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Legends of God, Legends of Shabbat:
A Text Immersion of Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot,
Commandments Two and Four

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

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Date: March 2, 2023
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Abstract

This senior project is a text immersion on *Midrash Aseret HaDibberot*, which is a medieval midrash on the Ten Commandments. Until today, there has been no published critical edition of Midrash Aseret HaDibberot available in English. The midrash itself is a collection of stories and folktales that are organized according to each of the Ten Commandments, and these stories not only probe more deeply into the commandments themselves, but also provide insight into the Jewish contexts (the Rabbis' priorities, anxieties, and hopes) in which the texts were compiled and arranged. My hope is that this project can serve to make the midrash's stories – and the midrashic process of shaping them – more accessible to the wider public, and that they can be referred to and studied as part of our community's ongoing engagement with Revelation.

The thesis contains three chapters: a brief introduction, a chapter on Dibbur Sheni, and a chapter on Dibbur Revi'i. I separated the text of the Dibbur into smaller sections for each story, and sometimes further divided lengthier passages to keep the text and its analysis close for reference. For each Dibbur, I included translations of the corresponding Hebrew text, literary and textual analysis, and broader commentary. My goal is, as always, to mine the richness of the biblical and midrashic literature for lessons which continue to be meaningful and relevant to Jews today. I used Professor Anat Shapira's edition of the Midrash for my source text, and also included some of her research and commentary as well. There is not much written about Midrash Aseret HaDibberot in the way of academic scholarship, but I referred to a selection of encyclopedia articles and Shapira's book as secondary sources, especially for providing the necessary context in the introduction.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהֶחֱיָנוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לַזְּמַן הַזֶּה.

Praised are You Adonai, sovereign of all, for keeping us alive, sustaining us, and allowing us to reach this moment.

It is with so much gratitude that I complete my senior project at HUC-JIR. I will be the rabbi that I am becoming because of my rabbis, teachers, professors, colleagues, classmates, dear friends, and students. I have loved learning from and with you all, and I know this is only the beginning.

Thank you to Norman Cohen for advising this project with heart, attentiveness, and insight. I will always seek meaning from Torah because of you.

I could not have arrived at this moment without support of my family, my parents, Laura and Danny, my siblings, Eli and Avi, and my hevruta in all things, Jacob. Thank you, thank you.

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Introduction

When God reveals God's self to the people of Israel, the matter which God reveals is the law. In an elegant twelve verses, from Exodus 20:2-20:14, God conveys the Ten Commandments – the ten utterances, the *Aseret Ha-Dibberot* – to the Israelites. Revelation is an essential turning point in the Torah and in our people's narrative, as a divine encounter brings the Israelites into a legal system, one that will grow and define the Jewish people for millenia to come. These Ten Commandments multiply into 613 laws from the entirety of Torah, laws that were then further clarified and expanded upon in Rabbinic Literature, specifically in the Mishnah and Talmud. These ten laws present themselves as our people's first laws, and from them, we become bound by a legal tradition. However, because the Ten Commandments are delivered to the Israelites by God (every other law comes through Moses, or, later, the Rabbis), these ten carry a certain measure of holiness. In his analysis of the Ten Commandments, Moshe Greenberg explains, "The Decalogue is further distinctive because it evenly balances obligations to God and to man and because its choice of subjects comes close to reflecting the Torah's most important concerns. As a result, Jewish thinkers have often regarded the Ten Commandments as the essence of the Torah."[1]

Referring to twelve verses as "the essence of the Torah" is a powerful and seemingly hyperbolic claim, and yet the Ten Commandments may come close. In just ten laws, they manage to address the relationships *bein adam l'makom* (between a person and God) and *bein adam l'chavero* (between a person and their fellow), while simultaneously establishing the institutions and ethical and religious behaviors that are most critical to a burgeoning

[1] Greenberg, Moshe. "The Decalogue Tradition Critically Examined" in *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition*, ed. Ben-Zion Segal and Gershon Levi (Publications of the Perry Foundation for Biblical Research; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990): tr. from Hebrew, 1985, p. 117.

Israelite society (monotheism, Shabbat, family relationships, protection against murder, theft and adultery, etc.). The Ten Commandments' significance continues still today, as Jews hear them read from Torah three times over the course of the year: the Exodus version during the week of Parashat Yitro, the Deuteronomy version during Parashat Va'etchanan, and also on the festival of Shavuot. Our synagogues' arks are often adorned with images of the two tablets, with some of the commandments' text inscribed. Even beyond the Jewish people, the Ten Commandments are among the most famous religious legal codes, representing core tenets and values, and could even be a foundation of "Western Ethics" altogether.

It's only fitting, then, that the Decalogue be attentively analyzed and explicated throughout Jewish (and non-Jewish) literature. And certainly, much ink has been spilled about what each word of these Ten Commandments means and precisely how they ought to be lived out, not to mention the additional, near-exponential, tomes of law that have been created to ensure each one is observed. And yet, the literature on the Ten Commandments is not only concerned with practicalities: sometimes, as in the case of *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* (the Midrash of the Ten Commandments), the Rabbis were concerned with the moral and ethical demands of these commandments, the devotion beyond halakhic obligation required to uphold them, and the lived experiences of keeping them.[2] What emerges is a text that is utterly unique for its time, rooted in narrative, stories, and folk-tales, and above all, preoccupied with the transmission and preservation of these ten essential values.

[2] Dan, Yosef. "Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot" in *Encyclopedia Judaica,* vol. 14, p. 185-186.

Context

There are approximately 30 manuscripts of *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* in existence, and until today, there still is no one official or authoritative edition of the text.[3] Further, each of these manuscripts contains between 17 and 44 stories, which brings the total number of stories connected to the Midrash to over 50.[4] Given this variety, we can't be sure of the precise time and place of Midrash *Aseret Ha-Dibberot's* composition, but scholars have determined that it was written sometime between the 7th and 11th centuries, with versions dating back to as early as the Geonic period.[5] So, while we don't know exactly when or where it was written, we can be certain that it was written in exile in Europe – likely what is now Spain or Italy..

This historical context is important for several reasons. For one, it explains some of the literary influences on the text: the Midrash drew both from models of Hebrew literature (that is, collecting various Talmudic stories into one place) as well as models found in non-Jewish culture (in particular, the "revolutionary" idea that stories could exist as an end unto themselves, not only as a way to explicate law).[6] This focus on the story was new for Jewish literature, but was characteristic of an attitude toward fiction that became popular in medieval times.[7] The philosophical milieu of the Middle Ages also contributed to enthusiasm around the Ten Commandments and for its further analysis – according to Moshe Greenberg, Jewish

[3]Anat Shapira Lavi has written one of the only literary critical commentaries on this text, and she used the manuscript known as Paris 716 as the basis for her book. For this reason, I also used her reproduction of the Paris 716 manuscript as the primary text for this Text Immersion project.
[4] Dan, p. 185.
[5] Ibid., p. 185.
[6] Shapira, Anat. *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot (A Midrash on the Ten Commandments): Text, Sources and Interpretation* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2005), p. 12.
[7] Dan, p. 186.

philosophers of the time were excited to "seek general principles from which particulars may be derived."[8]

Additionally, and perhaps most significant for my analysis, the broad time frame can still tell us about the Jewish experience and Rabbinic perspective of the moment of textual composition. The Midrash was written in a time of Jewish diaspora, powerlessness, persecution, and even fear, and that context likely informed much of the Rabbinic approach to writing. The Rabbis were writing for their Jewish communities in a time and place when it was likely difficult to be Jewish and to observe the laws and holidays. The text, therefore, often alludes to the existence of outside non-Jewish pressures before taking on an attitude of encouragement and empowerment (even occasionally veering into threatening language, should the Jews not follow the commandment at hand). The purpose of the Midrash feels like a charge, seemingly saying: *These Ten Commandments make you Jewish, and they are what tethers you to our people. Hold fast to them, or lose yourself in the abyss of exile.*

Content, Structure, and Style

The Midrash is loosely structured around each of the Ten Commandments, with each commandment (Dibbur) and its connected content following a similar structure. They all open with the biblical language of the Dibbur, and section begins with some interpretive material (the petichta) about the specific commandment: the Rabbis explain what the commandment means through the use of their own descriptive language, as well as with the support of additional biblical prooftexts that provide more detail about how to observe the commandment. But the interpretive work doesn't end there – Shapira explains, "Its [the

[8] Greenberg, p. 83.

Midrash's] special character that originates from the connection it creates between two genres: rabbinic interpretation [מדרש] and the collection of stories [קובץ הסיפורים]."[9]

From this introductory material, the text transitions to stories – some (primary stories) are lengthier and more detailed than others (secondary stories). These stories are sometimes about high-profile characters, such as biblical characters and rabbis, but often times are centered on typical (but frequently heroic) individuals of a community: unnamed men, women, and children who serve as what Shapira calls "anonymous exemplum."[10] Because the text doesn't focus on any one social group or population, no specific time or place, its message can actually speak to a universal audience, and can emphasize that each and every person is capable of taking on the commandment.[11] At the same time, it is still a distinctly Jewish text, as references to Jewish institutions (like the beit midrash, beit Knesset, the butcher, and holidays) indicate that the characters are always operating within a Jewish universe. [12] Common motifs include relationships between parents and children, women as heroines, and the tensions between living as a Jew and the pressures of non-Jewish (likely Christian or Islamic) hegemony. These characters are often faced with some sort of dilemma hindering their ability to live in accordance with the Dibbur in question, and the extent to which they uphold or surrender the commandment will determine their reward or punishment, respectively. The presence of these recurring themes creates a feeling of cohesion across each Dibbur.[13] The primary and secondary stories sometimes flow one to another other (these are "associative deviations," according to Shapira), but other times, they

[9] Shapira, p. 119.
[10] Ibid., p. 127.
[11] Ibid., p. 120.
[12] Ibid., 123-124.
[13] Ibid., p. 148.

are only linked together by a shared thematic connection to the Dibbur, with the word מעשה signaling a new story within the section.

Each section closes with a clincher of sorts, a final story that intentionally (and homiletically) connects the tale directly back to the specific commandment. These final stories are usually more explicitly ethical in nature, and they are often characterized by concluding language, summaries of the moral to be learned, explicit indications of the reward (or punishment) gleaned from observing (or not observing) the commandment, and references to rabbinic authority. [14] The final words return back to the cited language of the Dibbur itself, which provides a clear bookend and organizational system for each section. This established structure for each commandment (Dibbur, Petichta, Primary Stories, Secondary Stories, and Conclusion) demonstrates thoughtful and intentional editing, as well as attention to the art of storytelling.

Given this described structure, there are scholars who question whether or not this text actually qualifies as midrash. Unlike traditional midrashim, which typically focus on interpreting the verses of Torah themselves, this midrash instead uses the biblical text as a framework for other midrashic material. Yosef Dan explains:

> "It is basically a narrative work, one of the first medieval Hebrew works in the field of fiction. Its treatment of the midrashic material can be described as revolutionary: whereas traditional Midrashim place primary importance on homiletic material with only occasional use of stories, this work is primarily composed of stories, with the homiletic passages relegated to secondary importance."[15]

Dov Noy takes these views even further, going so far as to assert that, while the text is called a "midrash" and is even referred to in some manuscripts as a "Haggadah of Shavuot," it actually should not be considered religious literature, but instead secular-entertainment

[14] Ibid., p. 129.
[15] Dan, p. 186.

literature.[16] These are strong arguments, and perhaps, based on Dan and Noy's definitions, *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* does not qualify as a capital-M Midrash. However, the artistry and composition of this text – the weaving together of biblical verses and related stories, thematic and linguistic connections, the integration of Jewish law and Jewish narrative – is certainly an offering of Rabbinic interpretation and, therefore, a midrash in its own way.

Text Immersion

While *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot* covers all Ten Commandments, this Text Immersion thesis features translation, analysis, and commentary on two highly representative ones: Dibbur Sheni and Dibbur Revi'i. With the guidance of my advisor, Professor Norman Cohen, we selected these two sections in part because of the variety and richness of their stories, and because of the ways they demonstrate much of the Midrash's unique textual characteristics. The compilation and shaping of these amazing, smaller narratives into a cohesive unit has allowed for deep study of both the content and structure of the text, as well as analysis of the text's meaning for both medieval readers and for us today.

Additionally, as someone who will soon be ordained as a rabbi, whose job will include supporting people in their connections to God and to Shabbat, these two Dibburim felt especially practical.[17] At the risk of being anachronistic, the Rabbis composing this text – like rabbis today – faced an uphill battle, where commitment to Jewish life in the diaspora was increasingly challenging. The midrash's stories and the Rabbis' interpretive tactics

[16] Noy, Dov. "Tippusim Beinlume'em V'Yehudim B'Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot" in *Fourth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Papers, 2 (1968), p. 355.
[17]That is not to say that the others wouldn't have been! In fact, I hope that this project is just the beginning of ongoing engagement with this midrash, and that I will be able to deeply study the other eight commandments in the coming years.

provide fascinating insight into what they thought their people needed to hear and reveal what they found were the most compelling arguments for being a Jew in a non-Jewish society. While our contexts are wildly different, there is much to learn from these interpretive approaches, as well as from the explicit and implicit arguments that the Rabbis are making. Being a progressive Reform Jew in 2023 is certainly not straightforward, but I believe that engaging with these two of Judaism's core principles, and engaging with them through the interpretive lens of *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*, can reveal additional richness and guidance for us today.

Dibbur Sheni: You Shall Have No Other Gods But Me

Dibbur Sheni Introduction

לא יהיה לך אלים אחרים על פני לא תעשה לך פסל וכל תמונה (שמות כ, ג-ד). ראו נתתי לכם תורתי להנחיל את פריה. אל תכעיסוני בהבליהם, כי הבל המה מעשה תעתועים, ולא תשתחוו למתים ומעשה הגוים אל תלמודו, שמעשה הגוים הבל המה.

"There shall not be for you other Gods besides me; do not make for yourself an idol or any likeness." (Exodus 20:3-4) See, I have given you my Torah to bequeath its benefits. Do not anger me on account of their nothingness, for they are nothingness, a work of mockery. And do not bow down to the dead or study the acts of gentiles; for the acts of gentiles are nothingness.

The midrash on the Second Commandment begins with the biblical text itself. This follows the literary structure for the entire midrashic composition each section is grounded in the precise verse of the commandment that the midrash is explicating. Following the verse itself, the Rabbis offer introductory to frame some of the major themes and issues that the midrash will cover. As described in this opening paragraph, these themes include: the true inheritance of Jews (Torah and belief in God), the futility/nothingness/duplicity of idol worship, and the dangerous influence of non-Jews. Each of the stories of the midrash will – in both subtle and obvious ways – grapple with these issues.

שהעץ עושין ממנו האליל מיער כרת(ו), ועושהו חרש כצורת אדם, בכסף ובזהב ייפהו. אם אין לעושהו מה יאכל הוא לא יתן לו, ואם רעב לא ישביענו, ואם צמא לא ישקנו, כי הבל הם. אף ולא מריח , ידים לו ולא ימיש, רגלים לו ולא ילך, ולא יהגה בגרונו. כמהו יהיה עושהו וכל אשר בוטח בהם. וגם אמצה: לא כאלה יוצרי ישראל כי יוצר הכל הוא (ירמיה י, טז) , אשרי כל חוכי לו (ישעיה ל, יח).

They made an idol from a tree cut down from the forest and turned the thicket into the form of a man, and beautified it with silver and gold. If its creator has nothing to eat, it will not provide for him, and if it is hungry, the creator will not satisfy him, and if it is thirsty, it will not satiate him, for it is nothingness. [It has a nose,] but it does not smell, it has hands but doesn't feel, it has legs, but doesn't walk, and it does not make a sound through his throat. Its maker will become like it, as well as all who have faith in them. But also take courage: "Not like them is the creator of Israel, for [He] created all of it" (Jeremiah 10:16)[18], "Happy are all who wait for Him" (Isaiah 30:18).

[18] The actual verse of Jeremiah 10:16 reads a little differently than what is cited in this manuscript of the Midrash: "לֹא־כְאֵלֶּה חֵלֶק יַעֲקֹב כִּי־יוֹצֵר הַכֹּל הוּא" – *Not like the portion of Jacob, for [He] created all of it*. Regardless

Before entering into the world of the Midrash, the Rabbis start with a clear interpretation and explanation of the biblical text. In case a reader didn't understand what exactly the commandment meant, the Rabbis offer an example. "*What is an idol or any likeness*?" they might anticipate a reader asking. Their pre-emptive clarification, colloquially, might then be: "*Let's say you carved a piece of wood into the shape of a person, and added gold or silver. That would be an idol*." In order for a reader to understand what exactly is prohibited, the Rabbis have to detail what violating the commandment looks like.

Now that the readers have a working definition of an idol, the rabbis can quickly transition to explaining why it is so wrong. The theological and spiritual reasons will come later in and be the primary focus of the Dibbur, so the Rabbis seemingly take this opportunity to point out the logical flaws of idol worship. The Rabbis make use of the argument against idol worship that Abraham will use against his father in just a few sections, and they preview Abraham's argument by using similar language to his prooftext (Psalm 115:5-7). Like Abraham, the Rabbis point out how each part of the idol's body is actually useless. The idol may have all the requisite body parts of a person, but if none of those parts serve their intended purpose – if it cannot move or eat or speak or drink – then it is nothing but an impotent statue. It is nothingness.

The final sentence in this explanation presents the consequences for engaging in this idol worship: not only does the idol completely lack all power and meaning, but the same qualities will befall "*all who have faith (*בוטח*) in them*." It's a threat – not even veiled – for the readers: if they place their trust anywhere besides God, they will be as powerless and

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of the language of "Israel" or "Jacob," the focus is on the unique relationship between the Jewish people and God.

useless as idols. Even in its foreboding context, this sentence includes the root ב-ט-ח, a word and concept that proves essential not only to this introduction, but to the teachings of the entire midrash. Different permutations of ב-ט-ח (to trust, have faith in, be sure of) become a refrain throughout the midrash, because that is the essence of the Second Commandment. If a Jew would only have true, deep faith in God, they would never have any need to turn to false idols. The rest of the midrash, then, studies characters with varying degrees of faith, and explores the consequences or rewards that they then face.

The introduction ends on an optimistic note, however. Despite the ominous threats levied against idol worshippers, the Rabbis want to remind their Jewish readers that, as Jews, they're in a position of strength. Using prooftexts from Jeremiah and Isaiah, the Rabbis remind the Jews that 1) God is their creator, and 2) God will compassionately wait for their faith, respectively. While not cited directly, the verses that precede the verse from Jeremiah also contain echoes of Psalm 115 in their references to the "mockery/deception"[19] of idol worship – "there is no breath in them" (Jeremiah 10:14). Additionally, the verses surrounding the verse from Isaiah speak of God's grace and willingness to forgive – the text offers reassurance that even if Jews have transgressed and considered or engaged in idol worship, there is a way back – they simply have to "wait for Him" (Isaiah 30:18). Even before the Jewish readers bear witness to various models of faith throughout the midrash (both good and bad), the Rabbis want them to know that by virtue of their Jewishness, they have the capacity for redemption and return to God.

Taken together, these pieces of introductory material become a poignant and holistic opening to this section of midrash. The biblical text draws readers in, the Rabbis clarify the

[19] תַּעְתֻּעִים – the same word used earlier in the introduction

major issues and behaviors at hand, and then they offer a note of particularist *hizzuk* – a sort of encouragement and buttressing. The ensuing invitation into the midrash is personal and communal. While it hints at some of the challenges of keeping this commandment, the Rabbis also express their belief that every Jew is capable of meeting them.

Abraham's Birth

והוא מציל מצרה כל הבוטחים בו, והוא הציל אברהם אבינו מכבשן האש כשהשליכו נמרוד הרשע על שבטחַ בו ולא השתחוה לפסלו. שכן מצינו כשנולד אברהם אבינו קם כוכב אחד ובלע ד כוכבים מארבע רוחות השמים. וכשראו אצטגניניו נמרוד הלך לפניו ואמרו לו: אדננו המלך, בן נולד לתרח. נקנה אותו ממנו ונתן לו כל מה שירצהּ. אמר להם נמרוד: מפני מה אתם אומרים דבר זה? אמרו לו: ראינו שאותו יום שנולד אברהם קם כוכב ובלע שתי(!) כוכבים בשמים, וכסבורים אנו שהוא עתיד לירש שני עולמים – העולם הזה והעולם הבא.

כיון ששמע תרח דברים הללו אמר להם: שוטים, מה זאת שאתם אומרים? אמשול לכם משל , למה הדבר דומה? לאדם שאמר לפרד אחד: אני אתן לך כור של שעורים ואחתוך את ראשך. ענו להם הפרד: אם אתם חותכים את ראשי השעורים מה יהיו לי? כן דבר זה – אם תהרגו את בני הנכסים שתתנו לי מי יירשם? אמר לו: בנים אחרים שיולדו לך. אמר לו האחרים לא ידעתי וזה לא אפריד ממני. בקשו בכל ענין להרגו, וכשראה תרח אביו חבאהו במערה ועמד שם שלש שנים.

And He rescues from distress all who trust Him, and He rescued Abraham our father from the fiery furnace when Nimrod, the Evil one threw him into it on account of his faith in [God] and that he did not bow to his idol. When Abraham our father was born, one star arose, and swallowed four stars from the four corners of the heavens. And when this was seen, Nimrod's astrologers went before him and they said to him, "Our lord king, a son was born to Terach. Buy him [Abraham] from [Terach] and give him [Terach] all that he desires." Nimrod said to them: Why would you say such a thing? They said to him: We have seen that on the very day that Abraham was born, a star arose and swallowed two stars in the sky, and we are of the opinion that in the future, he will inherit two worlds: this world and the world to come.

When Terach heard these words, he said to them: "Fools, what is this that you are saying? Let me give you a parable. To what is this thing similar? To a person who said to a mule: I will give you a kur [a dry measure] of barley, and I will cut off your head. The donkey answered them: If you cut off my head, what good will the barley be for me? Thus is this situation: If you will kill my son, the riches you give me – who will inherit them?" He [Nimrod] said to him: "Other sons will be born to you." Terach said to him: "I do not know that the others [will be born] from me, and this one I will not separate from me." They wanted to kill him no matter, and when Terach his father saw that, he hid him in a cave, and he stayed there three years.

