in the Torah reads: ויאמר להם כה-אמר יהוה אלהי ישראל שימו איש-חרבו על-ירכו עברו ושובו משער לשער במחנה והרגו איש-את-אחיו ואיש את-רעהו ואיש את-קרבו. Ramban connects this to Numbers 16:9, in which the Levites are said to be separated out for the service of the Eternal. He suggests that the merit the Levites acquired by separating themselves from those who had sinned by worshipping the golden calf was rewarded by separating them out for the service of the Eternal.⁹⁹ Whether it was individual merit or group merit is difficult to say.

Ramban does make a statement about individual and group merit in his comment on Deuteronomy 11:13. Ramban examines why this verse, the second paragraph of the לאהבה את-יהוה אלהיכם ולעבדו בכל-לבבכם שמע, commands us when Deuteronomy 6:5, the first paragraph of the שמע, has already

98. והטעם בכל זה, כי בראשונות היה המעמד בעבור כל ישראל, וזה למשה בלבד, בזכותו ובתפלתו.

99. כי העבודה לאלהי ישראל, ולשמו נבדלו בזכות הזאת.

וְאַהֲבַת אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מַאֲדְךָ.

The answer he gives is that the former is addressed to the people as a whole, while the latter is addressed to the individual. This is apparent from the grammatical structure.

Rashi points this out as well, basing his comment on rabbinic literature.¹⁰⁰ Ramban,

however, goes on to conclude that, since 11:13 is followed by the miracles that the Eternal will do for the people, that miracles are done for the people as a group only.

וְהָיָה כִּי-יָבִיֵאֵךְ | יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע

לְאֲבֹתֶיךָ לֵאמֹר הָאָרֶץ לְעַמְּךָ לְעַבְדְּךָ לְעַבְדְּךָ לְךָ. Ramban concludes that זכות is

transferred only to the individual. He writes: ... כִּי הַשֵּׁם לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה הַנְּסִים תָּמִיד.

רק על מעשה רוב העם, אבל היחיד הוא בזכותו יחיה והוא בעונו ימות.

The responsibility, then, is the individual's. Wherever he may obtain his merit, his life and death are dependent upon that merit.

In his comment on Genesis 33:18, Ramban speculates as to why Jacob came "שלם" to Shechem. One of the possibilities is that שְׁלָמָה הָאָרֶץ תְּצִילֵהוּ. The land is also shown to have merit in Ramban's comment on Genesis 16:3. Referring to the desire of Sarah and Abraham to have children, Ramban writes: אֲוִלֵּי בְּזֻכּוֹת הָאָרֶץ יִבְנוּ. We see from this that not only can people produce merit, the Land of Canaan itself produces merit.

Other, less concrete things than land also produce merit. In his commentary on

100. Sifre Eikev, 41.

Genesis 46:1. Ramban says that it was not Jacob's merit but the merit of the sacrifices he performed that enabled him to see the Eternal. Ramban writes: **והנה בזכות** הקרבנות נראה אליו אלהי יצחק אביו. We may assume that the merit was not acquired by the sacrifice, but was acquired by Jacob by performing the sacrifice. It does seem in his comment on Genesis 7:1 that Ramban is saying there is inherent merit in the sacrifice itself. He writes: **ורמז לו עתה במדת רחמים על הקרבן, להודיע אותו שישעה אל קרבנו, ובזכות קרבנו יקיים העולם**.

If there was merit in the sacrifices prior to the destruction to the Temple, then there should be merit in that which replaced sacrifice after the destruction, namely prayer. This appears to be the case. In his comment on Exodus 13:16, Ramban writes that the reason why we raise our voices in prayer, why synagogues exist, and why prayer has merit, **וזכות תפלת הרבים**, is so we will have a place to praise the Eternal.

