On the Pages of a Greater Story:
A Prophetic Walk Through the Fictional Wilderness

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On the Pages of a Greater Story:
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In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James Cone calls for a Christian theological response to the ongoing history of racism in America. Likening the cross on which Jesus was crucified to the lynching trees of America, Cone writes, "I believe the cross placed alongside the lynching tree can help us to see Jesus in America in a new light and thereby empower people who claim to follow him to take a stand against white supremacy and every kind of injustice."[1] In asking Americans to hold the cross alongside the lynching tree, Cone is calling all Christian Americans to reexamine the stories and histories they tell themselves regarding race, religion, and unprosecuted murder in America.

After reading Cone's book and hearing his call, I felt called to reexamine the stories of the American Jewish community, and the ways in which biblical narratives continue to shape Jewish notions of justice and activism. To truly heed Cone's call, however, I also needed to identify and hold up the voice of an American prophet alongside those of the Hebrew bible. On American prophecy, Cone writes, "black artists are prophetic voices whose calling requires them to speak truth to power."[2] In the following three chapters I intertwine and hold as sacred both biblical stories, and those of Toni Morrison, a woman whose work and legacy I consider to represent a prophetic voice in America today.

On the power and purpose of fiction, Toni Morrison writes, "Narrative fiction provides a controlled wilderness, an opportunity to be and to become the Other. The

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[1] James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, ((Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013), 118-119.
[2] Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, xix.

stranger. With sympathy, clarity, and the risk of self-examination."[3] In this project, I attempt to walk between three of Morrison's fictional controlled wildernesses: *Beloved*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Paradise*, and the biblical worlds of Abraham, Moses, and Elijah. In weaving together the lives of these biblical prophets with American stories steeped in the African American experience, I seek to not only encounter the Other, but also to draw out new insights into the lives of pivotal biblical figures, and the messages they impart for America today. In *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann writes, "The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."[4] The prophet offers those around her a new way of seeing and being in the world. Toni Morrison's fiction has allowed me to see not only biblical stories in a new light, but also, my own American Jewish identity and the ways in which I can heed James Cone's call.

Each chapter presented here opens with two parallel images. The first image offered in each chapter comes from the life of a biblical prophet whose story is in some way central to that of the Jewish people. Chapter one opens with a picture of Abraham walking up Mount Moriah with his son Isaac. Chapter two begins with a picture of Elijah and Elisha crossing the Jordan river. Chapter three opens with a picture of Moses looking out over the Promised Land from the top of Mount Nebo. The stories of Abraham, Moses, and Elijah greatly exceeded their biblical origins. Abraham, paragon of faith, father of a nation. Moses, champion of freedom, recipient of revelation. Elijah, harbinger

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[3] Toni Morrison, *The Origin of Others* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 90.
[4] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 3.

of the Messiah whose name is evoked over and over again in Jewish ritual and in Christian scripture as well, and who reappears throughout rabbinic and modern literature. In many ways, these three characters, all prophets of Jewish tradition, have defined the story of the Jewish people across time.

In chapters one and two, the parallel images held next to and against the biblical scenes come from the literary worlds of Toni Morrison. These literary images bear a striking resemblance to those of the Bible, and yet, in their diverging details, also serve to illuminate in retrospect aspects of the prophetic ministries of Abraham, Moses, and Elijah. The third and final chapter, pivots from the world of Toni Morrison to the world of America today, evoking a real-world image of Martin Luther King Jr..

Chapter one, entitled, "On the Edge of Sanity; The Making of a Prophet," opens with two images of child sacrifice, one biblical, the other from Morrison's *Beloved.* Chapter one contrasts the biblical story of the Exodus with the legacy of slavery in America as portrayed in Morrison's *Beloved.* Chapter two, "Between Falling and Flying; The Prophetic Search for a Past," juxtaposes the story of Milkman in *Song of Solomon* and the message of Elijah. Chapter three "A View From the Mountain Top; The Single Garment of Destiny and An American Promise Gone Awry," highlights the import of the stories we tell ourselves about our histories and the ways in which they shape identity.

Toni Morrison concludes *Song of Solomon* with a leap into freedom. After years of moving aimlessly through life, Morrison's protagonist Milkman finds direction and new purpose in life by uncovering the story of his ancestor, a former slave named Shalimar. Legend has it that Shalimar ascended to freedom by leaping from a mountain

and riding the air back to his homeland. As the novel closes, Milkman emulates Solomon's leap to freedom. Morrison writes, "he knew what Shalimar knew: if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it."[5]

James Cone's call to Americans is hanging in the air. This thesis is my first leap into that air and to see how far I can ride it.

[5] Toni Morrison, *The Song of Solomon* (New York: Vintage International, 2004), 337.

On the Edge of Sanity:

The Making of a Prophet

A man is called by God to leave his home in search of a Promised Land. His wife by his side, they set off on a journey to a place flowing with promise. That same man is later called by God to sacrifice his son. Without hesitation, he packs up the necessary tools, rouses the boy from bed, and, together, they leave home. God shows him the where to carry out the sacrifice, and, there, he ties his son to an altar and raises the knife. At the last minute, an angel calls out his name, and tells him, "Abraham, do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from me."[6] Father and son walk back down the mountain together, heroes of tradition, paragons of faith.

A woman, born into slavery, beaten and raped, stripped of her family, leaves her home in search of a Promised Land. She runs away, sending three children before her to freedom, carrying one as she runs. She arrives with all four children, they are free. That same woman later hears the footsteps of the slave trader coming her way. Rather than return to slavery, she raises the knife and sacrifices her daughter. An angel never appears. She walks alone back down the mountain, a murderer.

Abraham and Toni Morrison's Sethe, one a prophet, the other property, both called to sacrifice their children. Why is one a hero and the other an outcast? Toni Morrison's *Beloved* sheds light on the nature of biblical prophecy, the evolution of

[6] Genesis 22:12

prophetic action, and the ways in which America has cast aside heroes and paragons of faith throughout its history.

In biblical choreography, the prophet stands between God and humanity, an intermediary between a people and its deity. The word prophet comes from the Greek *proph*ētēs[7] meaning "one who speaks on behalf of."[8] Indeed, standing between God and humanity, the prophet speaks both as God's messenger to humankind and as an advocate on behalf of humanity in the divine court. With one ear tuned to the divine frequency and the other open to the cries of humanity, the prophet breathes the word of God into the world while also demanding or assuaging divine judgement on behalf of his fellow.

Abraham is the first person dubbed prophet[9] by the biblical text, "for he will intercede,"[10] in order to save another's life. Like Abraham, Moses, prophet *par excellence*,[11] too, serves as an intermediary between the people and God. Recounting the moment of revelation at Sinai, Moses tells the Israelites, "I stood between God and you at that time in order to relay God's word to you."[12] Like all prophets of God, neither Abraham nor Moses chose his position.[13] Once called, however, the prophet steps into place between God and man; an intermediary advocating on behalf of both divine and human parties.

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[7] *proph*ētēs is the translation of *navi* used in the Septuagint
[8] Shalom M. Paul, S. David Sperling, "Prophets and Prophecy," in *The Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Second Edition, ed. Fred Skolnick, Michael Berenbaum (Farmington Hills: Thomson Gale, 2007), 567.
[9] There are four titles used for the pre-classical prophets: *hozeh, ro'eh* (both meaning seer), *ish haElohim* (man of God), and *navi* (prophet). The Classical Prophets take the title *navi*. Unless otherwise noted, I am using "prophet" as the translation of "*navi*".
[10] Genesis, 20:7.
[11] Deuteronomy, 34:10.
[12] Deuteronomy, 5:5.
[13] Paul, Sperling, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 567.

Standing between God and man, the prophet lives his life on the threshold, lingering somewhere between divine and human realms. As messenger of God, the prophet enjoys both a level of intimacy with the Divine, and endures a certain alienation from his people. As humanity's advocate, the prophet speaks in the divine court on behalf of the very same people who, at times, spurn him and God's warnings. When God tells Abraham, for example, of the plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham successfully negotiates a balance between divine judgement and mercy, speaking out on the cities' behalf and asking, "Shall the Judge of the land not act justly?"[14] Moses, too, demonstrates the prophetic capacity to alter God's decree. The Psalmist writes, "God would have destroyed [the people] had Moses, his chosen one, not confronted him in the breach to avert his destructive wrath."[15] Standing in the breach, the point between God and man, the prophet puts himself directly in the line of divine and human fire with only his words as his weapons.

The prophet, a lone voice in the world, is the forerunner and harbinger of God's judgement on earth. Yochanan Muffs likens the role of a prophet to that of a scout during wartime. He writes:

> The function of the prophet is to see the approaching enemy and to warn the people. A true prophet is not merely one who watches on the wall, but also one who tests the wall. If the wall, namely, the ethical behavior of the people, is broken, the prophet issues a warning and makes a vigorous protest concerning the danger.[16]

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[14] Genesis, 18:25.
[15] Psalms, 106:23.
[16] Yochanan Muffs, *Love and Joy; Law, Language, and Religion in Ancient Israel* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 35.

The prophet stands in the breach, the places of human ethical failure most vulnerable to God's severe judgement.

From the perspective of the breach, history and theology are one. Beginning with the everyday life of the nation, to its legends and founding myths, the prophet narrates God into the events of human history. To see from the breach, is to see a human history infused with divine action. The prophet gives the people their operational narrative, the story of who they are in the world. That story began with Abraham, God's first prophet. It is a story of election, of being chosen and sent on a mission in the world and the additional responsibilities that come along with chosenness. It is a story of blessing and purpose that originates between Abraham and God when God tells Abraham:

> Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. There, I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and curse him that curses you; and all of the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you.[17]

From the moment God speaks the words of the promise to Abraham into the world, the children of Abraham, the inheritors of God's covenant, live on the pages of a divinely infused story, one in which the world they see around them is only half the picture. In this story, the children of Abraham live out God's promise, multiplying and eventually finding their way to the Promised Land. Living out the story of this promise, the children of Abraham, also at times, fall prey to the lure of false gods and suffer under the yoke of human monarchs, some of whom are themselves heirs to the divine covenant with

[17] Genesis, 12:1-3

Abraham.[18] At these trying moments, it is the role of the biblical prophet to remind God's people over and over again who they are, and of the divine promise to which they fall heir.

In the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, there is no prophet who has to remind the Israelites more of this promise than Moses. Moses, who leads his people out of slavery and journeys with them through wilderness to the edge of the Promised Land, must over and over again tell the Israelites that their story does not begin and end with them, but, is instead a divinely infused history moving forward toward a promised future. When the Israelites look at their surroundings and complain about the lack of food and wish to return to Egypt,[19] Moses must invite them to see the greater story in which they live. In *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann expands on this aspect of prophetic ministry. He writes:

> The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us...To that extent, it attempts...to engage in a rejection and delegitimization of the present ordering of things.[20]

Though they have crossed the sea to freedom, many of the Israelites have not yet truly left Egypt. It is Moses' job to destabilize and disrupt the oppressive hold of Egypt; the society in which some Israelites still metaphorically live. Prophetic action, Brueggemann teaches, is that which disturbs and destabilizes the prevailing order of society by, first,

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[18] Samuel 1 & 2 and Kings 1 & 2 are replete with native-born leaders who act in ways that are displeasing to God. Ahab, for example, "did what was displeasing to the Lord more than all who preceded him" (1 Kings 16:30).
[19] Numbers 11
[20] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 3.

calling attention to the oppressive forces at work in the world, and then offering an alternate vision for the future.