This first narrative portion of the *Dibbur* begins with a typical transition[20] from the biblical commandment to the midrashic story. And, significantly, it all begins with Abraham. Even though there are multiple narratives throughout *Dibbur sheni*, Abraham's storyline occupies much of the text, and the focus on him at the outset of the midrash affirms the importance of Abraham's model. It's his character that will create the Jewish people, and his story and development will serve as an example for later characters (and us, too) to emulate.

In this first introduction to Abraham, we receive hints about his future destiny as Avraham Avinu, and learn about the circumstances of his upbringing. Through the repetition of ב-ט-ח throughout these first lines (and throughout the rest of the Dibbur as well), we learn how essential faith is to Abraham's character: from the very beginning, Abraham is identified by his trust in God. Additionally, when Abraham's birth is linked to one star swallowing four stars, we as readers learn just how significant Abraham will become: whatever people previously believed about the expansive secrets of the universe[21] was soon going to be replaced by the power of one entity (that is, God, with Abraham as human representative). By introducing Abraham with an emphasis on his essential faith and ensconcing him with "celestial credibility," the midrash positions him as an unquestionable and exceptional monotheist, and the hero of the text – even the astrologers of Nimrod acknowledge the significance of Abraham's birth. That said, because of these supernatural standards, there is no expectation that anyone else can be quite like Abraham. Instead, by including these

[20] According to Shapira, while the central story of the fiery furnace is a common one (with several parallels in other rabbinic texts), this particular version is noteworthy for its "oral character…in the language of popular storytelling." This storytelling style is typical of Aseret HaDibrot, and is something we continue to notice throughout the text. (Note 52, p. 40)

[21] In Abraham's time, celestial bodies were associated with mystery and power (they could determine the length of a day, bring warmth, bring in new life with light and danger with darkness), and they were also completely beyond human control. In this way, these celestial bodies played a theological role for Abraham's society, and so it's significant that Abraham's birth was marked by a celestial phenomenon. Abraham's existence is tied to divinity.

details, the Rabbis are setting Abraham up to be a perfect (and irreplicable) model of piety – someone for Jews to emulate, with the awareness that they'll never reach complete replication.

Because Abraham is just an infant at this point in the narrative, this section primarily gives us information not about him, but about his father Terach. In particular, we learn that Terach was likely close with idol worshippers[22] and that he was possibly part of an elite class,[23] and even so, he rejected those communal pressures in order to be a defiant and steadfast protector of his son.[24] While this portion of text is seemingly about Terach, it still gives us valuable insight into Abraham's character. With Terach as his father, Abraham has proximity to wealth and power, and is on track to be raised in the midst of idol worshippers. He could very easily follow the path of idol worship. For the Rabbis, these circumstances were all too relevant: their Jewish communities (in particular, the next generations of Jewish children) were developing in a context of "idol-worship." All around them, non-Jews were the ones in power, non-Jews controlled their land and communities, and non-Jews led those over whom they ruled according to their Christian or Muslim doctrines. It would be impossible not to be influenced by those surroundings, and so the Rabbis had to consciously work against those pressures. Even when the surrounding population isn't hostile, mindful and observant Jewish living can be difficult in a diverse and heterogenous environment – there's a reason Ultra-Orthodox and Orthodox Jews in America tend to congregate and self-

[22] While Terach's connection with Nimrod isn't as explicit in this version, Shapira notes that in other manuscripts, Nimrod told Terach his plan, or Terach himself was one of Nimrod's ministers (p. 41).
[23] Terach's rejection of Nimrod's offer is through a parable in which he explains that payment is useless to him without Abraham alive to inherit the money. This might mean that Terach is an independently wealthy or powerful man – money isn't necessary for him right now, but it matters to him in terms of what he leaves behind.
[24] When Terach hides Abraham in a cave instead of giving him up to Nimrod, he becomes part of the common trope in Jewish literature of righteous heroes hiding in caves. Like Shimon Bar Yochai, Elijah, David, and Saul

isolate. It's much easier to live according to one's own rules when you don't have to account for or accommodate any outsiders. That's not to say that being surrounded by those different from you is a bad thing – in fact, one of the biggest blessings of being a Jew in America is that we can be fully integrated into American society. The lesson to take from Abraham here, however, is to be mindful of those outside influences, and to be prepared to expend the effort required to hold onto your individual (and communal) identity.

Knowing that Abraham was deeply enmeshed into the surrounding idol-worship culture makes his rebellion in future sections that much more of a statement: here is a potential golden son of Terach, able to easily take advantage of all the wealth, power, and idolatry that surround him, and yet he chooses a much more challenging path in order to proclaim God's sovereignty. Terach's example here does create a familial precedent for rebellion. Instead of acquiescing to Nimrod's demands and giving up his son, Terach chooses to hide and protect Abraham, likely putting himself in danger. Even though Abraham will later turn against his father (and his father will turn against him, too), there is a sense here that standing up for their values – even in the face of danger – is in their family's blood. For Terach, the uncrossable line was sacrificing his son; for Abraham, it will be idolatry.[25] In their own ways, both men are models for listening to core values and behaving accordingly, even at great personal risk: Terach is willing to reject a bloodthirsty dictator's orders, and Abraham will be willing to die in a furnace.

In addition to teaching us about Abraham's faith-filled foundation and his unique family background, this section also offers some insight into the context in which Abraham is

[25] Ironically, Terach is rebelling against the pressure to sacrifice his son, yet Abraham didn't in the Akeidah. The difference here is found in who is leveling the pressure: Terach could say no to Nimrod and his advisors, but Abraham could not say no to God.

operating (and, by extension, the Rabbis as well). The repetition of מציל at the beginning of the section suggests that safety is central to this narrative, and that Abraham – and the Rabbis – deeply believe that God will provide that protection.[26]

We also learn about some negative associations with non-Jews, in particular, non-Jews in power. Nimrod is described as "הרשע," and he and his advisors are positioned as murderous authoritarian idolators, prepared to kill a baby just because of the possibility that he will challenge their control. The Rabbis are painting a picture of an existence in which Jews do not have control, in which God is not necessarily at the center of public life, and they conclude that this version of reality is dangerous and dystopian.

Abraham's Individual Awakening to God

ולאחר שלש שנים הוציאו מן המערה והוליכו לביתו. וכשיצא לחוץ וראה השמש זורח אמר בלבו: השמש הזה ברא העולם ולו אתפלל אני, שהוא ברא אותי. וכשבא השמש ונגה הלבנה אמר בלבו: כמדומה אני שזה אדון העולם ולו אתפלל אני, שהוא ברא אותי וכל העולם כלו. ועמד אותה הלילה בתפלה עד אור הבוקר, וכששקעה הלבנה וזרחה החמה אמר: עתה ידעתי כי לא זה ולא זה בראו העולם, אלא שניהם עובדים לאדון אחד. ואותו אדון ברא השמים והארץ וכל העולם כלו.

Three years later, he took him out from the cave and brought him to his home. And when he went outside and saw the shining sun, he said to himself: "This sun created the world and I will pray to it, because it created me." And when the sun set and the moon shone, he said to himself: "It seems to me that this is the master of the world, and I will pray to it, because it created me and the entire world." And he stood[27] all night in prayer until the light of morning, and when the moon set and the sun rose, he said: Now I know that it is not this [sun] or that [moon] that created the world; rather the two of them serve one master. And the same master created the heavens and the earth and the entire world.

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[26] The message here suggests a causative relationship between faith (ב-ט-ח) and salvation (מציל) – to acquire the safety that is so essential to the readers, they must – like Abraham – be people of faith. This language of divine salvation may not be as compelling to progressive Jews today, but there are certainly forces that we turn toward to persevere when we face challenges: faith in community, in the human capacity for kindness, in science and medicine, in relationships.

[27] By standing to pray, Abraham is embracing an embodied element of prayer. Standing was part of Abraham's biblical prayer practice as well – when he seeks Sodom and Gomorrah's salvation, "Abraham stood before Adonai" (Genesis 18:22), and when he witnesses its destruction, "The next morning, Abraham hurried to the place where he had stood before Adonai" (Genesis 19:27). The second example becomes the moment to which the Rabbis attribute the institution of Shacharit (BT Berachot 26b).

When Abraham emerges from his protective isolation in the cave, the first thing he does is consider the presence of divinity in his new environment. He emerges from the darkness into the light of day; there's powerful symbolism here, as he quite literally sees the light of monotheism. Abraham sees the sun, declares it the master of the world and his creator, and announces that he will pray to it. Then, when the moon appears, he draws the same conclusion – the moon is the master of the world, it created him, and he should pray to it. However, Abraham quickly realizes that both of those conclusions can't be true; there can only be one master of the cosmos. From this, he determines that there is actually one Creator responsible for all that he sees – for the sun and moon, yes, but also for the whole world, and for him, too.

Abraham is remarkable, according to the Rabbis, because he's capable of noticing a powerful presence in the universe. At the same time, Abraham's process of discernment introduces both his critical thinking skills and his interest in seeking "proof" of divinity – with his own eyes, he sees the way that the sun and moon change places, and that causes him to think differently about what the celestial bodies actually are. (This critical thinking will become especially important in the next section, when he questions whether his father's idols are gods or not.) This moment of clarity also shows that Abraham's belief system is still flexible and changing – with the introduction of new information, he is willing to admit that his earlier beliefs weren't fully correct.

By introducing these qualities at this point in the narrative, the Rabbis manage to characterize Abraham as both an every-man, and also extraordinary. Like all people, Abraham was susceptible to the temptations of worshipping the sun and moon – maybe the Rabbis are suggesting that it's only natural to feel awe at those celestial bodies. Abraham is

also like us in that he is ever-realizing, able to think differently and move beyond the expectations and context in which he was raised. And yet, Abraham is also unique in that he is especially sensitive to God's presence, and open-minded enough to realize that there is a God far more powerful behind it all. In presenting Abraham in this way, the Rabbis make him an accessible role-model, and show that even Jews who get confused about God can grow in their discernment and faith, and can find a path to returning to it.

Abraham's development in these scenes is a model for God-seekers today. He shows us how essential attentiveness, presence, and flexibility are for accessing God and spirituality. Like us, Abraham is on a spiritual journey: his perception and understanding of the sun and moon at first cause him to worship them, but he's curious and thoughtful enough to recognize that there's more beyond what he sees. For us, too, his story is a reminder to be open to what might lie beyond our initial observations, beyond the things we take for granted as fact. Today, for example, many people are willing to write off God because of "science" – but what if, like Abraham, they were willing to see beyond their scientific observations and see a world in which the power of both (science and God) existed? Science and observation can be a testimony to the existence of the miraculous in the world. Abraham teaches us the value of being attuned to holiness and open-hearted in our faith.

Familial Influence on Abraham's Theology

מיד שאל אברהם לתרח אביו, אמר: אבי, מי ברא השמים והארץ? אמר לו: אלוהות מרובים אשר לנו. אמר לו אברהם: ואיה הם? אמר לו: בפנות ביתי הם מונחים. אמר לו: הואיל ובביתיך הם אלך ואקריב לפניהם ושמא ירצוני כמו בני אדם אחרים.

הלך אברהם אצל אמו ואמר לה :עשי לי עוגות קמח סלת ואקריבנה לאלהי אבי. עשתה לו עוגה. לקחה והקריבה לפני הצלם הקטן. לא רצה לדבר בפני הצלם הגדול תחלה. הלך בפני הצלם הגדול ואמר לו: קום אכול קרבנך. ולא קם ולא זע ופיו לא ענהו כי הבל הוא.

אמר אברהם בלבו: שמא עוגה זו אינה ראויה? הלך לאמו ואמר לה: עשי לי עוגה אחרת יפה ונקיה יותר מן האחרת. וכן עשתה. מיד לקחה אברהם והקריבה לפני הצלם הגדול? אמר לו: הושט את ידך וקח נא את בירכתי וסעד לבך. ולא ענהו דבר כי עץ רקב הוא.

Immediately, Abraham asked Terach his father, saying: "My father, who created the heavens and the earth?" He said to him: "The many gods we[28] possess." Abraham said to him: "And where are they?" He said to him: "They are placed in the corners of my house." He said to him: "Since they are in your house, I will go, and I will sacrifice before them; perhaps they will reward me as other people."

Abraham went to his mother and said to her: "Make me cakes of finely sifted flour, and I will sacrifice them to my father's gods." She made him a cake. He took it and he sacrificed it before the small idol. He didn't want to say anything in front of the large idol at first. He went before the big idol and said to it: "Sit up and eat your offering!" It didn't get up and it didn't move its mouth and it didn't respond to him because it was nothingness.

Abraham said to himself: Perhaps this cake is not suitable? He went to his mother and said to her: "Make me another cake, more beautiful and pure than the other one." And thus she did. Immediately Abraham took it and sacrificed it before the large idol. He said to it: "Reach out your hand and take my gift[29] and eat your fill." And it didn't answer him, for it is nothing but decayed wood.

[28] The "we" here is interesting – Terach could be speaking of "we" as in their whole society, but the fact that Terach tells us that they're placed in "my house" also tells us that Terach is personally invested in idol worship.

[29] קח נא את בירכתי – "Take my blessing/gift": this is the same thing that Jacob says to Esau when they reunite in Genesis 33:11, and in a similar context: the idol and Esau are both rejecting Abraham and Jacobs' offers of food/sustenance. Its use here could allude to similarly complicated feelings. In Genesis 33:11, Jacob is reconnecting with Esau after a difficult estrangement, he's afraid of him, and he's being as deferential and as polite as possible in order to exit the situation unscathed. In our midrash's scene, Abraham also probably has mixed emotions, being afraid both that idols will come to life (challenging his beliefs), and also that they won't (meaning he has to go against his family)! The extension of blessing in both cases is Abraham/Jacob's attempt to reach out and seek connection, even in a fraught moment.

Now that Abraham has concluded that there is one Creator of all, he wants to figure out who that Creator is, and so he turns to his father as a source of wisdom. Like an adolescent or young adult child today coming to terms with new information and beliefs that are different from what their parents told them, Abraham must navigate his own growing awareness of the values of his family. He asks Terach who is responsible for creation, and when Terach answers that the "gods we possess" are responsible, Abraham initially goes along with it. Despite the belief in one God that he'd so recently proclaimed, Abraham doesn't seem to take issue with Terach's answer – he remains curious about who these gods are. Maybe his response is out of deference to and honor for his father, or maybe he's still open-minded about God/gods and not yet convinced of monotheism, but either way, he's not yet willing to challenge Terach. And, with his follow-up and clarifying questions, Abraham is not trying to trick Terach or dispute his theology; in fact, it seems like he's hoping to reconcile his newfound monotheism with the beliefs of his family. Abraham serves as an example of how a child might try to work through these conflicting values: his first response is to avoid accusations or disagreement, and instead assume that everyone is acting with best intentions and offering something true.

Abraham's theological curiosity and openness to his father's beliefs take him so far as an attempt at idol worship. Abraham seems truly interested in seeing the power of these inanimate objects: he tries not once, but twice, to gift them offerings so that they might respond to him. The first time around, when the idols don't react, he doesn't declare that it's because these gods are fake and that his beliefs are correct; instead, Abraham assumes that they didn't eat the cake because the cake wasn't good enough. He tries different cakes, different idols (small and large), different commands and demands, and has gotten no

response. The variety and extent of his attempts at idol worship show that Abraham isn't just being a rebellious teenager; it seems that he's really trying to make his family's belief system work for him. And yet, Abraham knows that he needs to be able to connect to these gods for him to believe in them; he's willing to experiment, but not willing to let go of his beliefs.

As a structural and literary device, these attempts at idol worship show a buildup of inner doubt and turmoil in Abraham. And, the details offered in this section also reveal to us just how deeply idol worship is ingrained in Abraham's family of origin. Terach says the idols are ones "we" possess, and they are literally inside of his home. Idol worship is also part of the family system: his father possesses the idols (and believes in them), while his mother makes the cakes that the family then sacrifices to those idols. Abraham's parents both participate in idol worship in their own ways, and expect him to as well. This makes Abraham's position that much more difficult – it's not just that he's coming to his own understanding of God, but also that his beliefs are in direct tension with his parents'.

The conflict between Abraham and Terach is about theology, but there are so many other cases in which parents and their children disagree about essential beliefs. Dealing with differentiation between parents and children is more than a common feature of the parent-child relationship: it's actually essential for the child's development into an adult. Whether this tension occurs during teenage rebellion or later, whenever children start to make decisions for themselves about their relationships, their beliefs, and their values, those decisions can often be perceived as a threat to the child's parents and a rejection of the way they were raised. The way these clashes are handled varies, and can have serious implications for the health of the relationship moving forward. Here, Abraham seems intent on honoring his parents' beliefs and preserving peace – after all, his father saved his life – and his

earnestness and curiosity demonstrate that. Sometimes, however, the parent-child relationship can't handle such individuation, and the differences reveal themselves to be impossible to overcome, fracturing the relationship irreparably (a parent refusing to accept a child's choice of life partner, for example). Unfortunately, the same will soon become true for Abraham and Terach.

Abraham Challenges Terach

מיד נחה חכמה וטהרה על אברהם ואמר: עינים להם ולא יראון, אזנים להם ולא ישמעו, אף להם ולא יריחון, ידיהם ולא ימישון, רגליהם ולא יהלכו (תהלים קטו, ה-ז). מה עשה אברהם? הצית בהם אש וכלם.

וכשהלך תרח אביו לפסלם מצאם שרופים. הלך לאברהם בנו ושאלו: מי שרף את אלהי? אמר לו אברהם: ידעתי שהקטון חרה בגדול והגדול שרף אותו ושרף את עצמו. ענהו תרח אביו: שוטה, הוא אינו שומע ואינו מדבר ואינו יכול להרע ולהטיב, ואתה אומר כי הוא הרג את כלם והוא בעצמו עמהם? אמר לו אברהם: אבי, השמע לאזנך מה שאתה מוצא בפיך. שאתה מניח מי שבראך וברא את השמים, ותעבוד לרקב אש שאין בו ממש?

ציער תרח את אצמו ודאג על אלהותיו והוליך אברהם בנו אצל נמרוד הרשע.

Immediately, wisdom and purity[30] rested upon Abraham, and he said: "They have eyes, but do not see; they have ears, but do not hear; they have a nose, but do not smell; they have hands, but do not feel; they have legs, but do not walk" (Psalm 115:5-7). What did Abraham do? He lit them all on fire, and destroyed them.

When Terach, his father, went to their idols, he found them burned. He went to Abraham his son and asked him, "Who burned my god?" Abraham said to him: "I know that the small one angered the large one,[31] and the large one burned him and burned himself."

Terach, his father, answered him: "Fool,[32] he cannot hear and he cannot speak and he cannot do good or evil, and you say that it killed the others and killed himself with them?" Abraham said to him: "Hear with your ears what comes out of your mouth. That you cast aside the one who created you and created the world, and you will worship the one destroyed by a fire that isn't real?" Terach was himself pained and worried about his gods, and brought Abraham, his son to Nimrod the Evil.

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[30] By characterizing Abraham with descriptors like these, the Rabbis continue to present Abraham as an exemplar. His actions make him righteous, but he is moved to act this way because of the qualities of wisdom and purity that have built within him over time, and are now part of his essence as a person.

[31] This could be a self-referential allusion to Abraham and Terach – the son is angering the father.

[32] This is the second time that the words שוטה/שוטים (fool/fools) are used in the midrash, both times by Terach. The first time is to reject Nimrod's demand that he turn over Abraham, and the second time is here, to reject Abraham's assertion that the idols destroyed each other. This could tell us a little more about Terach's character: he could be particularly haughty or stubborn, critical of anyone who doesn't think or believe like he does. This characterization of Terach heightens the tension between father and son – not only is Abraham standing up to his father, but he's also standing up to a father who's especially hard to argue with.

This section signifies not only a clarification of Abraham's theology, but is also a turning point in the way he relates to his family. After his spiritual awakening inspired by the sun and moon, his conversation with Terach, and his attempts to offer sacrifices, Abraham has finally arrived at his understanding of theological Truth. When his parents' idols don't react to his offerings, Abraham becomes critical, not curious like he'd been earlier,[33] and the Rabbis imagine him finally rejecting his family's idol worship through the words of Psalm 115:5-7.[34] These verses were also cited in the introduction to the Dibbur, which explicitly ties Abraham to the Second Commandment. Abraham rails on the impotence of these idols and seems enraged by the deception that is intrinsic to their existence. The fact that the idols have body parts without actually being able to use them encapsulates their superficiality, phoniness, and uselessness.

This is the second time that Rabbis include this specific idea of idols as a useless bodies. An adaptation of this prooftext – which contained similar ideas of unfulfilled human needs in a near-identical structure, but didn't use these exact words – appeared in the opening to the Dibbur. This concept serves as one of the core ideas upon which the Dibbur is constructed, and its inclusion here, therefore, continues a structural and thematic thread for the overall text. The essence of the message: any other god but God is useless. (This idea is also a direct extension of the 2nd Commandment.)

[33] In the previous moments of theological uncertainty, Abraham wondered aloud about whether there might be a stronger power to control the sun and moon, asked Terach seemingly sincere questions, and was open to re-doing his cake offering. However, the tone of his approach changes with this moment.

[34] While not included in the text of the midrash, the rest of Psalm 115 is significant: it proclaims that idol worship will hurt the worshippers, that the Israelites' faith in God will endure, and that the Israelites will be blessed for it. In this way, those absent verses foreshadow the rest of the midrash: Nimrod and the idol worshippers will lose, and Abraham will maintain his faith in God and will be blessed as a result.

When Abraham realizes that these are false idols and not gods, he burns them.[35] It's not immediately clear to us readers why he does this – it could be out of anger and frustration at being raised on lies, or it could be to prevent further blasphemy and idol worship. It's a decidedly violent approach though, and it represents a divergence from Abraham's previous methods of questioning his family and experimenting with ritual. Perhaps the Rabbis are trying to show that for Jews, some behaviors and circumstances are beyond the pale of acceptability – we shouldn't even be around idols because of how essentially sinful and anti-Jewish they are. It shows us that sometimes in a family, certain behaviors or differences just can't be tolerated, and no amount of dialogue can fix them.