In Ramban's system, **זכות** functions as money, although perhaps more subtly than it did in the Talmud. We can see in Ramban's commentary the idea that the merit of the ancestors has all been spent. In his commentary on Deuteronomy 32:26, Ramban writes: **בגלותנו עתה תמה זכות אבות**. It may be that Ramban includes this idea not because he conceives of **זכות** as being analogous to money, but only because this idea has previously appeared in the Talmud.¹⁰¹

Ramban does seem to treat **זכות** as if it were money in his comment on Exodus

101. See Shabbat 32a. above.

33:1. Exodus 32:35 talks of the plague that afflicted the Israelites, and 33:1,

immediately following, reads: וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵךְ עֲלֵה מִזֶּה אֶתָּה וְהָעָם

אֲשֶׁר הָעֵלִיתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וְלְיַעֲקֹב

לֵאמֹר לְזֶרַעְךָ אֶתְנֶנָּה. Ramban makes a connection between the plague and the

promise, and writes: כִּי בַעֲבוּר הַמַּגֵּפָה שֶׁהֵבִיא אוֹ גִזְרַע עֲלֵיהֶם נִמְחָה קִצָּת

חַטָּאתָם, וְנִתְרַצָּה לָהֶם מֵעַט לְהַזְכִּיר זְכוּת אֲבוֹתָם וּשְׂקִייתָם לָהֶם הַשְּׁבוּעָה

לְהֵבִיאֵם אֶל אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה אֶרֶץ זֵבֶת חֶלֶב דְּבַשׁ.

The theology behind this statement is that punishment atones for sin, but sin can also be negated through זְכוּת. It is as if Ramban is saying that a crime may be punishable by imprisonment (or in this case a beating) or a fine, or a combination of the two. If זְכוּת, the fine, was not used up in payment, surely it would make more sense to atone for the sin purely through זְכוּת, in this case, זְכוּת אֲבוֹת. Perhaps there was not enough זְכוּת left in the זְכוּת אֲבוֹת account to atone for the sin of the golden calf, or perhaps it was better not to use all of the זְכוּת אֲבוֹת up. In any case, here it is combined with punishment to atone for sin.

It may be that Ramban believes that we acquire merit from communal prayer. We have seen that we can acquire merit by being close to those who have merit. There are other ways to acquire merit. According to Ramban, the performance of *mitzvot* leads to acquisition of merit. In his commentary on Leviticus 16:3, Ramban explains the secret of the “בְּזָאת” with which Aaron may enter the equivalent of the Holy of Holies. He

writes: בזכות התורה, ...ובזכות מילה, ...בזכות שבת, ...בזכות ירושלים, בזכות ...בזכות שבטים, ...בזכות יהודה, ...בזכות כנסת ישראל, ...בזכות ... בזכות הקרבנות All of these produce merit which allow Israel to remain in contact with the Eternal.

The clearest statement Ramban makes regarding the method of obtaining זכות is found in his comment on Deuteronomy 30:6. He writes: מזמן הבריאה היתה רשות ביד האדם לעשות כרצונו צדיק או רשע. וכל זמן התורה כן, כדי שיהיה להם זכות בבחירתם בטוב ועונש ברצותם ברע.¹⁰² In this view of the religious system, a person must have free will to choose good or bad. To choose good gives you זכות. To choose bad gives you the opposite of זכות, punishment.¹⁰³ For Ramban, to do *mitzvot* is to do good. However, there are other ways to do good besides doing *mitzvot*.

One example of a way to obtain זכות without performing a *mitzvah* can be found in Ramban's commentary on Genesis 18:1. In this passage Ramban makes a very interesting comment. There is a statement in the midrashic collections that a maid at the Sea of Reeds saw what Ezekiel never saw.¹⁰⁴ Ramban tells us why this was so. He writes: ביורדי הים, שאמרו "זה אלי ואנוהו" ראתה שפחה על הים מה שלא ראה יחזקאל הנביא. זכות להם בעת הנס הגדול שהאמינו בה' ובמשה

102. בזמן התורה here seems to mean the time before the Messiah comes, including, of course, the time in which the Torah takes place.

103. One might think that the opposite of punishment, עונש, would be שכר, reward. Indeed, we saw above that the two are sometimes very close. As mentioned above, to confuse זכות with שכר is like confusing money with wealth.

104. Mechilta Shirah 3.

עבדו. Their merit was great because of their belief in the Eternal and in Moses, His servant. Belief in the Eternal and in Moses is good, surely, and deserving, in Ramban's system, of זכות. Belief in the Eternal is seen as a positive thing in normative Judaism, as we can see from Exodus 14:31. Yet would it have been as important had Ramban not lived most of his life in a Christian society, a society in which belief in the Eternal was the highest good?