In naming abuses of power, the prophet exposes the ways in which those in power benefit from the exploitation of those on the underside of the social structure. On the function of prophetic speech, Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, "what has been closed is suddenly

disclosed."[21] The prophet, a recipient of divine revelation, becomes, himself, a revelatory force in society, disclosing and exposing the rampant injustices at play in the world. To hear the word of the prophet, is to be, "exposed to a ceaseless shattering of indifference," [22] or in the words of Brueggemann, the words of the prophet break us free from a state of "numbness...an inability to care or suffer."[23] The prophet's vision is one of divine freedom; a re-ordering of the world which shatters the illusion of human authority and control, an order marked by a "politics of justice and compassion," rather than one of, "oppression and exploitation."[24]

The moment of divine revelation at Sinai reflects a prophetic re-ordering of the world marked by justice and compassion. At Sinai, God speaks to a group of former slaves and introduces a new world to them, one which begins in freedom and is marked by justice and compassion:

> I the Lord am your God, who brought you out of Egypt, the house of bondage...I the Lord your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject

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[21] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Perennial Classics, HarperCollins, 2001), xxv.
[22] *ibid.,* xxv.
[23] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 41.
[24] *ibid.*, 7.

> Me, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.[25]

In the wilderness of Sinai, God reveals a new world-order to an assembly of freed slaves. At Sinai, Moses writes liberation into the world.

In *Beloved,* Toni Morrison describes a scene of revelatory worship that also takes place in the wilderness among a group of former slaves. In a clearing in the forest, protected by the trees, the broken-bodied and brokenhearted gather every week to pray together. Standing at the center of the gathering, their leader, Baby Suggs, holy, calls out, "Let the children come,"[26] and tells them to, "let [their] mothers hear [them] laugh."[27] At this moment, the forrest rings with laughter, as the parents look on and smile. Next, Baby Suggs calls the men into the field to dance, so that their wives and children can watch them dance. Lastly, Baby Suggs calls the women into the circle to cry "for the living and the dead."[28] When the women finish crying, the entire congregation joins in the center to laugh, dance, and cry. When they finish, Baby Suggs tells them, "the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it."[29]

Protected by the trees, tucked away in the wilderness, Baby Suggs leads a group of oppressed and enslaved people in prayer. The world outside of the clearing is harsh. The bodies of these people have been whipped, starved, raped, beaten, and worked to the bone. Outside of the clearing, these men, women, and children are treated not as human

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[25] Exodus 20:1-6
[26] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 2004), 103.
[27] *ibid.*
[28] *ibid.*
[29] *ibid.*

beings, but as property. In the clearing, Baby Suggs creates a world in which the men, women, and children learn to endlessly love and embrace themselves and one another. She creates a place for these people to witness one another: for mothers to see their children laugh, children to watch their fathers dance, and mothers to recognize and acknowledge the pain of their world. In the clearing, Baby Suggs creates an alternative reality for her congregation; a place in which their bodies, minds, and spirits are infinitely beloved, a world in which laughter, dance, and tears flow freely.

The world outside of the clearing, is the world outside of the novel itself. A world in which black bodies are owned, maimed, and murdered without legal repercussion. It is a world in which a loving mother of sound mind would rather murder her children than return with her to slavery. A world in which a judge would rule that the same mother could not legally be held responsible for the murder of her daughter because both she and her child were property, not human, in the eyes of the law and, therefore, incapable of murder.[30]

Morrison captures this world and delivers it in the form of *Beloved.* Reflecting on the book and its impact, Morrison wrote:

> Narrative fiction provides a controlled wilderness, an opportunity to be and to become the Other. The stranger. With sympathy, clarity, and the risk of self-examination. In this iteration, for me the author, Beloved the girl, the haunter, is the ultimate Other. Clamoring, forever clamoring for a kiss.[31]

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[30]Toni Morrison, *The Origin of Others* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 90.
Morrison based *Beloved* on an article she read about a woman who had run away from the slave plantation on which she grew up, and, when caught by the plantation owners, attempted to murder all four of her children rather than return them to slavery. While the incident resulted in the death of one child, the judge in the case ruled that the mother could not be held responsible for the murder as she and her daughter were both property and not human beings.
[31] *ibid,* 91.

In *Beloved*, Morrison gives voice to the Other, Beloved and her mother, Sethe. Morrison calls them to laugh, to dance, and to cry together, and she invites her readers to witness them. Through *Beloved*, Morrison invites her readers to the clearing in the woods, her controlled wilderness, her breach. In the breach, Morrison gives voice and makes human those who are oppressed and dismissed by American history.

In the wilderness of *Beloved,* Morrison, like Baby Suggs, creates a narrative which rejects and rewrites that of the outside world. Morrison's clearing protects Beloved and Sethe. There, they are not property. There, the possibility of forgiveness is in the air. *Beloved* reimagines the story of a mother who would murder her child rather than return her to slavery. Morrison's fictional clearing is an act of prophetic imagining as defined by Walter Brueggemann.

As a work of prophetic imagination, *Beloved* offers a new story to the world, a protected clearing in a controlled wilderness which gives voice to Sethe and Beloved. As a work of prophecy, Morrison's fictional work has many real-world implications. Morrison creates a world in which Sethe's act of infanticide is understandable and, even, pardonable. Through sharing the stories of several former slaves, in addition to those of Sethe and Beloved, Morrison exposes the ways in which power in America has worked to oppress African American men and women since the country's inception.

Beloved also sheds light on the nature of biblical prophecy, providing insight into the evolution of a prophet from one "who speaks on behalf of," into one who offers a new vision and order for the world. In biblical literature, God calls the prophet to work. Yet, it is the prophet himself who speaks in the world, "not [as] a mouthpiece, but a person; not

an instrument, but a partner, an associate of God."[32] From where does the prophet derive his courage to stand in the breach, her ability to imagine a world that does not yet exist? Is the prophet born knowing how to partner with God, to destabilize the prevailing world order? Does God have a list of desirable prophetic qualities against which to measure potential candidates? The range of prophetic personalities in the bible seems to indicate a completely different answer to the question of how a prophet evolves from mouthpiece to visionary; from product of the world to shaper of the world.

The lives of Abraham, Moses, and the similarities they bear to those of Morrison's Baby Suggs, provide insight into the creation and courage of the prophet; a person who destabilizes and reimagines the world in which he or she lives. Such a reordering occurred for the first time in biblical record with the call of Abraham, who left his father's house with his wife Sarah, held by the promise that a new nation would come from their offspring. An Abraham's departure, biblical scholar Avivah Zornberg writes, "an act of radical discontinuity is, it seems, depicted in the Torah as the essential basis for all continuity: for that act of birth that will engender the body and the soul of a new kind of nation."[33]

Abraham's decision to leave, to break from his father's story in order to begin his own, is the first step toward realizing a new nation, a people with a distinct and unique identity in the world. The implications for such an act of rupture play out in the names and on the bodies of Abraham and Sarah. Initially called Abram and Sarai in the biblical text, Sarah

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[32] Heschel, *The Prophets*, 30.
[33] Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire; Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Image Books, 1995), 77.

and Abraham are renamed by God after leaving the place in which they are born and entering into a covenant with the Divine. Sarah and Abraham are renamed for a moment of rupture. Further, Sarah is barren, she is unable to conceive.[34] Zornberg notes that the Hebrew word for "barren"[35] shares a common root with the word "uprooted".[36] Metaphorically and literally cut-off from their respective lineages and places of origin, Abraham and Sarah begin the life of a new nation with an act which generates a re-ordering of the world they both knew.

Having left the house of his father to answer God's call, Abraham experiences firsthand the destabilization of a prevailing world order and lives to tell the tale. Both he and Sarah have seen a world transformed and reordered. Like Abraham, Moses is uprooted from his people. He experiences rupture firsthand and lives to tell the tale. Moses, born "into a world of genocide,"[37] to an Israelite mother, is literally plucked, "crying,"[38] from the pages of his people's story and written into an entirely distinct narrative. Drawn out from the bank of the Nile river by Pharaoh's daughter, Moses' very name connotes his movement from one world into another: "Pharaoh's daughter named him Moses, saying, 'from out the waters, I drew him."[39] Moses is named for a moment of rupture.

Once uprooted from his people, Moses is raised as the adopted child of Pharaoh's unnamed daughter in the house of the man who ordered his death when he was an infant.

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[34] Genesis 11:30
[35] עקר
[36] Zornberg, *Beginning of Desire*, 76-77.
[37] Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Moses; A Human Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 9.
[38] Exodus 2:7
[39] Exodus 2:10

Nursed by his Israelite mother, and raised by an Egyptian princess, Moses lives a childhood of rupture and reorder; a childhood which produces a man who later asks God, "who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and lead the Israelites from Egypt?"[40] Zornberg reads this question existentially, as one expressing deep confusion surrounding identity and place in the world.[41] Moses has been estranged from the Israelites his whole life; who is he to lead them?

Before God calls Moses to the role of prophet, Moses has already faced an existential line of questioning. While surveying the work of the Israelite slaves, Moses witnessed an Egyptian taskmaster beating an Israelite worker. Moved to action by the scene,[42] Moses slew the taskmaster, hiding his body in the sand. The following day, Moses again walked among the slaves, this time witnessing a fight between two Israelites. Moses asked, "Why do you strike your fellow?" The slave responded, "Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?"[43] Fearing for his life, Moses fled from Egypt, setting off on what became the ur-story of western political and social revolution,[44] the story of the Exodus.

What is perhaps most revolutionary in this early story from Moses' life, is not the act of killing the taskmaster, but rather, Moses' "answer" to the Israelite's question, "Who made you chief and ruler over us?"[45] This question comes from the mentality of a

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[40] Exodus 3:11
[41] Zornberg, *Moses*, 18-19.
[42] On this scene, Exodus Rabbah comments that Moses left the palace that day with the intention of sharing in the Israelites' distress (Exodus Rabbah 1:27).
[43] Exodus, 2:13-14. Translation from the Jewish Study Bible
[44] Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), ix.
[45] Exodus 2:14

person whose thinking is shaped by an oppressive reality. He is asking Moses, "are you simply another Pharoah in this world?" In this moment, Moses, a man intimately familiar with the benefits of power,[46] is confronted with a question whose implications stretch way beyond the life of one Egyptian prince. Will Moses, a man raised in Pharaoh's palace, choose to reenact and emulate the oppressive dynamics of power as another pharoah in the world? Or, will he break with the power of an authoritarian regime, and generate a nascent politic of compassion in Egypt?