In Abraham's ensuing conversation with Terach, as Terach tries to piece together what happened, Abraham uses a uniquely Rabbinic model of proving a point by pointing out the ideological opponent's hypocrisy. Abraham brings his father to understand the truth by rhetorically guiding him to realize the contradictions between what he says and what he believes. Terach plays right into Abraham's theological challenge: he not only admits to, but argues for, the powerlessness of his idols, and does so using the language and verbs that Abraham himself used earlier: they can't have destroyed themselves because they are unable to hear, speak, or do anything.

"Hear with your ears what comes out of your mouth,"[36] Abraham says to Terach. These are difficult words for a son to levy against his father, and bitter words for a father to hear. But, Abraham doesn't just shut down Terach, he invites him into his beliefs by declaring that that God created Terach, that he's one of God's people too. Again, this could

[35] Fire is an important part of the narrative because Abraham himself is going to be thrown into fire. However, these idols are destroyed by the fire while Abraham is not – once again, demonstrating Abraham's God's supremacy.
[36] This is a common idiom, and one that Abraham will leverage against Nimrod soon enough.

be a Rabbinic suggestion for how to deal with straying Jews and community members – instead of just criticizing their beliefs, remind them that they are God's people, and show them that they can be included in God's embrace as well.

Unfortunately, Terach doesn't respond to Abraham. Instead of engaging in dialogue or opening his mind to the possibility that he might be wrong, he stays within himself and his version of reality. He's "pained at himself" and "worries about his gods," and brings Abraham to Nimrod. When faced with a challenge to his beliefs, Terach's world – and he himself – are shaken. His only reaction is to reject Abraham and bring him to Nimrod for sure execution; Terach is more willing to have his son killed than to entertain their theological differences. The divide between father and son ends in the worst possible way.

Abraham's transformation from the "idol-worshipping son of Terach" to "monotheist Abraham is complete." And, from here we see something else too: the beginning of his development from an individual who believes in God, to one who spreads that belief to others.

Nimrod's Inquisition

וצעק במר נפש מלפניו ואמר לו: לאדם שישרוף את אלוהותיך מה יעשה לו? מי הוא זה ואי זה הוא אשר מלאו לבו לעשות כן? אמר לו: בני זה. אמר נמרוד לאברהם: למה שרפת את אלהי אביך? אמר לו אברהם: ומה אומר לאדני? אך שראיתי שחרה הגדול בקטן ושרף אותו ואת עצמו. אמר נמרוד: הם אינם יכולים לעשות מאומה ואתה תדבר לי כזבים.

He bitterly cried before him and said to him: "For a person who burned your gods, what should be done to him?" [Nimrod said,]"Who is this, and who would have the heart[37] *to do such a thing?" [Terach] He said to him: "It is my son." Nimrod said to Abraham: "Why did you burn your father's gods?" Abraham said to him: "What shall I say my lord? But I saw that the large one was angry with the small one and burned him and himself." Nimrod said: "They cannot do anything; you are telling me lies."*

[37] מי הוא זה ואי זה הוא – "Who is this, and who would have the heart" – Use of this rabbinic idiom makes a point about the evil of idolatry.

As his debate with his son proves futile, Terach brings Abraham to Nimrod for punishment. The theological conflict between Abraham and Terach has escalated, and what was once a father-son dispute now plays between Abraham and Nimrod, the evil emperor. Interestingly, this conversation (these lines of dialogue and the ones that follow, too) contains echoes of the earlier exchange between Abraham and Terach. Just as he did with Terach, Abraham uses Nimrod's professed beliefs against him, and forces him to recognize and admit out loud that his gods are actually powerless.

אמר לו אברהם: אדני המלך, ראה והבן מה שאתה מוציא מפיך, פיך ענה בהם שאינם יכולים לעשות מאומה, ואתה תעזוב אלים חיים ומלך עולם אשר ברא את השמים ואת הארץ ותעבד לפסילי עץ ואבן? ענה אותו רשע לאברהם ואמר לו: אני הוא שבראתי את השמים ואת הארץ.

Abraham said to him: "My lord king, see and understand your own words; your lips have answered that they cannot do anything, [yet] you will abandon the living god and king of the universe, [the one who] has created the heavens and the earth, and will worship idols of wood and stone?" This evil one answered Abraham and said to him: "It is I who created the heavens and the earth."[38]

Whereas with Terach, Abraham's dialectical challenge was focused on the logical inconsistency of believing in idols/gods, with Nimrod, he takes it further, pointing out that in worshipping these idols, Nimrod has actually abandoned the one God who has power, the only one who matters. His tone sharpens – how silly Nimrod is to worship gods of wood and stone, when there is an actual all-powerful creator out there!

What's especially interesting about this section of text is the way that the argument between Abraham and Nimrod both mirrors and deepens the prior exchange between Abraham and Terach. That is, while the conversations are very similar, there are some

[38] Nimrod's response to Abraham's challenge reveals the stakes of the dispute: it's actually not about divine power, it's about Nimrod's power. If Nimrod believes and advertises to his people that he is god (or god-like), then Abraham is questioning the society's collective acceptance of Nimrod's alleged sovereignty/divinity. In hinting at this, the Rabbis are showing just how deeply wrong Nimrod is – he worships ego and power, not holiness.

notable differences, and those differences might showcase Abraham's character development and development as a monotheist. With Nimrod, Abraham doesn't seem to have the deference that he had for his father anymore, and seems more willing to challenge Nimrod, regardless of the consequences. Readers might expect the opposite to be true – it's much more dangerous, for example, to defy the king rather than a family member, and yet perhaps through Abraham's model, the Rabbis could be suggesting that greater care actually needs to be taken within the family system. This could be a lesson for us in how we might approach our own rebellions and interactions – if Abraham can be more sensitive with his father than with his emperor, maybe we, too, should think more about how we treat those in our immediate circle. Especially upon reaching adulthood, our loved ones often aren't the ones who have control or disciplinary power over us; that power shifts to the workplace or the government or our social system. Terach can no longer play the fatherly role, and can no longer even protect Abraham. And yet, even when our loved ones don't have "power" over us any longer, they should still be treated with respect; those relationships (provided they are healthy and non-abusive) are more important that the other powers out there.

In addition to including such obvious allusions to the conversation with Terach, this section (as well as the previous section) is also noteworthy for its use of common rabbinic idioms – "Who is this, and who would have the heart;" "See and understand." In including these idioms, the Rabbinic voice is heard through a text that otherwise seemed confined to Abraham's life story. It's almost a vicarious insertion of dialogue: in their context, the Rabbis are also likely struggling with theological debates, but while it might not be safe to speak to a king in this way in real life, they can do so through their literature.

אמר לו אברהם: אם כדבריך עתה יבחן. אמור לשמש, שזורח במזרח ושוקע במערב, שיזרח במערב וישקע במזרח. אם תוכל לעשות כך אאמין אותך שאין אלוה מבלעדיך. כששמע נמרוד דבריו נכוחים תמה מאד בעצמו וקרא לאצטגניניו וספר להם את הדברים האלה. ואמר לו: אדננו המלך, הלא תזכור היום שאמרנו לך שנולד תינוק לתרח ובו ביום קם כוכב אחד ובלע ארבע כוכבים? על זה היה דברינו. ועתה, הואיל ובא לידינו, וכאשר עשה כן יעשה לו – נשרפו באש כמו ששרף אלוהותינו. מיד צוה נמרוד הרשע להסיק כבשן של אש שבעת ימים, ולאחר שבעת ימים תפשו אותו והשליכו אותו.

Abraham said to him: [If] it is according your words, now let us test it. Say to the sun, that rises in the east and sets in the west, that it should rise in the west and set in the east. If you can do this, I will believe you that there are no gods besides you. When Nimrod heard his challenging words, he was astonished, and he called his astrologers and told them these words. And they said to him: "Our lord king, remember the day that we told you that a baby was born to Terach, and on that day one star arose and swallowed four stars? It was about this that we were speaking. And now since it has come to be, and as it happened so it will be – we will be burned in fire as he burned our gods. Immediately, Nimrod, the Evil One, commanded to heat up the fiery furnace for seven days.[39] And after seven days, they grabbed him and hurled him into it.

As the debate with Nimrod continues, Abraham returns to the miracle of the shining sun from much earlier in the narrative. For Abraham, watching the sun (and noticing that there must be divine power controlling it) was his awakening to God. So, if Nimrod is to prove his power, then he has to overturn and disprove Abraham's moment of revelation. Obviously, Nimrod cannot rise to the occasion, and instead of engaging with Abraham, he turns in a panic to his astrologers – again, a reference to earlier in the story. Fire becomes a final recurring element in this section: Abraham destroyed the idols in fire, the astrologers fear that their kingdom will be burned in fire, and Nimrod declares that Abraham should be thrown into fire.

The repetition of these details, characters, and symbols in this section of the narrative tells us that our story is coming to a climax, and that the truth will soon be revealed. It's an effective storytelling method as it brings readers to the brink of suspense: control over the

[39] The furnace heats for seven days, possibly connected to the days of creation. If the question at hand in this moment is "who is the creator of the heaven and earth," then it's fitting that seven days is the amount of time that Nimrod (the false "creator") needs to prepare to kill Abraham.

sun and moon will prove who the Creator of all is, the astrologers' prophecy of Abraham's ascendency will be fulfilled or defeated, and Abraham will either die in or survive the fire. Through this literary device, the Rabbis further clarify the black and white nature of the debate – there is no gray area here, God's sovereignty will be proven along every possible dimension.

Abraham's Salvation

מיד ירדו מלאכי השרת לפני הב״ה ואמרו לפניו: רבונו של עולם, נרד ונציל צדיק מכבשן האש. והיו מתקוטטים ביניהם – זה אומר אני ארד תחלה וזה אומר אני תחלה. אמר הב״ה לגבריאל: אני יחיד והוא יחיד[ייחד] שמי ראשון בעולמי, דין הוא שאני בעצמי ארד להצילו. ואתה גבריאל תציל מבני אברהם אוהבי שלשה – חנניא מישאל ועזריה. ירד הב״ה בעצמו ובכבודו והציל אברהם אבינו מכבשן האש. וגבריאל הציל חנניה מישאל ועזריה מאותו כבשן האש אשר הפילם נבוכדנצר.

Immediately, the ministering angels came down before The Holy One of Being and said to him: "Master of the universe, we will go down and save [the] righteous one from the fiery furnace." And they quarreled amongst them – this one said, "I will go down first," and that one said, "I'll be first." The Holy One of Being said to Gabriel: "I am the unique one, and he first caused My name to be unique, it is only right that I myself will go down to save him. And you, Gabriel, will save from Abraham's sons, his three beloved ones: Chanania, Mishael, and Azariah." The Holy One of Being went down by Himself, and in His glory He saved our father Abraham from the fiery furnace. And Gabriel saved Chanania, Mishael, and Azariah from the same fiery furnace into which Nebuchadnezzar[40] cast them.[41]

Nimrod has hurled Abraham into the furnace for his claims about God, but we know that the hero's story can't end here. The angels immediately start fighting over who will merit saving Abraham from the furnace, but we soon learn that rescuing Abraham is a job that is too holy for the angels; it's a task for God and God alone. Despite being ostensibly all about God, this moment is the first time in the *Dibbur* that God actually appears and acts, intervening in order to save Abraham.

[40] This marks the transition from Nimrod to Nebuchadnezzar, which further deepens the parallel between this midrash and the narrative in Daniel 3.
[41] Shapira points out that there are several sources to this tradition: BT Pesachim 118a, Tanchuma Buber Tetzaveh 8, and Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1.

Inserting God only at this late point in the narrative is surprising, but it suggests to readers that this Dibbur's teaching really isn't about God – it's about humanity. Despite the religious pressures that surrounded them, the Rabbis weren't concerned about proving God's existence or power – that wasn't within their jurisdiction. What was within their control, however, was the extent to which they could empower their people to discover and commit to God. God isn't the character to be emulated here – Abraham is. It's an approach that Jewish leaders today could learn from; instead of trying to sell Judaism, it would be better to focus our energies on supporting and empowering our people to connect according to what is meaningful to them. It's not so much about what the object of faith is – it's about cultivating the presence and openness (like Abraham) to enable that faith to suffuse us.

The reason Abraham is so special in God's eyes, and so worthy of direct divine salvation, is that Abraham served as God's spokesman on earth. God explains, "He caused My name to be unique." Why does this public proclamation matter to God? Perhaps because if God wanted a chosen people (which seems to have been God's ultimate goal), having a human partner was essential. God needed someone whose faith was so deep that they could not only sustain *themselves* with their beliefs, but could convince and lead *others* as well. Even though God was in relationship with other humans before Abraham,[42] God's connection with Abraham was unique: God was the one who reached out to those other characters – they didn't sense God's presence or develop faith on their own, and they certainly didn't use their special relationship with God to share the knowledge of God's one-ness with others. Abraham, on the other hand, came to monotheism organically, discovering God on his own and eventually deciding to commit to God. Because of all this, perhaps God

[42] Adam, Eve, Cain, and Noah all come to mind.

saw Abraham as well-suited to being God's partner, and therefore, God God's self had to step in to save him. This moment, then, could be the beginning of their covenant, and could set the tone for their complex relationship going forward.[43]

באותו שעה [נתוכחו] מיכאל וגבריאל זה עם זה, שמיכאל רצה להצילם ואמר לו גבריאל: אין גבורתיו של הב״ה נראין בכך, שאתה ממים ומנהגו של עולם שהמים מכבין את האש. אבל אני מאש ואצנן הכבשן מבפנים ואחמם אותו מבחוץ, ובי יראו נפלאותיו של הב״ה. וכן עשה. ירד גבריאל והציל אותם מן הכבשן. נתקבצו כל מלכי העולם והפחות והסגנין לראות אם שלטה בהם ואם לאו, וראו שלא חרך שער ראשם.

At the same time, Michael and Gabriel argued with one another, that Michael wanted to save them and Gabriel said to him: The strength of The Holy One of Being isn't apparent in you, for you are from the water, and the custom of the world is that water extinguishes fire. But I am from fire, and I will cool the furnace from within it and I will heat it from outside it, and through me the wonders of The Holy One of Being will be seen. And so he did. Gabriel went down and saved them from the furnace. All the kings of the world gathered, the governors, and the prefects, to see if the fire would dominate them or not, and they saw that the hair of their heads was not singed.

Despite God assigning Gabriel the responsibility for bringing Abraham's sons out of the furnace, Gabriel and Michael continue to quarrel over how to do it, and who to do it. Gabriel is angling for a greater miracle, a more dramatic presentation of God's power. Michael and his water-essence extinguishes the fire, that's expected – water extinguishes fire. So, Gabriel's logic is that if the people see water putting out the furnace, they might not realize or believe that there was divine intervention at play. But if Gabriel and his fire-essence are able to extinguish the fire, that's other-worldly and completely unexpected; those who witness it will <u>have</u> to accept God's wonders. This is what Gabriel does, and then the miracle intensifies further when the people see that the sons' heads aren't scorched – only

[43] According to the Torah, the relationship between God and Abraham begins with an act of great faith, with Abraham heeding God's לֶךְ-לְךָ call in Genesis 12 to travel to Canaan. And then, so much more transpires in the relationship between the two – they establish two covenants, Abraham negotiates for Sodom and Gomorrah's fate, and God even calls for Isaac to be sacrificed. The biblical text takes Abraham's faith in God for granted – we don't really know why Abraham followed God – but this act of salvation adds to God's participation in the building of the relationship and in the deepening of Abraham's faith. Again, I don't think that this is a Rabbinic attempt to showcase God's power, but rather an illustration of the depths of the relationship between God and the Jewish people: God reaches out to those who are open to it.

divine intervention and a powerful God/angels could bring about this result. The public and dramatic nature of this miracle becomes especially significant because of those who witness it: the most powerful people in the world (kings, governors, prefects) came together to see what would happen. With such an influential audience, God's verified might could be publicized even further.

מיד שבחו להקב״ה ורוממוהו על אותו הנס, ומכין על ישראל ומרקקין בפניהם. ואמר להם: היה לכם אלוה כזה והשתחויתם לצלם והכעסתם אותו? מיד פתחו כלם והעידו: לך י הצדקה ולנו בשת הפנים [וגו] (דניאל ט, ז)

Immediately they praised The Holy One of Being and exalted Him on account of the very miracle, and struck Israel[44] and spat in their faces. And he said to them: "You have a God like this and you prayed to an idol and angered Him?" Immediately, they all opened [their mouths] and testified: "With You, O Lord, is the right, and the shame is on us etc." (Daniel 9:7)

This prooftext comes from the book of Daniel, a chapter in which he describes visions that he's had. Knowing that desolation is coming (according to an earlier prophecy from Jeremiah), Daniel publicly declares the Israelites' shortcomings:

> "We have sinned; we have gone astray; we have acted wickedly; we have been rebellious and have deviated from Your commandments and Your rules, and have not obeyed Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name to our kings, our officers, our fathers, and all the people of the land." (Daniel 9:5-6).

The specific line of text that the midrash uses comes from the verse that immediately follows this confession of guilt: "With You, O Lord, is the right, and the shame is on us to this very day," (Daniel 9:7). Daniel's prophecy goes on to continue to admit guilt in many forms and accept whatever punishments God has brought or will bring to bear on the Israelites. And yet, toward the end of the chapter, Daniel does ask for God to not totally destroy Jerusalem and the Temple – not because of the Israelites' merits, but because of God's mercy (Daniel 9:18). And then, in the midst of all these admissions of guilt and

[44] The concept of "Israel" shows up here for the first time in the midrash. This could enable the Rabbis to bring the story up to their day, and/or emphasize collective Israel's responsibility to be in covenant with God.

prayers, Gabriel appears to Daniel. In this vision, Gabriel offers a prophecy predicting the destruction of the Temple after some time of peace.

We can use this context to augment our understanding of this closing line of the midrash. In this line, all the people are testifying to God's oneness, denouncing idol worship and their earlier behaviors. Like Daniel, they're admitting to their shortcomings and failings, and proclaiming God's steadfastness in spite of it all. Daniel's prophecy looms though – if Daniel's confession led to information about his peoples' destruction, these peoples' confessions could also hint at future desolation.

At the same time, we start to see the transition away from Abraham and this primary Abraham narrative. Abraham has all but disappeared after he and his sons were rescued; suddenly the midrash's focus has turned to the bystanders and the idol worshippers. They're being spit upon and chastised by Nimrod/Nebuchadnezzar, and if the Daniel parallel holds, they're possibly facing eventual destruction as well. This conclusion may be an intentional shift in focus: even though the rest of the midrash was deeply engaged with Abraham's personal revelation and his journey to becoming an exemplar of faith in God, it now ends by introducing the implications for all the other people. Abraham was just the beginning – it's incumbent upon those who come after him to follow his lead, or face dire consequences. This is where the Rabbis bring us: the Jews must emulate Abraham, committing to God, or risk turning into the theologically confused and desperate onlookers, destined for destruction.

This moment brings us to the end of Abraham's story, but not the end of his character altogether. He will continue to be mentioned throughout the rest of the midrash as a symbol of faith and piety, and will serve as the exemplar to which other searching Jews will be compared. It's clear why the Rabbis wanted him as an example – he modeled commitment to

Judaism even at great personal risk – but it's less obvious how he might serve as a role model for us today, too. Engendering belief in God might not be the sole priority of the rabbis of today, but there are other qualities that we can learn from Abraham's story. Abraham's "discovery" of God in the celestial bodies teaches us about having curiosity about the world around us. The way Abraham discussed theology with Terach showed us the importance of compassion and openness in navigating challenging differences. Finally, in standing up to his father and Nimrod, Abraham modeled the courage that is sometimes required in order to stand up for our beliefs.

The Tower of Babel

וכל העובד עבודה זרה הב״ה עוקרו מן העולם הזה ומן העולם הבא, ״ובל יראה גאות יי״.

And all who participate in idolatry, The Holy One of Being uproots them from this world and from the world to come, and "they will not witness the grandeur of Adonai" (Isaiah 26:10).

Immediately following Abraham's salvation and the people's subsequent turning to God, this line serves as a bridge between the main story of Abraham and the smaller secondary stories in the Dibbur. From this sentence, we know that in the rest of the Dibbur, there will be idol worshippers, and they will face divine punishment on account of their idolatry. And, we know that this divine punishment is multi-pronged: not only will the idol worshippers be "uprooted" from this world AND the world to come, but they will also be eternally deprived of God's grandeur.

The final part of this bridge sentence is a verse from Isaiah 26:10. The chapter, in the midst of Isaiah's prophecy, preaches about God's generosity for God's people, as well the rewards for those who faithfully follow God, and the consequences towards those who don't. This particular line offers a description of what happens to the "רשע" – the evil one. We learn

that even when God is merciful to this evil one, he doesn't learn righteousness, and still "does not see the grandeur of Adonai." This verse is arguing that bad people can't change – despite second chances, despite being surrounded by positive influences, the רשע continues to do wrong and ignore God.

This biblical verse's use as part of the transition to this next section of the midrash is meaningful – in the same line that we're told that the idol worshippers will be punished by God, we're also reminded that even without this punishment, there would be no redemption for them. The idol worshipper/רשע will forever be stuck in their bad ways, regardless of divine help. It's a fatalistic way to start the second half of the midrash, but it could also serve as a word of caution or explanation: what we're about to read may be disturbing, and we may think that the builders of Babel (and other characters who misbehave) deserved a second chance, but we should know from the outset that that wouldn't work – they're doomed to continue in their evil ways. This is understandable in the context of Rabbinic literature, and may have been a way for the Rabbis to rigorously lay out their expectations for Jewish belief in their moment. The Rabbis are wary of those who feign an embrace of Judaism, and want to ensure that those who are part of their community are fully invested. Many of the midrashim seem to hinge on the belief that the bad will be forever bad, and that the good need to painstakingly guard their goodness against the evil surrounding influences. That is, idolatry can be a challenge at all times, and Jews need to protect themselves and their communities.