There were other actions which Ramban saw as acquiring merit, although they were not *mitzvot*. One such action was the destruction of Shechem by Simeon and Levi in defense of their sister Dina.¹⁰⁵ Another was the action of Pinchas when he killed the Israelite and the Midianite woman in Numbers 25:7-8.¹⁰⁶ Both of these were instances of zealotry. In the case of Simeon and Levi, Ramban admits that the destruction of Shechem would have been considered a sin if not for the fact that it was motivated by feelings for their sister. Actions motivated by intense feelings of love for the Eternal or one's family, it seems, acquire merit.

We have seen how merit is acquired in Ramban's system. Let us also examine what one can obtain with the merit one has acquired. We have seen above that the lives of Lot and Noah were saved by their merit. We have also seen at least the possibility that the Egyptian famine ended because of Jacob's merit. The people ate manna because of

105. Ramban on Genesis 49:5, ילמד עליהם זכות כי בקנאתם, על האחוה עשו מה שעשו, לומר שאין ראויים לעונש גדול, ולא החטא ראוי לימחל כי הוא חמס.

106. In Ramban's commentary on Deuteronomy 18:3 he writes: בזכות פנחס, כאשר זיכה לפנחס להיות כהן עמהם.

Moses' merit and the Sea of Reeds parted because of their own merit. The merit of Jacob and Joseph protected the Israelites from harm in war, and the merit of the land of Canaan might have brought a child to Sarah and Abraham.

We also saw how merit of the ancestors partly atoned for the sin of worshipping the golden calf. There are other ways in which merit can be used in Ramban's system. In his commentary on Deuteronomy 11:10, Ramban writes that merit can heal sickness. He says: **החולה צריך זכות ותפלה שירפאהו השם**. Because of the sick person's merit (and prayer), the Eternal will heal him.

These individual rewards may be obtained by **זכות**. For Ramban, however, the system is more complicated than that. For Ramban, the system by which we perform *mitzvot* and thereby obtain merit is the way we connect with the Eternal. We can see this in Ramban's commentary on Deuteronomy 6:2. He writes: **כי בעבור עשות המצות תזכה שיהיו לך בנים יראי השם, ויעמדו על פני האדמה לעולם ויעמד זרעכם ושמכם לפניו כל הימים, ולמען יאריכון ימך - בארץ שהיא נחלת ה'.** We can therefore see a cycle of merit here. By performing *mitzvot*, a person merits having children who are religious. Thus the person's descendants will remain on the earth, and thus the Eternal is pleased to make you righteous and give you merit.

The system is yet more complicated, however. We saw above how Ramban, probably because of the influence of Christianity, valued belief in the Eternal very highly. Ramban explains in his comments on Exodus 13:16 why the *mitzvot* of *mezuzah*

and *tefillin* are so important. He writes: כי הקונה מזוזה בזוז אחד וקבעה בפתחו ונתכוון בענינה כבר הודה בחדוש העולם ובידיעת הבורא והשגחתו, וגם בנבואה, והאמין בכל פנות התורה, מלבד שהודה שחסד הבורא גדול מאד על עושי רצונו, שהוציאנו מאותו עבדות לחירות וכבוד גדול לזכות אבותיהם החפצים ביראת שמו. By purchasing a *mezuzah* and putting it up, a person acknowledges creation, the knowledge and providence of the Creator, and also His prophets. By doing so, the purchaser proclaims his belief in the various aspects of the Torah, and acknowledges the great kindness of the Creator on those who do His will, and who were brought out of slavery into freedom. By doing all of this, the purchaser connects in with the merit of the ancestors, who delighted in the fear of the name of the Eternal, and thus becomes worthy of honor.

By doing any *mitzvah* a person acknowledges that the Creator exists and has commanded us to perform this *mitzvah*. Therefore, for Ramban, the performance of a *mitzvah* is a statement of belief in the Eternal. To believe in the Eternal, as we saw above in Ramban's comment on Genesis 18:1, is to acquire merit. To acquire merit is to be deserving of all of the rewards listed above.