In his book, Exodus and Revolution, Michael Walzer notes the ways in which the Exodus narrative breaks with the traditionally cyclical modes of storytelling in the ancient world. On the Exodus, he writes:

> We can think of it as the crucial alternative to all mythic notions of eternal recurrence--and hence to those cyclical understandings of political change from which our word "revolution" derives...the same story is enacted again and again; men and women alike lose their singularity; one represents another in a system of correspondences that extends upward, hierarchically, into the mythical realm of nature and of nature's gods...Exodus breaks in the most decisive way with this kind of cosmological story-telling.[47]

Hierarchical structures of power demand adherence to a strict world order in which those who occupy the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy believe that history moves cyclically -- change is impossible in a system which begins and ends in the same place. The story of the Exodus, however, provides a new model for historical narrative, a new model with which to understand ourselves in the world. Slaves need not remain slaves forever; power

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[46] Found as a baby by Pharaoh's daughter among the reeds of the Nile, Moses is raised in Pharaoh's palace. The medieval French commentator, Rashi, teaches that by the time Moses was fully grown, Pharaoh had appointed him charge of the royal palace (Rashi on Exodus 2:11).

[47] Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 12-13.

and authority need not rest with the greedy and corrupt for all time. Stories, like the story of the Israelites who leave Egypt for freedom, teach that history can be a "strong forward movement"[48] and not a reenactment of the past. As Brueggemann notes, 'forever is always the word of Pharaoh."[49]

In fleeing Egypt, Moses breaks with the cyclical nature of an authoritarian and hierarchical regime. When Moses returns to Egypt, he comes back not to recreate Pharaoh's rule in Egypt, but rather as the champion of a new world order, that of a God beyond men whose presence in the world shatters the ground beneath the feet of tyrants. Moses begins his prophetic ministry by systematically nullifying Pharoah's religious and political claims to absolute power through exposing the false gods of Egypt.[50] Moses smashes the cyclical claims of dynastic power and idol worship, and moves history forward. From Egypt, he launches the Israelites on a march toward a "promised end,"[51] a better place which exists not in messianic time, but in this world.

The story of the Exodus carries with it many implications for the post-Exodus world. The Exodus places God directly in human history. The Israelites live the experience of slavery to freedom, of divine discontinuity and rupture, of breaking from an imperial and oppressive context with the help of a God who is, "uncontained by the empire."[52] With its radical ruptures, the Exodus introduces a new paradigm for hope, "the

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[48] *ibid.*, 12.
[49] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 43.
[50] Beginning with the plague of lice, Pharaoh's magicians cannot replicate God's miracles in Egypt, and tell Pharaoh, "אֶצְבַּע אֱלֹהִים הִוא (this is the finger of God)" (Exodus 8:14-15). In this moment, the magicians of Pharaoh themselves reveal the falsity of their gods.
[51] Walzer, *Exodus*, 14.
[52] Brueggemann*, Prophetic Imagination*, 19.

world is not all Egypt."[53] Through the story of the Exodus, Moses models for all future prophets, the role of prophet as the conduit of hope for the people, "whose voice and vision sustain our faith."[54]

In rupturing the royal order of Pharaoh's world, Moses, recipient and recorder of divine revelation, expands and reorders the scope of the Israelites' world. Author of Torah, Moses tells the Israelites, you exist on the pages of a greater story in which the reign of Pharaoh is only one chapter. The power of Pharaoh pales in comparison to the power of a God whose very name implies eternal and unending presence. By introducing the name of God to the Egyptian world, Moses introduces new possibilities for expansion and freedom in Israelite society. As Brueggemann writes, "the speech of God is first about an alternative future."[55] Indeed, with God's name, Moses not only introduces an alternative future, but also, a usable past. God tells Moses:

> Go and assemble the elders of Israel, and say to them: YHWH God of your fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has appeared to me and said, "I have taken note of you, of what is being done to you in Egypt".[56]

Perhaps in slavery, the Israelites had forgotten the God of their ancestors, and worshipped instead the foreign gods of Egypt.[57] When Moses introduces God's name to the Israelites, he also connects God to the Israelite past, lest they think that they come from Egypt, that the world was and always will be Egypt.

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[53] Walzer, *Exodus*, 21.
[54] Heschel, *Prophets*, xxi.
[55] Brueggemann*, Prophetic Imagination*, 64.
[56] Exodus, 3:16.
[57] Evidence for this claim: Ezekiel 20:6-9, Joshua 24:14.

The first step out of Egypt, then, is a look back to Israelite history. Moses gives the Israelites back their story, their identity in the world. You are not slaves, he tells them, but inheritors of a grand tradition, worshippers of the God who created the heavens and earth. Indeed, Moses himself is on a journey of re-discovery. Though he breaks radically from the world of pharaoh, the world in which he grew up, Moses' experience of radical discontinuity reconnects him to a greater history. Moses' call to prophecy is paradoxically one of both radical rupture and radical continuity. In uprooting himself from the life he knows in Egypt, Moses discovers his own, deeper, roots.

Like the Israelites, like Moses, like Abraham, Baby Suggs and those who worship with her in the clearing have lived the experience of rupture. Children of slavery, they have been bought, sold, and beaten so many times, rupture is part and parcel of their lives. Born into slavery, Baby Suggs birthed eight children throughout her life, only one of whom was she allowed to raise. The other seven children were stripped away from her and sold to plantations across the South.

Morrison's characters, men and women who grew up treated like property, living plantations, are children of rupture. They are people, like Baby Suggs, whose sons and daughters have been sold away without warning; like Sethe, whose mother was there for breakfast, and sold by lunch. Morrison writes that in slavery, "you protected yourself, and loved small" because you never knew who or what would be taken from you.[58] Slavery told one story to the enslaved: you and not a person, you are a possession, nothing belongs you and you do not matter.

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[58] Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 191.

Like Moses, Baby Suggs breaks from a cyclical story of oppression. In her first act as a free person, Baby Suggs gives herself a name, rejecting that which her masters called her and choosing to identify herself with her husband.[59] Baby Suggs not only claims personhood in this moment, but also relationship. Even though her husband has been sold away and she does not know where he is, Baby Suggs claims an identity for both of them through the act of naming herself. Baby Suggs comes out on the other side of rupture, like Abraham and Sarah, renamed.

The prophet, Baby Suggs, has seen her world transform. Like Moses, she has walked through the breach and come out alive. In *Beloved*, Morrison echoes biblical stories of prophecy, reflecting that the experience of rupture itself can be one piece of prophetic evolution, one aspect of how the prophet moves from "one who speaks on behalf of," to one who reimagines the world. The prophet, Baby Suggs, has seen her world transform. She has walked through the breach and come out alive. Morrison, however, provides an additional insight into the nature of rupture that can be read back into the biblical text to shed light on the experience of the biblical prophet.

Like Abraham and Moses, Sethe sets out on a journey toward a Promised Land. Like Abraham, she is called to sacrifice her child. Unlike Abraham, Sethe is jailed, judged inhuman, and cast aside. Why? The entire novel hinges on the question of the Sethe's sanity. Is she crazy? Is Sethe's act of murder warranted? Justified? Forgivable? Heroic? Morrison's brilliance in *Beloved* is her ability to write from the breach, from a place of complete rupture. The rupture experienced by the prophet, she teaches, is not

[59]Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 169.

simply the act of leaving one place for another, or breaking with a people, it is the exact line where rational and irrational meet. The border between sanity and insanity, horrifying reality and fantasy. Morrison tells the story of Beloved entirely from the breach, and in doing so, exposes a terrifying reality of the prophet's life.

In stepping into the breach, the prophet moves into an unknowable reality, acting on that which cannot be justified or explained rationally. Baby Suggs steps out of the breach and lives. She takes for herself a new name, and shows the people around her the possibility of freedom in this world. Abraham and Moses, too, step out of the breach transformed, ready to take their people onto the pages of a new story.

Sethe is not so lucky. Hers is "not [yet] a story to pass on."[60] From an experience of rupture, it is the prophet who emerges with a new vision for the world articulated in the form of a story to pass on, a narrative which helps imbue the world with sacred meaning for others.

[60] Morrison, *Beloved,* 324.

Between Falling and Flying:

The Prophetic Search for a Past

Two men walk to the bank of the Jordan river. The older of the two removes his mantle and strikes the water. The river parts, and, together they walk on; master and disciple. Both know that the master's time on earth is coming to an end. As they walk, they discuss inheritance and legacy, what will the teacher leave his student? Suddenly, in a whirlwind, the teacher is carried up to the heavens by a chariot pulled by horses engulfed in flames. He is gone. The student rends his cloak and cries out toward the heavens. His teacher's mantle lies on the ground next to him. He picks it up and walks on. The young man, now alone, comes back to the bank of the river. He strikes the water with the mantle and the river parts. As he crosses, onlookers see him from a distance and cry out, "the spirit of Elijah has settled on Elisha!"[61]

A man and boy are slaving in the cotton fields of Virginia. The older of the two, a father to over twenty children, brought to America in chains from Africa, straightens his back, and runs toward the hills with the boy in his arms. On the top of the hill, the man spins around several times, and lifts off into the air, bound for his homeland in Africa. On the way, he accidentally drops the baby in his arms, whose fall is broken by the trees. They call this boy, "Jake, the only son of Solomon."[62]

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[61] 2 Kings 2:15

[62] Toni Morrison, *The Song of Solomon* (New York: Vintage International, 2004), 323.

Two stories of men lifted off the earth, carried away by the wind, leaving disciples behind. Both legendary in their respective worlds. Elijah, the divine crusader, wonder worker, and voice of God in Ahab's Israel.[63] Solomon, patriarch, ancestor to hundreds of former slaves and their descendants, the man who flew like a bird to freedom [64]. Both men come of age under tyrannical rule, both symbols of a power at work in the universe greater than any man-made forces of oppression at work in society. The lives of both obscured and veiled by their respective legends. What is the reason for their fame? In what ways do they interact prophetically with greater society?

Though separated by hundreds of years, when placed in dialogue with one another, the respective stories of Elijah the prophet and Morrison's Solomon shed light not only on the role of the biblical Elijah, but also the role of modern day prophecy in American society. Based in the experience of former African slaves and their descendants living in postwar America, Morrison's masterpiece illuminates the role and staying power of Elijah in Judeo-Christian tradition.

Song of Solomon tells the story of a (male) protagonist curiously nicknamed Milkman and his coming of age in postwar Michigan. A young black man born into a relatively prosperous family, he is driftless, listless, and apathetic. While he knows his life lacks direction and meaning, Milkman is suspended between falling and flying; fearful of failing, too scared to soar. Morrison captures the evolution of Milkman's

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[63] In 1 Kings 18:18, Elijah reprimands Ahab on behalf of God for forsaking God's commandments and pursuing other gods. In 1 Kings 18:19-22, Elijah resurrects a child.

[64] Morrison*, Song of Solomon*, 320-323.

character in the very structure of her story. *Song of Solomon* opens with a man falling to his death, and ends with Milkman taking flight.

