# MAN AND MIGHT: THE EVOLUTION OF THE HEBREW ROOT *G.B.R.* IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY IN BIBLICAL AND RABBINIC LITERATURES

NEIL E. HIRSCH

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinical Program
New York, New York

2010 / 5770

Advisor: Rabbi Norman J. Cohen, Ph.D.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Acknowledgements

It is with sincere gratitude that I thank Rabbi Norman J. Cohen for serving as my advisor on this thesis. His guidance on both the ideas and practical elements of this thesis was invaluable. Always in the first session of his classes, as he goes over the goals of the course, he notes that as we study the texts of our tradition, we should be thinking about the personal meaning that we find in those texts. The most valuable lesson I have learned from Rabbi Cohen is that our lives are mirrored by the experiences recorded in our Jewish tradition. This lesson is what has really opened my eyes to the wellspring of Jewish literature.

# INTRODUCTION

Where have the boys gone? Why is it that our camps as of late seem to be overrun with girls, and the boys do not seem to be around? How is it that sisterhoods in synagogues across North America are flourishing, with completely filled sessions on topics that are of import to them, while our brotherhoods are floundering when they try to do similar programming? When did the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion experience a tipping point in which the rabbinical school class shifted to a strong female majority? These are significant questions that our community has been asking recently.

Those who study this topic have noted that these are trends not only within the Jewish community; these trends are evident in the overall fabric of the United States, today. Consider higher education: "From 1972 through 2006, the immediate enrollment rate of high school completers [*sic*] increased faster for females than for males. Much of the growth in the overall rate for females was due to increases in the rate of attending 4-year institutions."[1] As we have worked to break the glass ceiling, a generation of women has grown up believing they can do anything--and they can. The boys club is in the later stages of being dismantled. Unfortunately, no one seems to be telling the boys this fact, or what it means for them. The effect is that the boys who are growing up in this world are becoming more and more absent, engaging less with the institutional systems that we have always believed lead to an individual's success. Where have the boys gone?

In attempting to respond to the challenge, our communal institutions immediately go to work creating resources that would address this problem. From a Jewish institutional perspective, we have identified this as a 'problem,' and we have begun to

[1] U.S. Department of Education, Fast Facts, http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=51.

tackle it within our established system. Books like *The Gender Gap*, published by the Union for Reform Judaism, offer things a community can do as a remedy.[2] Our response is programmatic. We see a deficiency in the community and we fill it with a program that is constructed to solve that deficiency immediately.

But I am not convinced we are ready to fix this 'problem.' It seems to me that we are in a place where we do not yet know what the problem is. We do not fully understand what is going on with gender and our community. The gender issues in our Jewish community present themselves as a problem of affiliation. But I believe there are deeper issues.

As we have worked to crack through the glass ceiling, we have not taught our boys what it means to be strong men in a world where they are truly equal to strong women. The deficiency lies in how our society is structured, with the feminist enterprise a part of it. Some would argue that we now need to catch the boys up to where the girls are in terms of their belief in what is possible for for their family and for their careers. We do not concretely know how to model an egalitarian powerful male in relationship to an egalitarian powerful female. We need to do this before we can begin to talk about programming. Quoting Karl Marx, Betty Friedan cites the process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis as the manner in which the feminist enterprise is engaged, and on the twentieth anniversary of the publishing of her book *The Feminine Mystique*, she contended that we are not yet 'post-anything': "I said that we had come about as far as we could with the male model of equity and that now we needed a model encompassing

---

[2] Hara E. Person, Carolyn Bricklin, Owen Gottlieb, and Melissa Zalkin Stollman, eds., *The Gender Gap: a Congregational Guide for Beginning the Conversation about Men's Invovlement in Synagogue Life* (New York: URJ Press, 2008).

female experience and female values, which men are beginning to share."[3] In this project, we are only just beginning.

It is out of this milieu that the topic for this thesis emerged. Before we can ask, '*Where are the boys?*' we first must know what it means to be a man, about that which a man concerned, and what are the qualities that bring him to proudly accept the label of 'man?' Hebrew has many words for man: *adam*, *eh-nosh*, *ish*, *zachar*, and *gever*. Each of these is rich in connotation. √*gbr* strikes me as particularly wealthy in meaning. The word *gever* is always translated as 'man,' yet a *gibbor* is a 'warrior.' As a verb, it indicates strong action, individuals prevailing over others in battle. And, God and men are praised throughout our tradition for having the quality of *g'vurah*, translated as 'might.'

In an effort to uncover one element of what it means to be a man, this thesis is about exploring the different usages of the root √*gbr*. By looking at different examples of *g'vurah*, of might, in our tradition, by looking at the ways in which our Sages employed the word, we are able to draw some conclusions on what it means to possess strength and might. My hope is that such an exploration of our rich literary tradition can help to foster functional models of masculinity for us today.

I became attracted to √*gbr* for another reason. The husband of a friend of mine is a West Point graduate and serves as an officer in the U.S. Army. He has done a tour of duty in Iraq and is currently stationed on a base in Kentucky. He and I were recently talking about his military college education. I asked him about what they taught him about being a soldier. "The privates," he said to me, "they are taught to be soldiers and obey orders. We, the officers, are taught to be scholars and warriors. We are encouraged

[3] Betty Fridan, "Twenty Years After the Feminine Mystique," in *The New York Times* (February 27, 1983), http://www.times.com/books/99/05/09/specials/friedan-20.html.

to think and know why we act." His West Point professors, when teaching about the models of war, look to the classic traditions in which the United States is so steeped. West Point requires the Illiad and the Odyssey for reading. The college has the helmet of Pallas Athena on its crest. And my friend shared with me that he identifies the Spartans as the ultimate warriors, and the perfect army for emulation. As we talked, I was struck by how well the warrior history out of which our nation emerges is embodied in my friend's husband. He understands who he is out of the rich classical literary tradition that West Point actively works to instill in its students. They present a concrete theory of masculinity that works for a segment of today's population, rooted in a strong literary tradition. I was left wondering about our Jewish warrior tradition, and the imbalance that we have struck between the machismo, warrior model of masculinity found in our biblical literature and in our Israeli soldiers, and the bookish model of masculinity that we associate with Yeshiva learning and Old World shtetl life.

In this thesis, I approach the texts that I amassed as literature, in which I am interested in both their historical contexts and contemporary interpretations of them. Second, while we are looking at these texts primarily to see how the tradition makes of the biblical and rabbinic figures, we also view the text through a gender-critical lens.

We begin in the first two chapters with an extensive look at the basic meaning and usage of √*gbr* in the Bible (chapter 1) and in rabbinic literature (chapter 2). Predominately, the biblical authors understood might in terms of its physical nature, while the Rabbis transformed might into a quality akin to extensive Torah learning and righteous living. Chapter 3 contains an examination of the concept of 'might' by analyzing the story of Moses and the Israelites in battle with Amalek. In that analysis we ask, what is the source of one's might? Understanding masculinity is also a matter of

modeling. Chapter 4 examines a handful of male characters in our tradition who are described in terms of their might, or who embody some form of what it means to be a *gever* or *gibbor*, for example Boaz, David, and Gideon. Finally in chapter 5 we study an example of the Jewish community working to construct a gender model and its expression. There, we focus on the rabbinic prohibition on cross-dressing and haircutting. The Rabbis use the text in Deuteronomy which states that a woman should not wear men's garments (*klei-gever*), and a man (*gever*) should not wear women's clothing to maintain the distinction among them. We will examine that distinction and the reasoning behind it.

In this day and age, we recognize that there are many models for gender and sexual orientation. Perhaps being concerned about men and women is even antiquated thinking. Many are now thinking beyond the gender binary. What would gender be if it were not constrained by the two labels of 'male' and 'female'? This thesis is an exploration of the development of one construction of Jewish masculinity. I fully recognize that society, writ large, constructed gender as a binary, yet for the sake of working within the Jewish tradition, I must proceed with the construction of that gender binary, which our tradition assumes. While we should be engaged in study about what gender might look like outside the bounds of the binary, for the purpose of this project, we cannot fully embrace the lessons throughout the Jewish tradition if we immediately refuse to work within the traditional construct. From my perspective, the most basic social construction that we have to accept to be able to engage in a study about men in the Jewish tradition is that there are two genders, one called 'male' and the other called 'female.' Second, the Jewish tradition legislates heterosexuality as the only condoned

form of sexual and loving relationships. For this reason alone, unless otherwise noted, I work under the assumption that the romantic relationships we discuss are heterosexual.

Gender is an aspect of one's identity that we often take for granted, especially men. On the journey of self-discovery, we men tend to ignore the deep consideration of our own masculinity as a marker of who we are and who we want to be. As we are suddenly faced with a need to consider the nature of masculinity in our world today, it seems imperative to give serious consideration to the role of gender in each of us.

# Chapter 1

## Biblical Usages of √*GBR*

√*gbr* is common in the Hebrew Bible. It can be identified hundreds of times across its pages, in many different usages. The root's meaning does not vary among the different books of the Bible: it connotes strong, powerful action and serves as a quality of being, for both human beings and the Divine.

It is important to begin with what we know of the origins of √*gbr*. This root is identifiable in most Semitic languages. Ugaritic texts use it in the form of a proper name, and it can be found in Akkadian poetry. In all but one instance, the meaning of the word lies in powerful action. In the different Semitic texts, √*gbr* is often used as a description for God.[4] From these ancient texts we have an expression of what we well know from the prehistoric, archaeological record. The development of early tools for agriculture and husbandry and tools for battle tells the story of humanity's charge to exert power over the land, over animals, and over one another. From an early time, humanity engaged in the exertion of strength and power. And in the early literatures, our forebears wrote about their own selves and others in terms of their might, even imagining God in a similar fashion.

The Hebrew Bible maintains the ancient meaning of √*gbr*. Nuanced variations of the root can be found in almost all books of the Bible. Striving to understand the nuances of √*gbr*, we come to understand the biblical view of the acquisition of masculine strength and power, and we come to understand might as it is harnessed. By establishing the plain sense meaning of √*gbr* and its usage in the Hebrew Bible, one may uncover the foundations upon which this root evolves in later Hebrew literatures.

---

[4] *"Gabhar," The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1975.

## A. As a Verb

### EXERTING POWER OVER OTHERS; TO PREVAIL

The biblical authors were recording the stories of the Israelites in relationship to other peoples. Certainly clashes between peoples were key to many of the narratives. And, Israel's position over or in subjection to other nations determined if this was a story of victory or of defeat. When √*gbr* is used to tell of the actions of one upon another, a power dynamic is established. The authors' use of √*gbr* as a verb tells of actions in which the characters are set up either as the winner or loser in battle. Who will prevail?

In chapter 7 of Genesis, the water subdues the land: "The flood continued for forty days upon the land, and the waters increased…."[5] In 7:17-24, the flood—*ha-mabul*—and the waters—*ha-mayyim*—are specific entities in their own right, acting upon the land, and that which is upon it. What do the waters do to the land? "The waters prevailed (*va-yig'b'ru*) and greatly increased upon the land;"[6] "The waters really overcame (*gavru m'od m'od*) the land."[7] "Increase," "swell," and "prevail" are all words English translators use to describe the verb *gavar* found in these two verses. The flood is a battle between the waters and the land. With great force after many days, *m'od m'od*, the waters prevail. The waters have all of the power and the mass. Not only do they act with force, but they also have the ability to extend themselves, and as the narrator describes the two actions equally, the waters both prevailed and increased upon the land. The land is the passive object acted upon. Nothing can be done in the face of this

---

[5] Genesis 7:17 (New Jewish Publication Society Translation, 1999).

[6] Genesis 7:18.

[7] Genesis 7:19.

divinely wrought storm. No matter the actor--it can be human, Divine, or parts of nature--the story of √*gbr* is always one of dominance and subjugation.

At the end of his life, Jacob calls his sons before him to tell of their fates. Are they to be strong or weak, dominant or subjugated, will they soar or will they fall? "Come together that I may tell you what is to befall you in days to come."[8] His sons gather, and Jacob offers each a poetic prophecy. Who are they to be, and who are their tribes to become? Jacob speaks of his sons predominately in terms of animal or nature metaphors: "Judah is a lion's whelp,"[9] "Issachar is a strong-boned ass,"[10] and "Naphtali is a hind let loose,"[11] "Zebulun shall dwell by the seashore,"[12] Reuben is "unstable as water",[13] and Judah "washes his garment in wine."[14] Upon describing each of his sons, Jacob speaks of blessings: "Your father's blessings [meaning his own] shall prevail (*gav'ru*) over his ancestor's blessings…."[15] In a competition between the blessings of past generations against his own, Jacob is victorious, just as water is the victor in the Flood. The choice of word is significant, considering that the rest of the monologue describes his descendants in terms of their own physical abilities, their own militaristic agility, and each son's future successes or failures.

---

[8] Genesis 49:1.

[9] Genesis 49:9.

[10] Genesis 49:14.

[11] Genesis 49:21.

[12] Genesis 49:13.

[13] Genesis 49:4.

[14] Genesis 49:11.

[15] Genesis 49:26.

As √*gbr* is used to describe the relationship between Jacob as father and his sons, √*gbr* is used to describe the relationship between Saul and Jonathan. The narrator recognizes the strength in their relationship, "Saul and Jonathan, loved and cherished each other, in their lives and in their deaths they never separated. They were swift as eagles; they prevailed (*gavru*) as lions."

A father teaches his son to use his inherent strength and how to prevail in life. It is natural then, to find the strongest, those with the most power, serving as the rulers. And, that use of strength is passed from one generation to the next. It is nonchalantly recorded in the many biblical genealogies, but the relationships bespeak a deliberate teaching of one generation to the next as to how to lead a people with might and strength. When the lessons are heeded, the nation prevails, and its leaders seem as strong as lions. When this message is lost, when God is not considered the ultimate source of one's strength, when actions are not done as instructed, it proves disastrous.

In these disastrous times, the Bible reflects on the notion of loss. Like the Psalmist in his darker moments, Lamentations reflects on the experience of a man in grief, experiencing loss. Each time the author uses the word *gever*, he utters the laments upon which this book stands, namely that "the foe has prevailed (*gavar o'yev*)."[16] "I am the man (*ha-gever*) who saw affliction with [God's] wrathful rod,"[17] he proclaims. God has afflicted this man, as one among the people. And to what does he attribute his condition? His own sins: "Of what shall a living man complain? Each one of his own sins."[18]

---

[16] Lamentations 1:16.

[17] Lamentations 3:1.

[18] Lamentations 3:39.

However, there are times when the Israelites do prevail. Key to understanding those times is the Amalek narrative, for in that battle we encounter the use of might, leaders with might, and a God of might. With Exodus 17:8-13, the reader becomes aware of God's powerful favor of the Israelites, Moses's power as the Israelites' leader, and the Israelites as a people ready for battle. Moses's staff, raised up, assures Israelite success in the battle. The text indicates that it is the staff being raised up that assures the Israelite's prevailing (*gavar*) in the battle. It does not immediately reference God's favor upon them, or any other divine destiny which assures victory in this battle. Rather, the strength of the Israelites lies in its leader's ability to exhibit stature throughout the fight. Even when Moses's arms can no longer lift up his staff, he must find a way to still affect the battle. The staff in his hand on which he holds a strong grip is the representation of God's might. With a rod imbued with Godly power, Moses has the ability to act with *g'vurah*. Even though he has his best men out on the battlefield, it is his arms and this staff that assure Israel's prevailing in battle.