Yet these rewards are only rewards in this world. They are, to return to Shabbat 127a, the הקרן קיימת לו לעולם. פירותיהן בעולם הזה. Where, then, are the המצות שלא לשמן על מנת לקבל פרס יחיה בהן בעולם הזה ימים רבים? In his comment on Leviticus 18:4, Ramban shows how זכות has meaning either in this world or in the next or both, depending on one's attitude. He writes: כי העושה המצות שלא לשמן על מנת לקבל פרס יחיה בהן בעולם הזה ימים רבים

בעושר ובנכסים וכבוד... וכן אותם אשר הם מתעסקין במצות על מנת לזכות בהן לעולם הבא שהם העובדים מיראה, זוכים בכוונתם להנצל ממשפטי הרשעים, ונפשם בטוב תלין, והעוסקין במצות מאהבה כדין וכראוי, עם עסקי העולם הזה.... יזכו בעולם הזה לחיים טובים כמנהג העולם. Those who perform *mitzvot* only in the hope of obtaining a reward in this life do receive merit, and they are rewarded for their merit in this life with long life, wealth, possessions, and honor.¹⁰⁷ Those who perform *mitzvot* in the hope of meriting the World to Come will merit it for the *mitzvot* they have done. Those who perform *mitzvot* out of love, without thought of reward, they will merit both a good life in this world and the world to come.

Ramban's logical system requires זכות. Although the similarity between money and זכות is not as pronounced here as it is in some places in the Talmud, we do see that a person performs *mitzvot* to acquire זכות, and that the זכות is then used to 'purchase' a reward.

Another place in which we see how זכות works in Ramban's system is his commentary on Leviticus 18:29. Ramban notes that there are three different ways in which a person may suffer כרת, that is, to be cut off. The Torah either says: בו ונכרת or it says הנפשות, העושות, ונכרתה הנפש ההיא מלפני¹⁰⁸ האיש ההוא¹⁰⁹.

107. Ramban does not mention זכות here, but it is implied.

108. As in Leviticus 19:9.

109. As in Leviticus 18:29.

¹¹⁰ Ramban explains the difference among the three of them. About the first possibility he says: **כי האוכל חלב או דם והוא צדיק ורובו זכיות אבל גברה תאותו עליו ונכשל בעבירה ההיא, יכרתו ימיו וימות בנעורים קודם שיגיע לימי זקנה, והם ששים שנה, ואין נפשו בהכרת. אבל יהיה לו חלק בעולם הנשמות כפי הראוי למעשיו הטובים כי צדיק היה, ויהיה לו עוד חלק לעולם הבא.** A person who is mostly righteous, and who has a lot of merit, but commits a sin such as eating fat or blood, will be 'cut off,' meaning he will die before he reaches a proper life span of sixty years. However, after death his soul will go to the 'World of Souls.'¹¹¹ and he will also have a place in the World to Come. This is the case of **בו ונכרת האיש ההוא**.

As for the case of **ונכרתה הנפש ההיא מלפני** Ramban writes: **ואשר עם החטא החמור ההוא יהיו עונותיו מרובין מזכיותיו, עונש הכרת שבעבירה החמורה מגיע לנפש החוטאת לאחר שתפרד מן הגוף והיא נכרתת מחיי עולם הנשמות.** Those who have sins that outweigh their **זכות** are subject to the second kind of **כרת**. They may live long lives that are replete with financial and social success, but they will not be able to go to the World of Souls. Rather, they will go to Gehinom for twelve months, after which they will be destroyed. This does not mean

110. As in Numbers 15:31.

111. According to Ramban, after the death of the body, the soul will dwell in the World of Souls until the Messiah comes. After that, the soul will be reunited with the body in the World to Come.

that they will not have a share in the World to Come. That is reserved for the third kind of כרת, which occurs irrespective of merit, if a person performs one of the sins for which one is denied the World to Come.¹¹²

זכות functions here like a savings account, while sin functions like debt. If your savings outweigh your debt, you are solvent. If your merit outweighs your sin, you can inherit both the World of Souls and the World to Come, even though you will be punished for your sin. If your sins outweigh your merit, you can inherit the World to Come, but not the World of Souls. After a year of punishment, you will cease to exist until the coming of the Messiah.

In this comment, Ramban writes further that it was not necessary to state in the Torah that the soul exists because of the merit of the commandments. It was only necessary to state that sin threatens the existence of the soul. In Ramban's own words, לא יצטרך הכתוב לומר כי בזכות המצות יהיה קיומה אבל יאמר כי בעונש העבירות תתגאל ותטמא ותכרת מן הקיום הראוי.