What finally brings Milkman to soar? Milkman, or Macon Dead, III., named for his father, gains the courage to leap and thus to fly when he finally uncovers his family's history. As a child, Milkman's father, Macon Dead, Jr. told him the story of his name. Macon Dead was a slave born in Macon, Georgia. At the end of the Civil War, he registered as a freeman. Unable to read or write, another man questioned him and filled out his paperwork. Morrison writes:

> The man behind the desk was drunk. He asked Papa where is was born. Papa said Macon. Then he asked him who his father was. Papa said, 'He's dead.' Asked him who owned him, Papa said, 'I'm free.' Well, the Yankee wrote it all down, but in the wrong spaces. Had him born in Dunfrie, wherever the hell that is, and in the space for his name the fool wrote, 'Dead' comma 'Macon.' But Papa couldn't read so he never found out what he was registered as till Mama told him.[65]

The importance of names and naming as a vehicle for either connecting to or rejecting the past emerges as an essential theme in Morrison's *Song of Solomon.* Names are so valuable a commodity, in fact, that Milkman's Aunt, Pilate, keeps the name her father gave her, the only word he ever wrote down, in a small box pinned to her ear, her only connection to her murdered father and lost past. Pilate, in fact, is the only person who will communicate anything to Milkman of his family's past. It is through Pilate's songs and stories, which at first blush ring as nonsense and folklore, that Milkman is eventually able to piece together his family's lineage.

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[65] Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 53.

Names in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* come not from one's lineage, but from, "yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, and weaknesses."[66] Pilate and Milkman's sisters Magdalena and First Corinthians, all receive their names from a tradition that originated with Macon Dead Sr. When it came time for him to name Pilate, he pointed to a word in the bible and that became her name, despite the fact that Pilate is an evil figure in the Jesus story, responsible for his crucifixion. Macon Dead Jr. continued that tradition, seemingly randomly giving his daughters the names First Corinthians and Magdalena. These names, which communicate a complete lack of biblical knowledge and, therefore, a lack of familiarity with Christian tradition, also convey yet another gaping hole in the legacy and heritage of the Dead Family.

Milkman's own nickname comes from a passerby sneakily watching him nurse from his mother's breast as a toddler. The name Macon Dead speaks to both a horrifying piece of American history and the choice to rewrite and forget that history by those who lived it. It is a name bestowed haphazardly to the powerless, but given power by the choice to keep it and pass it down. Rather than feeling empowered by his great grandfather's choice, however, Milkman, a young man coming of age in the era of lynching and historical events like the murder of Emmet Till, questions why the name Macon Dead was ever kept and never changed. His father answers, "Mama liked it. Liked the name. Said it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out."[67] Macon Dead, which sounds suspiciously like "making, ie., playing, dead" does, in a strange sense,

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[66] Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 330.
[67] Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 54.

mark an end to the family's status as slaves and the beginning of their freedom. What was preferable, and perhaps even necessary for the survival of Milkman's grandparents, however, has become the existential crisis of Milkman's being. He is made dead, rootless, unconnected to a past, and therefore lost in the present, drifting through life, unable to reach a future. Milkman's quest, then becomes, a search for the past; a heritage that will move his life forward with purpose and renewed meaning.

On the subject of Milkman's journey, literary critique Genevieve Fabre writes:

> Morrison's protagonist is entrusted with the task of putting bits and pieces together, of de/re/constructing chronology and genealogy...revelations about the past bear no clear meaning to him at the time when they are uttered. Yet each becomes part of his own history and must be put together in quilt fashion.[68]

Milkman thus leaves Michigan in search of a rumored family treasure. He returns, instead, with the knowledge of who he is in the world and the courage to leap. On his trip, Milkman follows a trail of breadcrumbs from Pennsylvania to the woods of Virginia, where he finds a town called Shalimar. Everyone in this town claims descendance from the flying slave Solomon. Milkman, who comes to the town only with the little information about his past provided by Pilate, pieces together, that he, too, is a descendent of Solomon. After a life dreaming of flying, Milkman's final leap, the closing scene of the novel, is "the fulfillment of a dream, is an act of faith in the legacy, an act of communion with Pilate, and with his flying ancestor."[69] Milkman's leap is one of courage; a leap into the future propelled by the past.

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[68] Genevieve Fabre, "Genealogical Archeology or the Quest for Legacy in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. Nellie Y. McKay (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1988), 108.

[69] *Ibid.* 113.

The basis for the biblical Elijah's unique staying power in Jewish tradition starts in Kings and is indirectly illuminated by the story of Solomon and his descendent Milkman in Morrison's novel. Elijah's story begins with the ascension of Ahab, the son of Omri, to the throne in Israel. Ahab served as King over the Northern Kingdom for twenty two years. During his reign, Ahab, "did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than anyone who came before him".[70] This formulaic introduction to the reign of Ahab serves to underscore the biblical author's negative evaluation of Ahab's tenure as King.[71] So abhorrent was Ahab's rule in the eyes of the author, that the same formula reappears in the biblical narrative even following his death.[72] The record of Ahab's time as monarch, therefore, is bookended or enveloped by a harsh authorial critique of his rule.

According to the biblical text, Ahab's evil ways are rooted in his pursuit of foreign deities. Indeed, the lineage of Ahab's wife Jezebel and the origin of her name, speak to Ahab's lust for foreign gods. Jezebel's father's name, אתבעל, literally translates as "with *Baal*." Further, in Ugaritic mythology, the suffix "*zubel",* as in *Je-zubel* is an epithet for the god *Baal* meaning, "god of rain and sweet water".[73] Ahab's marriage to Jezebel thus represents not merely a marriage to a foreign princess, but a union with the foreign god *Baal* himself. Together, Ahab and Jezebel build worship sites for the foreign deities *Baal* and *Asherah* across the kingdom of Israel.[74]

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[70] 1 Kings 16:29
[71] Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible; Second Addition* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2014), 695.
[72] 1 Kings 22:54
[73] Berlin and Brettler, *Jewish Study Bible,* 695.
[74] 1 Kings 16:31-33

Bible scholar James Kugel reminds us that at this time in Israel's history, prophecy was an established and societally recognized institution, one which served to connect Israel's society with Israel's deity. Kugel writes:

> When God had a message to be delivered to someone or some group (such as the king or some other individual; the royal house; foreign kings and their nations; or the people of Israel as a whole), He would send a messenger. Not a *mere* messenger, of course; apart from speaking on God's behalf, prophets were also holy men and women…[to] announce God's verdict or judgement, to be carried out or acted upon soon, if not right away.[75]

The prophet, a person of special skill in his or her own right, speaks to Israel on behalf of God, alerting all those who hear his message that it is time to change course and hearken to God's voice and commandments.

In the time of Ahab, the prophet Elijah, whose very name, אליהו (My God, He is Yah), communicates loyalty to YHWH,[76] rises to speak on behalf of God to the leadership and kingdom of Israel.

On Elijah's role during the reign of Ahab, Israeli bible scholar Professor Benjamin Uffenheimer writes that "[t]he stories of the Elijah cycle[77] reveal a cultural and religious rupture, now brought to perilous proportions by the royal court's single-minded pursuit of its political aims."[78] In the biblio-historical account of Ahab's reign, the realms of theology, religious cult, and the politics of foreign alliances are intertwined. In speaking the word of God, Elijah delivers both a theological and political message to the kingdom of Israel. God's anger over Ahab's pursuit of other deities will have

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[75] James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 439-440.
[76] Elijah, אליהו, means "my God YHWH"
[77] 1 Kings 17-19, 20-21; 2 Kings 1-2
[78] Benjamin Uffenheimer, *Early Prophecy in Israel* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999), 335-336.

far-reaching implications for both Israel and its governors. As a messenger of God delivering both a political and theological message, Elijah stands in the religious, cultural, and political breach between God and Ahab, a lone voice against Israel's power-hungry monarchs.

When Elijah first steps into the biblical text, he immediately speaks on behalf of God: "Elijah the Tishbite, an inhabitant of Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As the LORD lives, the God of Israel whom I serve, there will be no dew or rain except at my bidding'."[79] Elijah stands between God and Ahab, prophetic intermediary through whom God will communicate to Israel. Further, Elijah's pronouncement of the coming drought bears additional significance within the text. Elijah, tells Ahab, the husband of "*Baal, God of rain and sweet water,* daughter of '*with Baal'",* that there will be no rain or water in the land until YHWH commands such. Elijah's pronouncement of drought, therefore, is both a religious and political jab aimed at Ahab, Jezebel, and the god *Baal*. Elijah, messenger of YHWH, is out to prove the unmatched power of his God to Ahab and all of Israel. As the Elijah narrative will show, YHWH is the true sustainer and source of life on Earth.

As soon as Elijah pronounces the coming drought and reveals himself to Ahab, God instructs him to flee to the wadi Cherith, far away from the northern monarchs. Like Moses, Elijah must flee eastward to evade royal persecution.[80] Once east of the Jordan, Elijah takes shelter in a cave, sustained by the divinely-sent ravens who bring him bread and meat every morning, and water from a nearby wadi. Again, like Moses and the

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[79] 1 Kings 17:1

[80] When Pharoah seeks to kill Moses for slaying the Egyptian taskmaster, Moses flees eastward to Midian. (Exodus 2:15)

Israelites as they wander in the desert, Elijah is miraculously sustained by God while on his journey.[81]

Unlike the story of Moses and the Israelites, however, Elijah is the sole beneficiary of God's largesse in this episode. Elijah eats and drinks while Israel starves. What is behind this stark contrast? Perhaps, this scene, and subsequent scenes of similar import serve to highlight the benefits of serving YHWH. As the sole messenger of God's power, should Elijah not also benefit from God's ability to sustain and nourish in the time of a drought? In *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, Robert Wilson distinguishes between an intermediary who exists on the periphery of society and one who exists at the center of society with all the benefits of societal and royal support. Wilson suggests that what the prophet on the periphery loses in social status, he gains in divine support and sustenance.[82] Perhaps, then, Elijah's divinely provided feast at the wadi serves not to highlight his selfish nature, but the generosity and power of YHWH in rewarding the intermediary who literally sits on periphery of Israel.

The wadi, however, soon dries up in the face of the severe drought that continues to plague the land, and God instructs Elijah to take refuge in the home of a widow who will feed and sustain him through the drought. Elijah arrives at a widow's home, and finds her outside, gathering sticks in preparation for her and her son's last meal before their deaths from starvation and desperation. Elijah asks her to first prepare a meal for him. With some hesitancy, she cooks for Elijah, and, as a reward, Elijah sustains her and

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[81] Exodus 16:12
[82] Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 69-70.

her son with a never-ending supply of oil and flour, sharing his divine largesse with a family who, like him, exists on the periphery. Later, when the widow's son falls deathly ill, God, through the hand of Elijah, restores him to life. Elijah remains with the widow and her son for three years. In these three years, it has not yet rained once in the land of Israel.[83] It is as if God, through Elijah, continues to taunt Ahab and his *Baal* the "so-called" god of rain.

Finally, after three years of drought, God commands Elijah to leave the widow's house and find Ahab; a reunion cast in the mold of Moses' return to Egypt in order to confront Pharaoh and renew the people's faith in YHWH.[84] Elijah meets Ahab while he is scouring the land for water and food with his servant, Ovadiah. Though a servant in Ahab's palace, Ovadiah has maintained his childhood devotion to YHWH, rescuing and secretly hiding one hundred prophets of God from Jezebel and Ahab's deathly purge. Elijah finds Ovadiah first, scavenging for food and water.[85] Elijah asks him to announce his arrival to Ahab. After much convincing, Ovadiah agrees to broker an introduction. On the rainstarved ground, Ahab and Elijah meet.[86]

Ahab greets Elijah first, calling him the "troubler" or "destroyer" of Israel" (עוכר ישראל). Elijah retorts that Ahab is, in fact, the one who brought trouble on Israel in forsaking YHWH and the commandments.[87] This notion of "troubling" appears 14 times within the bible. The only other person referred to as a "troubler" by name in the context

[83] 1 Kings 18:2
[84] Exodus 3:10
[85] Every mention of drought signifies the absense or powerlessness of the rain god Baal.
[86] 1 Kings 18:17
[87] 1 Kings 18:18

of a narrative, is the character Achan in the book of Joshua.[88] Achan plunders that which is labelled as חרם or set aside for God. To abate God's anger, the people stone Achan. God is then satisfied. In the retelling of this story in 1 Chronicles, Achan's name is changed from עחן to עכר, and he becomes "the troubler who troubled."[89] Perhaps this story sheds light on the meaning of Ahab's insult, Elijah's retort, and the stakes of the game being played.