## B. As a Noun

### 1. Just a Man: *Gever*

There is no doubt that the word *gever* means man. What qualities does a man possess? What is it that defines a man's happiness, and about what does a man doubt?

"Happy is the man (*ha-gever*), who puts the Eternal God in his confidence, and who does not turn to the arrogant or to the followers of falsehood."[19] Man can do much to try to create an intimate relationship with God. This presence leads to happiness and keeps the individual from falsehood. Man can control to what extent he works to bring

[19] Psalm 40:5.

God into his life. "The righteous, seeing it, will be awestruck; they will jibe at him, saying, 'Here was a fellow (*ha-gever*) who did not make God his refuge, but trusted in his great wealth, and relied upon his mischief.' But I am like a thriving olive tree in God's house; I trust in the faithfulness of God forever and ever."[20] Such is the balance between the *gever* who lives a life in which he attempts to bring God in, versus the false *gibbor* who boasts about his own strength.[21]

When presented with a choice between truth and falsity, happiness and misery, choosing the strength and qualities of a *gever* seems obvious. Yet, when we look deep within ourselves for the root of our might, we may find ourselves filled with doubt that we will ever reach the standards that have been established in our tradition. If might, wisdom, valor, and knowledge are Divine attributes which we have the potential to obtain in our own lifetime, moments may exist where we feel that we will never succeed in gaining them. In pondering his doubts about his own might and wisdom, Agur ben Yaqeh in Proverbs 30 and 31 reflects on masculinity and femininity. His words are "the utterances of the man to Iti-el (*n'um ha-gever l'iti-el*)." Yet, this *gever* muses that he is a man of little worth: "I am brutish, less than a man; I lack common sense. I have not learned wisdom, nor do I possess knowledge of the Holy One."[22] He recognizes that masculinity is not monolithic, for there are men like him, those who are brutish, and those who curse their forebears.[23] Agur ben Yaqeh is seeking to understand man and woman; what he sees in man is difficult to comprehend; what he expects of women is an ideal.

---

[20] Psalm 52:8-10.

[21] Psalm 52:3-5.

[22] Proverbs 30:2-3.

[23] Proverbs 30:11.

As we question what it means to be a biblical man, a rabbinic man, and a contemporary man, we are left with ideas of what might make us happy and what might cause us to doubt. In all of our efforts over a lifetime, we seek to obtain wisdom, beauty, might, and other divine qualities. We are convinced that only if we have wisdom, if only we gained a bit more wealth, if only we were to exhibit might when it matters, our great position in life would be guaranteed. We would be who we want to be. We could live that happy life of which we always dreamed if we were just granted these key things. Our relationship to Godly attributes is key to gaining that desired happiness, yet doubt remains as to whether we will ever really reach that level of wisdom we seek. Being a *gever* involves self-awareness and an internal battle to prevail over one's own desires toward wisdom, beauty, confidence, and might.

This internal seeking is universal. The status of *gever* is also awarded to those outside of the community, and even those who in rabbinic literature are later labeled *resha'im* (the wicked). In the Book of Numbers, the preamble to Balaam's blessing of the Israelites describes that non-Israelite prophet as a *gever*. Balaam, with the spirit of God upon him, says, "The utterance of Balaam, son of B'or, and the utterance of the open-eyed man (*ha-gever*)."[24] This *gever* is one who sees the Israelites in the wilderness for who they are, and this conveys a sense of awe about them, considering their history, their relationship with the Eternal God, and their destiny. Balaam is thought of as a *gever* because of his seeking, as well as his insight, which leads him to God and to a profound respect for another people.

At the close of Deborah's song a short narrative vignette stands out—Yael's story of killing Sisera. With a tent peg, Yael pierced the foreign man's temple and he lay

[24] Numbers 24:3.

outstretched at her feet.[25] Yael's act was certainly one intended to ensure the security of her people.

Following the report of Sisera's death, though, Deborah tells of another woman's experience. Sisera's mother looks out a window and wonders where her son might be. The reader knows he is dead, yet experiences with this mother that foreboding feeling of not knowing of her son's wellbeing. Aloud, she wonders, "Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why so late the clatter of his wheels?"[26] The narrative seems to raise and address universal human issues and concerns. The reactions expressed are everyone's reactions. "The wisest of her ladies gave answer; she, too, replies to herself: 'They must be dividing the spoil they have found: A damsel or two for each man (*gever*), spoil of dyed cloths for Sisera, spoil of embroidered cloths, a couple of embroidered cloths round every neck as spoil.'"[27] Significantly, Sisera, as the one who is killed, is awarded the same humanity as the victor; Sisera is a *gever*. He is a man, who behaves as would be expected in battle. Yet, he is no longer a *gibbor* (in this case a hero who is a victor); he is just a *gever*. The enemy, when he falls to the Israelites loses the status of being a warrior. Yael has made it so.

Such a scene embodies Deborah's attitude toward war. She knows the difference between the warrior and the man. Bravery is an emphatic quality which any *gever* can obtain or lose. The difference between those who remain victorious versus those who are destined to fall lies in dedication to God, it lies in a willingness and an ability to do battle in the name of God, as Deborah closes her song: "So may all of Your enemies be

[25] Judges 5:27.

[26] Judges 5:28.

[27] Judges 5:29-30.

destroyed, O Eternal God. And, may all those who love Him be like the sun, which rises in His strength (*big'vurotav*)."[28]

## 2. MIGHTY MAN OF VALOR: *GIBBOR* & *G'VURAH*

Might is a quality known to God, for God is characterized as a *gibbor*. Deuteronomy 10:17 presents a phrase in which God is given particular attributes. Here, the Eternal God is personified in an image that is maintained and extended by our liturgy till today: "For the Eternal God is the God of gods, and the Master of masters, the great (*ha-gadol*), the strong (*ha-gibbor*), and the awesome (*ha-norah*) God, who shows no favor and does not take bribes." The warrior God is fear inspiring; the warrior God seems an appropriate representation for a culture that utilizes militaristic terms as descriptions. Personifying God as a warrior exemplifies the militaristic mentality of the Israelites.

This mentality is also seen in the Israelite's hierarchy as it is explained in the first chapter of the Book of Joshua. There, Joshua addresses the tribes of Ruben, Gad, and half of Manasseh, directing them to their task, as proscribed by Moses: "Remember the thing which was commanded to you by Moses, the servant of the Eternal God, saying, 'The Eternal God, your God, has put you on [this land] and given you this land. Your wives, children, and cattle will dwell on the land that Moses gave to you beyond the Jordan. Each of your strong warriors (*gibborei ha-chayil*) will pass armed before them, and you will help them, until the Eternal God has encamped your kinsmen, such as you are, and they will also possess the land, which your God, the Eternal God, is giving to

[28] Judges 5:31.

them…."[29] The tribes have a directed task to settle the land. Doing so will involve the use of a select group within each tribe, *gibborei ha-chayil*.

Who are these *gibborei ha-chayil*? Exodus 10 tells of negotiations among Pharaoh, his courtiers, and Moses and Aaron, with God involved. The story concerns to whom do the Hebrews worship—Pharaoh or God? Moses and Aaron seek permission for all of the Hebrews to worship God, "We will all go, young and old: we will go with our sons and daughters, our flocks and herds; for we must observe the Eternal God's festival."[30] To this Pharaoh makes a counter-offer, "No, in fact, the men (*ha-gibborim*) may go and worship the Eternal God."[31] Pharaoh's use of *ha-gibborim* is similar in this passage to *ha-anashim*, as his courtiers earlier say, "Send the men (*ha-anashim*) and they will worship the Eternal God."[32] Are these two words equal? *Anashim* certainly means "men," as does *g'varim*. In these negotiations, *g'varim* serves as a subset of *anashim*, a rank among the men. Although all of the Israelites traveled from Raamses to Sukkot, it was the *raglei ha-gibborim*, the ranks of the *g'varim*, who were the 600,000 specifically mentioned.[33] *Anashim* is the mass of men, *g'varim* the able-bodied among them who will do battle. A difference exists, and it seems to be rooted in status and perceived value of members of the community.

Looking at the Jericho narrative as a case study, this social ranking of *gibborei ha-chayil* is not exclusive to the Israelite clans. "God said to Joshua, 'See that I will

---

[29] Joshua 1:13-15.

[30] Exodus 10:9.

[31] Exodus 10:10.

[32] Exodus 10:7.

[33] Exodus 12:37.

deliver into your hands Jericho and her king, *gibborei ha-chayil*."[34] The syntax of this verse is enigmatic. Jericho and her king are organized as direct objects to the verb *natati* with the particle *et*. However, *gibborei ha-chayil* lacks the *et*-particle. Is it to be understood that it is Joshua's *gibborei ha-chayil* who are being given the city and her king, and that the text lacks the directive preposition *l'*, to? Or, is it lacking the particle *et* meaning that Jericho's *gibborei ha-chayil* will also be given to the Israelites? We know from other examples in the Book of Joshua that other peoples have among them individuals described as *gibborim*.[35] Yet, the intention of these battles is clear: for the Israelites to dominate and rule the Land.

The Book of Judges clearly situates and establishes the People of Israel as a civilization determined to dominate among warring civilizations. The book begins with Joshua's death, the Israelites are settled in Canaan, and once again—as is the case with many Israelite narratives, the Israelites are in need of leadership, as they have turned from God. Thus, God sends judges (*shoftim*) who deliver the Israelites from those who attack them.[36] God is with the judges, these deliverers, but is not with the people. When the judges die, God does not protect the people. Finally, God declares, "Since that nation has transgressed the covenant that I enjoined upon their fathers and has not obeyed Me, I for My part will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died."[37] The text lists the other nations against whom the Israelites would have to war, "that the Eternal God caused to rest [in the Land] in order to test the Israelites, who had

[34] Joshua 6:2.

[35] Joshua 10:2.

[36] Judges 2:16.

[37] Judges 2:20-21.

not known any of the wars of Canaan."[38] This generation of Israelites would arise in a time of war. Such would be a defining characteristic of the generation's personality: warriors among other warrior peoples.

This attitude is established in Deborah's Song, as she describes the battles taken on by the Israelite tribes. It was in their battles that the Israelites prevailed and that the tribes showed their strength and ability to defeat the other people: "Then the survivors fell to the nobles of the Eternal God's people, fell to *ha-gibborim*, with the warriors."[39] The warriors among the Israelites brought down their enemies, serving as God's tool. In this song, the Eternal God is a martial commander, wielding his weapon in battle, the *gibborim* amidst the people.

Twice in the Book of Judges the phrase *gibbor he-chayil* is used, as it was once in the Torah.[40] The characters described as *gibbor he-chayil*, the mighty men of valor, were Gideon and Jephthah. What characterized these men that they were awarded such a title?

Gideon is *gibbor he-chayil* before he is anything else. It is the introductory description in the first verse in which he appears. This title is how the angel describes him at the very outset of the narrative. It is a foretelling, yet Gideon questions this. He is not *gibbor he-chayil* in his own eyes. Gideon is preparing his home as others are coming to attack him. The angel appears—sitting under a tree—as Gideon adds wheat into a winepress, so that the Midianites may not derive benefit from it.[41] The atmosphere contains anxiety; the scene is that of the quiet before the storm, because Gideon's

[38] Judges 3:1.

[39] Judges 5:13.

[40] Judges 6:12, 11:1.

[41] Judges 6:11.

response to the angel's greeting is one of willingness to be contrary and coarse, "Please, my lord, if the Eternal God is with us, why has all this befallen us? Where are all His wondrous deeds about which our fathers told us, saying, 'Truly the Eternal God brought us up from Egypt'? Now the Eternal God has abandoned us and delivered us into the hands of Midian!"[42] Gideon is a man who speaks his mind, who gives his perspective, and does not hesitate to challenge the prediction that his people would overcome Midian, despite all of the evidence to the contrary. In response, God turns to Gideon directly, "Go in this strength of yours (*b'khochakha zeh*); you will deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Lo, you are my messenger."[43] What is Gideon's strength? That he conveys clearly to God's messenger his perspective on things, and why his experience tells a different story from the one that the angel conveys. God is supposed to be with Israel. God has done much for Israel, yet seems to have abandoned this generation. For such a perspective, for such a strength, Gideon is deemed to be God's deliverer. Gideon is one who worships God before the battle,[44] tears down idols,[45] who brings together tribes,[46] who leads by example,[47] who fights without exhaustion, and is ruthless in battle, and yet never loses sight that he fights for God. All of this defines why Gideon is considered a *gibbor chayil*.

---

[42] Judges 6:13.

[43] Judges 6:14.

[44] Judges 6:24.

[45] Judges 6:27.

[46] Judges 6:35.

[47] Judges 7:17.

Gideon is open to experiencing God's presence, but is shocked when he realizes that an angel of God has visited him.[48] Similarly, Jephthah's name signals openness, being constructed from √*ptch*. His name tells the reader that he is one who will be responsive, although others are not open to him. Conceived from Gilead's associations with a prostitute, the clan does not consider him a part of them: "For you are the son of a different woman," they say.[49] Yet, the people of Gilead needed Jephthah. When the Ammonites come upon them, they go and seek out Jephthah to be their *rosh* and their *qatzin*, their head and ruler. Jephthah is a man who, despite his personal history, returns to help those to whom he is related when they are in need. It takes resolve to return to a people who spurned you, and it takes dedication to God on the part of both parties involved.[50] Jephthah is a man open to reconciliation in times of strife. In this way Jephthah teaches that being a *gibbor* is as much about compassion as it is about strength.

Yet, he is a man so dedicated to doing God's will that he is even willing to sacrifice his daughter. How does such dedication fit into the persona of a mighty man of valor? Certainly one asks a similar question of Abraham. Neither narrative offers any absolute answers. The reader is left with the tension between abhorrent acts and a man characterized by compassion, strength, and might.

An essential question emerges: How can we be both imperfect beings while still being characterized as 'mighty?' Such a question characterizes Jephthah as well as the Kings of Israel and Judah.

---

[48] Judges 6:22.

[49] Judges 11:2.

[50] Judges 11:11.

For the lineage and genealogies of the kings, the notion of *g'vurah* is essential. Saul, the first king, is the son of Qish, the son of Aviel, and is from the tribe of Benjamin. This tribe is associated with different men who earn the title of *gibbor chayil*.[51] It is significant that Saul's stock is weighted with the heritage of mighty men. Furthermore, David is introduced as *gibbor chayil v'ish milchamah*.[52] This motif is carried into the later narratives of Kings, in which each reign of the king is noted by a formula: "The remainder of the words of <x>, that which he did and that over which he prevailed (*u'g'vurato*), in his war with <y> King of <Judah or Israel> are recorded in the annals of the Kings of <Judah or Israel>."[53] From Saul to David to Solomon to the last kings of Israel and Judah, strength in action (*g'vurah*) is a paramount quality.[54]

Yet, for as critical as *g'vurah* is for the kings, the prophets communicate that only through God's *g'vurah* alone do we stand or fall. God the responsible for humanity's successes, and as soon as humanity turns its attribution of all good things from God, God removes the reward from humanity: "Oh, cease to glorify man, who has only a breath in his nostrils! For by what does he merit esteem? For lo! The Sovereign God of Hosts will remove from Jerusalem and from Judah prop and stay, every prop of food and every prop

---

[51] For example, Eliada, mentioned in II Chronicles 17:17.