This is, admittedly, a challenging outlook for modern progressive Jews. Our tradition places a great deal of emphasis on an individual's capacity for *teshuvah*, and such rigid perspectives on good and evil aren't realistic or productive. In seeking a modern application,

we can focus more on an interpretation of the verse alone, removed from its Isaiah context (in which a person who commits idolatry will be deprived of God's goodness). It's difficult to focus on idolatry in a modern context. Idolatry doesn't concern today's Jewish communal leaders as much as it did the Rabbis, but they/we are absolutely preoccupied with the likelihood of Jews completely giving up on Jewish life.[45]A modern interpretation of this verse, then, is that those who reject or spurn Jewish life, or all who embrace things that are antithetical to Judaism ("*all who worship idolatry*"), will deprive themselves of the goodness and connection that comes with being part of something bigger ("*will not witness the grandeur of Adonai*").

It's a fitting transitional sentence. Both the fatalism and the threats of punishment come through, and serve as a frame for the subsequent stories. *Beware*, the Rabbis call out – *the characters in the stories you are about to read: they are perpetually wrong, and their existence and temptation poses a threat to you. Guard your faith closely.*

שכן מצינו באנשי דור הפלגה ובאנשי דור המבול ,שעקרם הב״ה מן העולם שכפרו בו ואמרו: הבה נבנה לנו עיר ומגדל וראשו בשמים (בראשית יא, ד). ונקח קרדומות ונבקיע השמים ויזובו המים אשר שם למעלה למטה, כדי שלא יעשה לנו כאשר עשה לדור המבול. ונעשה חתיכות מן השמים וגם נעשה מלחמה עם המלך שבשמים. ולא נניחנו לישב שם עוד, ונעמוד אנו במקומו ונעמיד שם עבודה זרה.

This is what was evident – in the people of the generation of the dispersion and in the people of the generation of the flood – that The Holy One of Being uprooted[46] them from the world because they denied [God] and said: "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky" (Genesis 11:4), "Let us take hatchets and break through the heavens, and the waters will flow [down] from above, below, so that what was done to the generation of the flood

[45] I won't go so far as to say that assimilation is modern-day idolatry, but I do see emotional resonance between the fears of the Rabbis and the fears of today's leaders, despite being a millennium apart. Regardless of century, Jewish leaders are seemingly always existentially concerned about Jewish engagement and participation.

[46] The use of the key root "ע-ק-ר" (to uproot) here connects this section to the line immediately preceding it, preserving the flow of the text, and deepening the logical conclusion of the storylines. In the first line, the midrash tells us that "The Holy One of Being uproots them," (those who worship idolatry) and in this line, we learn that "The Holy One of Being uprooted them" (the people of the generation of the dispersion and the flood). We can infer, then, that the two who are subjected to God's uprooting might have something significant in common. If not, they might actually be one and the same. Without saying it explicitly, the logical extension here is that the generation of the dispersion and flood are idol worshippers, and this identifying characteristic is how the Rabbis want us to read the story of Babel – the characters aren't just haughty, they're idol worshippers.

would not be done to us. And we will make judgments of the heavens and also make war with the king of the heavens. And we will not be allowed to dwell there any longer, and we will stand in place and put in place idol worship."

With the introductory phrase שכן מצינו, the text completes the transition from the main Abraham narrative to the secondary stories of the midrash and indicates that we're remaining in the biblical context (for now). Our midrash's prooftext is from Genesis 11:4: "And they said, '**Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky**, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world.'" The midrash only uses the first part of the verse (the builders' practical plan), but the second part, which explains their goals, is significant as well. From this second part of the verse, we learn about the builders' motivations: they wanted to be known, and they wanted to avoid dispersal.

It's not immediately obvious why this might have been offensive to God, but the act of taking their fates into their own hands implicitly suggests that they 1) don't trust God's will and/or 2) want to overcome God's will. The flood probably loomed in their collective memory, and they recognized that there were powers beyond themselves that had the capacity to destroy their lives. Instead of just sitting and letting that happen, they decided to build a tower to somehow prevent that ("else we shall be scattered all over the world"). This exercising of agency and implicit challenge to God could have been viewed as an act of idol worship – even though there was never any worship of a statue (as in Abraham's narrative). The builders denied God's power, and placed their faith in themselves rather than in God. (Similarly, in Abraham's narrative, the people placed their faith in Nimrod instead of in God.)

But, the biblical text and its implicit clues aren't quite enough to definitively represent the builders as idol worshippers. So, the rabbis add some damning lines of speech

to clarify the evil, idolatrous intentions of the builders, explaining that they want to "break through the heavens," and "make war with the king of the heavens" and "put in place idol worship." The antagonism against God intensifies through these Rabbinic additions. What the Torah seemed to describe as an exercise in humans pursuing glory, the midrash has transformed into humans all-out fighting against God. It makes the accusations of idol worship even more acute: while building a tower might symbolize arrogance and haughtiness, these midrashic verses represent the builders' undeniable hostility toward God and their pursuit of idol worship. It could be a rabbinic attempt to paint the builders of the Tower in a much more negative light (as they did with Nimrod), perhaps to both justify their punishment [47] and clarify that they really were idol worshippers. This impulse to differentiate between "us" and "them" could be coming from Rabbinic fears about Jewish integration into and cultural exchange with surrounding Christian and Muslim populations – especially when the surrounding Muslim population was trying to convert them. When communities live in close proximity to each other (as was the case for medieval Jews and their co-religionists), it's much easier to see potential religious rivals as humans, or even friends, and increased affinity for their practices and beliefs is entirely possible. Perhaps the Rabbis were concerned that, in the midst of this exposure and pressure to convert, Jews could lose sight of their differences. For the Rabbis, representing those differences more sharply in midrashic literature was one educational tool to maintain boundaries between the Jews and surrounding peoples.

[47] In an initial reading of just the biblical text, the builders' punishment could feel disproportionate – they wanted to build a tower, and yet God decided to completely destroy the unity and communal cohesion of their people. With this rabbinic interpretation added in, the builders' plans take on a much more sinister quality, and their identity as idol worshippers becomes crystal clear.

והיו עושין לבנים ושורפין אותן באש כיוצר ששורף סידותיו [סירותיו, יצירותיו], ובנו עיר ומגדל גבוה עד מאד. והיה באותו המגדל שבנו שבעים מעלות במזרח וכנגדם שבעים מעלות במערב, וכשהיו מעלין את הלבנה היו מעלין אותו במזרח וכשהיו יורדים יורדים ממערב וכשנופל אדם משם ומת אינן שמין על לב. וכשהיו מעלין את הלבנה ונופלת היו בוכין ואומרין: אוי לנו, מתי תעלה אחרת תחתיה.

And they would make bricks and burn them[48] in fire like an artisan who burns his pieces of clay, and they built a city and a very tall tower. And in the same tower they built seventy steps to the east, and across from them seven steps to the west, and when they brought up a brick, they would bring it up to the east, and when they came down [it was] to the west, and when a person fell from there and died they didn't pay attention. And when they bring up a brick and it dropped, they would cry and say: "Woe is us, when will another rise in its place?"

In these verses, the Rabbis show that the builders have a complete disregard for human life; they are doubling down on the idol-worshippers' cruelty. Not only are they openly defying God and seeking to undermine God for their own glory, but they also treat their own people terribly. And yet, when a brick falls, they do pay attention! This suggests that their values are wildly misplaced: they care only for the material objects that will engender their individual success, not for the human labor and lives that make it possible. Through these details, we learn that the idol worshippers are wasteful, careless, cruel, and self-pitying, and the Rabbis continue to demonstrate that evil behavior is inextricable from idolatry.

The attention that the text pays to the builders' actions is a reminder to us about the essential connection between belief and behavior. The builders aren't only "bad" because they deny God; they're also just wicked people. The text doesn't make it obvious whether there is a causative connection – perhaps their denial of God causes them to be cruel, or their cruelty obscures God's presence, or perhaps denial and cruelty feed off of each other. Either way, the fact that both belief and behavior are included in the descriptions here suggests that

[48] This reference to burning bricks could be an allusion to the idols that burned in Abraham's story – in both cases, these inanimate objects received disproportionate power and reverence.

both are necessary in the life of a religious person. Piety doesn't matter if you are unkind to others; altruism is shallow and impermanent without a deeper sense of purpose.

ועבר דרך שם אברהם וראה מעשיהם מקולקלים וקללם בשם אלהיו, והם אלילים ורעים ולא חששו לדבריו. והב"ה הוריד שם שבעים מלאכים ובלבל לשונם ודבריהם, אשר לא שמעו איש שפת רעהו. וכשהיה הוא קורא לרעהו להביא אבן הוא מביא טיט וכשקורא לו טיט הוא מביא אבן, ומכה איש את חבירו. וכשראו כך ויחדלו לבנות העיר, כמה שנאמר: "ויפץ יי אותם משם על כל הארץ" (בראשית יא, ח).

And Abraham passed by there, and saw their cursed deeds and [he] cursed them in the name of his God, and they were godless and evildoers, and they did not fear His words. And The Holy One of Being brought down seventy angels there and confused their language and their words, [so] that no one could understand the speech of his fellow. And when one would call to his fellow to bring stone, he brought mortar, and when he called to him [for] mortar he brought stone, and one would hit his friend. And when they saw this they stopped building the city, as it is said, "Thus Adonai scattered them from there over all the earth"[49] (Genesis 11:8).

All of a sudden, Abraham shows up: the paragon of monotheism himself is here to curse their behavior. Just as he criticized the idol-worship of his family and community, he is also cursing the behavior of the tower-builders.[50] This tells the readers that the Babel humans are definitively on the wrong side of monotheism. His appearance here connects this narrative to the opening story of the Dibbur, and establishes the thread that will continue throughout it: Abraham is a guide and symbol whose presence will indicate right and wrong to the reader.

By including Abraham here, the Rabbis continue to reinforce his "hero status." His character is elevated beyond his biography, and in his capacity to move through time and space (by showing up here), Abraham becomes almost supernatural, and gets closer to becoming an earthly partner of God. While the story of the Tower of Babel technically has

[49] The biblical text here actually is in the reverse order – while this sentence suggests that the people stopped building because of their confounded speech, and then were scattered by God, the biblical text says that they were scattered, and they stopped building the city. The midrashic order of events enhances God's power – God was able to stop their efforts and then scatter them, versus scattering them in order to stop their efforts.

[50] The link between the earlier narrative of Abraham and this present moment of criticism is drawn even more explicitly in the Hebrew: the idols that Abraham destroyed are צלם, which sounds very similar to קלם, the curses he's levying against the tower-builders.

nothing to do with Abraham's origin story, his presence here is engineered to put the two in conversation with each other – it establishes him as a literary motif, a litmus tester of good or bad faith. By developing Abraham into such a special human character, the Rabbis give the Jewish people something realistic to aspire toward. Humans will never be like angels, but they could get close to being like Abraham.

Once Abraham has laid the groundwork in identifying and criticizing the godlessness and evil that he sees, God shows up as Abraham's partner to continue the process. God's punishment is interesting – there are many other things God could have done to send a message (destroying the tower and/or killing the people are two options that immediately come to mind), and yet God chose to destroy communal cohesion instead. Perhaps God recognized that when people come together, they can gain power in a way that could be both misguided and threatening. This is borne out by the verse from the Torah that describes God's concerns: "Nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach" (Genesis 11:6). God's method of intervention here could have been just as much about sending a message to and punishing the current generation as about preventing the same thing from happening again in future generations.

The Rabbinic fixation on Abraham is a reminder to us about the importance of role models in religious leadership, and of the power that those role models have. Because of Abraham's journey, his history, and the reputation that the Rabbis have curated for him, Abraham is positioned as the ideal Jew. "Regular" Jews – that is, the people of Israel – can look at his trials and challenges and see for themselves their own pathways to piety. For us today, we should consider how having diverse Jewish role models and diverse Jewish stories

can make Judaism more accessible to all people – we all could benefit from having Jews to look up to.

> וכל כך אירע להם על שכפרו באלהים חיים, וכל מי שבוטח בהב״ה הוא עוזר לו ועושה רצונו, שנאמר: ״רצון יראיו יעשה״ (תהלים קמה, יט).

And therefore it all happened to them because they denied the living God, and all who had faith in The Holy One of Being, God helps them and fulfills their will, as it is said: "He fulfills the wishes of those who fear Him" (Psalms 145:19)

At the close of this Babel narrative, the root כ-פ-ר (to deny) is repeated meaningfully. It was used in the introduction to this story *("the Holy One of Being uprooted them because they **denied** Him*" – **שכפרו** שעקרם הב״ה מן העולם) and is now used in the closing ("*it all happened to them because they **denied** the living God*" – אירע להם על **שכפרו** באלהים חיים). Its repetition clarifies the grounds for the builders' punishment, and the lesson behind the story altogether: the people's punishment isn't because of their building, or because of their cruelty, or their arrogance, but is ultimately because they denied God's existence. They were haughty and arrogant, and thought they could fight against God and build their tower.

The prooftext here, from Psalm 145, brings in another critical element of the narrative: the people in Babel did not fear God! The demand for fear adds nuance to the aforementioned sin of **denying** God – not only was there denial, but there was also a lack of fear. The takeaway then, according to this prooftext, is that not only must we not deny God, but the proper way to engage with God is to fear God – only then will people be rewarded. According to the Rabbis, fear is the way to recognize God's presence and power in the world. Fear is a natural reaction to the moment that we recognize that we are not in control, and to the moment that we see that there is something (or someone) with power over us. We can experience fear in the middle of a storm, for example – it's not so much the storm that is scary, but the total lack of control. If these people are not afraid, then they must be arrogant

and detached from reality – the Rabbis don't want this; to maintain order and faith in God, they want their people to be afraid. This is challenging theologically, but worth thinking about from the rabbinic perspective; perhaps fear-mongering was a strategic way to maintain monotheism and faith in God for the Jews in this time.

For today, this last sentence of the Babel narrative actually offers us a deeper, multi-dimensional approach for talking about God. Faith doesn't only have to be about whether or not you believe in God (that is, not about denial vs. belief), but also about the relationship that you could have with the Divine (for the Rabbis, it was through fear; we might prefer different channels). It might seem contradictory, but it could also be liberating – don't worry so much about whether or not God exists, instead contemplate how you might want to live in the world, how you might want to relate to that which is bigger than yourself, and yet remains part of you too.

The Hasid in the Field

ומעשה בחסיד אחד שהיה לו שדה אחד , ובאותו שדה היה חירוב אחד. והיה שם עבודה זרה והיה מפסיד כל זרה שאותו צדיק[51] זורע באותו שדה, לפי שהיו בני אדם עובדין ויושבין תחת צלו של אותו אילן וממפסידים (!) הזרעים. אמר לו אותו צדיק לאשתו: לכי ונקוץ את האילן שלא נפסיד הזרעים.

The story of a Hasid who owned a field, and in the same field there was a carob tree. And there was idol worship there, and it spoiled all the seeds that the same Tzaddik planted in the same field, because there were people who would worship in the shadow of that tree and spoil the seeds. The same Tzaddik said to his wife: "Go and cut down the tree so that we will not lose the seeds."

[51] The title of the main character shifts here from Hasid to Tzaddik. This switch could be a feature of the manuscript or an indicator of multiple versions coming together, but the wordplay is interesting. Should we focus on the man's piety, or righteousness? Or are both essential to the kind of Jewish community that the Rabbis are trying to create? Both for the sake of clarity (and because this story is, at its core, about faith and piety) this commentary will refer to the main character as the Hasid.

With the cue of "ומעשה," the midrash indicates that we're transitioning from the primary biblical context to a more contemporary tale, while still remaining in the overall arc of narratives connected to Dibbur Sheni. This transition is representative of the style and structure of *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibberot*. In the Midrash, each Dibbur begins with the biblical text of the relevant commandment, and first offers summaries and interpretations of related biblical narratives. Then, the Midrash introduces post-biblical stories and new characters, individuals who are nuanced and very human, and are examples of people from whom we can learn. The first of these "real people" is the Hasid, a farmer whose land is being used for idol worship (people would come and worship at the carob tree[52] on his property). When we meet the Hasid, we quickly learn about his priorities and values: he notices the idol worship at the tree, worries that this idol worship is harming his crops, and asks his wife to cut down the tree in order to save the crops.

In this moment, the Hasid doesn't seem especially bothered by the theology of these people or the idol worship that they're engaging in; his primary motivation is the survival of his crops. He seems to think that the idol worship will destroy his seeds and therefore his livelihood. It's meaningful that the Hasid is instinctively drawing a connection between idol worship and material wealth – on a very basic level, he understands that idol worship is wrong and deserving of punishment. That said, he's not concerned about the idol

[52] In the Hasid's context, the practice of praying to any kind of tree was a form of idol worship, and there's also possible symbolism in the midrash's particular reference to carob tree. Not only does its "ח-ר-ב" root mean destroy/dry/sword (hinting that its presence will be dangerous for the Hasid), but the plant itself also appears elsewhere in Rabbinic Literature, symbolizing sustenance, deferred satisfaction, poverty, and punishment. These symbols of the carob could offer additional insight into the Hasid: 1) he already theoretically has all that he needs (the carob provides for all nutrition); yet 2) it's possible that the tree isn't flowering yet so he actually might be struggling; 3) because the carob is a symbol of poverty, the Hasid relying on it as his only sustenance could mean he's poor, and 4) he may need repentance. Taken together, the symbols present the Hasid as a case study of sorts: he's a normal man who's worried about money, and that makes him vulnerable and susceptible to idol worship.

worshippers – only the fact that their behavior affects him. The Hasid is no prophet. He's not interested in proclaiming God's oneness to the idol worshippers, but is willing to remove the facilitator of idol worship (the tree) in order to protect himself. It's not a particularly flattering characterization, and yet it is so realistic: in representing the Hasid in this way, the Rabbis show how unremarkable (and normally flawed) he is – any Jew reading this could very easily identify with his character. How many Jews might think that they are only responsible for themselves and their beliefs; anything else isn't their business. How many won't intervene or take a stand when they see fellow Jews doing wrong? This kind of individualist thinking is both ancient and contemporary – it was likely as much a feature of the Rabbis' context as it is ours. All of that said, the Hasid's individualistic outlook is not the focus of the story; the priority is to get him as an individual to prioritize God's oneness, and so the Rabbis' leave the question of communal responsibility unanswered.

הלך הוא לקצוץ את האילן ואמר לו: "אל תקצץ אותי ואני אתן לך דינר של זהב בכל יום," "אף על פי כן אקצץ אותו." יצא פעם אחרת ואמר לו: טול ממני שלשה זהובים בכל יום. הניחו והלך לביתו. יום שני חזר אצל האילן ומצא שם שלשה זהובים, עד שנתעשר אותו חסיד ובנה בתים וקנה עבדים ושפחות. והוא לא (ידע) (היה) יודע אותן שלשה זהובים מאין היא יוצאין. התחילו בניו ובנותיו ועבדיו למות.

He[53] went to cut [down] the tree and it said to him: "Don't cut me down, and I will give you a dinar of gold every day." "Nevertheless, I will cut it down." He went out another time and the tree said to him: "Take from me three pieces of gold every day." He left it, and went to his house. The next day he returned to the place of the tree, and found there three gold (pieces). When the same Hasid became rich, he built houses and purchased servants and female slaves. And he didn't know whence those same three gold (pieces) came. Then, his sons and his daughters, and his slaves began to die.

As the Hasid attempts to cut down the tree, the tree appeals to the Hasid's competing priorities by offering him money in exchange for its survival. We know that the Hasid seems primarily to take issue with the idol worship because it threatens his income. So, with the

[53] It's interesting that the Hasid initially outsources the job of cutting down the tree to his wife, though through a shift in pronouns or just an inconsistency in the text, it's actually he (the Hasid) who heads out to do the chopping.

promise of gold, he seems fine to allow the idol worship to continue. While there's some wavering back and forth on his part, once he gets the tree to pay three pieces of gold a day, the Hasid is fine to let the tree (and the idol worship) remain. In this, the Hasid's desire for wealth overtakes his faith and whatever commitment to preserving monotheism he has.

The tree offering the Hasid gold could serve as a parallel to a moment from earlier in the Dibbur when Nimrod's advisors offered Terach money in exchange for Abraham's life. Terach refused, on the grounds that money would be of no use without a son to inherit it. (He also cited a mashal, in which a mule was offered barley in exchange for his head, but he refused on the grounds that the barley would be of no use to him dead.) Underscoring the recurring theme of financial incentive for theological compromise serves to tie this section to the earlier Nimrod/Terach narrative. In the case of the Hasid, however, the consequences aren't quite so obviously deadly as a murdered son or a decapitated mule. That said, the tree's survival does guarantee the continuation of idol worship, which is a more spiritually dangerous loss. While the mule and Terach were strong enough to refuse the offers from those who sought to destroy them, the Hasid was not. And, then the consequences that were so obvious to Terach – the loss of his child – begin to befall the Hasid, as his children and slaves start dying.

In putting these three narratives in conversation with each other, a powerful commentary on money emerges. According to the Rabbis, money has no value if a person is physically or spiritually destroyed. And money can even be a source of further decline: in each story's case, the choice to accept money is positioned as a short-sighted or even dangerous decision. It served as a warning for their people, and for us too, to be vigilant

about the sacrifices that we're willing to make for money. According to the Rabbis, they're never worth it.

כיון שראה כך אמר: וכי בעל עבירות אני שמתו בני ועבדי? מה עשה? הלך הוא ואשתו לאותו אילן ומצאו בה אנשים משחקים תחתו, והוא לא שיחק עמהם ולא מצא הזהובים כמנהגו. בקש לקצץ את האילן, יצא שעיר אחד מן האילן, אמר: אין לך עוד עלי שכר. אמר לו: למה? אם היית משמח עם אותו אנשים ששמחו עמי היום היה לך שכר, עכשו לא שמחת עמהם עין לך עוד עלי שכר. עמד החסיד ובקש לקצץ האילן. אמר לו: אם אתה מקצץ אותי אני אהרוג אותך.