As a messenger of YHWH speaking from the periphery of Israel's society, Elijah threatens the very social, political, and religious order which keeps Ahab in power.[90] Elijah castigates Ahab for following foreign deities, and demands that the 450 prophets of *Baal* and the 400 prophets of *Asherah* who eat a Jezebel's table meet him on Mount Carmel in the presence of Israel. Ahab agrees to Elijah's challenge, summoning all of Israel and the prophets to Mount Carmel.

On the mountaintop, Elijah first speaks to the assembled Israelites, "How long will you keep hopping between two opinions?" he asks.[91] "If YHWH is God, follow Him; and if Baal, follow him!"[92] Elijah's comment sheds light not only on Ahab's relationship to *Baal* and YHWH, but also on that of the people. Like Ahab, the people have been unfaithful to YHWH, worshipping a pantheon of foreign deities in addition to the God of

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[88] Joshua 7:25
[89] 1 Chron 2:7
[90] Ahab has cast his lot in with Baal, and, in fact does incur God's wrath for his behavior. After he repents, however, God decides to visit his wrath on Ahab's son, sparing Ahab disaster in his lifetime. (1 Kings 21:29)
[91] Berlin and Brettler, *Jewish Study Bible*, 698. (A translation of 1 Kings 18:21; Literally the Hebrew עַד־מָתַ֞י אַתֶּ֣ם פֹּסְחִ֗ים עַל־שְׁתֵּ֤י הַסְּעִפִּים֙ translates, "how long will you keep hopping on the two boughs.") The verb פסח appears only eight times within the bible, most notably connected to God's "passing over" the Israelite houses marked with blood. (Exodus 12:13, 23, 27).
[92] 1 Kings 18:21

Israel. Elijah's challenge to Ahab and the prophets of *Baal*, therefore, must prove once and for all to Israel that while *Baal* may be responsible for certain aspects of the natural world, *YHWH's* power encompasses all.

Elijah stands on Mount Carmel, the sole champion of YHWH. Before the entire people, Elijah challenges the foreign prophets to a contest. He orders two young bulls slaughtered, brought to the mountain, and placed on two alters.[93] One built by the prophets of Baal, the other, he will build for YHWH. The sacrifice that is consumed by divines flame will reveal the true power of each God. The prophets of Baal agree to the rules of the contest, and begin to assemble their alter and invoke Baal's name.[94]

In a satirical turn, the prophets themselves "hop" around the altar for hours, screaming Baal's name to no avail.[95] Elijah stands alone, mocking the prophets as they feverishly fail to manifest Baal's presence and power on Earth.[96] Elijah then calls the attention of the onlookers as he repairs the altar for the sacrifice, placing around it twelve stones corresponding to the twelve sons of Jacob, to whom God said, "Israel shall be your name".[97] In a time of drought and famine, a time in which the god of storms himself cannot bring down water, Elijah commands the Israelites to pour water over the altar, wood, and bull three times. As water drips from the altar, Elijah steps forward and shouts:

וַיֹּאמַר֮ יְהוָ֣ה אֱלֹהֵי֒ אַבְרָהָם֙ יִצְחָ֣ק וְיִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל הַיּ֥וֹם יִוָּדַ֖ע כִּי־אַתָּ֣ה אֱלֹהִ֑ים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל וַאֲנִ֣י עַבְדֶּ֔ךָ וּבִדְבָרְךָ֖ עָשִׂ֥יתִי אֶת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִ֖ים הָאֵ֑לֶּה: עֲנֵ֣נִי יְהוָ֔ה עֲנֵ֖נִי וְיֵדְע֣וּ הָעָ֣ם הַזֶּ֔ה כִּ֥י אַתָּ֛ה יְהוָ֥ה הָאֱלֹהִ֖ים וְאַתָּ֣ה הֵסַ֔בְתָּ אֶת־לִבָּ֖ם אֲחֹרַ֥נִּית:

YHWH, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel! Let it be known today that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at

[93] 1 Kings 18:23
[94] 1 Kings 18:25-26
[95] 1 Kings 18:26
[96] 1 Kings 18:27
[97] 1 Kings 18:31

> Your bidding. Answer me, YHWH, answer me, that this people may know that You, YHWH, are God; for You have turned their hearts backward.[98]

Elijah's call here recalls that of Moses upon his return to Egypt and his introduction of YHWH to the people. Like Moses does when revealing God's presence and plan to the Israelites, Elijah names God in connection to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.[99] It is in this moment, a moment illuminated by Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, that Elijah's power as prophet in Israel reaches its peak. Through invoking the patriarchs on Mount Carmel, Elijah reconnects Israel to its past, giving the people their Song of Solomon. Elijah comes to teach Israel that they belong not *Baal*, the god of rain, but to YHWH, the God of eternity.

A divine fire immediately descends and consumes the sacrifice, the stones, and the altar. The people see God's fire and fall on their faces and call out, "יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים: Adonai is God.[100]" According to Walter Brueggemann, the language of doxology, of praising God's name and affirming God's ultimate authority in this world, is the weapon wielded by the prophet from the breach. With his eyes aflame and set on the throne, the prophet affirms God's eternal reign over the universe, a power greater than any worldly authority.[101]

In the face of a Pharaoh or King who seeks to limit and confine the authority and power of others, who orders the world according to his own bloodline with the palace at

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[98] 1 Kings 18:36-37
[99] Exodus 6:8-10
[100] 1 Kings 18:39
[101] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 18.

is center, the prophet introduces the possibility of infinite expansion and movement through invoking and praising a God of the past, present, and future. The God-centered story of the prophet itself destabilizes the royal order, unveiling a forgotten past and reimagining the future. Brueggemann writes:

> The language of the empire is surely the language of managed reality, of production and schedule and market. But that language will never permit or cause freedom, because there is no newness in it. Doxology is the ultimate challenge to the language of managed reality, and it alone is the universe of discourse in which energy is possible.[102]

Ahab's reign is one marked by death and stagnation. Elijah's invocation of YHWH and the return of the Israelites to their God brings not only rain to Israel,[103] but also and more importantly, lifts the hold of *Baal* from over the people, reconnecting them to their past and thereby creating new possibilities for the future.

As Elijah's story continues, one of these possibilities is revealed by an encounter with God. After Elijah successfully conjures God's presence on Mount Carmel and puts the prophets of Baal to the sword, Elijah invites Ahab to have a meal with him. Reminiscent of the covenant meal Moses shares with the elders of Israel in Exodus 24, Elijah's offer is one of peace and return to YHWH.[104] Ahab and Jezebel, however, will not make peace with Elijah, forcing him to again flee for his life. This time, Elijah flees into the wilderness. Like Moses and the children of Israel wandering in the desert, Elijah is sustained by God during his journey, though not for forty years, but forty days and

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[102] Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination,* 18.
[103] 1 Kings 18:45
[104] Jerome T. Walsh, "Elijah," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume 2, ed. David Noel Freedman, Gary A. Herion, David F. Graf, John David Pleins, Astrid B. Beck (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 465.

forty nights. Elijah's destination is the very place where Moses encountered God for the first time, Mount Horeb and it takes place over a time span identical to that of Moses when he ascended the mountain to receive the first and then the second tablets at Sinai.[105]

Unlike Moses, who begins his prophetic journey on Horeb, Elijah comes to Horeb ready to renounce his role as prophet in Israel. At Horeb, God speaks to Elijah.[106] Unlike revelation at Sinai, Elijah's moment of theophany comes not in a mighty wind, not in an earthquake, not in fire, but in "the sound of the thinnest stillness".[107] James Kugel suggests that the theophany described here rejects notions of divine revelation through natural phenomena, as the storm god *Baal* would appear to followers, but rather, "the true God's voice is beyond the natural world, it is, 'the sound of the thinnest stillness.'"[108] Elijah's encounter with God, here, reveals the possibility, then that God exists beyond fleeting and seemingly random natural phenomena that Elijah had himself invoked at the beginning of his prophetic journey by announcing a drought. Instead, YHWH stands eternally outside of our transient world, a constant and eternal presence across time and space.

In this voice, God asks Elijah why he has come. Elijah, the despondent, lone prophet of YHWH in Israel, renounces the people for forsaking the covenant. Before Elijah can renounce his role, however, God provides him with several tasks. God commands Elijah to anoint new Kings over Aram and Israel, and to prepare Elisha to succeed him as prophet.

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[105] Exodus 3:1
[106] 1 Kings 19:13-18
[107] Kugel, *How to Read the Bible,* 531; translation of 1 Kings 19:12; קוֹל דְּמָמָה דַקָּה
[108] Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 532.

After anointing two new monarchs and locating Elisha, Elijah has one final meeting with Ahab. This time, Elijah serves not as zealous champion of Israelite ritual and cult, but rather as the arbiter and voice of divine morality and justice in the case of Ahab and Naboth the Jezreelite.[109] When Naboth, whose vineyard abuts Ahab's palace, refuses to sell Ahab his land, Jezebel orders him murdered. Ahab then takes possession of the vineyard. God sends Elijah to chastise Ahab and foreshadow the deaths of Jezebel, Ahab, and Ahab's entire line. When Ahab repents, God relents and tells Elijah that divine punishment will be meted out in the days of Ahab's son.

Shortly thereafter, Elijah's own departure is foretold by several nameless prophets in Israel. Elijah's death shares several similarities with that Moses. First, like Moses, who is told by God when he will die and that he must appoint a successor,[110] Elijah knows his end is near and leaves Elisha in his stead.[111] Like Moses, Elijah's end comes near the Jordan river. Important to note, Elijah parts the Jordan moments before his ascension, reminiscent of Moses' miraculous parting of the Red Sea.[112] Lastly, neither Moses nor Elijah's bodies are recovered by human hands for burial. While Moses is buried by God, albeit in a grave that no one can identify, Elijah is taken up to heaven by a chariot of fire in a whirlwind.[113] Unlike Moses, Elijah's death lacks conclusion; while he departs from this world, he is never definitively pronounced dead, allowing him to endure above time. Indeed, Elijah's character continues to appear and evolve across Jewish literature.