[52] I Samuel 16:18.

[53] I Kings 15:23, 16:5, II Kings 13:12, 14:28.

[54] If g'vurah is a quality that is passed from one generation of leaders to the next, it is reasonable to extend it to those who show their might, yet do not wear the crown. For example, David, during his reign, maintained a band of men who were described as gibborim. Their names and many of their deeds are recorded in II Samuel 23:8-39 and I Chronicles 11:10-47. They are his military elite, and they stood with David in battle.

of water: soldier and warrior, magistrate and prophet, augur and elder; captain of fifty, magnate and counselor, skilled artisan and expert enchanter; and He will make boys their rulers, and babes shall govern them. So the people shall oppress one another—each oppressing his fellow: the young shall bully the old; and the despised shall bully the honored."[55] All are tools of God to ensure the success of God's people on the land; they are the gifts of God—food, water, soldier and warrior,[56] magistrate and prophet. These individuals serve God and act upon God's will. When they attribute these actions to their own ability, they lose sight of God's orchestration of their success. For that, the prophets say, we lose such gifts and are enslaved. Among David's entourage we have seen mighty men of valor taking their place. We have already seen parallels in the descriptions between the structures of society and the structures of the heavenly realm. The warrior king has his cadre of elite fighters. Likewise, the God of Hosts, too, has a hierarchy of angels in the heavens: "Bless the Eternal God, O His angels, mighty creatures who do His bidding, ever obedient to His bidding."[57] As God is the Warrior Ruler, the angels are the heavenly *gibborei khoach*, mighty men of strength.

Isaiah draws a further parallel which is important to understanding *g'vurah*: it is an attribute humans obtain always through God's bidding. We are able to act with might because God allows it. We are wise because God grants us wisdom. We possess knowledge because God grants us knowledge. We are strong because God gives us strength. There exists a set of attributes that every person seeks in his or her lifetime.

---

[55] Isaiah 2:22-3:5.

[56] "*Gibbor v'ish milchamah*," a reference to David, as these are the labels with which he is first characterized.

[57] Psalm 103:20.

These are attributes of God, gifted to humanity upon God's will: "Hear, you who are far, what I have done; You who are near, note My might (*g'vurati*)."[58] In our tradition we label God as wise, as knowledgeable, as strong, and also as mighty. Any time that one recognizes these attributes within him or herself, he is also acknowledging a portion of the Ultimate. In this reflective state, the biblical authors portrayed the best of humanity in God, and saw the best of God in humanity. This mindset led Isaiah to say: "YHWH goes forth like a warrior (*gibbor*), like a fighter He whips up His rage. He yells, He roars aloud, He charges upon His enemies."[59]

In these rhetorical flourishes, we see how Isaiah describes the Ultimate Warrior (*gibbor*) in a real, physical sense. This warrior is angry, vocal, and surges upon his enemy. This characterization, while applied to God, is also indicative of the personality of the human warrior. Such a description would seem appropriate for Gideon, or David, among others. In God we see ourselves, and in ourselves we see God. Each aspect of our best selves is attributable to God, and the aspects are equally bound up in one another.

Jeremiah's concern with God's *g'vurah* parallels Isaiah's. He speaks of how the warriors (*gibborim*) among humanity have fallen.[60] Yet, it is Jeremiah who transfers the notion of *g'vurah* from that of physical might to spiritual might: "Thus said the Eternal God: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom; let not the strong man glory in his strength; let not the rich man glory in his riches. But only in this should one glory: in his earnest devotion to Me. For I, the Eternal God, act with kindness, justice, and equity in

[58] Isaiah 33:13.

[59] Isaiah 42:13.

[60] Jeremiah 46:12, 51:30, 48:14, 50:9, 32:18.

the world; for in these I delight—declares God."[61] Physical strength, as well as other attributes that we obtain in life, can come and go, depending on where one finds him or herself along life's path. But, glory in devotion to the just God can be maintained no matter one's attributes or circumstances in life.

## C. Conclusion

In his studies, C.G. Jung identified archetypes that he saw present in individuals' psyches. One such archetype was that of the warrior or hero. The archetype can be seen through many different lenses, all of which lead to a listing of its key characteristics.[62] Being a *gever* or *gibbor* in the Hebrew Bible carries connotations that include being a person with wisdom, who can act with strength, who is determined to elevate his and others' status, increase his closeness to God, and prevail over other mighty foes. The *gever* is someone who experiences moments of doubt and disbelief, and is someone who can find happiness in God. The *gibbor* is a man who faces his enemy, who instructs his sons to live mighty lives, and who if he does as he is commanded, will find himself rewarded as being someone recognized within society.

As we continue with the analysis of √*gbr* in rabbinic literature, many of these themes are maintained. Yet, physical might is transformed into spiritual might. Military prowess and knowledge is replace by scholastic fortitude, creativity of wit, and knowledge of Torah.

---

[61] Jeremiah 9:22-23.

[62] Carol S. Pearson, *The Hero Within: Six Archetypes We Live By* (New York: HarperOne, 1998), 18-31.

# CHAPTER 2

## RABBINIC USAGES OF √*GBR*

√*gbr* in the Bible has a range of uses. We have seen that the root implies strong action, the prevailing of one party over another. For example, water prevails over the land in the Genesis narrative of the Flood. The word used for a man is *gever*, whether he is the enemy, as in the case of Sisera, or he is regular biblical figure, as is the case of Job. The warrior (*gibbor*) is central to understanding the Israelite male as protector, whether that character is mortal or divine. The might (*g'vurah*) that an individual holds is key to his or her power in relation to others. This might can be physical--the kings reign with might; or the might may be spiritual, as Jeremiah professed. The range of meaning for √*gbr* continues in rabbinic Hebrew. An analysis of the root's particular grammatical constructs in rabbinic Hebrew will show a continuity of meaning, along with further nuance in usage.

## A. As a Verb

### 1. *PA-AL*, to prevail

B.T. *Beitza* 20a-b records a story of the conflict between Hillel and Shammai:

Once, Hillel brought his offering (*olato*) to the Temple courtyard on a *yom tov*. As he entered the courtyard, Shammai's students gathered around Hillel. They questioned him, "What is the nature of this animal?" They wanted to know what Hillel intended to do with the animal, for attempting to sacrifice an *olah* offering on this day was prohibited from their point of view.

"It is a female, and I bring it as a *shlamim*," replied the sage. He grabbed the animal by the tale, shook it in front of Shammai's students, and they left.

On that day, says the narrative voice of this talmudic tale, *Beit Shammai* had the upper hand over *Beit Hillel*.

The phrase that is specifically used is literally: "The hand of the House of Shammai prevailed over the House of Hillel (*gav'rah yadam shel Beit Shammai al Beit Hillel*)." Shammai's disciples hands were powerful; it is with their hands that they prevail over *Beit Hillel.* Shammai's men understood that sacrifice was to take place in the Temple in a particular manner. Hillel and Shammai contended over how these sacrifices, and other rituals for that matter, should be practiced. When Hillel approached the Temple to make an offering according to his understanding, Shammai's followers saw a threatening practice. Could it be that Hillel would make an offering in a manner that would undermine the sanctity they all sought to protect? So they confronted Hillel and questioned him as if he were the student and they the disciplinarians. When Hillel gave a satisfactory answer, compliant with their views on how an offering should be made, the students backed off and allowed the teacher to proceed.

In direct confrontation, Shammai's sacrificial practice is affirmed. Through the power of *Beit Shammai,* and not through debate, with his students creating a wall around Hillel, Shammai's dominant position is established in this matter.

The story continues to tell of one elder from *Beit Shammai*, Bava ben Buta.[63] He knew that despite what others asserted in the moment, the *halakhah* should have been in accordance with Hillel. To make things right, he brought all of the *Qeidar* sheep in Jerusalem to the Temple courtyard.[64] "Anyone who should be bringing whole-offerings and peace-offerings, take an animal and make an *olah*," Bava ben Buta said. People came and made offerings.

---

[63] T. *Chagiga* 7. A variation of this story is continued in B.T. *Beitza* 20b.

[64] The name of an Arab tribe.

A sage from *Beit Shammai* asserted the *halakhah* of *Beit Hillel*, making things right for the greater good. Shammai's students defended their halakhic position by strong-arming Hillel. But when Bava ben Buta urged the masses to practice in accordance with the opposing academy, as the tradition says: "On that very day the *halakhah* was confirmed in accord with the opinion of *Beit Hillel*, and not a single person griped about it." In their constant arguing, and in this particular scene, Hillel triumphed Shammai: *gav'rah yadan shel Beit Hillel*, Hillel prevailed."[65]

In the give and take of the debate between Hillel and Shammai, they are trying to figure out how to best live religious lives in their own time. Hillel wants to make an offering to God as he understands what is appropriate. Shammai's followers want to maintain their understanding of the tradition, lest it should lead the community into transgression. In this battle over practice and worship, people argue with one another, and a winner emerges. In its simplest form, √*gbr* proves to be about one position asserting itself over another; one's 'hand' proves to have might over his foe's.

## 2. *PI-EL* AND *HIFIL*, TO MAKE STRONGER

In Exodus 17:8-13, the Israelites and Amalek are on the battlefield. Israel gains victory in this battle, but it is not without struggle. Moses, Aaron, and Hur are at the top of the hill, looking down at the fight. Moses raises his staff. When he does so, Israel overtakes the Amalekites. When Moses drops his hands, the Amalekites take the lead. That which ensures victory seems to lie in Moses's palms. This is implied in the *p'shat* of the biblical text, and the Rabbis question this: "Is it the case that Moses's hands

[65] B.T. *Beitza* 20a-b.

strengthen (*megavrot*) Israel, or that his hands break (*shov'rot*) Amalek?"[66] In Moses's hands lies a power that brings his people to a place where their might can be used against another people, but also where that people will be brought to nothing. Ironically, a person's hand can break (*shov'rot*) that which is in them. Yet, the inverse is also true: a strong hand can strengthen the hand of others. But for hands to strengthen an object is a curious claim. One's hands need some sort of magical ability to transfer strength to someone or something else. The lesson here is that might is transferable; one can be strengthened by another. In an individual's hands lies a power that can be transmitted for another's benefit. *Megavrot* is the inverse of *shov'rot.* As easily as Moses's hands break Amalek in battle, Moses's hands strengthen Israel, allowing them to proceed toward their destiny, to become the people they are meant to be.

### 3. *HITPAEL*, TO SWELL

Midrash Tanchuma tells the following story:[67] Pharaoh built for himself a palace alongside the Nile River. He also blocked up the Nile so that it would not drain into the sea. Given time, the waters of the river swelled (*mitgab'rin*) and the palace was raised up and destroyed. God lifted the palace, as it is written, "Speak these words: Thus said the Eternal God, 'I am going to deal with you, O Pharaoh king of Egypt, mighty monster, sprawling in your channels, who said, my Nile is my own; I made it for myself" (Ezekiel 29:3). The Holy Blessed One spoke to Pharaoh, "Wicked one! You raise yourself up with waters, and with waters you die."

---

[66] *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate Amalek* 1, on Exodus 17:11.

[67] *Parashat B'reishit*, 7 (Hotzeit-Choreb edition).

Pharaoh holds himself out to be the master of his kingdom. He builds a palace beside Nile, the river that is the source of his kingdom's wealth and might, and he tries to raise himself up by placing dams in the river. From the Nile, his lands are fertile and he has a fast method of transportation throughout his kingdom. However, he stops up that resource to exert the same mastery over the river that he felt as he built his palace. But the waters cannot be mastered; they are not Pharaoh's domain. God razes the palace with those very same waters, drowning Pharaoh's hubris in the process. A king does not rule over nature, even within his own kingdom. This *midrash* emphasizes God as the Creator and Master of nature.

As God is imbued with *g'vurah*, and as God gave human beings *g'vurah*, rabbinic literature also holds examples of nature's might. *Pirqei Rabbi Eliezer* tells about how the water prevailed over the land during the Flood.[68] Rabbi Tzadok teaches that on the 17th of *Marcheshvan*, the water of the flood fell upon the land. The first water was male (*mayyim z'kharim*). Then, there was water that also came up from the depths. This second wave was female (*mayyim n'qeivot*). The male and female waters attached to one another (*nitchab'ru*), and they prevailed (*gav'ru*) in destroying (*l'ha-chariv*) the land. This is what Scripture intended to convey with the statement, "And the waters really overcame (*gav'ru m'od m'od*) the land."[69]

When the elements of nature come together, nature's destructive power is made real. Water is a life-giving force, but it is also a destructive force. We know this too well from our own Hurricane Katrina and Asian Tsunami experiences in the past decade.

---

[68] *Pirqei d'Rabbi Eliezer*, Chapter 23.

[69] Genesis 7:19.

*Midrash Tanchuma* illuminates the fact that waters will swell and become a destructive force because of one man's hubris. Humanity may have an urge to create and to rule its domain, but God remains the Ultimate Power and Creator. *Pirqei Rabbi Eliezer* emphasizes nature's manifest power. Nature does not belong to humanity. In the struggle between nature and humanity, nature will prevail. As we saw with the power that lies in Moses's hands, when the Rabbis employ √*gbr* as a verb, they see powerful action that can either create or destroy. Might in its own right has both positive and negative valences.

## B. As a Noun

In investigating the application of √*gbr* as a noun, we find three forms. In its most basic form, when one speaks of √*gbr* as a person, he or she speaks about a man. In the emphatic, the man is seen as a warrior. As an idea, we speak of might in English, and *g'vurah* in Hebrew. These definitions are established in the biblical literature. Rabbinic literature offers more nuanced examples of who these people are, and what sort of quality of *g'vurah* they possess.

### 1. *Gever*, man

The word *gever* is generally understood as a straightforward term. Other words for 'man,' such as *adam* or *zachar,* hold more obvious weight within the literary tradition. However, the word *gever* is equally rich.

For the Rabbis, a man being a *gever* is a matter of fact; there is no special status accorded. Yet, in the Talmud, the Sages speak about men performing *mitzvot*. A man is

obligated to perform particular tasks. Each *gever* has such responsibilities. This prompts discourse as to what the responsibilities of each *gever* is. The Talmud is a record of determining how people are to perform the *mitzvot* and traditions passed down to them. The action in which each *gever* should or should not take part is an elemental step to achieving the larger goal of being observant of the *mitzvot.*

For example, consider the wearing of *tzitzit.*[70] Rabbah bar Huna visited Rava bar Rav Nachman's home. When Rabbah entered, he saw Rava wearing a folded garment with *tzitzit* affixed at the corner creases, not on the corners of themselves. "This is not the corner that the Merciful One spoke of in the Torah," said Rabbah to Rava. Rabbah understood that the *tzitzit* are to be placed on the actual corners of the garments, not along creases that make artificial corners. Rava removed that garment that was incorrect, and put on a different one.

The Torah contains the *mitzvah* for a man to affix *tzitzit* to the corners of his garment. We are obligated to this command. Therefore, the Rabbis explore *tzitzit* and the traditions around them to determine how best this *mitzvah* can be performed.