There are three additional interesting points that Ramban makes about זכות in his commentary. In discussing Noah in his commentary on Genesis 6:9, Ramban makes the same point mentioned above in Chapter One. If Noah is to be rewarded, then his children must be rewarded as well. Noah's righteousness may save him, but if his children are not also saved, Noah's reward comes to nothing. Logically, therefore, a parent's זכות must result in the children being rewarded. זכות must be transferable. As

112. In general, idolatry.

והנה אחר שהיה נח צדיק ואיננו ראוי ליענש, גם בניו וביתו. Ramban puts it. ראויים להנצל בזכותו, כי היה עונש עליו אם יכרת זרעו.

This is how זכות works. There is no practical difference between a case in which a person gets something good because her father deserves the reward of seeing his daughter getting something good, and a case in which a person gets something good because she can use supernatural points that her father has stored up in a heavenly bank. In either case, the daughter receives reward because of the merit of her father. Similarly, there is no practical difference between a case in which a man gets rewarded because he is a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who deserve the honor of having their descendants rewarded, and a case in which a heavenly bank pays out dividends.

Ramban makes another interesting comment when he discusses Numbers 14:17. When Moses prayed to the Eternal for forgiveness for the sin of refusing to go up into the land because of the report of the ten spies, he said: יהוה ארך אפים ורב-חסד. נשא עון ופשע ונקמה לא ינקמה פקד עון אבות על-בנים על-שלשים. ¹¹³ Ramban notes that there is a difference between Moses' words in 14:17 and the original statement by the Eternal in Exodus 34:6-7. In the latter, the Eternal says: יהוה | יהוה אל רחום וחנון ארך אפים ורב-חסד ואמת: נצר חסד לאלפים נשא עון ופשע וחטאה ונקמה לא ינקמה פקד | עון אבות על-בנים על-שלשים ועל-בני בנים על-שלשים ועל-רבעים. One of the differences between these two

113. Numbers 14:18.

statements is that the former lacks the phrase **נָצַר חֶסֶד לְאֲלֹפִים**, the very phrase one would expect Moses to stress.

According to Ramban, Moses could not use that phrase because it would ask for forgiveness on the basis of **זְכוּת אֲבוֹת**. Because the people had refused to go up into the land, the inheritance of which was the basis of the promise to those same **אֲבוֹת**, they could not be forgiven because of that promise. Therefore, **זְכוּת אֲבוֹת** was invalid in that case. As Ramban writes, **כי לא בזכות, "נוצר חסד לאלפים"**, ולא הזכיר **אֲבוֹת** נתפלל משה עכשיו ולא הזכיר בתפילה הזאת לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב כלל, והטעם בעבור שהארץ ניתנה לאבות ומהם ירשוה, והם מורדים באבותם ולא היו חפצים במתנה שלהם אשר האבות היו בוחרים בה מאד, והיאך יאמר "אשר נשבעת להם בך וגו' וכל הארץ הזאת אתן לזרעכם"¹¹⁴ והם אומרים אי אפשרנו במתנה זו.

What makes this statement interesting is that Ramban agrees that the root of the concept of **זְכוּת** lies in the statement **נָצַר חֶסֶד לְאֲלֹפִים**. The idea of transferrable merit, which Ramban found in the story of Noah and which he felt was explicitly mentioned in Exodus 34:7, really does go back as far as the Torah. It is only the word "**זְכוּת**" itself, and some of the ways in which it could be used, that were added later.

The third interesting statement of Ramban is found in his commentary on Deuteronomy 18:3. We already briefly mentioned this section in which Pinchas obtains

114. Exodus 32:13.

זכות for killing the Israelite and the Midianite out of his zealotry for the Eternal.

Deuteronomy 18:3 contains instructions on what portion of the sacrifice the priests receive.¹¹⁵ The interesting point is that Ramban says that this information was given at Sinai. It was given because of the merit Pinchas acquired for his action, which had not yet taken place. As Ramban puts it. **נרמזו שם על הזכות העתיד. זיכה לכל.**

השבט בזכות פנחס. כאשר זיכה לפנחס להיות כהן עמהם. If the Eternal is omnipotent and omniscient, then זכות can go backwards in time as well as forwards.