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[109] 1 Kings 21:1-29
[110] Deuteronomy 31:14
[111] 2 Kings 2:9
[112] Exodus 14:21; 2 Kings 2:8
[113] Deuteronomy 34:6; 2 Kings 2:11

The prophet Malachi, casts Elijah as the messenger who will be sent by God before the coming of the messianic age. Speaking in the voice of God, the text states:

> Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the LORD. He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents, so that, when I come, I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction.[114]

This passage provides key insight into the evolution of Elijah from prophet in Israel to harbinger of judgement day. Malachi builds on the portrayal of Elijah within Kings. Elijah, who stood alone on Mount Carmel championing God is now *the* champion of God, the prophet singled out among all others who will serve as God's messenger in the future. The original text in Malachi hearkens to that of 1 Kings 18. Just as Elijah asks God to turn the hearts of the people[115], so too, will Elijah turn the hearts of parents and children in reconciliation.[116]

Elijah, who put his own life in danger to champion God and performed miraculous acts of healing to glorify God's name, will now champion and heal humanity at the behest of God. As such, the image of Elijah as harbinger of the Messiah is not limited to Jewish tradition. The book of Matthew casts John the Baptist in the mold of Elijah, describing him as, "the Elijah who was to come", solidifying and affirming Elijah's connection to the messianic age and timeless role in Jewish history.[117]

In his biblical roles of prophetic dissident, itinerant miracle worker, and harbinger of the messiah, Elijah stakes his claim in Jewish tradition as arbiter of a more just and

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[114] Malachi 3:23-24
[115] 1 Kings 18:37; וְאַתָּה הָסַבְתָּ אֶת־לִבָּם אֲחֹרַנִּית׃
[116] Malachi 3:24: וְהֵשִׁיב לֵב־אָבוֹת עַל־בָּנִים וְלֵב בָּנִים עַל־אֲבוֹתָם; this imagery reappears in Ben Sira 48:9-11
[117] Matthew 11:14

moral world. Later rabbinic texts affirm and amplify Elijah's role in Jewish history, depicting Elijah as an omnipresent and omniscient miracle worker and helper to the poor and needy who moves across time and space in between divine and human realms. In Bava Metzia, for example, Elijah's uncharacteristic absence from Judah HaNasi's *beit midrash* is explained by his commitment to waking up and preparing each patriarch for his daily prayers.[118] In this story, Elijah explains that he was delayed in his task because each patriarch had to be woken up separately, lest all three pray simultaneously and the messiah comes prematurely. As in the text of Malachi, Elijah's earlier biblical characteristics are synthesized and amplified in the rabbinic imagination, giving way to an Elijah who travels between past and present, acting as an intermediary and safeguard between divine and human realms.

Elijah continues to "pop-in[119]" throughout rabbinic and Jewish literature. While his appearances are noted within the text, they are accompanied by little fanfare; Elijah appears exactly where and when he is most needed, and no one is ever shocked to see him. Further, at times, Elijah appears in disguise. In Nedarim, for example, Elijah appears to Rabbi Akiva and his wife as a poor person begging for straw.[120] Elijah's presence within the story serves to underscore Rabbi Akiva's generosity. Despite the disguise, Elijah continues to shed light on the best of humanity, perhaps hinting on the role of humanity in ushering in a messianic age through compassion and kindness to one another.

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[118] Bava Metzia 85b
[119] For more on the "pop-in" see: **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KzOv2jrC1I8**
[120] Nedarim 50a

Elijah's tenure as prophet in Israel is borne of Ahab's (miss)rule and ambivalence toward the God of Israel. From here, Elijah morphs from biblical to messianic proportions. In the world of First and Second Kings, books in which history and theology are one, Elijah's unrelenting dedication to YHWH positions him as not only a hero in the mind of the book's authors, but also, at times, the sole champion for God in a culture tainted by idolatry and foreign rule. The Book of Kings, pitts Elijah's zeal for YHWH directly against Jezebel and Ahab's relationship to the prophets of other gods. In the world of Kings, therefore, Elijah serves as the arbiter of Israelite morality, speaking out against the loathsome behavior of a monarchy which has failed to worship soley the God of Israel. As an agent of divine power and morality, Elijah's role within the text is twofold; to speak out against royal idolatry and to glorify and magnify God's presence on Earth.

Though in the world of Kings, God is clearly on Elijah's side, Elijah's dual role as political dissident and itinerant prophet often leave him isolated on the margins of Israelite society. The contest between the prophets of Baal and Elijah highlights Elijah's willingness to stand alone against foreign gods and political corruption. As he assembles all of Israel on Mount Carmel, Elijah calls out, "I am the only prophet of the Lord left, while the prophets of Baal are four hundred and fifty men."[121] Even when surrounded by people, Elijah is alone.

Returning now to Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, though written many centuries later and in an entirely different social context, the novel nevertheless sheds

[121] 1 Kings 18:22

light on the work of the prophet and Elijah's role throughout Judeo-Christian tradition. Elijah's ascension in the Chariot of Fire is recapitulated in the ascension of Solomon. Both represent a leap toward an infinite and expansive future free from a tyrannical and oppressive reality. In uncovering the song of Solomon and the names of his family members while walking through the town of Shalimar, Milkman unlocks the key to his past, the key to understanding that he is more than the oppressive reality which binds him. He thinks, "When you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do."[122] In learning his family's story, Milkman binds them and himself to an eternal life force. He is more than the kings and false prophets preaching white supremacy who claim truth and power.

Elijah comes to remind those who heed his call, that they belong not to Ahab, not to Jezebel, not to the Kings in their midst, but to a greater force at work in the universe, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Elijah, the prophet, tells the Israelites who have been cut off from their God, living in a stagnant and decaying world, that they belong not to the despot, but to the God of their ancestors. Along similar lines, Morrison's novel reminds us that the prophet's role in the world is to show others that the impossible road to freedom is possible, that when you come from somewhere, you can discern where you are going. Elijah is with us in every moment of Jewish history, reminding us who we are and the power of God to bring about ultimate goodness in this world.

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[122] Morrison, *Song of Solomon,* 329.

A View From the Mountain Top:

The Single Garment of Destiny and An American Promise Gone Awry[123]

Two men, both prophets in their time, separated by thousands of years, stand on the mountain top, each looking out over a promised land. Though neither will ever reach that land, both give their respective peoples a radically new vision for the future of the world. On the mountaintop, Moses looks out over the land which God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the land God will give the children of Israel as inheritors of that promise.[124] Thousands of years later, on April 3, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. joined Moses on the mountaintop and looked out over a human panorama of beauty and pain. King's account of human history that night began with the story of the Exodus, and ended at his own moment in time, as he spoke to an entire people waiting to cross to freedom. Addressing a crowd of over three thousand gathered at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple, King said:

> "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!"[125]

Dr. King was assassinated the next day.

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[123] The closing section on mass incarceration in America is excerpted from a chapter which appears in *Moral Resistance and Spiritual Authority.* Jonah Pesner and Seth Limmer, *Moral Resistance and Spiritual Authority* (New York: CCAR Press, 2018), 201-206.

[124] Deuteronomy 34:4

[125] Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard, *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 2001), 222-223.

Before he stands on the top of Mount Nebo,[126] Moses, like King, gives the Israelites the story about who they have been and a vision for who they should try to become in their new land. Moses' radical ethic of social responsibility based in collective memory, recorded in the Torah, recapitulated in the book of Deuteronomy, instructs the Israelites on legal, social, theological and ritual questions that will arise once they begin building their new society.[127] On the distinctiveness of Deuteronomy, Bible scholar Jeffrey Tigay writes:

> The Torah's humanitarianism is most fully developed in Deuteronomy's legislation and exhortations on behalf of the poor and disadvantaged: debtors, indentured servants, escaped slaves, resident aliens, orphans, widows, and Levites, as well as animals and even convicted criminals...Deuteronomy explains that humanitarian duties toward the disadvantaged are based on Israel's similar experiences in the past (10:19; 15:15; 24:18, 22).[128]

In Deuteronomy, Moses instructs the Israelites that it is not their duty simply to remember their own history of slavery and oppression,[129] but also to transform that memory into the foundation for the construction of a just and caring society. Just as God took note of Israel's suffering in Egypt and guided the vulnerable and nascent nation through the desert, so too, must Israel now take special care of the most vulnerable within its midst. On this Deuteronomic theme of caring for the vulnerable, Bible scholar Patrick Miller writes:

To all those seeking the Promised Land, Deuteronomy comes to teach that:

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[126] Deuteronomy 34:1
[127] In the JPS Commentary Introduction to Deuteronomy, editor Jeffrey Tigay writes, "In form, Deuteronomy consists of farewell discourses and poems that Moses delivered to Israel in the last weeks of his life, and brief narratives about his final activities." Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996) xxi.
[128] Tigay, *JPS*, xvii.
[129] Exodus 13:2

> the blessing brings with it demands and responsibilities, indeed in a way not true before the promise was accomplished. From here on, Deuteronomy stresses that that blessing, gifts, and prosperity, by their very existence, place burdens, require leadership, and demand shared responsibilities and work.[130]

Entering the Promised Land is only half the equation, the Israelites, Moses teaches, must take on an ethic of shared responsibility to preserve and maintain the promise of the land. The unfolding of that blessing occurs under communal leadership and a collective responsibility toward the common good. In his vision for achieving the promise of America, Dr. King shared the metaphor of the "single garment of destiny." At a 1968 address on the National Cathedral, Dr. King said:

> We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured.[131]

While King's promised land differed from that of Moses, both men preached an ethic of collective responsibility and shared destiny. Both taught that the lives of the powerful and vulnerable were intimately wrapped up in one another.

Perhaps the starkest example of Moses' understanding of collective responsibility as seen uniquely in Deuteronomy is the ritual of the broken-necked calf[132] and its subsequent treatment in rabbinic sources. The ritual details the precise course of action local leaders must take if a slain and unknown human corpse is found out in the open

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[130] Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 28.

[131] Delivered at the National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., on 31 March 1968. Congressional Record, 9 April 1968.

[132] Deuteronomy 21:1-9

between multiple cities with no hint as to the details of the crime.[133] Moses instructs the leaders of all the nearby towns to come out and measure the distance between the body and the border of their cities. The leaders of the town most proximate to the corpse must then break the neck of an unworked calf and recite the words, "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see."[134] After performing this ritual, Moses teaches, the leaders of the town are absolved of any possible guilt they may have incurred as a result of the murder.

The treatment of the corpse in Deuteronomy and the accompanying ritual raise several questions. Namely, to whom exactly does the blame for this murder fall, and what exactly did the leaders of the closest town "not see"?[135] While the ritual presumes the innocence of the town's leaders, it also, through the explicit denial of guilt, introduces the possibility that perhaps the leaders might in fact bear some responsibility for the crime. The Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds each offer a unique perspective on the question of collective responsibility. The Babylonian Talmud interprets the biblical ritual as a statement of articulated responsibility to the victim: "no one came within our jurisdiction whom we discharged without food and whom we did not see and whom we left without providing him an escort."[136] Here, the ritual of the broken-necked calf atones for the

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[133] The Hebrew here, שדה, signifies a place that as Dr. Aryeh Cohen points out is, "ownerless or wild". Aryeh Cohen, *Justice in the City; An Argument from the Sources of Rabbinic Judaism* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012), 70.