In his visit to Rava, Rabbah discovered that Rava might not have been performing the *mitzvah* as it should be done. From this, Rabbah considers other aspects of the wearing of *tzitzit,* such as the length of time one must wear *tzitzit* to fulfill the *mitzvah.* Rabbah rhetorically wonders, "Do you think that *tzitzit* is a personal obligation (*chovat gav'ra*, literally 'the obligations of a man')?" When a man dons *tzitzit* for the first time, has the *mitzvah* been fulfilled? Or, is this a *mitzvah* that one must constantly fulfill by wearing *tzitzit,* described as a *chovat talit*? The commandment either involves the man or

[70] B.T. *Menachot* 41a.

the garment. If *mitzvat tzitzit* is a *chovat gav'ra*, a personal obligation, then when Rava puts on that garment first thing in the morning, blesses it, and then takes it off, he has fulfilled the commandment. There would be no need for him to walk around with fringes hanging from his shirt all day. However, if the obligation lies in the garment itself, and not the man, it is a *chovat talit*, as Rabbah thinks, and one must wear the garment throughout the day.

It is strange to think that a garment can carry the obligation of a commandment. We are more accustomed to thinking of ourselves as having accepted the yoke of God's commandments. This talmudic text juxtaposes these two views, and surprisingly accepts that the obligation lies in the garment and not on the man. Although it is the dissenting position within this debate, this text teaches us that within the halakhic system, it is reasonable to assert that a *gever* is obligated to God's commands.

### 2. *GIBBOR*, WARRIOR

The stories of Jephthah, Gideon and others contained within the Book of Judges, as well as the narrative of David as a mighty man of valor and a man of war (*gibbor chayil v'ish milchamah*), firmly establish √*gbr* in the emphatic, nominal form meaning 'warrior.' Though *gever* generally means a 'man,' when found in the form of *gibbor*, it means a 'warrior.' Interestingly enough, God is equally described as a *gibbor*. We will explore the meaning of the Jewish warrior and the Divine Warrior in later chapters.[71]

[71] See Chapter 3A and Chapter 4.

In attempting to understand it in the plain sense, consider the *midrash* from the *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael* on Exodus 17:9.[72] "Choose for us men," Moses instructs Joshua as the Israelites prepare to battle the Amelkites. Rabbis Joshua and Eleazar parse this command into two elements. "Choose for us *gibborim*," they say; warriors must be chosen from among the men of Israel. And they can be distinguished by one trait: *yirei chata*, they are individuals who fear sin. The men (*anashim*) to choose as warriors are to be those who will respect God and the commandments, and keep far from transgression.

In this way, the Rabbis are able to define Israelite warriors as different from the warriors of other nations. At a warrior's core is not a fearlessness, a willingness to jump into danger, a bravery, or even physical strength. When the Israelites prepare for battle, it is the pious who the Rabbis see as the best equipped to fight. The true *gibbor* is the God-fearing individual.

### 3. *G'VURAH*, MIGHT

*G'vurah* is the attribute one needs in challenging, tenuous moments. There are times when one does not know what is to come next. The situation could end up positive; still, we must always have the strength to move forward. That inner drive telling us to charge on is *g'vurah*; it is the precious power that drives action. In biblical literature, *g'vurah* is a physical aspect of human beings, which Jeremiah and other prophets transfer to the spiritual realm. *G'vurah* presents itself mostly as something physical, yet for the Rabbis its source is always some internal strength. Musculature does not matter; an inner drive to strong action does.

---

[72] *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael*, Tractate *Amalek* 1.

A person is awarded certain qualities, both positive and negative, with which he or she approaches life. It is as if these qualities descended from heaven:[73] Wisdom, beauty, wealth, poverty, arrogance, might (*g'vurah*), lice, witchcraft, disease, promiscuity, brazenness, conversation, drunkenness, and sleep. These qualities are exhibited in different ways and in different settings. Set among these qualities, *g'vurah* takes on particular meaning.

Each of these 14 qualities was meted out in ten measures, and nine were awarded to the Jewish people, while the other was given to the rest of the world. On this premise, one is able to see the other nations in a particular light, made apparent by the single measure of quality awarded to them. For example, wisdom fell to the Land of Israel, and the rest of the world was only given a small measure of wisdom. Jerusalem has nine parts of Beauty; the rest of the world, a single measure. Women hold nine measures of the ability to converse, and men hold one. Ten measures of disease came to the world, and pigs have nine of those. Finally, the Persians were given the highest measure of might (*g'vurah*).

History serves as evidence to the position that the Persian people are the ones who mainly possess might. The Persians prevailed over the Babylonians, who destroyed the First Temple. They ruled over the most vast empire in the region. And they ruled intelligently. When the Babylonians exiled those who were subjugated under them, the Persians--certainly not without their own moments of ruthlessness--ruled wisely. Cyrus decreed that the Jews could return and rebuild the Temple. While king of the massive empire, he ruled with a might that was directed by intelligence. It was not based solely

[73] B.T. *Qiddushin* 49b.

on brute strength or fear; the Persian's mighty rule was characterized by associated positive qualities such as wisdom and diplomacy. These other qualities exemplify the nuanced meaning of *g'vurah*.

The party who prevails over another possesses *g'vurah*. But, *g'vurah* must lead to living in a way that is wise, which embodies the essence of the rabbinic *gibbor*. *G'vurah* is a quality essentially desired by all people, but is never held by all; it is a finite quality in the world.

## C. Conclusion

The Rabbis use √*gbr* to describe a physical attribute and the brute power that one exerts over another. It is not dissimilar from the biblical usage, yet the Rabbis further emphasize it as a spiritual state of being. When someone from Shammai's academy confronts Hillel, it is still a physical confrontation in which they intend to prevail over Hillel. That being established, the rabbinic tradition can dive farther into the root's meaning: the spiritual state of *g'vurah* is emphasized when the Rabbis investigate what it takes to be a *gibbor*. They are the ones who recognize that other qualities, like wisdom and beauty, are required along with might. This is a tension that they allow to remain. This dialectic involving physical strength and inner determination raises a significant question, namely, what is the source of one's might? This question is the topic of the next chapter.

# Chapter 3

## With a Strong Hand and an Outstretched Arm:
## what is the root of one's might?

> Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. Moses said to Joshua, "Pick some men for us, and go out and do battle with Amalek. Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill, with the rod of God in my hand." Joshua did as Moses told him and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Then, whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; but whenever he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses's hands grew heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur, one on each side, supported his hands; thus his hands remained steady until the sun set. And Joshua overwhelmed the people of Amalek with the sword.
>
> Then the Eternal said to Moses, "Inscribe this in a document as a reminder, and read it aloud to Joshua: I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven!" And Moses built an altar and named it *Adonai-nissi*. He said, "It means, 'Hand upon the throne of the Eternal!' The Eternal will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages" (Exodus 17:8-16).

Moses, Aaron, Hur, Joshua, the Israelites, and God celebrate a victory over Amalek. Each is an active participant in this story, and each contributes to the battle at Rephidim. They share the responsibility for this successful fight, and that stands as the testament to the battle. If it were not for God, the battle would end badly. If it were not for Moses taking up the rod of God, there would be no success. If Aaron and Hur do not hold up Moses's arms, if Joshua does not take up the sword, and if the Israelite men are

not open to God's Torah,[74] the Israelites would not pass this test; their destiny would not be realized. For Moses, Aaron, Hur, Joshua, and all those involved, demonstrate *g'vurah* (might) in the contributions that each make. When we are faced with moments in which *g'vurah* must be harnessed, we are left to wonder whence comes the might? Does the might that we experience in our own lives derive from God as *Ha-G'vurah*, the ultimate source of might, from our leaders, from our own hands, or from our community?

The Israelite-Amalek battle is a scene that we can examine in order to answer that question. Is God the root of success in this battle? Is Moses's lifting up the rod of God the key to success? Or, is it the able-bodied Joshua and Israelite men with swords in hand who bring down Amalek? If we can identify the source of power for the Israelites here, we might also learn something about our relationship to that power, and uncover moments in our own lives in which that power source is evident.

### A. GOD AS *HA-G'VURAH*

For the Rabbis, God is the source of might. People are able to find solace and confidence in a God who provides in times of need, and who strikes out on their behalf. The mighty God is protective due to His kindness (*chesed*), "With a strong hand and an outstreached arm, for [God's] kindness is everlasting."[75] The God of Israel delivers the Israelites out of Egypt, leads them through the wilderness, brings them to the Land of Israel, and provides for them as they conquer and inhabit the Land. This is an act of divine kindness.

---

[74] *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael*, Tractate *Amalek* 1, on Exodus 17:11.

[75] Psalm 136:12.

In compassion and in might, God is called to stand as the ultimate leader for the Israelites against Amalek. God is with Moses, Joshua, and the Israelites as they face Amalek in battle. Moses's outstreched arm as represented in the staff that he lifts up is a manifestation of God's presence. In the valley beneath him, the battle begins. The Rabbis picture him calling out to God, "Master of the universe! With this rod You brought Israel out of Egypt. With this rod You split the Sea for them. With this rod You shall perform miracles and mighty acts (*g'vurot*) for them at this time."[76] God has provided for the Israelites, first in the Exodus from Egypt and then at the Sea. Moses now beseeches God for this moment to be the next chapter in the story of God's leadership. God is the mighty leader; with a strong hand, Moses and the Israelites can face the battle, and with an outstreached arm, they know they will succeed.

When God performs these mighty acts, when God leads the Israelites in battle, God claims victory. *Pesikta Rabbati* teaches that God, as a warrior, is always present in our struggles. When we prevail in those struggles, it is God to whom the victory is granted. It is God "to whom victory belongs [as is noted and quoted in the following typical biblical verses]: 'This God is the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty' (I Chronicles 29:11); 'God is a man of war' (Exodus 15:3); 'Then shall God go forth and fight' (Zechariah 14:3); and also by the verse, 'God will go forth as a mighty man' (Isaiah 42:13)."[77] God as mighty man, as a warrior for the Israelites, leads the battle over Amalek. God deserves the victory, for God is the source of that power.

Moses and the Israelites need God in this moment. They have seen what God is capable of, and the Israelites know their own limits. God must be present, for promises

---

[76] *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael*, Tractate *Amalek* 1, on Exodus 17:12.

[77] *Pesiqta Rabbati* 9:3.

were made. Rabbi Chalafta teaches that God is holy and pure, and God "stretched out [a] hand against the impure. Why? Because [God] is great and aweful, and because [God] wished to display strength for Israel's sake."[78] God stands in a covenental relationship with the Israelites, and God is committed to being with Israel and to remaining with them in difficult times. To Jacob, God promised, "I will go down with you to Egypt."[79] The *midrash* teaches that God fights in Israel's wars, and Isaiah confirms this when he says that God "will go forth as a mighty man, [God] will stir up jealousy like a man of war."[80]

In the battle against the Amalekites, whenever Moses lifts up the rod of God, Joshua and the Israelites prevail in the battle. And when Moses's hands tire, Israel is forced to fall back. The rod directs the Israelites to God's presence. When Israel looks at their leader, they are reminded of God as one who commands Moses to take his position in this battle,[81] and when they see the rod extended in Moses's hands, their gaze focuses on the heavens, and they are reminded of God's mighty and miraculous presence at that time and at other similar moments.[82] In this way, the Israelites are fortified in the God known as *Ha-G'vurah*.

If the victory over Amalek seems great, if the victory demontrates power, if the victory inspires awe, and if God truly is at the lead of the battle, then we can say that God is great, powerful, and awesome. Witnessing God's miraculous and mighty works has led many to make such statements, and in desiring miracles and searching for

---

[78] Exodus *Rabbah* 18:8.

[79] Genesis 46:4.

[80] Isaiah 42:13.

[81] *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael*, Tractate *Amalek* 1, on Exodus 17:11.

[82] *Ibid*. and B.T. *Rosh Hashanah* 29a.

magnificent, redemptive moments, others pray for evidence of God's might. For example, Nehemiah calls out: "And now, our God, great, mighty and awesome God, who stays faithful to [God's] covenant…."[83] The God of the covenant possesses all of these attributes, and we remember them from our people's narrative, and hope for a demonstration of God's might in our own time.

Yet, many religious thinkers have written of the experience that God's greatness, might, and awesomeness seem distant, absent, or eclipsed. The shaking of religious confidence is seen in the Psalms, Job, and Lamentations. From the Bible to the Rabbis to our time, we express a longing to be witness to God's acts.

When Moses is witness to God in the Burning Bush, to the miracles of the Exodus, to the defeat of Amalek, to Sinai, when Moses is the one granted face to face communication with God, it leads to a confidence that allows for him to proclaim God as "the great (*ha-gadol*), the mighty (*ha-gibbor*), and awesome (*v'ha-norah*) God."[84] But, our tradition is filled with moments of doubt and uncertainty. The Jewish leaders during dubious times serve as a counter to Moses and the confidence he expresses in relationship with God. Jeremiah challenges Moses with the words, "Surely strangers are croaking in God's Sanctuary!" Jeremiah foresaw the ransacking of the Temple. Where in Jeremiah's time is God's awesomeness? He addresses God in his prayer as "the great and powerful God," alone.[85] Jeremiah eliminates God's awesome quality, for it is not evident to him and his generation.

---

[83] Nehemiah 9:32.

[84] Deuteronomy 10:17.

[85] Jeremiah 32:18.

Daniel's doubt is similar to Jeremiah's. Strangers were enslaving God's children. Where is God as the People's warrior when the Jews are enslaved after the Exodus from Egypt? So, in Daniel's prayer, he does not mention God as *gibbor*: "God is great and awesome,"[86] but not powerful.

The Rabbis set up the comparison among Moses, Jeremiah, and Daniel. Like their forebears, they have faith in the covenant made between the People of Israel and God. This faith is a resource in their difficult times. A tradition among the Rabbis of the Land of Israel holds that the Men of the Great Assembly considered the apparent absense of God in their time as evidence of God's might. This we read in the Talmud, "This is [God's] mighty strength, that [God] restrains His will to show a long-suffering countentance to the wicked."[87] The Rabbis believe in a God who is able to act and who likewise has the power to restrain His might; this is God's awesomeness. A relationship with that sort of God allows for a small, unique nation to exist among others. The Rabbi's God is a God of truth; having shown might on behalf of Israel before, God cannot be false in these eclipsed moments.[88] Ben Zoma asks, "Who is mighty? The one who restrains his urges."[89] Yet, God shows no restraint in the battle against Amalek. Both models--a God of action and a God of restraint--are powerful.

Such a message is important for us as well in our own time. The challenge of recognizing God in a moment of need is universal. The experiences that make up our lives sometime speak to God's power, and at other moments make us long for a strong

---

[86] Daniel 9:4.

[87] B.T. *Yoma* 69b.

[88] *Ibid*.

[89] M. *Avot* 4:1.

hand and an outstreached arm. "Eclipse of the light of heaven, eclipse of God--such indeed is the character of the historic hour through which the world is passing," wrote Martin Buber in 1952, "… An eclipse of the sun is something that occurs between the sun and our eyes, not in the sun itself."[90] The Israelites, guided by Moses's staff, are led in their battle against Amalek, to look toward the heavenly God. In the great, powerful, and awesome God, they find their leader in this battle; as a result, they are led to victory. Jeremiah, Daniel, and the Rabbis are not blessed with God's presence in the same way. Nonetheless, others' experiences tell of what is possible regarding God's might. For that chance we continue to pray, with the hope that it can be as fervent as the *Mekhilta*'s prayer: "I will sing unto the Eternal, who is mighty, as it is said, 'The great God, the mighty, and the awesome' (Deut 10:17); 'The Eternal strong and mighty, the Eternal mighty in battle' (Psalm 24:8); 'The Eternal will go forth as a mighty man' (Isaiah 42:13); 'There is non like you, Eternal One; You are great, and Your name is great in might' (Jeremiah 10:6)."[91]

## B. A MIGHTY PEOPLE:

### MOSES AND THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL IN THE BATTLE WITH AMALEK

The Jewish tradition is filled with moments of success in which God is seen as its source. Yet, while human beings' involvement is downplayed, it is not insignificant. God can be a decisive force, but not without brave human action in partnership. Amalek appears at Rephidim intent to fight with Israel. God does not perform a miracle, removing Israel's foe by storm, flood, earthquake, or blight. Israel is still required to

---

[90] Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1957), 23.