When he saw this, he said: Is it because I am sinful that my sons and workers died? What did he do? He and his wife[54] went to the same tree and found there people playing [worshipping] beneath it, and he didn't play [worship] with them, and he did not find the gold coins as he was accustomed. He sought to cut down the tree, and a demon came out from the tree and said: "You no longer have wealth because of me." He said to him: "Why?" "If you had rejoiced with the same people that rejoiced with me today, you would have wealth, now you did not rejoice with them, (so) you no longer have wealth due to me." The Hasid stood and sought to cut down the tree. It said to him: "If you cut me down, I will kill you."

Upon experiencing such misfortune, the Hasid immediately thinks to blame himself, and then moves directly from this self-questioning ("how did I sin?") to investigating the tree. This sequence in his thoughts and actions shows us that he intuits some connection between his misfortune and his decision to allow the tree to live. Even if he doesn't have definitive proof yet (and even if permitting idol worship wasn't an explicit part of the deal), he does recognize that there must be cosmic consequences to allowing idol worship to continue on his property. And, as has been the case since the beginning, the Hasid continues to refuse to participate in the idol worship happening around him. This shows us that the Hasid has some internal compass that keeps him from joining in – he's okay with permitting idol worship in his presence, but actually participating crosses a line for him. He's only thinking of himself, not about how his actions will impact or negatively influence others. His

[54] The Hasid's wife only appears twice in the narrative – first when the Hasid desires to cut down the tree, and now when the Hasid refuses to participate in idol worship. At these two moments, the Hasid resists the charms of the tree. Perhaps the text is suggesting that she's a good influence on him…

self-focused internal compass will show itself to be even stronger in the coming lines, as the pressure on him intensifies.

This pressure comes from the tree, and it comes from a more sinister place than the Hasid originally realized. We quickly learn that the tree deceived us and the Hasid – the Hasid thought he was only dealing with a tree, but it was actually a demon all along. As is appropriate for his newly revealed demonic nature, the demon also changes the terms of the agreement with the Hasid. At first, the Hasid would receive payment if he left the tree standing (passively allowing idol worship, though not participating in it). But now, in order to receive the wealth he so desires, the Hasid is required to worship the tree himself. The demon's final threat shows how swiftly the stakes can change: all of a sudden, the Hasid's desire to avoid idol worship will come with the risk of death.

This progression is significant, and it could be the Rabbis' way of demonstrating the slippery slope of living among idolators. At first, a Jew might be able to passively avoid idol worship (or Christianity or Islam), even if it's "in the air," or in their surroundings. But, sooner or later, they will get caught up in it, and will be expected – or even required – to join in. And, it's entirely possible that that requirement could come with the threat of death. Perhaps the Rabbis are suggesting that their people should avoid this challenging situation altogether, and distance themselves from any idol-worshipping influences.

מיד נכנס החסיד אצל סנהדרין וסיפר להם את המעשה. אמרו לו: מכור כל מה שהיה מאותן דינרי זהב והחזר אותם לו לקצץ את האילן. הלך ועשה כן, ונטל קרדום אחד ובקש לקצץ את האילן. יצא השעיר כנגדו ואמר לו: חסיד, טול ממני שלשה זהובים בכל יום ואל תקצץ אותי. אמר החסיד: אם תתן לי אלפים זהובים בכל יום איני מניחך עד שאקצץ אותך. מיד ברח השעיר וקצץ החסיד את האילן וחזר לביתו. וזרע אותו שדה, באותו שנה יצאו ממנו אלף כורים. ועוד מצא באותו שדה, כשהיה חורש אותו, מטמון שהיה טומן באותו מקום שהאילן מונח שם, להודיעך שכל העושה דבר לכבודו של הב״ה מכפיל לו שכרו.

Immediately, the Hasid entered the Sanhedrim, and explained what occurred to them. They said to him: "Sell whatever you bought with the gold dinars and return it, and (then) you [can] cut down the tree." He did so, and grasped an axe, and sought to cut down the tree.

The demon came out against him and said to him: "Hasid, take from me three pieces of gold each day, [and] don't cut me down." The Hasid said, "[Even] if you would give me one thousand gold pieces every day, I would [still] not leave you alone until I cut you down." Immediately, the demon fled, and the Hasid cut down the tree and returned to his house. And he planted the field, and in the same year 1000 kurs[55] [of grain] came from it. And when he plowed it, there was hidden in that very spot where the tree was a treasure, to tell you that everyone who does something to honor the Holy One of Being would double his reward.

While the Hasid has certainly strayed from the Second Commandment in allowing idol worship to happen on his property, the Rabbis are careful to describe just how possible it is to return to the right path. They include Rabbinic guidance and clear steps for repentance, showing any straying readers that they, too, are capable of return.

In the Hasid's moment of greatest need, the Sanhedrin – the legendary council of wise Jews in the Rabbis' collective imagination – appear to advise him. It's significant that they show up to provide guidance here: it shows readers that they need not navigate the pressures of idol worship alone; they have their religious leaders and community there to support them. For the Rabbis, this is an important message to convey to Jews who might be feeling religiously confused or alone in their dispersion. While the appearance of communal elders feels almost magical in the text, the near-instantaneous presence of the Sanhedrin could communicate just how helpful and available the Rabbis hope to be for their people. A Jew struggling with the pressures of being a religious minority could take comfort in this, and might start to think differently about how to strengthen their Jewish identity. Jewish individuals today can also benefit from the wisdom and strength of our Jewish communities – not just wise elders of the Sanhedrin, but the many organizations and institutions whose sole purpose is to support Jews on their educational, familial, and spiritual journeys. Representatives of these sorts of modern-day Sanhedrins (that is, rabbis, cantors, educators,

[55] The 1000 kurs of grain could be a parallel to the donkey story from earlier in the Dibbur. This creates a pattern that teaches readers that, if they

and Jewish communal leaders) ought to recognize the power they have to do good – just feeling like you're not alone can make a world of difference in a person's life.

And, the members of the Sanhedrin aren't just symbolic characters: they provide the Hasid with real practical advice. He needs to repent, an action that will require him to renounce all that he gained due to his complicity by selling whatever he was able to buy with his ill-gotten gold and returning it. It's a straightforward and sensible corrective, showing that it's not all that complicated or difficult to return to the right path. If a person repents for their wrongdoing, and repairs the harm that they have done, then they can rejoin their community. The steps in repenting aren't always spelled out as clearly as in this case of a consulting Sanhedrin, but the underlying principles are transferable. True repentance can only be achieved when an individual identifies the different decisions along the way that caused them to do harm, and then they address those different behaviors. The Hasid couldn't just chop down the tree – he had to grapple with the fact that he was tempted by money, and had to deal with the consequences of giving it back.

However, the demon's cruel response to the Hasid's sincere attempt at repentance does indicate that the way to return is not necessarily smooth. When the demon tells the Hasid that he will kill him, it reflects a real danger for the Rabbis – in the Middle Ages, not complying with the demands of the surrounding power could result in death.

As the Hasid tries to fix his mistake, the demon retorts with the same greedy request that the Hasid used at the beginning. It's possibly a mocking reminder of how low the Hasid had stooped before, but the Hasid doesn't take the bait. Instead, he actually doubles down on his mission, and appears even more steadfast in his rejection of his idol worship. Whereas

earlier, three coins was enough for him to turn a blind eye, he announces that not even a thousand could buy out his faith today.

The demon has preyed on the Hasid's greed, insecurity, and fear, but now that it is gone and has been replaced with steadfast faith, the demon is rendered powerless, and flees. This could show that Jews should not fear – the "demons" that surround them (which could be coercive governments, or critical and denigrating Christians and Muslims) are full of empty threats. If the Jews just stick to their principles and stand up for themselves, those external pressures and threats will flee and disappear. With the demon gone, the Hasid can chop down the tree and return to his house, a scene that symbolizes his spiritual journey as well: after a treacherous dalliance with idol worship, the Hasid has returned home to God. The Hasid has somehow found his courage, and as if to show the extent of his growth, he uses the field – a location that had previously been for idol worship – to instead worship God. He cuts down the blasphemous tree and tills and tends God's earth. It's a complete transition for the Hasid, as he develops from surrendering to the promises of wealth, to rejecting those promises, to being rewarded for his rejection.

The Hasid's story is a story of an average person who is rewarded for his faith in God. And, part of being an average person includes making mistakes. The Hasid's journey tells readers that it's possible to have doubts and even stray from your faith in God, so long as you eventually come around to the right side. The Hasid was initially punished for his collusion with the demon and the related idol worship, but as soon as he rediscovered his faith and committed to it (even at great personal risk), he was redeemed and rewarded. It's an important lesson for the rabbis' context – being surrounded by the overwhelming presence and influence of Christianity and Islam was probably very difficult for Jews, and many

outwardly embraced their customs. And yet, this story proves that a single error in judgment doesn't need to be the end. Just like the Hasid, we can find our way back to faith.

The Folk Healer

מעשה ביהודי אחד חגר , ששמע אומר שהיה עבודה זרה במקום אחד, שכל חגר שהיה מהלך לשם מיד הוא הולך. אמר אותו יהודי: אלך לשם אולי ארפא. הלך לשם ולן לשם לילה אחד עם שאר בעלי מומין. ויהי בחצי הלילה כשהיו כלם ישנים, אותו יהודי היה נעור וראה שד אחד שיוצא מן הכותל ובידו פך של שמן. והיה סך את החולים והניח את היהודי.

The story of a lame Jew, who heard it said that there was idol worship in a place, where every lame [disabled] person who would go there would immediately walk. The Jew said: I will go there and maybe I will be healed. He went there and stayed there one night with the other disabled individuals. And it happened in the middle of the night when they were all sleeping, the Jew stirred and saw a demon coming out of the wall, and in his hand was a cruse of oil. And he would anoint the sick, but left the Jew alone.

With the transitional language of מעשה, the midrash moves to the next narrative. Again, it features a story about an ordinary person, with ordinary challenges (disability) and ordinary desires (healing). Like the Hasid of the previous section, the main character here will be a person with whom people can identify. This prevailing literary strategy of this part of the midrash – that is, using ordinary characters to deconstruct and normalize ordinary failings – makes the spiritual dilemmas and challenges in question relatable and personal. The Rabbis aren't featuring a perfectly pious person whose example is far beyond human reach, nor are they exaggerating an evil caricature of people. This tell us that in the midrash, as in life, wavering occasionally in one's faith is treated as normal and expected. We shouldn't be ashamed of slipping up or falling short. With the fragility of the human ego in mind, we can understand how strategic this approach of using normal, flawed characters is: readers are much more likely to be open to learning from the example of someone to whom they feel similar.

The ordinary person, in this case, is the lame Jew, who is willing to venture into an environment of idolatry[56] in order to be healed. Hearing of idol worship in a certain place, the disabled Jew goes there. His desire for healing overtakes his faith in God, which also serves as a parallel to the tale of the Hasid, who prioritized wealth over God. In both cases, these competing priorities make sense: a person would seek wealth to support their family; of course, an ill person would seek health and healing. Once again, by including such human impulses, the Rabbis illustrate that they understand the moral dilemmas that their people are facing. They do not villainize these people for their choices, rather they point out that, even in such difficult dilemmas, we are capable of choosing the right path.

The parallels continue with the arrival of a demon, who appears in the middle of the night. As in the story of the Hasid, where the tree turns into a demon, the outside evil force takes the shape of a demon here as well. Using demonology is an important writing strategy for the rabbis in our text. Instead of openly referring to the populations or religions that are a challenge to the Jews (Christianity/Christians and Islam/Muslims), the rabbis represent these external pressures in one mythical being: the demon. It's a safe choice not to openly call out or criticize those religious forces, but still effective – the Rabbis trust that those who read these midrashim will know the demon's implied symbolism.

When the demon appears, it anoints the sick people surrounding the lame Jew, though not the Jew himself. Anat Shapira compares this to a similar story within the New Testament, in which Jesus offered miraculous healing after anointing the ill with oil (John 5:1-18).[57] This midrash, therefore, could be a reaction to the story of Jesus; whereas the demon was a subtle

[56] It's not clear whether the Jew will be expected to participate in the idol worship, but that omission may actually be significant – the Rabbis aren't only concerned about participation in idol worship, they're also wary of proximity to idol worship.
[57] Shapira, p. 47

nod to outside religions and the inclusion of anointing could be a more pointed reference to Christianity. Additionally, the fact that the Jew doesn't receive oil from the demon could serve as a warning to Jews who are curious about or beginning to believe in Jesus – just as the idolatrous healing is not for the Jew in the story, the idolatry of Jesus is off-limits for the Jews of their communities.

אמר לו היהודי: ואותי מפני לא סכת? אמר לו: וכי אין יהודי אתה? למה באת בכאן? וכי יהודי הולך לעבודה זרה? אין אתה יודע שעבודה זרה אין בו ממש? אלא לכך אני מטעה אותם, כדי שיחזקו אותם בטעותם ולא יהא להם חלק לעולם הבא. ואתה שחייב לקוץ בעבודה זרה ולעמוד ולהתפלל לפני הב״ה שירפאך, תדע: למחר היה זמנך להרפא ובעבור שעשית זאת לא תמצא רפואה לעולם. לכך לא יבטח[58] אדם אלא בהב״ה שהוא חי וקיים.

The Jew said to him: "And why didn't you anoint me?" He said: "Aren't you a Jew? Why did you come here? Why would a Jew go to a place of idol worship? Don't you know that idol worship is baseless? But for that I misled them all, so that they would be more fixed in their evil ways and they would not have a part of the World to Come. And you who needs to loathe idol worship and stand and pray before God to heal you, know [this]: Tomorrow was your time to be healed, and because you've done this, you will never find healing." Therefore, no one should trust in anything except for The Holy One of Being, who lives and endures.

The Jew is disappointed that he's not included in the anointing, which makes sense – despite the allusion to Jesus, anointing was both a Jewish and Christian ritual. In the Torah, anointing had cleansing purposes, and was used to declare priestly status, make a covenant, and heal a leper. In this narrative, therefore, anointing serves as an example of the shared history and at times spiritual gray area between Jews and Christians. The Jew may be putting his faith in a Jewish practice, but it's in a decidedly non-Jewish context, which demonstrates the tension that Jews might have felt as religious minorities.

It is the demon who reminds the Jew of his Jewishness, and he does so with harsh language of rebuke. He questions the Jew's identity as he reminds him of it ("Aren't you a Jew?"), his motivations ("Why did you come here?"), and then in a remarkable moment of

[58] The root of ב-ט-ח appears again here, mirroring its use during the Abraham narrative. Its return serves as a reminder that faith in God is critical, and it is the essential foundation of the second commandment.

candor, points out the futility of his plan ("Don't you know that idol worship is baseless?"). Finally, the demon admits to his duplicity ("I misled them all, so that they would be more fixed in their evil ways"), which is a damning representation of outside religions. They may be appealing and attractive, but ultimately, these religions pull Jews further away from their divine purpose, and any yielding to this temptation will have serious consequences. For the Rabbis, the concern isn't only about turning toward another faith, but also about turning away from Judaism.

It's interesting to hear this vitriolic and critical content from a demon, but again, it could be the safest way for the rabbis to communicate their ideology. It's much more palatable to hear that kind of criticism from a mythical non-Jewish creature than from a rabbi, for example. Even though the authorship of this character is technically Rabbinic, there's rhetorical strength in placing these ideas in the mouth of the enemy. Beyond strategy, however, this approach of having the demon as the truth-teller also offers insight into the lived experiences of Jews – it shows us that sometimes it takes people and experiences outside of the individual to remind us to rely on or turn toward God. This theory is beautifully borne out in contemporary interfaith work, for example. When people come together despite their religious differences, the process of communicating across those lines of difference can actually build deeper religious identity for each individual. Instead of viewing it as a threat, engagement with other faith traditions and seeing the breadth of religious expression can actually be an opportunity to discern (and affirm) that which is most important to us.

After the demon admonishes the Jew, he reveals a piece of devastating irony: the lame Jew allegedly would have been healed if he'd only waited and trusted God's timeline.

Now, he will be never find healing. The implication in this revelation is that part of the power of faith comes from its consistency. The Jew can't pick or choose when to believe in God, because he'll never know when his belief (or lack thereof) will have serious consequences – to receive the rewards of faith in God, his faith has to be constant. It makes sense for the Rabbis to share this outlook. For them, any sort of religious experimentation could be harmful to the cohesion and unity of the Jewish community. It's interesting, though, that this story immediately follows the Hasid and the Tree. Whereas the Hasid made a mistake and lost direction for a time, he was able to repent and restore himself. There's no such option for the lame Jew here. It's a much less optimistic narrative, and more threatening to a reader. The harshness here could come from the fact that in the preceding story, the Hasid was a passive enabler of idolatry, whereas in this story, the Jew is actively seeking out participation in idol worship. Even if both are bad, the Rabbis are suggesting that one behavior is worse.

The demon explains what the Jew should have done instead: he "needs to loathe idol worship and stand and pray before God that you will be healed." This demonic explanation shows that there are different standards for Jews than for other people, and these behaviors (like rejecting idol worship and praying to God) are part of what it means to be in covenant with God. These expectations are well-known in the world – even by demons! – and in order to achieve redemption every Jew needs to live with the awareness of and belief in a source of healing in the world. Even through the demon's words, the Rabbis are detailing exactly what their tradition demands from their Jewish community and shows them the right path. While organizationally and communally sensible (the Rabbis need to communicate clear expectations of behavior), this declaration is theologically challenging. Do they really believe

that with enough faith and prayer, physical healing will come from God? It may be that God is an embodiment of healing, even if it doesn't always manifest itself.

Today, we know that all too often, that doesn't happen, and even the most pious and devoted people do get sicker and weaker and die. In fact, leaning too heavily on this imperfect outlook could be why the Jew turned to idol worship in the first place: maybe he did pray fervently and saw no results. As rabbis today, we need to be careful about the promises we make and the theology that we offer, particularly related to illness and healing. While spiritual strength could come from being in relationship with God, physical healing comes more directly from doctors, medicine, and scientific advancements. Drawing distinction between the two – as well as noting the ways they can complement each other – is essential. While the midrash offers the Lame Jew rebuke instead of compassion, we know there are other ways to respond to someone in crisis. It's worth noting that this harshness comes from a demon – perhaps a community member or a loved one would know better, and could offer understanding, comfort, and guidance.

The story of the lame Jew concludes with the following summary from the rabbis, who assert*, no one should trust in anything except for The Holy One of Being, who lives and endures.* This teaching acknowledges there will likely be temptations and roadblocks along the Jewish journey, but the enduring promise is that faith in God will ultimately reveal itself to be most essential. There is a force in the universe that can make for healing. God isn't going anywhere. Whereas there may be other distractions, it is only God who "lives and endures," and our best (and only) option is to remain with God.

Miriam and Her Sons

ומעשה במרים בת תנחום שנשבית הוא ושבע בניה, והביאום לפני קיסר המלך. ואמר קיסר לגדול שבהם: עבוד עבודה זרה. אמר לו: איני כופר באלהי שכתב לנו לא תשתחוה לאל אחר (שמות לד, יד). הוציאו והרגו.

The story of Miriam, the daughter of Tanchum,[59] and [S]he and her seven sons were captured, and they were brought before Caesar the King. And Caesar said to the eldest of them: Observe idol worship. He said to him: "I will not deny my God, as it is written for us: 'You must not worship any other God'" (Exodus 34:14). He took him and killed him.

This final vignette in Dibbur Sheni somewhat circles back to where we began, with a family drama. Whereas Abraham and Terach struggled over their diverging theological beliefs, Miriam and her seven sons demonstrate shared belief and a unity in purpose. This narrative features each of Miriam's seven sons refusing to bow to Caesar, despite the threat of death. And, it also showcases Miriam's piety, as she encourages the sons to maintain their faith. In contrast to Abraham and Terach, there is real religious cohesion among the family, and yet, it has a tragic ending: each of the seven sons and their mother die. However, the Rabbis both praise and glorify their choices, suggesting that unity and faith – even at risk of death – is preferable to the fractured theology of Terach's house.

The central conflict of the tale is the imprisonment and testing of the family at the hands of Caesar, the King. Each son is brought before Caesar, who demands idol worship from him. Each son refuses, citing a unique verse taken in part from the 10 Commandments that declares their faith in the one true God, and is killed for his response. This fictionalized conflict likely reveals a real fear of the Rabbis, that their people may have to face a religious inquisition from the surrounding Christians or Muslims, whoever had the coercive power of the moment. At the same time, they may have imagined a similar kind of interaction could have happened in situations of much lower stakes, maybe in a conversation with a neighbor

[59] Shapira, p. 48: Miriam bat Tanchum is a character that appears in many other places in Rabbinic literature, and there are many parallels to this story elsewhere.

or a low-level government official. The Rabbis may have sought to prepare their people for any kind of demand on their faith, and by including such a dramatic series of events, they were declaring that regardless of circumstance, loyalty to God must endure.

The cycle of events begins with the first son, whom the Caesar orders to "observe idol worship" (that is, to perform idol worship). Refusing, the son responds with a verse from Exodus 34:14 – "You must not worship any other God." This verse comes from Exodus 34, which is several chapters *after* the revelation of the 10 Commandments (Exodus 20). Though the second son will immediately reference Exodus 20, it's interesting to be starting in a slightly different place. The context in Exodus 34 is very different from the context in Exodus 20. In Exodus 34, God and Moses are reeling from the betrayal of the Golden Calf. The tone of this verse, then, is tense and even threatening – God is cautioning the Israelites not to worship anyone or anything else, because God is vengeful. This verse is born out of a failure of faith, a mistake that the first son will not repeat. By using this verse, the first son is announcing that he will not worship idols out of recognition that it's wrong, and out of his fear of God's vengeance. This is the first argument against Caesar, but it is quickly followed by six others.