[134] Deuteronomy 21:7; The Hebrew here is ambiguous. What exactly did the leaders of the town "not see"? (וְאָמְרוּ יָדֵ֙ינוּ לֹ֤א שפכה [שָׁפְכ֨וּ] אֶת־הַדָּ֜ם הַזֶּ֗ה וְעֵינֵ֙ינוּ֙ לֹ֣א רָאֽוּ) This question will be taken up later in the chapter.

[135] Deuteronomy 21:7

[136] Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (Jerusalem: Haomanim Press, 1993), 206.

possibility that the leaders and residents of the town did not provide adequate sustenance or protection for a stranger passing through town.

Recording the response of the Babylonian Talmud, the Palestinian Talmud adds another layer to the discussion. There, the text asserts that the ritual atoned not for the act of neglecting the victim, but for the possibility of legal negligence regarding the assailant: "The rabbis here [the land of Israel] took the text to refer to the slayer. That no one came within our jurisdiction whom we discharged...and and neglected to bring him to justice."[137] While still preserving the interpretation of the Babylonian Talmud, the rabbis in the land of Israel offer the interpretation that the intention of the biblical ritual was atonement for a failure of the legal system.

In his book, *Justice in the City*, Dr. Aryeh Cohen considers both passages and the original biblical passage in Deuteronomy, and notes that in declaring their innocence of these crimes, the town leaders were raising the possibility that they, in fact, may actually bear responsibility for the murder;[138] and, as refined by the rabbinic texts, the crime could either be the result of a failure of the town's social network or its legal system. In his reading of the text, Dr. Cohen cites the 19th Century Ukrainian Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser, known also as the Malbim. The Malbim synthesizes the Palestinian and Babylonian readings, adding, also, a layer of commentary. He writes:

> That we [the town leaders] were not indirectly instrumental in this murder on account of not providing the murderer with food for the lack of which he was driven to commit this capital crime or because we did not provide the victim with an escort the he should go alone in a place of danger.[139]

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[137] Leibowitz, *Devarim*, 207.
[138] Cohen, *Justice in the City*, 73.
[139] Cited in Nechama Leibowitz, *Devarim*, 207.

The Malbim raises the possibility that perhaps both the slayer and the slain were not shown adequate care and hospitality as they passed through town, and the community failed in its responsibility to sustain and protect both the murderer and the murdered.

From biblical to modern texts, the hypothetical case of the anonymous corpse lying out in the open triggered a rabbinic and communal process of self-scrutiny and reflection. Though our hands may not directly shed blood, the commentators ask, in what ways are we accountable for the horrendous breach of safety and peace in our midst? In *Paradise*, Toni Morrison steps directly into that breach, opening her novel with the picture of slain body on the outskirts of a town filled with promise, a place made in the image of God's promised land. Unlike the story of the unknown corpse in Deuteronomy, however, the identity of the slayed and the slayer are both known.

In *Paradise*, Morrison plays with notions of race and identity in America against the backdrop of murder. *Paradise* takes place in the town of Ruby, a fictionalized version of the historically all-black towns established across the Midwest following abolition.[140] Though founded by former slaves, these historical towns replicated the racial hierarchy which existed in America, welcoming men and women with light skin and turning away people with darker skin tones.[141] Morrison's Ruby was built by those men and women who were cast out and refused entry to all-black towns because of their skin color. As a result, Ruby's social hierarchy places ultimate social primacy on "blue black...8-rock" skin, skin as dark as the eight-rock level of a coal mine.[142] Residents whose skin reveals

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[140] Toni Morrison, *The Origin of Others* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 55-74.
[141] Morrison, T*he Origin of Others*, 57.
[142] Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: First Vintage International, 2014), 193.

any drop of white blood are shunned and marginalized by the community as evidence of "racial tampering," mixing with outsiders.[143]

Every year, the children of Ruby re-enact and retell the story of Ruby's founding, a story of a "tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what happened to them," marching through the wilderness in search of a promised land.[144] The townspeople refer to Ruby's mythic founding as the story of the "Disallowing".[145] The "Disallowing" is the story of Ruby's eight founding families, men, women and children, wandering from town to town in search of a home, half-starved and growing weaker with each passing day. At every town, the story goes, white and black folk turned these dark-skinned wanderers away. As the story of the "Disallowing" passed from generation to generation, "these people internalized the shame and hatred they experienced, and, through storytelling, passed on a determination to their descendents to become even more exclusive and intolerant than their persecutors."[146] Ruby's residents, the inheritors of the "Disallowing," build their Promised Land on the principles of their own racial superiority borne of persecution and the town's subsequent isolation.

Hundreds of miles from the closest town, Ruby's residents build an entire world to counteract the world "Out There":

> Out There where your children were sport, your women quarry, and where your very person annulled; where congregations carried arms to church and ropes coiled in every saddle. Out There where every cluster of white men looked like a

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[143] Morrison, *Paradise*, 197.
[144] Morrison, *Paradise*, 189.
[145] *ibid.*
[146] Channette Romero, "Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and "Nation" in Toni Morrison's *Paradise,*" *African American Review* Vol. 39, No. 3 (Fall 2005): 418, (415-430).

> posse, being alone was being dead. But lessons had been learned and relearned in the last three generations about how to protect a town.[147]

In their isolation, Ruby's residents build a haven from the of lynch mobs, segregation, and legalized discrimination which exist "out there".[148] Indeed, the town of Ruby inverts the rules of "Out There." In Ruby, people leave their doors unlocked. Men, women, and children walk the streets unafraid of lynch mobs. In Ruby, it is the white people who must fear for their lives.[149]

In an ironic twist, Ruby, the Promised Land for so many of its residents, becomes exactly that which exists "Out There". The story of persecution and oppression told and retold every year in Ruby ultimately, does not fuel an ethos of embracing and loving the proverbial other, but instead, provokes the murderous rampage with which the book both opens and closes. As the novel itself so aptly asks, "How could so clean and blessed a mission devour itself and become the world they had escaped?"[150]

On the outskirts of Ruby sits an abandoned convent. Over the course of many years, women seeking refuge from violence, poverty, and misogyny build a small community within the walls of the convent. The women who make their home their welcome everyone into their ranks, regardless of age, race, or social standing. Despite squabbles or even violent, physical brawls the women may have with one another, the convent is a true haven from the world, a place in which women who have been

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[147] Morrison, *Paradise*, 16.
[148]Morrison, *The Origin of Others*, 55-74.
[149] *Paradise* opens with the words, "They shoot the white girl first" (3). Morrison writes that she used the opening to signal "the presence of race as hierarchy, and, its collapse of reliable information." (xvi).
[150] Morrison, *Paradise*, 292.

marginalized and spit out from society can call home. In stark contrast to Ruby, the convent is a place of racial and religious blending and mixing. The women, whose racial and ethnic backgrounds are never revealed, depend on one another for their survival. Further, these women bear witness to one another's stories of pain and suffering at the hands of the outside world. In sharing and witnessing one another's pain, these women offer a model of storytelling in opposition to that of Ruby. Rather than repeat stories of pain and persecution over and over again in the service of further isolating their community, these women share their stories with the hope of opening themselves to one another and the world. Scholar Channette Romero writes, "the women are able to heal each other collectively by first articulating their traumas...and then learning to recognize and love the connections between them."[151]

As the elders and leaders of Ruby, who are all men, grow increasingly insular and wary of change, the women of the convent increase in number and begin to spill into the town. The anxiety and anger induced by the presence of these wild women is exacerbated by the ever-growing rift between the younger and older generations in Ruby. The tension between these groups reveals itself in the argument over the town's creed which is etched into the historical communal oven. The oven, which sits in the center of town, was the first permanent feature installed in Ruby by the town's original founders. While it remains the gathering place for Ruby's residents, the younger and older townsfolk argue over the ancient words adorning their oven. The older generations believe that the oven

[151] Romero, "Nation," 418.

reads, "Beware the Furrow of His Brow."[152] The younger generation insists, however, that the words on the oven spell out, "Be the Furrow of His Brow,"[153] and later, "We are the furrow of his brow."[154] Perhaps ostensibly trivial, the negligible difference between the two interpretations belies Morrison's genius in *Paradise*.

The debate over the writing on Ruby's oven is in many ways a revision of the prophetic writing on the wall in chapter five of the biblical book of Daniel, foreshadows a clash between the younger and older generations of the town with very deadly consequences. The town's oven, Ruby's historical center, is the focus of a generational shift in African American and American conceptions of identity. The older generations insist on a reading of the oven which supports the mythical origins of their town on which they have built not only their own identities, but also the very principles on which Ruby functions. On the younger generation in Ruby Ana M. Fraile Marcos writes:

> By transforming the phrase from a warning...to a self-assertive statement of divine identification and disapproval of the present, the young people of Ruby express their desire to make themselves creative agents in a new Exodus toward freedom and redemption. [155]

At the heart of Ruby's generational conflict lies the power of storytelling and stories in crafting collective and individual identity. Just as the founders of Ruby told and retold their story of wandering and oppression in order to build and fortify their Promised Land, so, too, must Ruby's young folk tell and retell a story that will protect them as they encounter for themselves the world outside of Ruby's walls.

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[152] Morrison, *Paradise*, 195.
[153] Morrison, *Paradise,* 195.
[154] Morrison, Paradise, 298.
[155] Ana M. Fraile Marcos, "The Religious Overtones of Ethnic Identitybuilding in Toni Morrison's *Paradise," Atlantis*, Vo. 4 No. 22, (December 2002): 107 (95-116).

With *Paradise*, Morrison asks, what do we do once we reach the promised land? What stories about ourselves and about God do we tell and how do they inform our moral thinking and action in the world? With the memory of persecution fresh in their psyche, the older generations bring an ethos of fear to Ruby. The young people raised in Ruby, however, rebel against this fear, turning a history of oppression into a foundation for strength. The stories we tell ourselves, Morrison teaches, matter. Frustrated and fearful, the older men of Ruby lead a deadly raid on the convent, the misplaced site of their anger. While no one knows exactly how many women were murdered than night, at least one corpse lies on the outskirts of Ruby, a failure of justice in the promised land.

Two stories of murder. One biblical, the other told in Toni Morrison's 1997 novel *Paradise*. In 21st Century America, a country overflowing with historical images of lynched, mutilated, and shot black bodies, both stunning examples of a tear in the garment of destiny we all wear, and the ways in which the stories we tell about our past shape our present realities. In his recently published treatise, *Tears We Cannot Stop; A Sermon to White America*, Professor Michael Eric Dyson calls on all white Americans to recognize the tears in the garment filled with "pockets of misery and suffering that seem to be filled with a disproportionate number of black people."[156] Dyson writes that these trends will continue to grow if white Americans continue to mythologize the American past and ignore the full scope of American history. "Beloved," Dyson writes, "you must give up myths about yourself, about your history. That you pulled yourselves up by your

[156] Michael Eric Dyson, *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017), 5.

bootstraps. You must also forcefully, and finally, come face-to-face with the black America you have insisted on seeing through stereotype and fear."[157]

Dyson's call to white America is a call to join Moses and Martin Luther King Jr. on the mountain top; to look out over history and see all of its beauty and pain. Looking out from the mountain top, what is the history of white, Jewish America? What are the stories we have told ourselves and whom have we failed in our American story? In order to answer these questions, I will begin with my own family.