[91] *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael*, Tractate *Shirata* 1, on Exodus 15:1.

struggle and to fight; Moses must organize and lead his people, Joshua still brings together a fighting force, and the Israelites wield swords in the face of their enemy.

For Moses, the ability to act comes from the intersection of wisdom (*chokhmah*) and might (*g'vurah*), teaches *Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana*: "Who is wise (Qohelet 8:1)? This is Moses, as it is written, 'He brought down a city of warriors (*ir gibborim*)' (Proverbs 21:22), [and] raised up wisdom. 'And who knows the meaning of anything?' (Qohelet 8:1) For he explained the Torah to Israel."[92] Moses as the Israelite leader, guiding them toward the Promised Land, through battles such as the one with Amalek, and away from slavery, qualify him as having "brought down the warrior cities." Paralleling the destruction of a city with the establishment of wisdom speaks to Moses's struggles to make the Israelites a cohesive people. Moses possesses and uses the rod of God in Egypt and at Rephidim. The staff in his hand shows his power as prophet, as God's mouthpiece, as the one who does what God desires. That rod in his hand destroys Amalek, and also builds up the people of Israel; for one to be victorious, another must be destroyed. Moses represents that tension. In might, Amalek is broken; in might, Israel is established.

And significantly, according to the Rabbis, Israel is established upon the foundation of Torah. Torah is the source of Israel's strength and its the guide for action, both on and off the battlefield. Due to Torah, Moses can impart the might necessary to prevail over Amalek. Likewise, when Israel turns from Torah, their might dissipates. As Rabbi Elazar said: "When Moses raised his hands towards heaven, it meant that Israel would be strong in the words of Torah, to be given through Moses's hands. And when he lowered his hands, it meant that Israel reduced its zeal for the words of the Torah to be

[92] *Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana, Parashat Parah Adumah*, 4:4.

given through his hands."[93] The *midrash* here stresses that Moses's hands are guides, Torah wisdom passes through them to Israel in order that the people might realize God's victory.

The responsibility that Moses holds at this moment is weighty. Moses's hands grow heavy. They drop. They must be supported for the sake of the Israelites, for the his own sake, and for God's sake. Moses's hands hold the key to the people's success, for his hands were faithful (*va-y'hi yadav emunah*).[94] The *Mekhilta* teaches that Moses's faith, expressed in his hands, is pulled in two directions. With one hand, Moses measures Israel, and with the other, he pleads to God. In his first hand, Moses looks to receive that which Israel can offer in the moment, only to find that his hand is empty. With the other hand, the Rabbis imagine Moses praying: "Our Master of the Universe, by my hand You brought Israel out of Egypt, and by my hand You divided the Sea, and by my hand You performed miracles and mighty deeds (*g'vurot*). So, now at this hour, by my hand may You perform miracles and mighty deeds."[95] Moses creates a prayer referring to that which God had already done for the Israelites, with the hope of what could come in this battle. Moses in his wisdom weighs and judges the situation. In one hand, from the Israelites, he grasps at nothing, representative of their ingratitude. In the other, he beseaches God to direct the Israelites to victory so that they might continue on the journey that they have only just begun.

---

[93] *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael*, Tractate *Amalek* 1, on Exodus 17:11.

[94] Exodus 17:12.

[95] *Ibid*.

Moses is distressed as long as Israel is in danger; he is "a person [who] is obligated to suffer with the masses," the tradition teaches.[96] Feeling the pressure to achieve, Moses is confronted with choices that weigh heavily on him. He holds the options in his palms. He must rest upon the wisdom set forth by the examples of his forefathers, just as he rests upon the stone during the battle.[97] Moses must envision that place to which he is taking his people, knowing well the history from which the Israelites come. And he must be able to articulate what needs to be done in the moment to be able to make sure that the vision can be realized. This is Moses when he faces Amalek at Rephidim, the leader who possesses both *g'vurah* and *chokhmah*, might and wisdom.

For a leader to be effective, though, he also is in need of a people to lead. Moses depends upon Israel, and they are as key in the battle as God or Moses. Who is Israel at Rephidim? The nation of Israel willingly fights against Amalek. "Pick some men for us, and go out and do battle with Amalek," Moses instructs Joshua. These freed slaves who have been wandering in the desert and are now asked to commit themselves to battle. Not all of Israel fights, though. Joshua chooses men (*anashim*). The Israelite's leaders do not seek out captains, warriors, or strong men, those skilled and able bodied for war. An assumption may be made that the Israelites have men among them equipped for battle, but this would be misleading. We want to imagine the regular Israelite man as strong and militarily skilled, but our tradition simply characterizes these men as being iniquitous and not upholding of the covenant. It is for this reason, the tradition teaches,

---

[96] *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*, on Exodus 17:12.

[97] *Ibid*.

that Moses's hands are lifted to impart Torah, otherwise the Israelites would forget it.[98] This is the sole source of their might.

Significantly, Amalek is aware of Israel's weakness. In one *midrash*, Amalek and his father, Eliphaz, who is of Esau's line, are having a conversation.[99] "Amalek, my son, who is the one who will inherit both this world and the world-to-come?" Eliphaz asks. He knows that Israel holds this destiny, and could have instructed his son to take up with Israel, to aid in their journey by building wells and roads on their behalf. Yet, Eliphaz gives no such direction, and Amalek goes to battle with Israel at Rephidim. The *midrash* looks at the name of Rephidim, claiming that the place name comes from √*rph*, to let go, and *yadayim*, hands. This place signals Israel's moral lapse. Their hands loose their grasp on God's Torah, and Amalek comes at this opportune moment, when Israel is without the might of the Torah. As much as we want them to be, the Israelites are not the mighty ones when they are confronted by Amalek. They are the beneficiaries of God's might, but they are not faithful.

## C. Conclusion

According to the *midrash*, Amalek recognizes that the Israelites are not in a position of might. With the rod of God in his hands, lifted up to teach and remind them of the Torah, Moses sits on the hill over the Israelites as they battle with Amalek. He rests himself on a stone, symbolic of the mighty history upon which they rest. His arms are upheld with the power of the Torah by which he is guided. Moses's outstretched arms and extended hands remind the Israelites of what is important to them so that they

---

[98] *Ibid*.

[99] *Tanna D'bei Eliyahu* (Friedmann edition), *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah*, 22.

might fulfill their mission and be rewarded in this world and in the world-to-come. So we ask again: God, Moses, and Israel--from among them, what is the root of the might exhibited? God is *Ha-G'vurah*, and Moses demonstrates that God is the source of might through the Torah represented by the magical rod in his hand, and received by Israel, as long as the people's gaze remains fixed upon it.

# Chapter 4

## Other Mighty and Not-so-Mighty Men

In John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, the hand defines the man. Lennie's hand is a big paw, and with this massive, bear-like hand he unwittingly kills Curley's wife.[100] Like some big, dumb animal, Lennie places his paw on the woman, intending only to pet the pretty curls of her hair that form little sausages. But, what is a soft, gentle touch to Lennie is murderous for Curley's wife. Lennie's masculinity--as conveyed through his hand--is both fierce and unaware.

Curley's masculinity is different. He is a man who walks around with a glove filled with Vaseline on his hand. The other men at the ranch claim its because he is keeping his hands soft for his wife.[101] Curley at one point in his life is a light weight boxer. For this reason, the men stay away from him, even though most of them are twice his size. A small man with soft hands, trained to be able to fight for himself--Curley is always on the defensive.

For many biblical men, physical attributes such as the nature of their hands can also make the man. Even God is described as being present with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. Moses, poised to act in dangerous moments, wields the rod of God in his hands. The Bible is filled with male characters who are defined by their physical ability. Their might is evident in their power and size. For instance, Samson's power lies in his hair. But, as is shown through the Steinbeck's characterizations, the physical attributes are indicative of a man's other qualities. A number of these physically mighty biblical men are also defined in terms of non-physical attributes. For example, Moses's might, as we saw in the previous chapter, is tied up with his possession of wisdom.

---

[100] John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men* (New York: Penguin, 1965), 3.

[101] *Idem*, 27.

In this chapter we will examine the rabbinic tradition's perspective on a number of biblical male characters to understand their qualities. The essential question is: what makes a mighty man? First, we will look at biblical stories and *midrashim* that generally define the characteristics of mighty men. Then, we will use a handful of biblical men as prototypes and anti-prototypes for what it means to be a mighty man of valor.

## A. The Mighty Man from Among Others

> 'Let the nations know they are only men (*eh-nosh*), *Selah*.' (Psalm 9:21b) Every time the word 'man (*adam*)' is discovered in the Bible, it means 'a man' in actuality. [When it is the case that] man and beast (*adam u'b'heimah*), [are mentioned together, it means] a man whose knowledge is like a beast's. [When it is the case that] a man [is called] *gever*, [it refers to] the Sages (*Chakhamim*). [When the word] *eh-nosh* [is used for] man, [it means] an ignorant [man] (*shoteh*).
>
> (*Midrash T'hillim* 9.16)

The other nations are to be known as *eh-nosh*. This *midrash* shows that a number of words can be used for 'man.' What is the significance of calling someone a *gever* versus *adam*, *ish*, or *eh-nosh*? This *midrash* offers us three categories of man--*adam*, *gever*, and *eh-nosh*--each defined independent of the others. The *adam*, *gever*, and *eh-nosh* are all men with which we are familiar, specifically characterized, like Steinbeck's Lennie and Curley.

The man who is juxtaposed to the cattle has the mind of a beast. He is subject to his animal instincts, and we are left with little to distinguish between Man and beast (*Adam u'beheimah*) when spoken about as such.

A *gever* is wise. The simplicity of this statement in *Midrash T'hillim* draws us to further investigate what is meant by it. The relationship between the notions of *g'vurah* and *chokhmah* is firm in the minds of the Rabbis.

*P'siqta d'Rav Kahanah* in *Parashat Parah* expands on the terse statement made in *Midrash T'hillim*. God, Adam, Israel,[102] the student of a Sage (*talmid chakham*), and Moses [103] are all listed in response to the question from Qohelet 8:1, "Who is wise?" Wisdom is not a universal characteristic. Only particular figures are identified with wisdom. God is wise, as it is written that "The Eternal with wisdom founded the earth."[104] Adam is wise for he named all of the creatures. Israel is wise in that "they know how to explain the Torah in 49 ways to reach a ruling for uncleanliness, and in 49 ways to reach a conclusion in favor of cleanness."[105] The student of a Sage shows wisdom when he can sufficiently explain a *mishnah*. And, Moses is wise as he is the one who instructs the People of Israel in the ways of Torah. For a man to be wise, and thus to

---

[102] It is the case that the voices of the Jewish tradition are not monolithic as to Israel's character. In the previous chapter, we characterized Israel during the battle against Amalek as iniquitous and as having difficulty keeping God and Torah in their mind as they fought. In contrast, *Pesiqta d'Rav Kahanah* believes that Israel is a people mindful of Torah.

[103] For a description of Moses in terms of his might and wisdom, see Chapter 2B.

[104] Proverbs 3:19.

[105] *Pesiqta d'Rav Kahanah, Parashat Parah Adumah*, 4:4.

be a *gever*, he must follow the lead of these figures. A man must learn from these examples, and model his own action after them--learning to create and name in reverence or learning to explain, convey, and teach Torah. To be a *gever* is to take up these practices. Then, a man can be both *gever* and *chakham*.

Returning to *Midrash T'hillim*, the word *eh-nosh* describes the man who is the opposite of the *chakham*, a man who is ignorant. The other nations of the world, in the Psalms verse, are *eh-nosh*. If Torah learning leads one to being a *gever* and a *chakham*, being of another people, unaware of Torah and God's ways, leads you to being naive to what is important.

When the Rabbis call other nations idiotic and unlettered, unsurprisingly to the modern reader, they show their lack of consideration for other peoples. It should also be read as an expression of their attitude toward the supremacy of Torah and the Jewish way. Describing *adam* as a man of the earth, a man who is among beasts, is a characterization of one who has specific skills to contribute. The man of learning--the *gever*--is a characterization of a person with might. It is the option that leads to the best position a man can find in the Jewish community, that of Torah scholar. Yet, the *shoteh* is the man of little regard. He cannot contribute to the community through physical action or through learning. The ignorant only draws on the resources of others and knows not what is important in the world. In light of these categories, being deemed a *gever* is the best option available. If a *gever* is wise, then to be a *gibbor*--the emphatic form of *gever*--is all the more so a desired status.

Who then, from among the range of biblical figures, is worthy of this praise? Who stands in might? What sort of man can deliver the Jewish people into safety?

"Who is fit for this thing (*Mi ha-gon l'davar zeh*)?" Esther *Rabbah* asks.[106] Perhaps Mordecai as a Jewish man already living in Shushan. Moses and David are both shepherds, allowing them the qualities of leadership before they were granted a people to lead. Saul is fit to be king, as he is from the tribe of Benjamin, who himself was a mighty man of valor. Jephthah is the brave warrior, able to fight and lead when there seems to be no one else fit to do so. And, breaking the male dominance of this list, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Aviram lists Deborah, the prophetess, as able to deliver Israel from their forceful oppression.

Each character in the Bible illustrates human qualities that inform us as to how one can live in the service of God. They also illustrate how we might transgress on our journey toward righteousness. Esther *Rabbah* categorizes men and a woman who are worthy of serving as leaders of the Jewish people in their moments of need. This text implicitly shows that as we categorize, distill, and analyze each figure, we recognize that the qualities that make the man are conditioned by that man's autobiography. Moses cannot be a leader without having first been a shepherd. Yet, these qualities can also be understood more generally. For example, Moses's shepherding is indicative of his ability to bring people together and his being able to direct them in. Others in the Bible do not stand out as men worthy of praise for their might. These figures are certainly important to understanding constructions of Jewish masculinity. Yet, so much of the Jewish narrative is based in what defines a man as being mighty. It is a symbol of power to stand with *g'vurah*, and it establishes the patriarch as supreme,[107] whether that patriarchy is granted through physical or intellectual prowess. To understand how the biblical and

[106] Esther *Rabbah* 5:4.

[107] I make this argument here to illuminate the rabbinic attitude to the patriarchy.

midrashic authors understood *g'vurah* as a construction of masculinity, and for us to be able to glean some meaning from that, we must recognize that only a handful of our biblical characters were granted this attribute. While not an exhaustive list, the following are key biblical figures whose qualities allow us to understand variations on the theme of Jewish masculine might, men who lived with some sort of *g'vurah*.