Ramban also saw the tension between merit and grace. Our merit might save us, but if we do not have enough merit, the Eternal may save us purely because of Divine mercy. In his commentary on Genesis 19:16, Ramban writes: **לא - עליו - לא בחמלת ה' עליו - לא בזכותו, רק בחמלת האל וברחמיו הרבים. או יאמר שהחזיקו בו למחר להוציאם בעוד החמלה עליו, פן יצא הקצף מלפני ה' ויספה.**

For Ramban, זכות is a vital part of the system of reward and punishment, the way in which the Divine connects with humanity, and particularly Jews.¹¹⁶ As one might expect of a thinker with Ramban's complexity, זכות is used in many different ways, and gives his system a certain internal consistency. We have seen that merit is obtained by doing good, which mostly but not exclusively means doing *mitzvot*. In Ramban's

115. וְהָיָה מִשְׁפַּט הַכֹּהֲנִים מֵאֵת הָעָם מֵאֵת הַזֶּבֶחַ אִם-שׁוֹר אִם-שֶׁה וְנָתַן לַכֹּהֵן הַיָּדֵעַ וְהַלְתִּים וְהַקֶּבֶה.

116. In his commentary on Genesis 15:14, Ramban states that non-Jews who follow the commandments of the Eternal acquire merit. He writes: **אפילו גזר שאחד מכל...האומות יריע להם בכך וכך, וקדם זה ועשה גזרתו של הקב"ה זכה בדבר מצוה** Thus the Egyptians were not punished for enslaving the Israelites, but for going beyond enslavement by killing and oppressing them.

system, merit has value both in this world and after death. Merit can be used up, and it transfers from one person to another.

Without זכות, Ramban's system would not work. The concept of transference of merit, which we saw making a faint appearance in the Tanakh, became so integral to Judaism in the Tannaitic and Amoritic periods that by the thirteenth century, we would not expect to see a Jewish theological system without it. Such, at least in the case of Rabbi Moses ben Nachman Gerondi, has proven to be the case.

Chapter Five: Conclusions

As we have seen, the concept of transference of merit existed in the Torah but was denied in the later books of the Tanakh. The root **ה.כ.ז** was not yet associated with merit. By the year 200 C.E., about the time the Mishnah was redacted, the idea of transference of merit had returned to Judaism. The root **ה.כ.ז** had come to be identified with merit. It also had a number of related meanings.

By the time the Talmud was completed, **זכות** and the transference of merit were inextricably linked with the Jewish view of man's connection to the Divine. Perhaps beginning earlier, in the mishnaic period, **זכות** had come to be treated as if it were money. It could be saved, spent, divided, inherited, and given away. Some six hundred years later, in the works of the Ramban, these aspects of **זכות** were still current.

Today, more than seven hundred years after the death of Ramban, does any hint of this concept remain? Michael Berg of the Kabbalah Center tells a parable of a man who falls asleep and dreams of his judgement. A giant scale is set up, and 'Dark Angels,' representing his sins, climb into one of the two pans of the scale. 'Light Angels,' representing each of his merits, then climb into the other pan. Interestingly, in this parable 'Gray Angels,' representing pain and suffering, then pull some of the Dark Angels from the pan of sins.¹¹⁷

Were this parable internally consistent, there would be another kind of 'angel,'

117. Berg, pp. 105-108.

representing the rewards the man had already received in this life, who removed the 'Light Angels' from the pan of merit. We can recognize this theory, despite the 'New Age,' feel-good mask, as the concept of the balancing out of merit and sins we saw in Ramban's commentary on Leviticus 18:29. The system functions like a bank account. If you have more credits than debts, you will inherit what Ramban called 'The World of Souls.'

Berg makes the claim that we will be reborn over and over until we achieve 'spiritual perfection.' Although he is not the only Jew to profess this conviction, it is far from being a mainstream belief. Berg suggests that we can use the merit of our future perfect self, our *'tzaddik'* self. He writes "We can draw on the spiritual power of this future self in order to bend the perceived laws of reality, in the same way that we might borrow money from a bank to buy a house."¹¹⁸

Berg's ideas are often so far from the mainstream of Judaism that we may, with some justification, question whether his 'Kabbalah Center' has any connection with Judaism at all. Yet this idea of using merit for actions which have not yet taken place is not different from Ramban's idea, expressed in his commentary on Deuteronomy 18:3. In Ramban's commentary, the descendants of Aaron become priests, to receive part of the sacrifices forever. They acquire this reward on Sinai as a result of the merit of Pinchas, despite the fact that Pinchas would not perform the meritorious action until some time after the reward was given.