קרא לשני ואמר לו כן, אמר לו: איני כופר באלהי שכתב לנו אנכי י אלהיך (שמות כ, ב). הוציאו והרגו. קרא לשלישי ואמר לו כן, אמר לו: איני כופר באלהי שכתב לנו לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על פני (שמות כ, ג). הוציאו והרגו. קרא לרביעי ואמר לו כן, אמר לו: איני כופר באלהי שכתב לנו לא תשתחוה להם ולא תעבדם (שמות כ, ה). הוציאו והרגו. קרא לחמשי ואמר לו כן, אמר לו: איני כופר באלהי שכתב לנו כי יי הוא האלהים ואין עוד (דברים ד, לה). הוציאו והרגו. {קרא לששי ואמר לו כן, אמר לו: איני כופר באלהי שכתב לנו שמע ישראל וגו (דברים ו, ד) הוציאו והרגו.}

He called for the second, and said the same to him, and he said: "I will not deny my God, who wrote for us, "I Adonai am your God" (Exodus 20:2).[60] *He took him out and killed him.*

[60] ***"I Adonai am your God** who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2)* – Now we've arrived at the 10 Commandments, and this verse and the two that follow come from this same moment of revelation in the biblical narrative. In addition to beginning the 10 Commandments (and therefore, we're not yet in Dibur Sheni), this verse establishes God's relationship with the Israelites. God is their God because God was/is their salvation, and the subsequent commandments are grounded in the promises and

He called for the third, and said the same, and he said, "I will not deny my God, as it is written for us, "You shall have no other gods besides Me" (Exodus 20:3).[61] *He took him out and killed him. He called for the fourth, and said the same to him, and he said: "I will not deny my God, as it is written to us, "You shall not bow down to them nor serve them" (Exodus 20:5).*[62] *He took him out and killed him. He called for the fifth and said the same to him, and he said: "I will not deny my God, as it is written for us, "That Adonai alone is God, there is none else" (Deuteronomy 4:35).*[63] *He took him out and killed him. {He called for the sixth and said the same to him, and he said: I will not deny my God, as it is written for us, "Hear O Israel, etc." (Deuteronomy 6:4).*[64] *He took him and he killed him.}*

Caesar's interrogation continues for brothers two through six, with near-identical outcomes. Caesar continues to "say the same," and the brothers continue to refuse, though they cite different verses in their refusals. And, each brother is put to death. Both the

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partnership between God and the Israelites. By using this verse, the second son is invoking this relationship – this son will never agree to worship idols because he is loyal to his God, the same God who took his ancestors out of Egypt.

[61] *"**You shall have no other gods besides Me**." (Exodus 20:3*) –This is the opening verse of the 2nd Commandment (which includes 4 verses, Exodus 20:3-6), and also the opening verse of our midrash on Dibbur Sheni. We're still in the biblical context of revelation, and have transitioned from the special relationship between the Israelites and God, to God's singularity. It is the certainty of divine one-ness that the third son calls upon in his rejection of idol worship.

[62] *"**You shall not bow down to them nor serve them**. For I your God Adonai am a vengeful God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me" (Exodus 20:5)* – We're still in Commandment 2, though this verse has echoes of Exodus 34:14, which the first brother used. Admittedly, this response doesn't add so much to the conversation with Caesar, though it does clarify the fourth brother's boundaries – he will not bow down nor serve any other God. And, because the rest of the verse (as in 34:14) includes the threats of vengeance, that could also be part of the fourth son's response – no, he will not bow nor serve because God will not only punish him, but his descendants.

[63] *"You have been shown to know that **Adonai alone is God, there is none else**."(Deuteronomy 4:35)* – For this verse, we jump all the way ahead to Deuteronomy. We haven't yet arrived at the reiteration of the 10 Commandments, but we are about to (just 20 verses later, in Deuteronomy 5:6-18). Our verse and the chapter immediately before are setting the stage for this restatement of commandments, as Moses extensively prepares the Israelites for re-listening to the Decalogue: he pre-emptively reminds them not only of their history with God, but also of what will happen if they don't listen closely enough. The verse of 4:35 manages to capture this entire idea – "you have been shown" (that is, the Exodus and these decades in Egypt have proven to you) that Adonai alone is God; therefore, act accordingly. While the meaning of "Adonai alone is God, there is none else" in this verse might ostensibly seem similar to the third son ("You shall have no other gods besides Me"), this verse actually seems theologically stronger. After decades of evidence, not only should the Israelites not <u>have</u> other Gods, but they know definitively that there <u>are</u> no other Gods. While the third son made a statement about normative behavior, the fifth son has taken it a step further, and made a statement about theology.

[64] *"**Hear, O Israel**! Adonai is our God, Adonai is one."(Deuteronomy 6:4)* – This verse comes after the repetition of the 10 Commandments, and after Moses's encouragement (again) that they carefully observe them. The sixth son has offered the essence of Judaism in one line. While the other verses were powerful, they were all shaped by the implied context – God's salvation, God's vengeance, the existence or not of other gods, etc. – all of that helped the sons explain why they wouldn't worship idols. In contrast, the sixth son's response doesn't have any of that – he's simply announcing that he will not worship idols because God is his God, and the only God.

repetition and variety of these scenes is significant: the Rabbis could have just said, "Each son refused and was killed until all six sons were killed," yet they chose to describe each son's story in detail. This demonstrates the Rabbis' belief in the value of the individual – each person's response mattered to them. Perhaps it was because they believed that of the sons was able to add more of God's presence into the world through their individual encounter, and perhaps they wanted to show how the Jewish community would honor every person who stood up to Christianity and Islam. Being a person of faith and remaining true to a belief in a difficult time is rewarded – there is no monolithic treatment of martyrs, just individual reverence.

Similar analysis applies to the text's choice to use different verses for each son's response. The depth and breadth of these biblical citations first tells us just how intrinsic and all-encompassing the monotheistic belief in God is to our people. In their moments of panic, each son could rattle off a different quote about God's oneness and sovereignty, ending with the proclamation of Sh'ma. Additionally, the verses all generate somewhat different rationales for their refusal, which again shows that belief in God is not monolithic, but dynamic and many-sided. In the footnotes, there's deeper analysis of each verse in its context, but together, the verses serve to make the following arguments about God (in order from second to sixth son): they are loyal to God because God took them out of Egypt and redeemed them from bondage; they believe that there are no other Gods; they know that they (and their descendants) will be punished by God for idol worship; their lived experience has shown them that God is one, and; finally, God is their God. The verses all lead to the same essential point, but the variety of textual reference points literarily conveys the variety of

paths to piety. Regardless of reason and biblical context, the Israelites and the sons maintain their faith in God.

קרא לשביעי קטן ואומר לו כן, אמר לו: אלך ואתייעץ באמי. אמר לו: לך. הלך ונתיעץ באמו. אמר לו: אמי, מה אעשה? אמרה לו: תרצה שאחיך ישבו במחיצת בוראם ואתה תשב בחוץ? אל תשמע לו לאותו רשע ואל תפרוש מאחיך. הלך אצל קיסר. אמר לו: מה תעשה? ענה לו: איני כופר באלהי שכתיב בו את י אלהיך האמרת היום ויי האמירך (דברים כו, יז-יח). אמר לו: אשליך לך טבעתי שבו צלם וכרע לו ותפשהו, כדי שיאמרו רצוני עשית. אמר לו: אוי לך קיסר, לכבודך כן לכבוד הב״ה על אחת כמה וכמה שאני חייב לכבודו. הוציאוהו והרגוהו.

He called for the seventh, the youngest one, and said the same to him, and he said, "I will go and I will consult with my mother." He said to him: "Go." He went and he consulted with his mother. He said to [her]: "Mother, what should I do?" She said to him: "Do you want your brothers to dwell under the protection of their creator, and you will reside outside? Don't listen to this evil one, and don't separate yourself from your brothers." He went to the Caesar, who said to him: "What will you do?" He answered him: "I will not deny my God, about whom it is written, 'Adonai, your God, You have affirmed today' 'And Adonai has affirmed you' (Deuteronomy 26:17-18).[65] He said to him: I will send you my ring, upon which is an image; you will bow to it and grasp it, so that they will all say you did my will. He said to him: "Woe is you, Caesar, to honor you thusly; [but] to honor The Holy One of Being, all the more so that I am obliged to honor God." They took him out and killed him.

When Caesar finally confronts the seventh and youngest son, the pattern is disrupted. Instead of straightaway responding in the manner of his brothers, he turns to his mother, who guides him. Despite an implied personal interest in his survival, Miriam suggests martyrdom. She seems to believe that, despite their murder, her sons are being cared for by God. And, she may even believe that they are closer to God because of the circumstances under which they died. Miriam wants her last son to be protected in this same way, and doesn't want him to different from his brothers or to be outside of the protection that they will get, so she advocates for this course of action.

There's an implied element of faith here (she believes that he will be rewarded for refusing to participate in idol worship), but her words seem to be more about her son's fate in the afterlife, as opposed to what his tradition and his community (and his God) demand of

him. Whereas her other sons/his brothers refused to worship idols because of their sense of obligation to God (their prooftexts said as much), Miriam actually doesn't rely on a prooftext or turn to Jewish law: her focus is on protecting and preserving her family. The difference is small, especially because she arrives at the same point, but it's an interesting supplement to the other brothers' rationale and is an approach that might speak to less learned or textually-literate readers. Her approach to this dilemma entails a sense of preserving the whole family under God's protection. Admittedly, the fact that she is a woman (and a mother) may play into the way her perspective is represented: if the Rabbis were considering that women could hear these stories too, they may have wanted to offer a more family-oriented and less textual argument for piety. Either way, Miriam's intervention and advice play decisive roles here, and ultimately determine the seventh son's response (her feminine and maternal influence is somewhat typical of this midrashic collection, which occasionally highlights the role of women, especially mothers).

Despite also rejecting Caesar's demands, the seventh son's response is slightly different. The prooftext that he uses comes from the end of Chapter 26 of Deuteronomy, a chapter that focuses on how the Israelites are to express gratitude to God for their blessings. These instructions conclude with the two lines that the seventh son offers in his rejection of idol worship. In contrast to the verses that the other sons used, which were more one-directional (the sons proclaimed their faith in God), this verse demonstrates a much more symbiotic and covenantal relationship between God and the Israelites. In Chapter 26 overall, God gives blessings, so the Israelites tithe and take care of the vulnerable; in verses 17 and 18, the Israelites affirm God, and God affirms the Israelites. Perhaps Miriam's rationale is reflected in the seventh son's prooftext: he is committed to God and God alone because he

knows God is committed to him, to his family, and to his people. Because he feels safe in God's love and in God's promised protection (according to his mother), he is able to maintain and proclaim his faith.

אמרה להם אמם: בבקשה מכם הניחו לי לנשוק את בני. וכן עשו. אמרה לבניה: אמרו לאברהם אביכם שלא יגביה לבו בבן אחד שנעקד לשמים, שאני יש לי שבעה בנים כלם עקודים והרוגים. והפילה עצמה מן הגג ומתה. יצתה בת קול ואמרה: אם הבנים שמחה (תהלים קיג, ט).

Their mother said to them: "Please [I ask] from you, let me kiss my son." And they did. She said to her sons: "[They] said to Abraham, your father, that his heart should not be lifted when one son was sacrificed to the heavens, as I have seven sons, and all of them were sacrificed and killed." And she threw herself from the roof and died. A bat kol emerged and said: "A happy mother of children" (Psalms 113:9).

As Miriam mourns over her youngest son, she references Abraham's[66] example, perhaps in an attempt to comfort herself by placing herself in his company. Like Abraham, who was prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac out of devotion to God, Miriam, too, is a parent who placed faith in God above her children's lives. And, similar to Abraham who was commanded not to be uplifted at the death of his son, Miriam, too, refuses any sort of uplift or glory, literally throwing herself down from a roof. Due to her sacrifice, she, like Abraham, is placed among the great people, regarded as a "happy mother of children." Placing Abraham and Miriam in conversation with each other could be the Rabbis' way of suggesting that like Abraham, Miriam presented an exemplary model of faith in God, even if she wasn't necessarily a character whom the Rabbis expected Jews to perfectly emulate.[67] In the sheer passion and sacrifice of her choices, they presented something aspirational, an example of

[66] In addition to his prominence as the main story of the midrash, we also see Abraham modeling monotheism and cursing the people in Babel, and we have this reference to him sacrificing his son (modeling faith in God). He continues to be a through line of the midrash, and a paragon of what it means to "have no other gods besides Me."

[67] That said, Jews taking their own lives rather than being killed by external forces was tragically not completely rare, especially in the context of the Middle Ages and during the Crusades.

how the leadership of a home can matter just as much as leadership of a people. Abraham becomes "our father," after all.

Calling Miriam a "happy mother of children" is an ironic and seemingly strange choice, but looking at the rest of this verse from Psalms helps it make sense. As part of a list of all that God is capable of, the Psalmist concludes: "He sets the barren woman among her household as a happy mother of children. Hallelujah." This suggests that God's power is so great that even someone without children can feel happy, as though she has children. In Miriam's case, even though she is now childless (and dead too), God's reward for her is that she still feels the joy of being a "happy mother of children." Her being a mother of children could also be a reference to the future children of Israel, whose endurance is made possible by her faith. Mothers can be the keys to Jewish survival; the ways they raise their children allow them to become seeds for the Jewish future.

Additionally, when accounting for the historical context of this midrash, it's possible that this narrative could be a rabbinic response to the tragedies of the Crusades – it would have been a very powerful text for mothers who had lost children to violence. In promising reward and eternal protection from God, this narrative could be fortifying for relatives of victims of the Crusades, those who were murdered because they refused to convert.

While Miriam and her family are positioned as paragons of piety, their story *is* incredibly troubling in its violence, and again, the Rabbis likely weren't advocating for Jews to imitate her and pursue of martyrdom. However, the midrash's messages about the importance of family unity and the responsibility family members have for each other endure. It's beautiful that the argument that Miriam offers her seventh son has less to do with God and more to do with family and protection – there are many reasons to trust in God, and

the love of family could be an expression of that trust realized. Because it comes from a woman and is centered on the family, this could be read as a more "feminine" perspective on religious commitment, but it is no less powerful because of that. In fact, by including this story, the Rabbis add diversity and nuance to the ways Jews can have faith in God.

The Conclusion of the Dibbur: Monotheism as an Essential Jewish Obligation

ולכך יהיו כל ישראל מוזהרין ביראתו של הב״ה כדי שיזכה עם הצדיקים בגן עדן. אמר הב״ה: הודו שמי בגוים שעל כן פזרתי אתכם בגוים למען תספרו נפלאותי בהם. מיד פתחו ואמרו: שמע ישראל י אלינו יי אחד (דברים ו, ד). כמו שכתב: לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על פני (שמות כ, ג).

For this reason, all of Israel are warned concerning the fear of The Holy One of Being, in order that they will merit with the righteous in The Garden of Eden. The Holy One of Being said: "Praise my name amongst the nations. For this reason I scattered you all among the nations so that you would tell of my wonders to them." Immediately they opened [their mouths] and proclaimed: "Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4). As it is written: "You shall have no other gods besides Me" (Exodus 20:3).

As the midrash transitions from Miriam's story to the conclusion of the Dibbur, the language of divine reward for faith continues here. However, it extends beyond the context of her specific story. Given that Miriam's faith was rewarded with the status of a "happy mother of children;" we learn that the corresponding reward for all of Israel will be admission to the Garden of Eden. This expansion of subject allows Miriam's story to extend beyond just the individual familial narrative, which is especially significant as we near the end of the Dibbur. Referring to the consequences/rewards for "all of Israel" could serve a reminder to readers that the midrash they've been reading wasn't just a series of stories – its teachings were meant to inspire and educate all Jews.

The importance of this conclusion is underscored by imagined words from God – the only time, other than in Abraham's story, that God speaks in the whole Dibbur. This divine dialogue provides detail about the Jewish people's purpose: their dispersal is for the sake of

spreading God's praise among the other nations.[68] This rationale would have been especially meaningful for the Jewish communities the Rabbis were writing for – all of whom were living in exile in the time of this midrash's composition. Dispersal, in this case, is not punishment or a symbol of divine indifference, but an opportunity for Jews to further exult God's presence and role in their lives.

The response to God's announcement of Jewish responsibility is immediate: "they" (presumably the children of Israel) proclaim the Sh'ma – Deuteronomy 6:4. Interestingly, this verse is the same prooftext that the sixth son used. Using it here not only serves to link Miriam's story to the conclusion, but also demonstrates the impact of one person's faith on others. The example set by Miriam and her sons has lasting consequences and far-reaching influence – it has the potential to inspire the doubters in their community and beyond to proclaim their own faith in God. Emphasizing this link to Miriam's sixth son also adds a more personal dimension to the Jewish responsibility that God declared earlier. The aforementioned "all of Israel" who must praise God goes beyond the communal – the individual should be like the sixth son and take on responsibility, because each person is uniquely capable of influencing others to turn toward God.

Albeit subtle, this focus on the individual's impact continues the earlier stories' motif of individual spiritual journeys (the Hasid, the Lame Jew, and now the sixth son). While the Dibbur began with Abraham, it is ending with regular people. As discussed earlier, it was helpful for the Rabbis to feature both "superheroes"/extra-pious models (which Abraham

[68] This "scattering" is a reference back to the Babel story, which links the individual stories together. However, there's a little bit of revisionist history – God didn't scatter the people so that they would proclaim his wonders, but did so as punishment for their idol worship, loss of faith, and arrogance. That said, these words still serve to underscore God's power.

was) as well as representations for how regular people act. Ending on this note, therefore, is a powerful statement of how each person can take the call of the commandment to heart.

With the words of the Sh'ma, all of Israel accepts God's oneness and sovereignty. The Dibbur then closes right where it opened, with the assertion that there are no other gods but God. Including this verse at the close of Dibbur Sheni brings the entire text full circle, reminds the readers of what this was really all about, and neatly ties together the many disparate stories. In the way that a chapter ending is obvious in a book, this closure here allows readers to internalize and synthesize all they've learned before moving onto the next commandment.

Dibbur Revi'i: You Shall Remember the Sabbath Day and Sanctify It

Introduction to the 4th Commandment

זכור את יום השבת לקדשו. ששת ימים תעבוד וכו׳ (שמות כ, ח-יב). יום השביעי בחרו יי וקדשו בשמו, שנאמר: ויברך אלהים את יום השביעי ויקדש אותו כי בו שבת (בראשית ב, ג). והנחילו לעמו ישראל שבחר משבעים אומות ונתנו בחלקם כדי שינוחו בו.

"Remember the sabbath day and sanctify it. Six days you shall labor" (Exodus 20:8-12).[69] *Adonai chose the seventh day and sanctified it in His name, as it is said: "And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy—having ceased on it" (Genesis 2:3) And bequeathed it unto His people, whom He'd chosen from the seventy nations, and gave it to be their portion so that they may rest on it.*

As in the rest of the midrash, Dibbur Revi'i begins with a snippet of biblical text from the commandment itself.[70] Interestingly, though, the biblical reference to the commandment doesn't end there – it's actually supplemented with another biblical prooftext from Genesis to ground the commandment in its origin: God's blessing the seventh day of Creation and ceasing work. While the verse from Exodus could, on its own, establish the importance of keeping Shabbat, the Rabbis' decision to include the line from Genesis adds a level of gravity and divine importance to the commandment. It was God who first remembered Shabbat, therefore, the very act of remembering Shabbat is imbued with a divine quality as we emulate God in doing so. In addition to bringing God's example into the commandment, including its Genesis origins could be a pedagogical and rhetorical tool that serves to add additional meaning to the commanded action. The Rabbis are encouraging their community to think about Shabbat observance in the context of the story of Creation. The cessation of work is

[69] The rest of the verse reads: *and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of your God Adonai. You shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements. For in six days Adonai made heaven and earth and sea – and all that is in them – and then rested on the seventh day; therefore, Adonai blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it*.

[70] While the midrash only includes the text from Exodus 20:8 and 20:9, the entirety of the commandment is four verses. The only other commandment as extensive is Dibbur Sheni, Exodus 20:3-6 (commandments 1, 3, 5, and 10 are all one verse each, while 6, 7, 8, and 9 are collapsed into one verse total).

now not only about obligation; it is also an opportunity to "walk in God's ways" and re-enact the miracles of Creation. The Dibbur then seeks to clarify that it is the Jews who are required to remember Shabbat. Using the language of inheritance/נ-ח-ל, the Rabbis explain that Shabbat is a gift that God gave to God's chosen people. This raises the stakes of the commandment: it's not just something the Jews are being told to do; rather, it's an obligation and opportunity that they have inherited by virtue of being chosen by God.

With the commandment, its origins, and its subjects all established, this introductory section of the Dibbur can now venture into the specifics of what it actually looks like to remember Shabbat. The subsequent short passages describe the practicalities of Shabbat, including both its unique, cosmic holiness and the behaviors and traditions that are expected of the Jews on Shabbat (and, the consequences for those who don't keep it).

ואפילו איסורי גהינם ינוחו בשבת, שאינם נדונים בהכנסת שבת. שמלאך דומה הממונה על הנפשות מכריז ואומר – צאו מגיהנם, ומתיר אותם ואינם נדונים בשבת. וכשישראל אומרים סדר קדושה במוצאי שבת, אותו מלאך מכריז ואומר למיתי אומות העולם – צאו למות, שנאמר: צלמות ולא סדרים (איוב י, כב). מהו צלמות? צאו למות. ולמי אומר צאו למות? למיתי אומות העולם שאין אומרים קדושה, שנאמר: צלמות ולא סדרים (שם), ולא לישראל שאומרים סדר קדושה. ולכך חייבין כל ישראל לומר סדר קדושה במוצאי שבת ולשמור שבת.