## B. BOAZ:

### THE *GIBBOR CHAYIL* AS A MAN OF ECONOMIC POWER

In our time, the focus of study on the Book of Ruth has mostly been on its female characters. This has been the book of choice for many feminist Bible scholars, and with good reason.[108] Ruth and Naomi exemplify the ability of biblical women. The Book of Ruth is a source to understand the dynamic between the mother-figure and daughter-figure. It allows us to see the power dynamic of biblical relationships outside of the classic reading of male dominance. As Kates and Twersky Reimer put it, "The story is an emblem of women like ourselves seeking to feel at home in a patriarchal tradition and discovering support and sustenance in both the resources of that tradition and the voices of other women."[109]

Ruth is a powerful figure in her own right. Described as an *eishet chayil*, a woman of valor, she is the only other biblical woman to be given this moniker other than

---

[108] See Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 238-263.

[109] Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, eds., *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), introduction, xix.

the proverbial woman described in the Bible's famous acrostic poem.[110] The story of Ruth is a narrative in which she comes to know Boaz, marry him, and assure a stable future for herself as the widowed daughter-in-law of the widow Naomi.

Her status is made all the more significant in that her second marriage is to Boaz, a *gibbor chayil*. Together, they are our only explicit biblical couple who possess valor together. The Rabbis saw this as significant. Rabbi Abbahu asks, "If a giant marries a giantess, what do they produce?" Mighty men of valor (*gibborei chayil*) is his answer.[111] From Ruth and Boaz's union, six major biblical figures come--David, the Messiah, Daniel, Chanan'yah, Mishael, and Azar'yah.[112] David is the most prominent among them, of whom it is said, "Skillful in playing, and a mighty man of valor, and a man of war, and prudent in affairs, and a comely person and the Eternal is with him."[113] A great man comes from a great line. Furthermore, the *midrash* goes on to expand David's qualities outlined in the proof text: David's 'skill in playing' tells of his knowledge of Scripture, 'mighty man of valor' translates to his ability with the *Mishnah*, 'he is a man of war' who also understands the give and take in the context of Torah, his 'prudence' is seen in his good works, and he is a man enlightened in learning.

Considering the valiance and might ascribed to Ruth, Boaz, and David, the Rabbis are teaching that these traits are familial, which is reminiscent of the might professed in

---

[110] Proverbs 31:10f.

[111] Ruth *Rabbah* 4:3.

[112] B.T. *Sanhedrin* 93a-b.

[113] I Samuel 16:19.

the stories of the different generations of the Kings of Israel and Judah.[114] Second, this *midrash* illuminates the Rabbis' effort to spiritualize the acts of the warrior king David. David is not a man of war, he is the bookish type. David's might is found in his ability with the *Mishnah*. His enlightenment is not exhibited in military triumphs, but in Torah learning. As the Rabbis are constructing masculinity, and creating a patriarchal and hierarchical society, it is explicitly one that is based on study, knowledge, and the gaining of wisdom. The Rabbis are morphing an Israelite warrior culture into a rabbinic, academic one. It is still a place only for the men, but one's position in this society is not won through brutish action or military prowess. These men make their place in the world through their brilliance exhibited in study and debate.

In many ways, Boaz's character prefigures this shift. David's line—with Ruth and Boaz as ancestors—is described as possessing *g'vurah* and *chayil* (valor). However, Boaz's description as a *gibbor chayil* is not tied to the simple knowledge of who his great-great-grandchildren will come to be. Boaz in his own right earns that title. Boaz is a *gibbor chayil* in terms of his financial stability, in his position in the community, in his wisdom, and in his relationship to God, as well.

Boaz's financial stability is illustrated by his simple behavior. He is a landowner, one who watches over many people, and who can go to the gates of the city to be heard by the others there. He gives Ruth six barleys,[115] which the Rabbis interpret to mean his intention to display his wealth or to signal the six significant descendants that

[114] E.g., I Kings 15:23, 16:5, II Kings 13:12, 14:28. For further explication of the meaning of this literary trope found in the stories regarding the Kings of Israel and Judah, see Chapter 1B2.

[115] Ruth 3:17.

are to come from his union with her.[116] Boaz also is not under obligation to take Ruth in marriage; another man within the community should serve as the redeemer for Ruth's levirate marriage. Yet, Boaz says that he will take on that responsibility, and he releases the other fellow from his obligation. Such actions speak to Boaz's personality, and to the characterization that is given to him--that of a *gibbor chayil*.

Boaz is also a man of his word; he keeps his oaths even in the face of evil inclination. This fact strengthens Boaz's status as a mighty man of valor. "There were three men who were tempted by their evil inclination, but who strengthened themselves against it, in each case by taking an oath," teaches Rabbi Yose.[117] Joseph in the face of sinning "swore to his evil inclination saying, 'By God, I will not sin or do this great evil."[118] David also makes an oath which can be understood as being directed at his evil inclination to resist committing the sins that face him. And Boaz as well makes an oath seemingly to Ruth: "As God lives, lie here till morning." That evening, Boaz was overtaken by his evil inclination. It said to him, "You are an available man and can seek a woman. And she is an available woman and can seek a man. Stand up! Go sleep with her, so that she becomes your wife." To this carnal voice in the night, Boaz swears, "As God lives, I will not touch her." Upon that oath, Boaz told Ruth to lie with him till the morning, when he would go before the other men to take on the responsibility of being her levir.

---

[116] B.T. *Sanhedrin* 93a-b.

[117] Ruth *Rabbah* 6:10.

[118] *Ibid*. In this midrash, the Rabbis change the syntax of Genesis 39:9, moving "by God (*Lei'lohim*)" to the front of the statement, so that it can be read as an oath, as opposed to Joseph stating that he is sinning in God's eyes.

To be mighty is to also act honorably, fulfilling the promises made with others and with God. To be mighty is to stand in the face of one's own evil inclination, and swear to turn from its own power. In this way, all three of these mighty men exhibit compassion for others, conquering their own base inclinations. Proverbs 24:5 states, "A wise man is strong (*gever chakham ba-oz*)." Rabbi Hunia teaches that *ba-oz* should be read as *Boaz*, since "a man of knowledge reinforces strength (*koach*), in that he strengthens himself in an oath to his evil inclination."[119] Boaz is certainly powerful, exerting power over the other possible redeeming kinsman, over Ruth, and other figures in the story. Yet, this power is different from Joseph's and from David's. Boaz is a mighty man of means and a mighty man of will.

Lastly, Boaz is a mighty man of God. Rabbi Tanchuma said in the name of the Rabbis that there were three decrees which came from the earthly courts and were confirmed by the heavenly court.[120] One of these three decrees was that an individual can give a greeting that uses the name of God. The Rabbis look to scriptural support for this decree. They site three examples: Jeremiah 23:27, Ruth 2:4, and Judges 6:12. In the Book of Ruth, as Boaz approaches from Bethlehem, he says to his reapers, "May the Eternal be with you!" "May the Eternal bless you!" they respond. Such a greeting could be taken for granted, as we take for granted the "God bless you," offered when we sneeze. Or, it could be laden with meaning, like a traditional Jew's response to the question, *How are you?* "*Barukh Ha-Shem* (God is blessed), I am good," he might say. Is Boaz's greeting to the reapers an expression of his religiosity or is he saying something where the meaning is not in line with the plain sense of the phrase? The third proof text

---

[119] *Ibid.*

[120] Ruth *Rabbah* 4:5, cf. B.T. *B'rakhot* 54b, 63a, and B.T. *Makkot* 23b.

may help to answer this question. "The Eternal is with you, mighty man of valor" says God's angel to Gideon in Judges 6:12. Gideon and Boaz are both mighty men of valor. These men are paralleled in our tradition. They are both viewed as having great might, and they are both figures through which God's name is made known in greetings. An intertextual link exists with these two pieces for these two figures. It allows us to categorize them and understand that these two men are more alike than dissimilar. Both are characterized vis-à-vis might and vis-à-vis God's name. Boaz invokes the name on his own, while Gideon is addressed by God's angel directly with God's name. God's precious name could not be squandered on men of little worth or regard.

Money, communal position, and reverence for God; these three characteristics earn Boaz the title of 'mighty man of valor.' For him, his prowess does not rest in his abilities with the sword. Boaz shows his might in his ability to make an argument, to work strategically to get what he wants and do what he thinks is right, and in how he addresses and treats others, which should be interpreted as an outward expression of God's presence in his own life. Boaz models a masculinity that is defined by ability in the economic, interpersonal, and religious spheres.

## C. GIDEON:

### THE MIGHTY--YET HUMAN--WARRIOR

If Boaz is the Thomas Jefferson of biblical men, Gideon is George Washington; Gideon is the military general. He is the man who earns his leadership position in the community through military acumen. As was examined in Chapter 1, Gideon is a figure who is given the title of mighty man of valor long before he shows any ability.[121] He

[121] Pp 20-22.

doubts God's choice of him to serve for the purpose that has been laid before him: "Please, my lord, how can I deliver Israel? Why, my clan is the humblest in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's household."[122] Still, God insists that Gideon will serve as a deliverer for Israel: "I will be with you, and you will smite down Midian as if they were only a single man."[123]

In the biblical text, Gideon serves as the *gibbor chayil*, as the angel first addresses him, despite whatever doubts he holds. Gideon fights zealously and ruthlessly to deliver Israel to safety against Midian. Before he becomes this mighty warrior, though, he makes an offering to God. It is with this offering that the Rabbis see a different Gideon than the biblical characterization.

The Rabbis include Gideon in the ranks of other mighty men. *Tosefta Rosh Hashanah* 1:18 asks, "Why has [Scripture] not told the names of the righteous?" To avoid comparisons, is the answer given. Different figures in the Bible act righteously in the face of great danger. Each is worthy in his own right, and to mask comparisons, this text teaches us that the names have been obscured. Thus, one might be able to seek his own path toward righteousness given his own situation, and as a result avoid fruitless comparisons. Gideon is listed in this text as a righteous man whose deeds are masked through the mixing up different names in the biblical text.

That being said, a strong strain exists in the rabbinic tradition that makes Gideon out to be an idol worshiper. After learning that he is to take on Midian, Gideon makes an offering. His offering is intended only to praise God, and it is only one of six times—out

---

[122] Judges 6:15.

[123] Judges 6:16.

of 20 in all—when the sacrifice-consuming fire comes down from heaven.[124] Yet, some of the Rabbis see this offering as idolatrous. Rabbi Chiya bar Abba said, "It is forbidden to greet a friend with the words 'in peace (*b'shalom*)' in a dirty place."[125] Despite this rule, Gideon builds an altar upon which he makes his offering. The *midrash* teaches that he named the altar itself *Shalom*. He does not address God as *Shalom*, and thus the sacrifice that was made was idolatrous. Rabbi Simeon ben Lakhish said, "Of three men was the phrase 'In a good old age' said: Abraham deserved it, David deserved it, but Gideon did not deserve it."[126] The reason given—his offering was an act of idolatry. Rabbi Abba bar Kahana identifies seven transgressions in connection with Gideon's sacrifice: "It was offered on the wood of the Asherah, it was offered on hewn stones, it had been set aside for idolatrous purposes, it was a bull that had been worshiped, the sacrifice was performed by a non-priest, at night, and it was too young."[127] Rabbi Abba's extensive analysis is intended to exhibit the way in which Gideon is a sinner, only deserving of reproach, and beyond the Rabbis' efforts to redeem him as a righteous figure in the Jewish tradition. It seems to be that some of the Rabbis when looking at Gideon's character can only see transgression. They cannot take into account Gideon's other qualities.

Other readings are possible, though. In fact, Rabbi Abba's understanding of Gideon's offerings can be read in an entirely different light, when seen in the context of

---

[124] *Sifrei Zuta* (Horowitz edition) on Numbers 11:1.

[125] *Massekhtot Q'tanot*, *Massekhet Derekh Eretz*, *Pereq Shalom*, 11; cf. Leviticus *Rabbah* 9:9.

[126] Genesis *Rabbah* 44:20.

[127] Leviticus *Rabbah* 22:9.

another *midrash*. Gideon knows his place in his society, "My family is the poorest in Manasseh," he says.[128] Poor means he has little resources available. Gideon lacks power and access. He wants to praise God, to make an offering to God, but how could he ever make it to the priests or to an appropriate place given his status in the society? So, he goes to a high place, and makes a considerable sacrifice for a man of his stature. He does what he can. Still, as Rabbi Abba points out, he commits seven transgressions in the process. To this, though, God says, "Let no man criticize him. He did it in My name and it was I who told him to do so."[129]

Gideon does what he thinks is right. He makes an offering to God whom he addresses *b'shalom* (in peace). Transgressions occur, but God recognizes intention. And the Rabbis can also recognize the limited abilities of those born into difficult conditions. Qohelet 9:16 states, "The poor man's wisdom is despised." Throughout biblical and rabbinic literature, figures exist who were born into poverty and who came to righteousness. They contradict the man who argues that ability belongs to the elite alone. "Rabbi Akiva's wisdom was despised because he was poor?"[130] Still, Gideon committed idol worship. Yet, "there was no greater 'poor man' than this."[131]

The abilities of the poor are limited because of their place in society. Do the Rabbis recognize Gideon's contributions? Some teachers say yes, others say no. Some can look past what seems to be a well-intended, though ignorantly made, offering, while others cannot. What can we learn from this? Gideon's status as a mighty man of valor

---

[128] Judges 6:15.

[129] Numbers *Rabbah* 14:1.

[130] Ruth *Rabbah* 1:2.

[131] *Ibid*.

cannot be taken away. God's angel calls out to Gideon with this description. But, when the mighty man of valor tries to worship God, to do what he thinks is the right thing to do in that moment, do we stand in judgment in ways that cloud Gideon's real accomplishments? Gideon is a fierce warrior who roots his actions immediately in worship, and his actions keeps Israel safe for a generation, though, he is a man from a small, poor clan within Manasseh. Gideon is like David, Jephthah, or Akiva; he is the leader who emerges from obscurity. He is the underdog who no one would assume as worthy of such a leadership role, given his upbringing. We want to make our mighty men of valor into giants, and we want to firmly call them *hero*. Often we can do that, but Gideon shows that these men are fallible. To be mighty does not preclude one from coming from a poor upbringing, and as a result, at some point in his life behaving in an improper manner.

## D. SISERA:

### A YOUR-NOT-SO-MIGHTY-ANYMORE MAN

One might wonder why Sisera is ranked among these other men. He is never called a *gibbor chayil*, he is an enemy of the Jews, and he is brought down by the valorous Yael. Nothing about this man seems to speak of might.

In the Bible, foreign figures are called *gibbor chayil.*[132] Yet, as we noted in the *p'shat* reading of Deborah's song, in which Sisera's story is told, one of Sisera's mother's attendants speaks about their people's warriors as *gever*, "They must be dividing the spoils they have found: a damsel or two for each man (*gever*),"[133] The power of the root

[132] E.g., Joshua 6:2.

[133] Judges 5:30.

√*gbr* is in its shift of meaning from *gever* to *gibbor*. Any male can be a *gever* (a man), but only particular individuals can become a *gibbor* (a warrior). That morphing happens for Gideon when God's angel calls him a *gibbor chayil*. Still, Sisera is seen in the Bible as only a *gever*, though his humanity is mantained even as the fallen enemy.