There are also many examples in rabbinic literature of the Divine acting for the

118. Ibid., p. 192.

merit of children not yet born. As Urbach writes, "From the concept that on account of future happenings previous generations were vouchsafed Divine grace, some Amoraim drew the conclusion that the righteous of later generations are also able to help their ancestors by their merit. They transferred the merit of the sires into that of the scions, and they said that the Israelites went forth from Egypt because of the merit of the generation of Isaiah or on account of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah."¹¹⁹

Michael Berg's ideas may be distant from normative Jewish thought, but there is a practice followed by all four major streams of Judaism that could not exist without the notion of the transference of merit. I refer to the practice of 'giving an *aliyah*' to one person when a different person reads from the *sefer Torah*. A person who reads from the Torah scroll acquires merit for doing so. In mainstream Judaism, a second person is invited up to the Torah to recite a blessing over the reading. The person who recites the blessing is the one who receives the merit for the reading of the Torah.

I have heard this concept explained very seriously in Orthodox synagogues as a way to transfer merit to a person who is unable to read Torah, and with greater or lesser stress on the metaphoric nature of the concept in Conservative synagogues. I have heard the same explanation given in Reform synagogues, although perhaps a bit apologetically, or tongue in cheek. Any synagogue that does not hold with supernaturalism would have a difficult time explaining how this merit is stored, transferred, or redeemed. Yet the practice continues, and there is no other systematic explanation for why it does.

119. Urbach, p. 499.

The concept of זכות also appears in Jewish prayer. According to Marc Brettler, the appearance in the Amidah of the phrase בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵינוּ, אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק, וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב reflects a rabbinic theological doctrine known as ‘merits of the ancestors’ (*z'khut avot*), according to which the righteous actions of the patriarchs continue on to benefit their descendants.¹²⁰

There is no research available on how widespread the belief in merit may be among the Jewish laity. Anecdotally, I may mention here that the mother of the author of this essay received a letter from his great-uncle upon his acceptance into Hebrew Union College's Rabbinic program. Without a doubt, the great-uncle stated, the author's entrance into the seminary was a reward for the merit of his grandfather, ז"ל.

As mentioned in the introduction, any system that hopes to encourage people to act a certain way must establish a system of reward and/or punishment. From the beginning of Judaism, certain ritual and ethical behaviors have been encouraged. The original rewards promised were physical: rain in its season, crops, a long life, and so on. By the end of the Biblical era, as we see in books such as Job and Ecclesiastes, doubt was being cast upon the integrity of this system. For this reason, the concept of reward had shifted by the end of the Second Temple period to reward given after death.

This was a partial solution to the problem of theodicy, the suffering of the innocent in a system which presumes the existence of a Divine being who is both all powerful and all good. As Saadia Gaon said, the suffering of the righteous in this world

120. My People's Prayer Book, Vol II, p. 60.

compensates for their minor sins, so their reward can be perfect in the next world.¹²¹ To say this in another way, "God pays off evil men for their petty virtues with trifling this-worldly rewards."¹²² Another solution was punishment for secret or unintentional sin. As mentioned above, the suffering of the purely innocent, such as a baby, casts doubt on the viability of this solution. Another possibility is the transference of punishment from one's ancestors. As Harold Schulweis writes, "We may explain the punishment of the righteous as evidence of the wickedness of his father." The converse of this statement, of course, must also be true. Schulweis goes on to say "Inversely, if an evil man prosper, it may be the merit he inherits from his parents' good deeds."¹²³

The system of זכות as it became established was very useful in dealing with questions of theodicy. It is possible for the system of reward and punishment in the afterlife to exist without זכות. Nevertheless, such a system would be difficult to understand and accept. The system as it exists with זכות, in which each good action has a positive value and each bad action has a negative value, is easy to comprehend. The system of reward and punishment becomes like a bank account. The rabbis can easily explain how each person should behave. They say יהא אדם רואה את עצמו כאילו חציו זכיי וחציו חייב עשה מצוה אחת אשריו שהכריע את עצמו לכף זכות עבר עבירה אחת אילו שהכריע עצמו לכף חובה על זה¹²⁴

121. Saadia Gaon, pp. 210-212.

122. Harold Schulweis in Millgram, p. 207

123. Ibid.

124. Tosefta Kiddushin, 1:13

In this system, a person need not despair if he or she commits a sin. It can be balanced out by a merit. On the other hand, since we never know our balance, it is important that we treat each opportunity for good or bad as vital.