*And even those confined to Gehinom would rest on Shabbat, since no one is judged at the time of the entrance of Shabbat. The angel Duma (who was responsible for the souls) announces and says: "Go from Gehinom," and he releases them and they are not judged on Shabbat. And when Israel said Seder Kedushah at the end of Shabbat, the same angel announced and said to the dead of the nations of the world, "Go to die," as it is said: "death-shadow and disarray" (Job 10:22). What is "death-shadow" (*צלמות*)? It means to "Go to die" (*צאו למות*). And to whom was he telling to go to die? To the dead of the nations of the world, those who do not say the Kedushah, as it is said, "death-shadow and disarray" (Job 10:22), and not to Israel, who do say the Seder Kedushah. And therefore, all of Israel is obligated to say the Seder Kedushah at the end of Shabbat, and to keep Shabbat.*

The first thing that the Dibbur tells us about Shabbat has less to do with the way Jews observe it, and more to do with the day's inherent holiness. On Shabbat, the Dibbur teaches that all judgments of an individual's fate are suspended; those being punished in the afterlife

have respite. More precisely, the angel Duma[71] relieves those in Gehinom of their suffering on Shabbat, for no reason other than because it is Shabbat. The implication is that every person is deserving of and entitled to rest on Shabbat, an entitlement that extends beyond the world of the living. Shabbat is an all-encompassing phenomenon, not bound by space or afterlife. When Shabbat ends, however (as indicated by the recitation of Seder Kedushah), Duma returns those dead individuals to their fates in Gehinom.

The Rabbis explain this seemingly magical legend through the use of a prooftext from the Book of Job. The verse used comes from a portion of Job's dialogue as he's lamenting the devastating tragedies and misfortunes of his life, and even lashing out at God. In the verses that immediately precede our prooftext, Job wishes that he'd never been born, and desires to go to a land of "death-shadow and disarray." This land that Job is referring to is Gehinom, and the Rabbis use the Hebrew words of this verse to create a sort of wordplay that clarifies the relationship between Gehinom and Shabbat. This land of Gehinom is one of "צלמות" and "לא סדרים" – directly translated, it refers to a "death shadow" and a "lack of order" (or disarray). However, the Rabbis play with the meaning of words: צלמות becomes צאו למות, "go to die," which is Duma's decree to return to Gehinom. Meanwhile, לא סדרים takes on a liturgical meaning, saying that Duma's decree happens when there is no (לא) recitation of Seder Kedushah (סדרים) anymore – the sign that Shabbat is over. Through the use of this prooftext, the Rabbis argue that sinners must return to Gehinom once Shabbat ends, which must mean that they were granted freedom from it at Shabbat's beginning.

This mystical midrash about Gehinom, Duma, Shabbat, Jews, sinners, and Seder Kedushah serves to communicate a few essential teachings. One, it suggests that Shabbat is

[71] Duma is an angel who administers over those who are in Gehinom – a version of hell in biblical and rabbinic texts.

in and of itself special: the day's essence is one of far-reaching, expansive, and inclusive rest. Every person, good or bad, observant Jew or non-observant Jew, gets to experience Shabbat. It's a beautiful message for all Jews to hear, that regardless of how they've acted during the week, they are deserving of the gift of Shabbat. If sinners eternally trapped in the pits of hell can get respite on Shabbat, shouldn't we all? Two, the story highlights the sacred temporality of Shabbat – Duma's "magic" is catalyzed by הכנסת שבת, the entrance of Shabbat, and the sinners' reprieve ends as soon as the closing prayers are recited. Part of Shabbat's holiness is in its limitation: it's only for 25 hours a week, and its beginning and ending must be attended to accordingly.

The imagery of Duma's liberation of (and recalling of) sinners is a stunning representation of Shabbat's power, one that can be imagined in all sorts of contexts. Shabbat is a time of letting go of the material world, and if something as immense as respite for eternal sinners is possible, what else can we let go of on Shabbat? At the entrance of Shabbat, what can we release, knowing that it will return to us after Shabbat's end?

ואין דליקה מצויה אלה במקום שיש בו חלול שבת, שנאמר: "ואם לא תשמעו לי לקדש את יום השבת והצתי אש בשעריה ואכלה ארמנות ירושלם ולא תכבה (ירמיה יז, כז). וכל השומר שבת זוכה להיות לו חלק לעולם הבא שכלו שבת, וכל המחלל שבת כאל[ו] מעיד בהב"ה שלא ברא את עולמו בששת ימים ולא נח ביום השביעי. ואשרי שומרי שבת ואשרי מענגו, שנאמר: וכבדתו מעשות דרכיך (ישעיה נח, יג). מהו וכבדתו? שלא יהא מלבושיך של חול כמלבושי של שבת. מעשות דרכיך -- שלא תלך בשבת כמו שאתה הולך בחול. ממצוא חפצך – אסור לו לאדם לבקש חפצו בשבת. ודבר דבר – אסור לו לאדם לומר: כך וכך אעשה למחר.

And consuming fire is found only in the place where they desecrate Shabbat, as it is said, "But if you do not listen to me to sanctify the Sabbath day,[72] then I will light a fire in its gates; and it shall consume the fortresses of Jerusalem and it shall not be extinguished." (Jeremiah 17:27). And all who keep Shabbat will merit a portion of the world to come, which is totally Shabbat. And all who desecrate Shabbat, it is as if they are testifying that the Holy One of Blessing did not create the world in six days and did not rest on the seventh day.

[72] Part of the verse is missing in the midrash – the entirety should read: *"But if you do not listen to me to sanctify the Sabbath day [and carry a burden when you come through the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day,] then I will light a fire in its gates; and it shall consume the fortresses of Jerusalem and it shall not be extinguished."*

Happy are those who keep Shabbat and happy are those who rejoice in its delight, as it is said: "If you honor it and go not your ways" (Isaiah 58:13).[73] *What is "If you honor it"? That your dress is not your weekdays' clothing as you'd wear clothing on Shabbat. And "Do not walk" – on Shabbat as you would walk on a weekday. "Look to your desires" – it is prohibited for a person to seek their desires on Shabbat. And "speaking idle words"– it is prohibited for a person to say, "Thus and thus will I do tomorrow."*

With the "why," the spiritual value of keeping Shabbat established, the midrash turns next to the "how": what does it actually mean to "remember" Shabbat? These next two passages of the introductory section describe in more detail the behaviors and rituals that are required of Jews as part of Shabbat observance. In both this passage and the one immediately following, the midrash uses additional verses from Jeremiah and Isaiah to clarify the expectations of Shabbat observance. These verses are likely selected because they both reference Shabbat, and their respective references to Shabbat contain additional imperatives upon which the rabbis expound.

Jeremiah's prophecy is a winding rant about how the Israelites ought to behave, and all the ways they've fallen short. In this section in particular, he communicates words from God about Shabbat observance in Jerusalem, and lists the ways that they must guard themselves (הִשָּׁמְרוּ[74] בְּנַפְשׁוֹתֵיכֶם) against any behaviors that might violate Shabbat. The commandments contained within the midrash's prooftext (Jeremiah 17:27) verse are specifically to sanctify Shabbat (לקדש) and to not carry burdens on it (ולבלתי שאת משא)[75], and the surrounding verses also repeat these same instructions, many times over. In Jeremiah

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[73] The remainder of the verse reads: *If you refrain from journey on the sabbath, from pursuing your affairs on My holy day; and call the sabbath "a delight," Adonai's holy day "honored"; and if you honor it by not following your ways nor pursuing your pleasures, nor speaking idle words*

[74] In the repetition of the 10 Commandments in Deuteronomy, the verb ש-מ-ר is used in place of ז-כ-ר. That is, in the Exodus version of the Decalogue, the Israelites are told to "remember" (זכור) Shabbat, while in the Deuteronomy version, they're told to "keep" or "guard" (שמור) Shabbat. The invocation of שמור here hints to readers that this is ultimately about the 4th Commandment, even if not in the Exodus form that catalyzed the midrash.

[75] This commandment comes from the section of the verse that is missing from the text of the midrash, but we can assume that the rabbis, in citing the verse, had it in mind as well.

17:21, 22, 24, and 27 the Israelites are told not to carry burdens, not to work, and to sanctify Shabbat. Seeing the use of such extensive repetition in such a contained section of text, it's obvious that these three behaviors are critical to Shabbat observance. What they mean, however, is sometimes less clear; this lofty biblical poetry is hard to understand, which makes it challenging to internalize and carry out. It becomes the responsibility of the midrash, then, to flesh out what it actually looks like for a Jew to carry burdens, or to honor Shabbat, or what kind of work is meant. The subsequent stories serve as examples of those commandments lived out.

The cited verse is about more than just the required behaviors; it continues on to articulate the consequences that will befall the Israelites if they do not adhere to them. According to Jeremiah, God will strike Jerusalem down with an inextinguishable, all-consuming fire if its inhabitants do not obey God's Shabbat commandments. Interestingly, whereas the Rabbis omitted some words from the biblical text in their citation (they left out the phrase about not carrying burdens, though I still accounted for it in my own analysis), they deemed the consequence section of the verse essential enough to be fully included. Given that so much of Dibbur Revi'i addresses the magnificent rewards for keeping Shabbat, including this part of the verse serves as a bit of a counterbalance. The message here is that it's not only about the positive benefits that Jews might enjoy as an incentive for their Shabbat observance; they also risk danger, destruction, and punishment if they do not comply.

The next prooftext, a verse from Isaiah, includes many references to Shabbat-appropriate behaviors. While the entirety of the verse is not reproduced in the text of the midrash, as was the case with Jeremiah's verse, the fullness of its language is relevant and

will be included here. Similar to Jeremiah, Isaiah's prophecy is also a lengthy exhortation to the Israelites about the kind of behavior that God *actually* desires from the Israelites. Elsewhere in the chapter, it is clear that God abhors empty, insincere, and hypocritical ritual – what God wants is deep and intentional engagement with the commandments. Shabbat observance is no different, and Isaiah lists the ways in which the Israelites can honor it: refraining from traveling and pursuing affairs, honoring Shabbat and delighting in it, not imitating the ways, seeking the desires, or speaking the idle words of non-Jews. Once again, like with Jeremiah's prophecy, the biblical poetry here isn't straightforward in its instructions; it's not obvious how Isaiah's directives are to be acted out. For this verse, however, the midrash does immediately address ambiguity by offering up more practical definitions to some of Isaiah's commands. According to the Rabbis' clarification, these lines teach Jews that they should wear special clothes on Shabbat and not travel on Shabbat, should not seek their desires nor talk about plans for the future.

This section of the introduction presents a spectrum of ways for Jews to remember Shabbat: sanctifying it, not carrying burdens, not working on it, rejoicing in it, honoring it, not following one's everyday ways, not pursuing one's pleasures, and not speaking idle words. The rest of the midrash is a series of stories and moral tales about the value of keeping Shabbat, and each story touches upon one or more of those specific behaviors. The first midrash in Dibbur Revi'i is about two parents who refrain from mourning for their sons' deaths on Shabbat – in this case, they are fulfilling the commandment to remember Shabbat by not carrying burdens of grief. (Additionally, mourning would also conflict with rejoicing and honoring Shabbat, as some Shabbat rituals meant to honor Shabbat – like dressing nicely – are prohibited for mourners. Even discussing their plans for mourning would violate the

prohibition of not speaking idle words.) The next section underscores the stories of two Jews who are known for celebrating Shabbat with meals of fish and choice meat: they are exemplars for rejoicing in Shabbat. Next, we have a midrash of a cow who refuses to plow on Shabbat – by ceasing her work, she models the practice of not behaving on Shabbat as one would the weekdays. The final midrash is one about the merits of properly preparing a home for Shabbat, highlighting the rituals that one might use to sanctify Shabbat.

Each one of these stories follows a similar structure: an individual acts with intention to observe Shabbat – especially in the face of external pressures – and is therefore rewarded, either spiritually or financially. Their common theme is that Shabbat observance will be rewarded, and the implicit messaging for readers is that every Jew should follow suit.

Do Not Carry a Burden: Not Mourning on Shabbat

ומעשה באשה אחת שהיו לה שני בנים, ונפלו לבור בשבת ומתו. והמתינה היא לבעלה עד שבא מבית הכנסת וכשבא אכלו ושתו. כשגמרו לאכול אמרה לו: אם רצונך בעלי, אומר ל(י)[ך] דבר אחד.
אמר לה: אמרי.
אמרה לו: שני כתרי זהב הופקדו היום עשר שנים, ועתה מבקשים אותם ממני. אתנם או לא?
אמר לה: תני.
אמרה לו: שני בניך נפלו לבור ומתו, ועתה תן כבוד לקונך ולא נחלל שבת. ולא צערו עצמם בשבת. כיון שהחשיך עמדו על פי הבור להוציאם ולקברם, ובזכות שלא צערו עצמם בשבת עלו מן הבור חיים ושלום.

The story of a woman who had two sons, and they fell into a pit on Shabbat and died. She waited until her husband came from the synagogue, and when he came, they ate and drank. When they finished eating, she said to him: "If it is your will, my husband, let me tell you something."

He said to her: "Speak." She said to him: "Two gold crowns came due today after ten years, and now the lenders are demanding them from me. Should I give them or not?" He said to her: "Give them." She said to him: "Your two sons fell into a pit and died, but now we need to give honor to God and not desecrate Shabbat."

And they did not sadden themselves on Shabbat. But when it got dark, they stood at the mouth of the pit to take them out and bury them. Due to the merit of not mourning them on Shabbat, they (the sons) rose from the pit alive and in peace.

This first tale of the midrash is a macabre story of a family who navigates Shabbat observance in the midst of tragedy. On Shabbat, a woman's[76] two sons fall into a pit and die, but she waits until her husband has returned from synagogue and has had his Sabbath meal before telling him the news. The woman's decision to withhold the information enables her husband to fulfill the obligations of Shabbat: to pray, to attend synagogue, and to eat a festive Shabbat meal. When she finally does share the news with him, she reminds him that they must honor God and not desecrate Shabbat – the implication is that to mourn their sons would be tantamount to Sabbath desecration.

Their choice not to mourn their sons on Shabbat could be a fulfilment of Jeremiah's call not to carry burdens on Shabbat. While not literal, the burden of parental grief is one of the heaviest things a person can experience, and these parents decide that they cannot bear it until Shabbat is over. Additionally, the ritual requirements of mourning – like tearing clothes, wailing, sitting low to the ground – are in direct tension with the joy and honor that Shabbat demands, according to Isaiah. For these parents, then, mourning on Shabbat will desecrate it, and so they wait until Havdalah to begin their mourning rites. At Shabbat's end, when they go to the pit to prepare to bury their sons, the sons come back to life. The midrash concludes that because their parents did not desecrate Shabbat through mourning, they were rewarded with the return of their sons. As will continue to be the theme throughout the text, individuals are rewarded when they make decisions – sometimes incredibly difficult ones – that allow them to prioritize and preserve Shabbat's sanctity.

[76] This midrash is featured elsewhere in rabbinic literature, most notably in Midrash Mishlei 131, a commentary on Eishet Chayil. In that version of the text, the man is Rabbi Meir, and the woman is his wife, Beruriah. This additional context is not essential here to understanding the plain meaning of the story, but assigning this story to these personalities serves to further elevate the righteousness and importance of their decision.

The method through which the woman shares the news of their sons' death is an essential part of the story because it lays the foundation for their eventual decision. She presents her husband with parable: she was lent two gold crowns, and now the original owner is seeking them back. What should she do? Her husband tells her in no uncertain terms that she is to return the gold crowns. The woman then immediately shares that their two sons have died, which makes clear her metaphor: the two crowns are their sons, and God is the ultimate lender who has sought their return. By including this bit of wordplay (instead of just announcing that her sons have died), the Rabbis establish the connection between God's sovereignty, God's power of creation, the boys' deaths, and Shabbat. Both God and their two sons are "crowning presences" in their lives. The decision to observe Shabbat in light of this tragedy is about honoring God: God created all and God created these two sons, and if God rests on Shabbat, then they should too.

This story is important because it demonstrates the ways in which life can get in the way of Shabbat observance. This is obviously a most extreme case – it's hard to imagine anything more devastating or disruptive than the tragic death of one's children. And yet, these pious parents are able to not only compartmentalize, but also react to the boys' death in a way that actually deepens their Shabbat commitments. Their example poses a compelling challenge: when something occurs in an individual's life that obviate the joy of Shabbat, these parents show that it's possible to zoom out and make meaning of the seemingly competing values. The parents decided that their sons' deaths were in God's hands (it was God, after all, who demanded their return), and so it was sensible to also observe God's holy day.

In a world in which Saturdays are popular times for soccer games or birthday parties, is it possible to also experience God's presence? And if so, might that inform the way we relate to and spend the day? Like these parents, can we conceptualize the 25 hours of Shabbat in a way that gives honor to the ultimate Source, and adjust the way we choose to spend our time accordingly? Some progressive Jews may not be interested in putting off significant life moments or demands until after Shabbat, but perhaps there's a way to synthesize the two, and somehow link what we do on Shabbat to its deeper meaning.

Rejoicing in Shabbat: A Precious Pearl

ומעשה בחסיד אחד ושמו יוסי מוקיר שבי, והיה גוי אחד שכנו והיה עשיר גדול. אמרו לו הוברים: כל ממוניך מוקיר שבי אוכל אותו (וכו' כמו שכתוב למעלה). {כששמע כך הלך ומכר כל אשר לו, וקנה מהם מרגלית אחת וקבעה במגבעו. יום אחד היה עובר על הגשר, ובא רוח והפריח וכובע מעל ראשו. ונפל במים ובעלו דג אחד, וזימנו הקב"ה לדייג אחד ערב שבת בין השמשות. ובא הדייג בשוק עם הדג ולא מצא אדם שירצה לקנות דג גדול כמוהו. אמר הדייג בלבו: אלך אצל יוסף, שהוא רגיל לקנות תענוגים לכבוד שבת אולי יקנה אותו. הלך אצלו וקנהו ומיהר לתקנו לכבוד שבת. כשקרעו מצאו בו אותה מרגלית שהיתה מהגוי שכינו, ומכרה ב"ג אלפים דינר זהב. וכל זה אירע לו מפני שהיה מכבד שבתות.}

The story of a Hasid, by the name of Yosi Mokir Shabbei, who had a non-Jewish neighbor who was very wealthy. Astrologers said to him:Mokir Shabbei will consume all of your money (etc. as is written above).

{When he heard this, he went and sold all that was his, and with its proceeds, purchased one pearl, and set it in his hat. One day, he was crossing a bridge, and a wind came and caused his hat to fly from his head. It [the pearl] fell into the water and a fish swallowed it, and the Holy One of Blessing caused a fisherman [who caught the fish to come in] at erev Shabbat at dusk. And the fisherman came to the market with the fish, but he didn't find anyone who wanted to buy a fish as big as this one. The fisherman said to himself: I will go to Yosef, who's used to buying delights to honor Shabbat. Maybe he will buy it. He went to his place, and he [Yosef] bought it and hurried to prepare it to honor Shabbat. When they tore it open, they found within it the same pearl that was from his non-Jewish neighbor, and they sold it for 13,000 golden dinars. And all of this happened to him because he would honor Shabbats.}

The next story in the midrash is – at its surface level – a tale of a man who is handsomely rewarded for his piety in Shabbat observance. Seemingly by chance, a large fish

that he purchases to celebrate Shabbat contains a valuable pearl inside, leaving readers with the lesson that people are materially rewarded for their decisions to honor Shabbat through a choice meal. In fact, however, many factors converged to land this fish on the man's Shabbat table. These factors reveal deeper Rabbinic commentaries on society's preoccupation with wealth and control – and suggest that Shabbat could perhaps be a corrective.

This section of midrash begins from the perspective of a wealthy non-Jew, who learns from some astrologers that his wealth will be taken by his Jewish neighbor, Yosi Mokir Shabbei. From the outset, the Rabbis introduce tension, as the unnamed non-Jew is contrasted with not only a named Jew, but with a Jew with a name of significance: Yosi Mokir Shabbei could be translated as "Yosi Who Honors Shabbat." The meaning of his name tells us that Yosi is known for his Shabbat practice, but this is about more than reputation. Because names in Jewish Literature often offer insight into the person as a whole, the text is telling us that Shabbat observance is an essential part of Yosi's identity. So, the text contrasts a man who has no identifying features nor anchoring values with Yosi, who honors Shabbat.

When the non-Jew hears his fate predicted by the astrologers, he sells all of his property in order to consolidate all of his wealth into one pearl, which he then hides in his hat. It's a selfish choice: this is a wealthy man who could conceivably be using his resources in any number of more generous ways, but instead he concretizes it into its most restrictive, least useful form. It is his attempt to hold onto his wealth even more tightly and avert the predicted outcome.[77] In doing so, the non-Jew is trying to control as much as possible – he's trying to both control his wealth and keep it to himself, and also control the fated outcome of his life.

[77] Much of my analysis of this story was inspired by Rabbi Joel Nickerson's recorded Zoom class, "The Shabbat Pearl: Talmud Tales" (August 6, 2020). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MiIB32lKYeo

Shabbat is decidedly not about control; the day of rest happens regardless of human influence, and it's a day not about doing or making, but about surrendering, and living according to the world at rest. People can so easily fall prey to the idols of materialism, consumption, and control, and the Rabbis were offering a critique of this orientation. The opposite of Yosi-Who-Honors-Shabbat is this anonymous money grabber, a selfish, isolated, and controlling character. That he doesn't get away with this behavior and still loses the pearl makes it clear the Rabbis disapprove of him. The problem the Rabbis were responding to has, unfortunately, only gotten more extreme in our modern context, as technology, financial pressures, and other distractions have exacerbated our obsession with "things." At the same time, the observance of Shabbat rejects this overwhelming obsession, and is one of the reasons why, in our modern context, people continue to recognize Shabbat as a radical act.

Despite the non-Jew's crafty wealth-hoarding plan, it becomes quite clear that he has far less control than he thinks. While crossing a bridge, a wind blew his hat off of his head, and cast the precious pearl into the water below, where a fish swallowed it. A wobbly bridge, a gust of wind, roaring water, and a hungry fish: the slightly comic scene reveals just how powerless this man actually is in the face of the elements. There's no official biblical prooftext in this passage, but the overlap between this scene and the story of Jonah are striking. The storm, sea, and fish-swallowing are obvious connections, but their presence alludes to deeper similarities. In both stories, the men prefer to stay in their own isolated world rather than do some good: the non-Jew is only focused on keeping all his money to himself, and Jonah refuses to prophesize for the people of Nineveh. Rather than face their fates, both men attempt to escape and hide in their own ways, but those attempts are similarly

thwarted. By hinting at a connection between the non-Jew and Jonah, the Rabbis are suggesting that the non-Jew is also a self-interested, short-sighted, and selfish character.