The Rabbis treat Sisera differently.[134] Yael's triumph in bringing down Sisera is accomplished through a transgression. The Rabbis discuss what it means for him to have fallen at her feet. The text is sexually suggestive, and the Rabbis argue that she had to have sexual relations with Sisera to enable her to be in his tent at a time when she could have driven the peg into his head. In this talmudic passage, the Rabbis argue that there are conditions in which great deeds are only made possible by first transgressing. Sisera's mother and her ladies might think of Sisera and their men as *gever*, but the Sages call Sisera an evil one, "Rabbi Yochanan said, 'That evil man (*rasha*) performed seven acts of cohabitation [with Yael] on that day.'"[135] Yael takes up with him, and in this transgression performs a great deed. It raises the question of whether wicked people can be involved in great deeds? It seems the answer is yes. Yet, it seems to be the case that recognizing Sisera as a *rasha* dehumanizes him in the process, making him more like the serpent than a man against whom it is worth taking up arms.

In this light, Sisera serves as a challenge to our understanding of might and masculinity. The biblical text exhibits a sensitivity about understanding 'the other.' Yael brutishly takes away Sisera's life. As he may have sexually violated her, Yael equally penetrates Sisera with the stake to end his life. The biblical text is aware of the symbolism. About this, though, the Rabbis are brutish here. With a single word--*rasha*--

---

[134] B.T. *Yevamot* 103a-b, cf. B.T. *Horayyot* 10b.

[135] *Ibid*.

they dehumanize Sisera beyond any way that he had been in the tradition before. All of this forces us to ask, "When we look at our enemies, do we see a human being or a demon?"

## E. SOLOMON:

### A MIGHTY MAN WITH DOUBTS

Throughout the biblical narratives, God calls upon men to perform particular sacred tasks; individuals are chosen as God's agents. Yet, what is it about Noah, Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Solomon, Mordecai, or Boaz that make these men stand out as the ones who can do God's work on earth?

We make Solomon out to be a king who rules in might, in wisdom, in understanding, and with many other qualities worthy of praise. In many ways, we wish to see Solomon in ways that we do not see the averge leader. The tradition surely looks more soberly at his father, recognizing his transgressions more readily. Yet, Solomon seems to be a figure who, despite how others view him, makes himself out to be a figure who is introspective and filled with self-doubt in his role.

Solomon is given the God-granted splendor of kingship (*hod malkhut*) after his father David: "The Eternal made Solomon exceedingly great in the eyes of Israel, and endowed him with majesty that no king of Israel before him ever had."[136] This Solomon is one who is fit to be king, in Gods' eyes and in the people's eyes. Solomon stands on his father's shoulders which emables him to rule the people. Yet, *Midrash Mishlei* notes,

[136] I Chronicles 29:25.

"And yet, after all this kingship, and all this wisdom, and all this understanding, and all this praise, Solomon must say, 'I am brutish, less than a man' (Proverbs 30:2)."[137]

We elevate our rulers to a status nearly divine, those like Solomon, David, and others who are appointed by God. Why are David and Solomon described as possessing *g'vurah* at the end of their days? They rule with might; each serves as a warrior king in his time. They maintain Israelite territory, and make secure the lives of their Israelite subjects. They are also musicians and poets and scholars. Still, Solomon beats his chest because of moments of brutishness, for his harshness, for his actions that he sees as being less than manly.

In an attempt to see these figures as models for masculinity, it is important to note—and the Rabbis illustrate this through their *midrashim*—that these men are not all-powerful. We tend to make them into superheroes who deliver Israel into its God-given destiny. Yet, they are still only men. They are fallible, with moments of weakness. Solomon recognizes this when he calls himself less than a man.

To be less than a man allows us to determine the bounds of masculinity. As in *Midrash T'hillim*, the Rabbis are engaged in a determining of rank among men based upon the qualities that they exhibit. Noah is called a righteous man (*ish tzaddiq*), notes *Midrash Mishlei.* Solomon categorizes himself differently than Noah. Solomon does not feel that he an *ish* who is a *tzaddiq*; he does not deserve this categorization. Instead, he is even less than Adam, for Adam could "arrange his heart (*ma-arkhei lev*)."[138] Adam possessed an emotional awareness. Solomon sees himself as less than Adam; he is a man

---

[137] Chapter 30.

[138] Proverbs 16:1.

without understanding (*v'lo vinat adam li*).[139] Noah was a righteous man. Adam had basic understanding of the heart and mind. Solomon—despite all of the evidence that exists—believes he has none of this.

We hold our forefathers up as mighty men of valor. Yet, the tradition teaches us that these men, as they live, still have doubts about who they are. We can see in their actions that they do mighty things, and that understanding and wisdom characterize who they are. But, we must also recognize that these figures who exert power over others, and rule in God's favor, are also men with questions about their abilities. These men have moments of sensitivity and awareness that we must not overlook, and that we cannot stress enough. Introspection and self-awareness characterizes Solomon, and it is a quality of his masculinity that must be taken into consideration when seeing him as a whole man.

## F. GABRIEL:

### GOD'S MIGHTY ANGEL

God's angels serve as messengers between God and human beings. The angels come and go, and do God's bidding. Often we meet an angel as God's mouthpiece. A number of angels are described in both the Bible and in rabbinic literature. One key angel is Gabriel.

Gabriel's name is significant here. He is the angelic embodiment of might and masculinity. As such, he earns his name, which can be broken into its two key elemental words: *gever* and *El*. Literally, Gabriel is a man of God, a warrior of God. With this name and through his actions, we realize that Gabriel represents God's power of justice and might. Gabriel is the embodiment of a God who is known as *Ha-G'vurah*.

---

[139] Proverbs 30:2.

*Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* teaches that four angels surrounded God on the throne.[140] To God's right is the angel Michael, representative of life. To God's left is Gabriel, representative of death. For the first time, we are presented with the absolute danger of might. If one encounters God's left hand, Gabriel, he meets death.

Gabriel is often described harshly in the tradition, though we may be able to achieve a more balanced view. Gabriel seems to fill the role of the strict arbiter of justice, but he is also a watchman and savior for the People of Israel. Rabbi Nehemiah said, "See how great is the love of the Holy One for Israel, as He has designated the ministering angels as 'the mighty creatures (*gibborei koach*) who do His bidding' (Psalm 103:20) to be watchmen over Israel."[141] Michael and Gabriel are made out to be saviors,[142] granted by their status as *gibborei koach*, that they possess both the qualities of warrior and a strong being.

For Gabriel, these two qualities--strength and the ability to act--come together in his role as the watchman over Abraham. Gabriel faces a moment in which judgement must be made. Nimrod has cast Abraham into a fire. [143] How can the father of Israel deserve to die before his destiny may be known? "Master of the Universe," Gabriel addresses God, "may I go down and cool the fire, to save the righteous man from burning in it?" Gabriel shows an ability to act and a cool-headedness to face God in order to assure the correct judgement on Abraham's behalf. God wonders aloud, "I am unique in My world, and [Abraham] is unique in his world. It is fitting for the Unique One to save

---

[140] *Pirqei d'Rabbi Eliezer*, Chapter 4.

[141] Exodus *Rabbah* 18:5.

[142] This *midrash* continues to describe Michael's actions in this manner.

[143] B.T. *Pesachim* 118a.

the unique one." God must make a judgement. Abraham is the only man fit in his world to promote monotheism and fight idolatry. If he were to die in Nimrod's fire, Israel would not be born. Gabriel calls God's attention to the danger present, and God has Gabriel, his strong left arm, go and save Abraham. As the ministering angel of fire, he cools the furnace. Gabriel puts out the flames. By a mighty and strong angel, God's judgment is made known, and one may profess, "God's truth is forever."[144]

In another midrashic scene,[145] Gabriel is known as the personification of strict justice, *middat ha-din*. The Rabbis are attempting to understand Ezekiel's prophecy about Jerusalem's devastation, in which God instructs a man with writing utensils to "pass through Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who moan and groan because of all the abominations that are committed in it."[146] God then instructs others to go behind the man who was writing and kill off everyone without the protecting mark. Rabbi Acha believes that the man writing is the angel Gabriel, who God instructs to "go and place the letter *tav* in ink on the foreheads of the righteous, so that the angels of destruction will have no power over them; and on the foreheads of the wicked, place a *tav* in blood, so that the angels of destruction will have power over them."

Gabriel, the aspect of judgement, argues with the Divine: "Master of the Universe, what is the difference between the two?" God responds, "These are the completely righteous, and the others are the completely wicked." Such an answer is not sufficient for Gabriel, the *middat ha-din*. "Master of the Universe," he replies, "the righteous ones had the opportunity to protest…"

---

[144] Psalm 117:2.

[145] B.T. *Shabbat* 55a.

[146] Ezekiel 9:4.

"It is revealed," interjects God, "and known to Me that if they had protested [against the wicked, the latter] would not have accepted."

"If it is revealed to You, is it actually revealed?" concludes Gabriel.

Gabriel leaves God with a challenge: Is a divine revelation actually revelation if God is the only one to know it? Gabriel tells God that this question must be answered in good conscience before the Heavens may go forward and exact justice over the wicked while leaving the righteous to continue as they were.

The scales of justice are in Gabriel's hands. As the scales show who is innocent and who is guilty, he must also impart the punishments upon them. This is a charge that takes many qualities--patience, intelligence, wit, and a willingness to act. This is *g'vurah*, and it is who Gabriel is God's mighty being. In his task, our tradition conveys the idea that Gabriel sees it as his mission to work with God through the judgements, double checking the Judge's conclusions before irreversable actions are performed. Gabriel shows deference to God, but his rank among the heavenly beings allows him a freedom of speech with God that enables judgement to be what it should be--careful. Once that judgement has been made, Gabriel then has the ability to carry out the decree. Among the angels, Gabriel is powerful. He has God's ear. In this study of what it means to be powerful, full of might, what can be learned from the mighty heavenly being, Gabriel? Patience, the desire for dialogue, and a fortitude to carry out one's duty even if it is strict or fierce, are all qualities of the mighty man.

## G. The Rabbis as Mighty Men of Valor

The righteous individual, upon experiencing God's countenance, is granted many things. In his love of God, he shall be "as the sun when he goes forth in his might

(*g'vurato*)."[147] The sun is a mighty presence in the universe. Its rays are strong, and its heat can leave its mark. Rabbi Simeon ben Yochai said, "Like seven kinds of happiness will be the faces of the righteous when they receive the face of the Presence of God in the age to come."[148] The righteous individual experiences these seven kinds of happiness in the best ways that nature has to offer: through the sun's mighty rays, from the fairness of the moon, in the shock of lightning, and in lilies or olive trees.[149] The life of the righteous individual reaps the best of what the world has to offer. The God-fearing individual has much to hope for if he is able to live his life righteously. In this regard, the Rabbis hope to establish themselves by their righteousness. Righteousness and *g'vurah* seem to go hand in hand for our Sages.

What sort of persons earns this mighty righteousness? The judge who is able to judge truthfully, charity collectors, and children's teachers, based upon their career path earn a splendor that is like "the radiance of the firmaments (*k'zohar ha-raqia*)."[150] But this is not might. Might is reserved for those who engage in deep Torah learning every day—the Rabbis themselves! Ravina quotes Judges 5:31 to make this point. The Rabbis in their learning earn the place of being like the sun whose rays go forth in might.[151] Different career paths in the rabbinic tradition earn individuals different statuses in the world to come. Consistently the Rabbis are at the head of this hierarchy. It is not surprising that might is reserved for them. In this way, the Rabbis can be seen as the next

---

[147] Judges 5:31.

[148] *Sifrei* to Deuteronomy, *Pisqa* 47.

[149] *Ibid.*

[150] B.T. *Baba Batra* 8b.

[151] *Ibid.*

manifestation of the mighty men of valor from the biblical tradition. Where God's warriors left off, God's students pick up.

We have noted that many of our mighty men of valor are really underdogs by nature. They come from weaker tribes, as is the case for Gideon, or from mothers who are given little regard, as is Jephthah's case. The Rabbis see themselves in a similar light. They are creating a new way forward for Israel after the destruction of the Temple. In a dark time, they are the light that offers the way to continue to worship God and to seek God's favor. The Sages suffer, yet do not complain. They make something of their suffering, and in as much, they establish themselves in might. The Rabbis teach in a Baraita, "Those who suffer insult but do not insult [others], who hear their disgrace but do not reply, who perform [God's will] out of love and are happy in suffering," those are the ones who experience an existence like the sun as it goes forth in might.[152] Bar Kappara stressed that Torah learning be brought to the places where it would not be found, "In a place where there is no man (*gever*), be the man."[153] Dark times exist for our Rabbis, but Torah is their light. Through Torah they emerge as the biblical warriors did in the past. The biblical warriors experience a might granted and sustained by God. The Rabbis construct an image of themselves—through the imparting of Torah to the masses—that is similar to the biblical figures, save that their weapon is learning. Through their learning they may achieve righteousness, and they can yet again

---

[152] B.T. *Shabbat* 88b. B.T. *Yoma* 23a and B.T. *Gittin* 36b also offer examples of *Talmidei Torah* who overcome insult by not responding, and who in effect earn the designation 'mighty.'

[153] B.T. *B'rakhot* 63a.

experience *g'vurah,* a sort of mightiness that was lost in the rubble when the Temple Cult came to an end.

This self-aggrandizement in which the Rabbis are engaged, their taking on the mantle of might, shows itself most graphically when they connect meaning with the size of their penises. B.T. *Bekhorot* contains a *sugiya* that is of key interest for our understanding of the Rabbis and their construction of masculinity. The rabbinic mindset is set on categorizations. In doing so, they create two varieties of man who would be unfit to serve as a priest, even if he is a *kohen*. These are *ha-m'ush-ban* and *ba'al gever*. The *mishnah* teaches that if a *kohen*'s "breasts incline downwards like a woman's, belly bulges, navel protrudes, is subject to epileptic seizures even on rare occasions, is prone to demonic madness, or is *ha-m'ush-ban*, or *ba-al gever*, then he is unfit" to serve as a *kohen*.[154] Much can be said for each of these conditions, but it is the last two that are our interest. A priest can be excused from his duties if his body shows a particular blemish. What does it mean to be *ha-m'ush-ban* or *ba'al gever*? The *G'marah* teaches that *ha-m'ush-ban* is a man with large testicles and a *ba'al gever* is a man with an abnormally large penis. The Rabbis debate what is abnormally large, but the consensus is that is a penis that hangs to a point around the knee. All of these blemishes are immediately visible. The average individual seeing the priest in such a condition would draw questions. One wants to know that his priest is healthy and fit for the important duty with which he is charged. These physical signs all involve areas of the body connected to health and fertility. And, these categories are associated with our human evolutionary drives. For example, for a woman, large breasts indicate an ability to nourish a baby. For a man, they serve no purpose, and speak to a lack of musculature, which signals a

[154] B.T. *B'khorot* 44b.

lack of health and an inability to be the protector. Yet, the genitalia presumably are not publicly visible.

We are left to wonder why the *Mishnah* would prohibit a man with such a condition from serving in his priestly capacity. "And until what point" is a *kohen* fit given the size of his penis? He enters the realm of a *ba'al gever* when his penis is at or is beyond the knee. The *kohen* is considered unfit when his genitalia, the sexual organs that are not visually indicative of good health become enlarged to the point that they cannot be concealed. It is a blemish because the *kohen* can no longer conceal his enlarged penis, at which point it then becomes a blemish and not a regular, appropriately functioning organ. The term *ba'al gever* is taken to mean 'possessing one's manhood,' but the priest who suffers from this ailment is hardly an example of this meaning since it indicates a physical ailment, which the Rabbis suggest would inhibit a priest's action and service.