One possible danger of the *זכות* system is that people might depend on the merit of their ancestors, without attempting to acquire merit on their own.¹²⁵ In fact, this never became a problem. Even in Christianity, in which the concept of grace figures so strongly, there never appeared large numbers of people who felt that they could behave however they pleased, thinking that Divine grace would save them anyway. Similarly, pious Jews doubted the value of their own merit while performing *mitzvot* to the best of their ability. As Solomon Schechter wrote, "... [T]here can be no doubt that the *Zachuth* of the fathers in no way served to silence the conscience of the individual, relieving him from responsibility for his actions."¹²⁶

The idea that merit is transferrable also helps to deal with problems of theodicy, as Schulweis mentioned above. A righteous person who is suffering may have inherited a negative balance from his parents, and is still paying it off. A sinful person may have inherited *זכות* from his fathers, and is thus enjoying rewards in this life. Yet as we saw in the third chapter, the concept does not solve all problems of theodicy. In Moed Katan 28a we saw that Rava was confused by a comparison between Rabba and Rabbi Chisda. One received what are usually thought of as the rewards for merit in this life, while the other received none of them. How could their *זכות* accounts be so different?

125. Marmorstein, p. 94.

126. Schechter, p. 183.

In fact, the concept of transference of merit solves problems of theodicy only when the people in question are like most of us, neither tremendously good nor terribly bad. When the highly meritorious are punished, or the truly evil are rewarded, doubts are cast upon the integrity of the system.¹²⁷ The system also seems flawed when the rewards or punishments are extreme. We cannot imagine sins so vast that they would account for the suffering seen in the Holocaust. Nor could Rava imagine that Rabba's ancestors had been so evil that their sins would have cancelled Rabba's great merit. Conversely, where would someone like Pol Pot get the merit to die of natural causes in his seventies?

Despite this flaw, the *נכות* system works fairly well. A larger question arises, however, when we ask ourselves if we want this kind of system at all. Do we really feel that our own merits, even with the help of the merits of our ancestors, are enough to enable us to acquire the World to Come? The sages have given different answers. There is an element in Judaism that leans towards grace as a more complete explanation of the relationship between the Eternal and Israel than the merit system. Even those who come down on the side of merit may ask themselves what special merit the patriarchs had, that they were chosen to have a special relationship with the Divine. The rabbis have said that the Torah was given because of the merit of the patriarchs, the merit of Moses, the merit of circumcision, and so on. Yet how did the patriarchs, Moses, and even the *mitzvot* come to be ways of accruing merit?

127. Marmorstein mentions the idea that the completely righteous may die for the sins of the community. This idea appears mostly in the midrashic literature. Marmorstein, p. 82.

The only possible answer is that the merit system itself is an example of Divine grace. The Eternal did not make contact with the patriarchs for His own benefit. The three who visited Abraham at the terebinths of Mamre, the covenant of circumcision, the giving of the Torah itself— all of these were only excuses for the Eternal to give Israel merit. For those of us who exist after the age of miracles, we can acquire merit by performing *mitzvot*. None of the *mitzvot* we perform add anything to the Eternal. We do them only so that we may acquire merit.¹²⁸

Paul defined Christianity as a form of Judaism in which the Torah was fulfilled by the risen messiah. Therefore, in Christianity, the performance of *mitzvot* became unnecessary. For the rabbis to then define Judaism as the religion of the Tanakh that held that the messiah had not yet come, was then to reject the notion that *mitzvot* were no longer necessary.

Therefore Judaism could never take the same approach to grace as Christianity. By definition, obtaining merit by performing *mitzvot* must be part of Judaism. To borrow Christian terminology, works must always take precedence over faith in Judaism.

Yet as we have seen in Ramban's commentaries, the purpose of works is to demonstrate our faith. And the *mitzvot* system, our system of works, which is purely for the purpose of the accrual of merit, is an example of Divine grace. So both are ultimately necessary. The question is only whether faith leads to works, as in Christianity, or works lead to faith, as in Judaism. Do we receive grace despite our lack of merit, or are we able to obtain merit because of grace? Judaism insists on the latter.

128. Stewart, p. 128.

Without the *mitzvot* system, and by association, the system of זכרות, Judaism would not be Judaism.

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