If the non-Jew is the bumbling villain of the story, then Yosi-Who-Honors-Shabbat is its hero. With some divine intervention,[78] a fisherman catches the fish who swallows the pearl and brings it to the market as Shabbat is approaching. No one is interested in buying a fish so big and so close to Shabbat, but the fisherman decides to go to Yosi, a man with a reputation for "buying delights to honor Shabbat." From this, we learn that Yosi is recognized for his Shabbat observance across multiple levels: not only is he known for buying nice things to celebrate Shabbat, but he also has a reputation for prioritizing Shabbat such that his community members can be sure that he'll buy a nice fish, even at this late hour. And, they're right – Yosi buys the fish, rushes to prepare it for the Sabbath meal, and as they sit down to eat it, they discover the greedy non-Jew's pearl inside. The astrologers' prophecy comes true: Yosi-Who-Honors-Shabbat does indeed get all of the non-Jew's wealth.

According to the Rabbis' coda to the midrash, the pearl was Yosi's reward for his commitment to Shabbat. Yosi models the principle of "Oneg Shabbat" as referenced in the midrash's introduction – of elevating the joy of Shabbat through food, drink, song, and celebration. (The sentence that describes Yosi's Shabbat practice reads: רגיל לקנות **תענוגים** לכבוד שבת – he was accustomed to buying delights, *ta'anugim*, to honor Shabbat.) But, it was more than just his willingness to buy the fish on Erev Shabbat that set Yosi apart. In contrast to the non-Jew, Yosi wasn't looking to keep his wealth to himself; he wanted to use it, to

[78] The text clearly says that the Holy One caused the fisherman to catch the fish and bring it in to sell, yet it doesn't mention anything about the God in connection to the seemingly more fantastic bridge/wind/fish sequence of events. It's an interesting disparity, which possibly suggests that God was not involved in the non-Jew's punishment (that is, the non-Jew brought his misfortune unto himself), but was involved with Yosi's reward.

share it, to invest it in the things that mattered most to him (chief among them being Shabbat). Yosi was acting in a way that was synonymous with his name and his identity – even when it wasn't convenient or easy.

Yosi's example offers many approaches to Shabbat observance that are still meaningful today. Most obviously, he demonstrates the importance of rejoicing in Shabbat, of prioritizing the special foods and drinks and joyous activities that are an essential part of observing Shabbat. It's a nice reminder that these elements aren't bonus or extra – Oneg Shabbat (the Joy of Sabbath) is commanded to us just as much as the prayer and ritual components. So often keeping Shabbat is positioned as an exercise in deprivation: Jews might think of it as a day on which they *can't* drive, or *can't* use electronics, or *can't* cook. This isn't the full story though: if Jews knew how fun and joyous Shabbat could be, perhaps it would seem less onerous, and more about the opportunity for enjoyment.

Another part of Yosi's example that is worth underscoring is the extent to which he was *accustomed* to keeping Shabbat in his holy way: his choice that one Friday night to buy the fish wasn't a one-off decision; it was the result of an ongoing commitment to celebrate Shabbat every week. This, too, is countercultural – it can be challenging for progressive Jews to conceive of committing themselves to a practice every week. One can almost hear a congregant push back: "What if on Friday night there's a work event, or if flights are cheaper, or if my child wants to go to a school dance or a practice SAT?" In our overscheduled and constantly striving society, the idea of setting aside one day a week can feel limiting and even frightening. And yet, it was only because Yosi had established a regular Shabbat habit that the sequence of events that brought him the pearl was able to happen. Sometimes, things as important as Shabbat require sacrifice and restriction.

A final lesson from Yosi actually comes from the contrast between Yosi and the non-Jew. To the extent that Yosi is generous and outward-facing and flexible, the non-Jew is tight-fished, only concerned with his internal world, and isolated. The Rabbis are teaching us that the non-Jews' path is no way to live; that when we cut others off, we are poorer for it (literally and figuratively). And so, while the pearl is ostensibly Yosi's reward for Shabbat, it may be that as a specific inheritance for the Jewish people, Shabbat is actually the most precious gift of all.

ועוד אמר ר׳ חייא בר אבא: פעם אחת נתארחתי אצל יהודי אחד, והביאו לפני שלחן אחד של זהב משואי שש עשרה בני אדם ושש עשרה שלשלאות של כסף היו בו. ועל אותו שלחן היו כל מיני מאכל וכל מיני מגדים. אמרתי לו: בני, מה עשית שזכית לכך? אמר לו: קצב הייתי, וכשהייתי קונה בהמות הייתי בורר הטובה לכבוד שבת. אמרתי לו: ברוך המקום שישלם לך שכר טוב כזה.

And further, Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba said: One time, I was hosted by a Jew, and he placed before me a golden table that was carried by sixteen people and sixteen silver chairs with it. And on the same table were all kinds of foods and all kinds of delicacies. I said to him: What did you do to deserve this? He said: I was a butcher, and when I used to buy livestock, I would pick the best to honor Shabbat. I said to him, "Praise Ha-Makom who has granted you a reward such as this."

This short vignette follows the more extensive midrash of Yosi-Who-Honors-Shabbat, but it's likely that the Rabbis decided to juxtapose it at the end because it is aligned with the same value of *Oneg Shabbat*. This piece follows a similar motif: a Jew acts with reverence for Shabbat by investing in high quality food with which to rejoice in it, and is financially rewarded for his decision. In this case, we learn of Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba's acquaintance, a butcher who was apparently quite wealthy – the kind of wealth that includes silver chairs, a golden table, and delicacies. When pressed about the source of his wealth, the butcher shared that he received this reward from Ha-Makom in response to his practice of setting aside the best livestock to eat on Shabbat. Just as Yosi-Who-Honors-Shabbat was rewarded with a pearl for his *Oneg Shabbat* fish, this unnamed Jew was rewarded with

wealth for his *Oneg Shabbat* livestock. Additionally, unlike almost anywhere else in the Dibbur, in both of these stories, God plays a role in the reward for the individuals. We learn that The Holy One caused the fisherman to catch the fish and come to shore, and that HaMakom granted the butcher his reward.

The lesson in this juxtaposition is that, in order to appropriately rejoice in Shabbat, one doesn't only need to be a holy person with an impressive reputation for observing Shabbat. This anecdote shows that a person can do quite a bit of good within their own sphere of influence – a butcher isn't any sort of elite role, and yet because he used his sliver of power to honor Shabbat, he was rewarded. Following Yosi's story, the pressure to rejoice in Shabbat may feel intense; what if a person worries that they don't have nice enough things to appropriately honor Shabbat? The inclusion of this story, therefore, lowers the stakes, and makes *Oneg Shabbat* accessible to all, regardless of wealth or status.

The same lesson is valuable for Jews today – in a world that can be so fixated on status and appearances, we don't need to overhype the expectations for *Oneg Shabbat*. The butcher's example demonstrates that *Oneg Shabbat* can happen when a person makes an effort according to their specific talents (as the butcher did with his livestock selection), and as long as decisions are made with care and intentionality, anything can be worthy of "honoring Shabbat." With this refreshing perspective, the options for *Oneg Shabbat* become limitless. A challah cover doesn't need to be made of the finest silk – a preschooler's fingerpainted cotton sheet can be just as holy. A Shabbat table doesn't need expensive roses, but if an individual takes the extra few minutes to stop by the grocery store in order to buy a single carnation, then they, too, have made their meal special and beautiful, and are rejoicing

in Shabbat. Whether through special clothing, foods, music, or décor, any person can elevate Shabbat, so long as they are committed to the practice.

Not Following Your Ways: The Jewish Cow Who Wouldn't Plow on Shabbat

ומעשה ביהודי אחד שהיתה לו פרה אחת, וחורשת כל ימי המעשה. ונתדלדלה ידו ומכרה לגוי. לקחה [ה]גוי וחרש בה כל ימי המעשה וכשבא יום רצה לחרוש בה והיא רבצה תחת העול ותמאן לחרוש. והכה אותה הגוי מאד ולא רצתה לנוד ממקומה. כיון שראה [ה]גוי הלך אצל היהודי ואמר: טול פרתך שמכרת לי, כי מום יש בה שאינה רוצה לחרוש היום. כששמע היהודי כך (הלך) הבין שבשביל שבת היא עושה, כי כן היתה מנהגה לנוח בשבת.

The story of a Jew who had a cow, and she would plow every weekday. His wealth was dwindling, so he sold her to a non-Jew. The non-Jew took her, and plowed with her every work day.[79] *And when Shabbat came he wanted to plow with her, but she crouched beneath the yoke and refused to plow. And the non-Jew hit her hard, but she did not want to move from her place. When the non-Jew saw this, he went to the Jew and said: "Take your cow that you sold me, because she has a defect that she does not want to plow today." When the Jew heard this, he understood that it was because of Shabbat that the cow did this, because she was accustomed to resting on Shabbat.*

This story is one of a farm animal, and the ways that her custom of resting on the Sabbath positively influence those around her. In this tale, a poor Jew must sell his cow, but when he sells her to a non-Jew, the non-Jew is appalled that the cow won't plow for him on Shabbat. Despite the various abuses with which the non-Jew afflicts the cow, she refuses to work. As it turns out, the cow had inherited her first owner's Shabbat observance of ceasing to work on Shabbat: because the Jew would never work the land on Saturday, neither will the cow. It's a hilarious premise, and the humor was definitely not lost on the Rabbis. The story, then, is a satirical and sharp commentary on the accessibility of Shabbat observance: If a *cow* can have a sense of time and its corresponding sanctity, all the more so must every Jew!

The challenging interaction between the Jew, the cow, and the non-Jew could also reflect some of the pressures that Jews might feel living under Christian hegemony. The non-

[79] Literally, "The 6 Days of Creation."

Jew is furious that the cow won't work for him on Shabbat, and he beats her to try to prod her into action. So, too, it could be challenging for Jews who are attempting to engage with non-Jews: by refusing to work on Shabbat, they could be forfeiting income, losing jobs, or even angering those non-Jews around them. Additionally, the language of the non-Jew is devastating – he says the cow has a "defect" because it won't work on Shabbat. How painful might it be for Jews to feel as though they're treated as "defective" for honoring their religious obligations? The interaction between the non-Jew and the cow becomes an evocative lens through which to view Jewish-non-Jewish dynamics: the gentle, defenseless, harmless, Jewish cow, subject to the demands of the oppressive non-Jew.

The Rabbis may not have known the exact science of food chains, but they certainly knew that a cow was not a predator, and the symbolism of the pasturing herbivore appears in sharp contrast to the man, the top of the chain. In including this kind of emotionally sensitive symbolism, the Rabbis are also honoring the reality of Jewish experiences – they seemingly understand that in a society that disparages Shabbat observance and Jews, it's not easy to keep Shabbat.

אמר לגוי: בא עמי ואני אעמידנה. הלכו שניהם אצל הפרה, ולקחה היהודי ודבר באזנה ואמר: פרתי פרתי, אתה ידעת כשהיית ברשותי אתה נוחה בשבת, ועכשו גרמו עונותי מכרתיך לגוי ואת ברשותו. בבקשה ממך, עמדי וחרשי. מיד עמדה על רגליה וחרשה. אמר ל(ה)[ו] הגוי: אף על פי כן טול פרתך ותן לי הדמים, כי כל פעם שתרבץ אלך ואסבב אחריך להעמידה? ועוד לא תתפרד ממני עד שתאמר לי הכשפים שלחשת באזנה. התחיל היהודי לבכות ואמר לו: מכשף אני? אמר לו הגוי: מי יאמינך? אני הכיתיה כל היום במלמד ויגעתי עליה ולא עמדה, ואתה בלחישת שפתיך תעמידינה? אלמלא כשפיך לא תעמידנה? אמר לו: בשבועה, כך וכך שחתי באזנה ועל כן עמדה.

He said to the non-Jew: "Come with me and I will raise her up." The two of them went to the cow, and the Jew took her and spoke in her ear and said: "My cow, my cow, you know that when you were in my possession you rested on Shabbat, but now my sins caused me to sell you to the non-Jew and you are in his possession. Please, stand and plow." And immediately, she stood on her legs and plowed. The non-Jew said to him: "Nevertheless, take your cow, and give me its value, because every time she lies down I'll go and run after you to raise her up? And further, don't leave me until you tell me the sorcery that you whispered in her ears." The Jew began to cry and said to him: "Am I a sorcerer?!" The non-Jew said to him: "Who

will believe you? I hit her all day to teach her and labored over her and she wouldn't stand. But with a whisper of your lips you made her stand? Without your witchcraft, you wouldn't have made her stand." He said to him: "I swear, this is what I spoke in her ear and therefore she stood."

While the cow is committed to resting on Shabbat, the terrified Jew wants her to compromise. He explains to her that she can't abide by his Shabbat observance anymore; she's now under the control of this non-Jew, and has to follow his commands. She immediately acquiesces, which shows just how influential the Jew is, the power dynamics at play, and the extent to which the Jew understands how to relate to her. Given the vulnerability of the cow, she may not only represent Jews, but more specifically, could represent Jewish children. A possible extension of the metaphor is that the Jew is advising his *child* to forego keeping Shabbat if necessary. For the entirety of her life the Jew has had power over and responsibility for the cow, and has taught her how to be "Jewish," but when she enters mainstream society and is rejected and harmed for acting Jewish, the Jew wants her to give it to guarantee her survival. It's a reasonable fear for Jews to have, unfortunately even today, and it's sensitively handled in the midrash – the Rabbis don't begrudge or criticize the Jew for this fearful and defensive behavior, but his actions will be proven wrong soon enough.

The cow's acquiescence and plowing is not enough for the non-Jew. He rejects the cow and wants his money back, and further, he accuses the Jew of using witchcraft to get the cow to start plowing again. This reveals another Rabbinic fear – what if there is no negotiating with Christianity? No matter what a Jew does, they will be rejected by Christian society. This could have been especially salient in the context of Jews converting to save their own lives. But would Christians ever really trust them, or would they, forever, be outsiders, and be disparaged accordingly?

Additionally, the non-Jew's accusation of witchcraft and sorcery (and the Jew's terror in response) illustrates the vulnerability of Jews in Christian society. Despite the Jew's protests, the Christian insists that something unholy is going on, that the Jew can't possibly have influenced the cow to stand without a spell or some other spooky trick. A self-conscious fear of the Rabbis emerges: What if Christians can't conceive of a legitimate religious observance that isn't Christian, and so they lump Judaism in with witchcraft and any other forms of dangerous practice? There's an implicit warning here: commit to your religious practices, but be polite and transparent about them too. It's almost as if to say that Jews should act in a way that Christians know what the Jews doing so they don't assume we're dangerous, but not so publicly that they perceive Jews being arrogant about it.

Throughout this whole story, Rabbis are painting a disturbing and disheartening portrait of what it means to be Jewish in Christian society. Jews are vulnerable and powerless, and even as they try to hold onto their Sabbath observance in private, they are at the mercy of Christian criticism and judgment. Some Jews may tell their community members to give up their practice for their own protection. And yet, the climax and outcome of the narrative brilliantly turns the distrustful and fearful assessment on its head: what if, instead of shrinking in fear from Christian oppression, Jews recognized the value of their tradition, and took pride in it?

כיון ששמע הגוי כך הרהר תשובה בלבו ואמר: אוי לי, מה פרה זו שאין לה לא שיחה ולא דעת הכירה בוראה, ואני שראני הב״ה בצלמו ונתן בי בינה ודעת איני מכיר את בוראי? מיד הלך ונתגייר וזכה ללמוד תורה הרבה. ונקרא שמו בישראל ר׳ חנינא בן תורתא ועד עכשו רבותינו אומרים הלכה עד שמו, יהיה חלקו עם הצדיקים בגן עדן. לכך יבין אדם ויתן אל לבו לכבוד את השבת.

When the non-Jew heard this, he thought about the response to himself and said: "Woe is me! If the cow who can not speak and has no intelligence has recognized her creator, what about me, whom The Holy One saw in His image and gave understanding and intelligence? How do I not know my creator?" Immediately he went and converted, and he merited learning much Torah. And throughout Israel his name was called Rabbi Hanina ben Torta,

and until now, our Rabbis speak of halakha according to his name, and his portion will be with the righteous in the Garden of Eden. Therefore, may a person understand and give his heart to honor Shabbat.

While the Jew and his cow seemingly surrender their religious convictions at the slightest hint of external pressure, the non-Jew is transformed by what he sees. He thinks to himself, incredulously, that if a cow can be aware of the miracle of God's creation and can act accordingly, shouldn't he be able to do the same? He immediately converts and becomes not only a Torah scholar, but also a rabbi of great status and halakhic influence. And, as is the theme in this midrash, we also learn that he's rewarded for his piety with a portion in Eden. The curious thing about the man's observation isn't just that the cow won't work; he is moved to conversion because of the reasoning that he discerns behind the cow's behavior. The cow's refusal to plow is deeply connected to God: God created all, God created her, and in the aftermath of creation, God rested on the seventh day. So, too, must she rest on Shabbat.

This insight is essential because it grounds Shabbat observance in theological purpose: Jews don't need to remember Shabbat out of some perfunctory sense of requirement or "because God told them so," but because they are God's creations, created in God's image, and should honor their creator accordingly. The ritual obligation to desist from work on Shabbat is therefore deeply connected to the holiness of the day; it is an opportunity to be like God, to recognize that work demands boundaries, that production and creation are not the end-all purpose of life.

Engaging with the meaning behind ritual is a critical part of religious education, which is likely why the Rabbis included these details. When people understand why they're expected to do certain things, they are more likely to participate in those acts and get fulfillment from them. The repetition of words like "understanding" and "intelligence" in this

section (בינה, ודעת, מכיר) suggest that the Rabbis were preoccupied with the extent to which their people truly understood the importance of Shabbat, and wanted to ensure that they could share that understanding. The satire of the cow, then, is a challenge to Jewish readers – if a cow can be so attuned to God's presence, how can any Jew not be?!

We can take Rabbi Hanina ben Torta's revelation to heart as well. His religious development shows us that religious observance is not static – if we remain open to insight and input from those around us, there is always the possibility for greater awareness, and the capacity to then discover greater meaning. And, in our capitalist society, in which a person's worth is measured by what they're able to produce and what work they're able to do, we could all benefit from learning from the cow.

Honoring Shabbat: How to Prepare a Home for Sabbath Eve

ואמרו חכמים: לעולם יסדיר אדם ביתו להכנסת שבת ויערוך שלחנו, לפי ששני מלאכים מלוין לו לאדם מבית וכשבא אדם לביתו ומוצא נר דלוק ושלחן ערוך ומטה מוצעת, מלאך טוב הכנסת לביתו, אחד טוב ואחד רע.[80] אומר: יהי רצון שיהיה לשבת אחרת כך. ומלאך רע עונה אמן בעל כרחו, ומצליח כל אותה שבוע. ואם אינו מוצא נר דלוק, מלאך רע אומר: יהי רצון שיהא לשבת אחרת כך. ומלאך טוב עונה אמן בעל כרחו, ואין מצליח כל אותה שבוע. לכך כל ישראל יהיו מוזהרין בכבוד שבת לקדשו, כמו שכתוב: זכור את יום השבת לקדשו (שמות כ, ח)

And the sages say: A person should always arrange their home to welcome in Shabbat and set their table, since two angels accompany them from the synagogue to their home, one who is good and one who is evil. And when they arrive home and find a lit candle and a set table and a made bed, the good angel says: "May it be Your will that it shall be like this for another Shabbat." And the bad angel answers: "Amen" against his will, and he will be successful throughout that week. But if they do not find a lit candle, the bad angel will say: "May it be Your will that it will be like this for another Shabbat." And the good angel answers: "Amen" against his will, and he will not have success throughout that very week.

Therefore, all of Israel shall be careful to honor Shabbat and sanctify it, as it is written, "Remember the Sabbath day and sanctify it." (Exodus 20:8)

[80] BT Shabbat 119b

After a series of incredibly fantastic midrashim – revivified sons, traveling pearls, and sentient cows – the Dibbur ends quite simply, with a tale about the importance of preparing one's home for Shabbat. The story presents a clear binary: preparing for Shabbat is good and will yield blessing, but a home absent of Shabbat ritual is bad and will yield curses. The Rabbis establish this binary through angelic decrees: If, on Erev Shabbat, someone arranges their home with lit candles and a festive meal and a made bed, then a good angel will announce that they'll be blessed accordingly in the week to come. But if, on Erev Shabbat, a person's home is just their regular home and is missing any semblance of Shabbat's presence, then a bad angel will announce that their coming week will lack success.

In listing such practical behaviors, these details around preparation for Shabbat contain echoes of the Isaiah prooftext from the midrash's introduction. Ultimately, this is what is being asked of the Jewish people: to act differently on Shabbat, to comport themselves – inside and outside of their homes – with awareness that this is a holy day, and in alignment with the reverence that it demands. When modern readers engage with this challenge, they might want to imagine the trio of behaviors that would, for them, mean that their home is ready for Shabbat. What permutations of cleaning, cooking, and other preparation can create an environment that is hospitable to Shabbat holiness?

In some ways, this midrash is similar to the others in its focus on the rewards and punishments of Shabbat observance (and lack therof): the prevailing motif throughout the entirety of Dibbur Revi'i is that observing Shabbat brings rewards, but disregarding Shabbat brings negative consequences. This story, then, is not only an appropriate summary to the preceding texts, but also, in its simplicity, it is likely more relatable to readers. It may not be possible for Jews to place themselves in the more dramatic narratives of the previous

sections, but every Jew has within themselves the capacity to light some candles, set their table, and make their bed. Every Jew can remember Shabbat.

This leads us directly into the closing line of the midrash, which speaks to the entirety of the Jewish people as it exhorts – "All of Israel shall be careful to honor Shabbat and sanctify it." The midrash has taken readers through some of the many ways that a Jew might honor and sanctify Shabbat – through intentional choices about mourning, with joy, by preparing special food, and by ceasing from work. What is left, then, is the essential task to remember to do so: to remember the Sabbath day (Exodus 20:8). With this, Dibbur Revi'i concludes with the words of fourth commandment in the biblical text, the same way it began.

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