Looking out from the mountaintop, I see my great grandfather stepping on to Ellis Island, just one of over twenty million people who immigrated to America from Europe in search of freedom between 1880 and 1924, one of two million Jews who came here in what Abraham Cahan dubbed, "the beginning of a new great Exodus of the wandering people[158]." Pushed from the lands of their birth by poverty and persecution and pulled by the promise of abundance in America, these travelers heard the call of over 100 years of American history, the promise of freedom for all people.

From the mountaintop, I see my grandfather, Hershel, Nathan's son, first fruits of the new land, born in Brooklyn to Russian immigrants. I see him standing in his army uniform. I see him sitting in geology class in Brooklyn College where he met my grandmother, receiving financial assistance from the GI Bill, what historian Karen Brodkin dubbs "the biggest and best affirmative action program in the history of our nation".[159] I see him, one of over eight million American veterans who took advantage of

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[157] Dyson, *Tears We Cannot Stop*, 94.
[158] Abraham Cahan, *Atlantic Monthly* Vol. LXXXII (July 1898): 263-287.
[159] Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 27.

the educational benefits of the Bill, on their way to the middle class. I see my grandparents receiving a bank loan to buy the home in Brooklyn where they would raise four children.

From the mountaintop, I see African American and female veterans of that same war systematically denied their GI benefits[160] and disproportionately rejected from colleges across the country. I see non-white families denied the same bank loans that pushed my family into the middle class through the practice of red-lining and the promotion of restrictive mortgage covenants that legally created segregated neighborhoods in cities and kept non-white families out of the suburbs. I see urban renewal projects like the building of highways through cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago that left those who could not enter the suburbs trapped in neighborhoods slowly falling into disrepair.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, W.E.B. Dubois wrote, "this nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found freedom in his promised land".[161] Standing on the mountaintop at the dawn of the 21st Century, we see a history of an American people enslaved, murdered, and legally discriminated against. From slavery and Jim Crow to the mass incarceration of people of color in America today -- a span of almost 400 years -- the freedman has still not yet found freedom in his promised land.

From the mountaintop, we see a story of grotesque contrast: the first fruits of generations of white American immigrants, rising higher into prosperity; and the strange

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[160] Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 41-44.
[161] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Signet Classics, 2012), 11.

fruit of the South, poignantly evoked in the words of Jewish poet Abel Meeropol and made famous by the immortal Billie Holiday:

> Southern trees bear strange fruit
> blood on the leaves and blood at the root
> Black body swinging in the Southern breeze
> Strange fruit hanging from the poplar tree.[162]

In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Professor James Cone places the symbol of Jesus on the cross in conversation with the history of lynching in America. Cone calls for a theological wreckoning among all those who worship at the cross and its resonances with the lynching tree in America. He writes, "I believe the cross placed alongside the lynching tree can help us to see Jesus in America in a new light and thereby empower people who claim to follow him to take a stand against white supremacy and every kind of injustice."[163] In concluding his call to American Christians, Cone writes, "the lynching of black America is taking place in the criminal justice system."[164] Where is the place for American Jews in Cone's call to action? As a white American, I share in the collective destiny of all Americans. As a Jewish American, I can offer a response to mass incarceration steeped in rabbinic sources.

According to the Pew Charitable Trusts, nearly 1 in every 31 Americans lives either under correctional control in prison or jail, or on probation or parole for nonviolent offenses.[165] This shocking statistic does not even take into account the thousands of men and women who live with the permanent scar of a felony incarceration on their record, or

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[162]James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013), 120.
[163] Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, xix.
[164] Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 163.
[165]http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/about/news-room/press-releases/0001/01/01/one-in-31-us-adults-are-behind-bars-on-parole-or-probation

the family members of those who have been incarcerated. Across the country, a felony incarceration can lead to legalized forms of discrimination including but not limited to: denying men and women employment, housing, public benefits, the ability to serve on a jury, and public accommodations, all of which affect not only the person being discriminated against, but his or her family members as well. As Michelle Alexander argues in *The New Jim Crow*, mass incarceration in the United States has led to the creation of a caste system in which men and women who live or have lived under the control of the criminal justice system are permanently subjected to legalized discrimination for the rest of their lives.

The Exodus narrative is an inspiring story in which the Israelites move from slavery to freedom; the statistics on mass incarceration on the other hand tell the dispiriting story of a people who have moved from one form of enslavement to another. While incarceration rates differ from state to state, on average, 1 in 11 African American adults compared with 1 in 45 white adults live under correctional control.[166] As Professor Jonathan Simon so aptly writes in *Governing Through Crime*:

> for the first time since the abolition of slavery, a definable group of Americans lives, on a more or less permanent basis, in a state of legal nonfreedom...a shocking percentage of them descendants of those freed slaves.[167]

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[166] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010, 2012), 99.

[167] Jonathan Simon, *Governing Through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6.

The cycle of incarceration and recidivism fueled by racism and poverty within the United States is the Egypt in our midst.

In contrast to today's criminal justice system, biblical and rabbinic legal structures did not utilize incarceration as a means of punishment or a way of forcing someone to remain in a permanent state of non-freedom or exile from the community. Indeed, rather than isolate and oppress members of the community who were found guilty of committing a crime, systems of punishment outlined by the Bible and refined by the rabbis actually sought the opposite outcome. The absence of incarceration as a form of punishment in biblical and rabbinic texts speaks volumes. Punishment in Jewish tradition, with the exception of capital cases, functioned as a way of bringing about *teshuvah* and full return to the community.

Imprisonment as the sole form of punishment is a foreign concept to both biblical and rabbinic notions of justice. While there are instances in the Bible and in rabbinic law in which a person is detained for a crime, the period of detention lasts only as long as it takes to determine the person's guilt or innocence, and the exact nature of his or her punishment. Citing the story of the blasphemer who was detained for his crime in Leviticus 24, for example, the rabbis argue that incarceration may be used when waiting to hear if the accused will be put to death or not.[168] Similarly, citing the example of the man who "illegally" gathered wood on Shabbat and was kept under guard even though it was clear he would be sentenced to death,[169] the rabbis assert that one may be

[168] Sanhedrin 78b
[169] Numbers 15:34

incarcerated until the exact nature of his punishment is determined (i.e. stoning, burning, etc.).[170]

Other instances of incarceration cited in the Talmud include cases of murder in which the accused is either a repeat offender or there were no witnesses to the crime. Incarceration in these cases, however, is understood as a means of bringing about a quick death through depriving the accused of food and other basic necessities.[171] It should also be noted here that sentences of capital punishment were not handled lightly by the courts. Even in cases in which someone was sentenced to death, the court engaged in an elaborate system of communication in which a rider on horseback waited within sight of the courthouse and the site of execution just in case new evidence emerged that would exonerate the convicted.[172]

Other legal mechanisms within biblical and rabbinic notions of justice existed to ensure both the safety of one who commits certain crimes, and his or her eventual return from a state of exile. Biblical texts document the existence of six cities of refuge, towns to which those who had accidentally committed manslaughter could flee and live their lives in safety.[173] Following the death of the High Priest, these accidental manslayers could return home, forever pardoned for their crime.[174]

The Gemara also displays a certain empathy for those who have been imprisoned, and is aware of our social responsibility toward the incarcerated, teaching that, “prisoners

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[170] Sanhedrin 78b
[171] Mishnah Sanhedrin 9:5; Sanhedrin 81b
[172] Sanhedrin 42b
[173] Joshua 20:7-8
[174] Makkot 11b

cannot free themselves from their shackles; others must help them".[175] Today's shackles are not limited to the walls of a prison. Once released from prison, most people are still bound by both the force of law and by stigma, forces which keep the walls of the sea from parting for millions of men, women, and children. Stanford Law Professor Joan Petersilia writes:

> Parole departments in most large urban areas have developed a prevailing culture that emphasizes surveillance over services...Not surprisingly, most released prisoners are rearrested and returned to prison. The Bureau of Justice Statistics recently released the most comprehensive study ever conducted in the United States of prisoner recidivism (i.e., an offender's return to crime). The study found that 30 percent -- or nearly one in three -- released prisoners were rearrested in the first six months, 44 percent within the first year, and 67.5 percent within three years of release from prison (Langan and Levin 2002)...Ex-convicts appear to be doing less well than their counterparts released a decade earlier.[176]

In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides writes that *teshuvah* atones for all sins.[177] Maimonides' conception of *teshuvah* involves repentance, atonement, and return. Once a person has repented for his or her sins, forgiveness and reintegration into society must follow. Today's criminal justice system, one that emphasizes punishment and surveillance over rehabilitation and reintegration, offers few opportunities for true *teshuvah* – true return for those permanently sentenced to states of non-freedom.

In a modern midrash by Howard Schwartz, Rabbi Yohanan asked his students what they thought the parted walls of the Red Sea looked like as the Israelites crossed from slavery into freedom. When no one answered, Rabbi Yohanan told them that the walls of the sea resembled a window lattice. Suddenly, there came a voice from the back

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[175] B'rachot 5b
[176] Joan Petersilia, *When Prisoners Return Home; Parole and Prisoner Reentry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 11.
[177] Mishneh Torah 1:3

of the *beit midrash*. The voice was that of *Serah bat Asher,* Serah the daughter of Asher, granddaughter of Jacob. Serah called out, "I know exactly what the walls resembled. I was there, I crossed the Red Sea--and they resembled shining mirrors, mirrors in which every man, woman, and child was reflected, so that it seemed like an even greater multitude crossed there, not only those of the present, but also those of the past and future as well." When Serah finished, no one questioned her, for she was there.[178]

Every year during the holiday of Passover we read the story of the Exodus from Egypt. We retell, and relive our journey from slavery to freedom. Every year we remind ourselves that we too know oppression, hardship, and alienation. Every year we return to Egypt, and every year we leave again. If we were to look at the reflection staring back at us from the walls of the parted sea, we should wonder who would be with us on this march to freedom. And who would be missing. And who in our midst still suffers from oppression, hardship, and alienation. If we today were to look into the mirrors of the sea as we walk out of Egypt, we would notice that a significant number of our fellow citizens are not walking with us. If our Reform Jewish community takes seriously our commitment to both social justice and Jewish tradition, we must work to open new pathways for people who remain shackled in narrow places, we must recognize that our fate and the fate of all Americans are intimately bound up with one another in the single garment of destiny.

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[178] Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 381.

Conclusion

Two distinct line of inquiry opened as I wrote this thesis. The first was an attempt to pull together biblical and fictional worlds. I did not do either justice. In the coming years, I hope to have an opportunity to truly parse out the many roles of a prophet within the bible, and to make the case that Toni Morrison is an American prophet. While I greatly enjoyed meandering through many narrative and fictional wildernesses, I believe that I wandered too far off the path at times, and lost track of certain guiding questions and overarching themes.

The second line of inquiry to emerge was the work of defining or sharpening notions of American Jewish identity and the theological response of American Jews to James Cone's call for religious and spiritual reckoning in America. This call is especially relevant today with daily headlines surrounding the participation of Jewish women in the Women's March, and the American Left's seemingly monolithic approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I look forward to sharpening notions of Jewish identity in America today.

I am grateful for the opportunity to hold up the voice of Toni Morrison alongside that of our most sacred text. In the coming years, I will continue to tease out new insights into biblical literature using Toni Morrison's literary canon.