The Rabbis are legislating a standard of health for their communal leaders. Normal health is the goal. In this, the Rabbis entertain the question of what men's health should be. A story of Rabbi Yishmael ben Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Elazar ben Rabbi Shimon is told that they were once standing belly to belly. They were so large that a woman commented, "Your children are not yours!"[155] These two Sages were so large that it was unfathomable for the woman that they could successfully have sex with their wives so that their children were actually theirs. "So as a man is, so is his might (*g'vurato*)," they respond, "Love pulls back the flesh."

Rashi notes that these two rabbis' penises functioned as they should.[156] Both possible responses taken together evidence Rabbi Yishmael's and Rabbi Elazar's

[155] B.T. *Baba Metzia* 84a.

[156] Rashi on "As a man…", in B.T. *Baba Metzia* 84a.

confidence that their reproductive function and responsibility were not in jeopardy because of their size. Their response brings a man's responsibility to fathering children under the banner of *g'vurah*.

This *aggadah* groups health with reproductive ability. The woman who confronts the two rabbis recognizes that when one's health is not as it should be, it calls into question their abilities to fulfill the commandment to be fruitful and multiply. The priest cannot serve if he suffers unusual ailments. Similarly, Rabbis Yishmael and Elazar potentially could not fulfill their obligation to procreate. The *G'marah*, however, continues to list the sizes of the two rabbis' penises. By doing so, the text asserts their ability to have intercourse with their wives, and to successfully father children.

Despite the woman's assertions, these two corpulent rabbis fulfill their manly duties, and in their response, offer a new understanding of what it means to be mighty. To be a man means to also be a father. Possessing the ability to father children is symbolized in the healthy functioning of the male member; it is not based upon overall health. For Rabbis Yishmael and Elazar, their *g'vurah* does not lie in their Torah knowledge or in righteous deeds, but in their ability to successfully father children. Despite all of their inadequacies, these Rabbis teach us the importance of fatherhood to masculine might.

The rabbinic attitude toward their own might is not monolithic. In some ways, the rabbinic tradition is predictable, the Torah scholar is their warrior, and the righteous man is one who earns the might of the sun in the course of his days. The man who is able to stand up to opposition, and maintain his own sense of self, he also is a mighty man. In other ways, the relationship between might and masculinity is complicated; might

something physical, though constrained by sexual drives, and measured by the size of one's genitalia.

## H. Conclusion

Masculinity in any society is multivalent. Those who are mighty among men are complex characters. And, we live our lives looking to these models to inform our own behavior and attitude. In the search for the perfect modeling of masculinity and might, we are empty handed. But, the rabbinic tradition offers figures who exhibit great ability when presented with opportunity. We see men who accept who they are, which may or may not be an easy task. And we see men who show doubt as to their own abilities. All of this speaks to what it means to be mighty, and all of this speaks to the richness of human experience. No one voice can teach us the absolute path to our own self-understanding.

# CHAPTER 5

## RABBINIC CROSS-DRESSING AND HAIRSTYLES:

### A DISCUSSION OF SOCIETAL NORMS OF MALENESS

"Talking about gender for most people is the equivalent of fish talking about water. Gender is so much the routine ground of everyday activities that questioning its taken-for-granted assumptions and presumptions is like thinking about whether the sun will come up," writes Judith Lorber.[157] This is no small thing. When we recognize 'male' and 'female' as socially constructed categories, we are then drawn into a world in which we see the things that we do as indicative of those categories with which we identify. When we clearly see how gender identity functions for the individual and for the community, we recognize the foundational experiences that exist in that individual's autobiography in relationship to his or her community. One's gender identity is "carefully constructed through prescribed processes of teaching, learning emulation, and enforcement."[158]

For the Jewish individual, he or she finds his or her place in the society as male or female based upon all of these factors. In a traditional environment, these roles are most pronounced, although they certainly are present in the liberal streams of the Jewish community as well. For example, the traditional community offers the son educational opportunities that promote maleness, to the exclusion of the girls, which only advances the traditional patriarchal orientation. In that same vein, the mother shows her daughter how to keep the Jewish home. The biblical and rabbinic literatures outline appropriate behavior for these genders, to be enforced through the differences in the obligations to particular *mitzvot*. In all of these ways, the Jewish community has constructed its understanding of what it means to be called 'male' or to be called 'female.'

---

[157] Judith Lorber, "The Social Construction of Gender" (1994) in *The Inequality Reader*, eds. David B. Grusky and Szonja Szelenyi (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 2007), 276.

[158] *Idem*, 278.

Significantly, these factors in no way consider the Jew's inner-drive toward a particular gender identity. It is unfortunate that we cannot read into a text that which is not there. We want to find examples of egalitarianism, yet it seems to be the case that the Jewish tradition tells a story of enforcement and delineation between what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman.

Significant to distinguishing maleness from femininity is how an individual expresses his or her gender. Clothing, hair, makeup, and body language all speak to how an individual identifies. Gender expression and gender identity are linked, yet not necessarily in sync. And for some, that incongruity—seeing someone who we presume to be one way, but presents oneself in another, is disturbing, dangerous, and radical. It is for this reason that defined boundaries for gender expression come out of the Jewish legal tradition; they force gender expression onto the individual, regardless of the inner identity under which he or she functions.

### A. The Biblical Prohibition on Cross-Dressing

What is the scriptural basis for the rabbinic legislation on gender expression regarding clothing? Deuteronomy 22:5 is fervent, "A woman must not put on man's apparel (*klei-gever*), nor shall a man (*gever*) wear woman's clothing; for whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Eternal your God." Two rules of the same ilk are established in this verse: a woman does not wear man's apparel, and a man does not wear women's clothing. Those who do cross-dress commit an abomination of the Eternal God (*to'avat YHWH Eloheikha*).

An abomination is a serious form of transgression, used "frequently to define what is ethically or culturally beyond the pale."[159] And the behaviors prohibited under this category of transgression seem to be ones that Israel knew were committed, or that they thought to be committed, by their neighbors. The Jewish tradition enforces particular behavior in order to exhibit the difference that exists between other traditions and itself. *Kashrut*, *shatnez*, and cross-dressing are all articulations of Israel's uniqueness among the nations. "Israel's ethical and cultural practice was strongly determined by a need for distinctiveness. Even today we still encounter this need in religions and their associated ethos."[160] Surrounding nations evidently practiced these abominations. Israel is defined as unique, and in order to underscore this, developed customs that emphasized its singularity. In that way any prohibition labeled as an 'abomination' can also be seen as a polemic. Seeing it in such a light will help us to understand why the Rabbis interpret the cross-dressing prohibitions so strictly.

Of the two directives given in Deuteronomy 22:5, the significance lies in the use of the word *gever*. A woman shall not wear *klei-gever*, literally 'men's objects.' And a *gever* is not to wear women's clothing. What does the phrase *klei-gever* mean? What counts as a man's 'object?' Finally, for the *gever*, what outward gender expressions fall under the category of women's apparel?

## B. The Dangers of Being a Cross-Dresser

[159] H.D. Preuss, "*To'avah*" in *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, v. 15, ed. George W. Anderson et. al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2006), 594.

[160] *Idem*, 594-595.

A woman shall not wear men's objects, and a man shall not wear women's clothing. What counts as a man's object? What are men's garments that a woman could wear?

To make the matter simple, one can look to the parallelism that exists in the original prohibition in Deuteronomy 22:5. This is the approach taken in a *baraita* found on B.T. *Nazir* 59a.[161] The phrase *klei-gever* is parallel to another phrase, *simlat ish*. "If a man does not wear women's clothing (*simlat ishah*), then a woman [does not wear] men's clothing (*simlat ish*)," the text reads. Two different phrases are used, but the plain, literal meaning of *simlat ishah* should be understood in tandem to the phrase *klei-gever*. It is not a complicated matter; the verse contains a doubling to cover both genders under the obligation.

But the matter is complicated when we try to understand its status as an abomination. The *baraita* takes issue with the biblical verse, "It is called an abomination, but there is no abomination here!" Based upon this statement, the *baraita* moves the argument from simply the act of cross-dressing alone into how one expresses him or herself in the community. This tradition holds that the abomination occurs when a male-to-female cross-dresser sits with women, or when a female-to-male cross-dresser sits with the men. The difference lies between private and public gender expression. The Talmud seems to tolerate a man or woman who indulges in gender bending, if it occurs in the private confines of his or her own home. Yet, the public gender-bender performs an abominable act. For what reason?

---

[161] Cf. *Sifrei* on Deuteronomy, *Pisqa* 226:5.

Rabbeinu Asher ben Yehiel (*Ha-Rosh*) claims that this is the abomination because of the risk of promiscuity.[162] When one is cross-dressed and among his or her opposite gender, Rabbeinu Asher asserts that this would lead to harlot-like behavior.

Such a position makes sense considering the historical context in which it was written. Rabbeinu Asher lived in Germany and Spain in the late 13th and early 14th Centuries. During his lifetime, the crowns under which he lived were instituting sumptuary laws for the first time in European history. Sumptuary laws "regulated the consumption of goods, consisting in the analysis, quantification, or prohibition of various demonstrations of opulence displayed during banquets, feasts, funerals, or in one's attire."[163] The legislators cited many reasons for the institution of these laws, mostly under an aesthetic rationale, yet from a historical perspective, they functioned to "maintain and reinforce social barriers… to promote and to marginalize, to signal proximity to power as well as distance from it."[164] The regulation of clothing in Rabbeinu Asher's milieu was to exert political control and to publicly signal social status. So his own reading of the *baraita*, namely that cross-dressing in public is harlot-like behavior and an abomination, can be seen as his own Jewish articulation of the sumptuary laws that were of his time. Enacting this as a law--whether secular or halakhic--works to protect the community as those in power construct it. The cross-

---

[162] *Pirqei Ha-Rosh* in B.T. *Nazir* 59a.

[163] Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, "Reconciling the Privilege of a Few with the Common Good: Sumptuary Laws in Medieval and Early Modern Europe," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 39:3 (Fall 2009), 597.

[164] *Idem*, 599-600.

dresser in Rabbeinu Asher's world is counter-cultural, even criminal. The cross-dresser is dangerous to the community.

Whether defined by the formal legislation of the medieval period or cultural norm in our own time, cross-dressing is defined by the dominating society as subversive behavior. Considering that, though, the cross-dresser is still driven by his or her own motivations. In some ways, it can be considered a way to fit into a role in which the individual feels he or she belongs, but would otherwise cannot pass there. Cross-dressing is the way to get in when an individual is ostracized. The legislation under the rationale that cross-dressing would lead to promiscuous behavior tells more about the enforcers than the subjects of that law. It functions to protect the majority from their fear of being violated in their realm. However, the assumption that the cross-dresser goes into a room filled with the other gender with the intention to act sexually inappropriate seems to be weak reasoning. More likely, the cross-dresser does so to enter into a realm otherwise barred to him or her, but a realm in which he or she desires to belong.

Returning to the phrase *klei-gever*, Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov presents a dissenting opinion: "How do we know that a woman should not go out wearing armaments for war (*bikhlei-zayin l'milchamah*)?" Because a woman should not have *klei-gever* upon her, is the answer given.[165] Again, the talmudic text parallels two phrases: *klei-zayin* and *klei-gever*. The word *zayin* has multiple connotations. In modern Hebrew, it is a vulgar way of speaking about the penis. Yet, in rabbinic and biblical Hebrew, the word *zayin* means 'armor.' *Klei-zayin* are protective garments, the ancient kevlar vest. In this light, *Keli-gever* takes on new meaning, being synonymous with *klei-zayin*. Rabbi Eliezer is stating that there is a prohibition against women presenting themselves

[165] B.T. *Nazir* 59a.

as taking up arms, readying for battle. This *baraita* teaches that the battlefield is not a place for women.

However, Rav Idi claims that such a prohibition against women wearing armaments is not necessary, since "a woman's armaments are [always] upon her."[166] What does Rav Idi mean by this notable difference between men and women? "[The men] would not kill her, rather they would seek to have sex with her (*ba ahleiha*)" argues Rashi.[167] The natural armaments that a woman possesses against an assailant is her existence as sexual object. In the analyses of power between the sexes, it is often the case that a woman's power lies in her being an object of a man's sexual desire. This would be Rashi's explanation of Rav Idi's claim. The woman's armament lies in her objectification on the part of her assailant, thus she has no need for weapons of war. But we ask: A woman's protection from murder is her ability to be raped? Our tradition here does not take into consideration the harshness of sexual assault and the damage that would be done to the female victim. Rashi's argument, while explanatory, exacerbates Rav Idi's assessment. Our tradition does not take into consideration that victimization happens in all manners of assault; a victim is not only a victim in the case of murder. Rav Idi would have it that women need no protective clothing, for sexual objectification and victimization is sufficient protection.

## C. Rabbinic Hairstyles

At the end of the *baraita* in B.T. *Nazir* 59a, Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov connects his position on *klei-gever* with the other portion of the Deuteronomy verse, that a man

[166] B.T. *Avodah Zarah* 25b; B.T. *Yevamot* 115a.

[167] *Avodah Zarah* 25b.

may not wear women's clothing. What are classified as women's garments? Anything that is meant as an adornment beyond the practical. Objects that beautify the man, as women beautify themselves with things like make-up and hairstyles, are forbidden to men. Rav teaches, "A man may not trim his entire body with a razor."[168] Rav forbids a man from grooming the hair on his head, his underarms, and his pubic area. This prohibition is so strict that it could even incur lashes. The rabbinic scholars debate about this prohibition and its punishment. They want to know if it is a scriptural or rabbinic decree that warrants such harsh punishments? In the end, the prohibition against using a razor to trim one's hair anywhere on his body is based on the proof text: "A man may not wear a woman's garment."

The Talmud maintains this position in a number of *sugyiot*. "Regarding a person who pulls out [on Shabbat] white hairs from among dark hairs, he is liable for even one [white hair]. This is even forbidden on a weekday, as it it said: 'A man may not wear a woman's garment.'"[169] Trimming one's body hair and plucking out grey hairs, are acts of beautification in which a man might desire to engage. Yet, it is forbidden on the basis that to beautify oneself would be to wear women's clothes. It would be an act of feminization.

We see that the Rabbis were compelled to prohibit acts of feminization as they interpret the act of beautification as only appropriate to the female. We are thus driven back into the realm of gender expression as a construction of society, what it means to be a man is defined by societal constrictions and enforcement. The Rabbis insist that the differences between men and women be maintained. "The social institution of gender

---

[168] B.T. *Nazir* 58b.

[169] B.T. *Shabbat* 94b, B.T. *Makkot* 20b.

insists only that what they do is *perceived* as different."[170] Just as the Rabbis prohibit the act of cross-dressing, not because it in itself is an abomination, but because the public presentation of gender-bending is seen as dangerous, the Rabbis also prohibit the men from beautifying themselves, which would be seen by others. It is a dangerous act in that flies in the face of how a man should act. As Mary Douglas says, society "has external boundaries, margins, internal structure. Its outlines contain power to reward conformity and repulse attack."[171] Rabbinic patriarchy is the dominant power in rabbinic social construction. Those in power enforce rules over those within the community to maintain that power. If men were to start interesting themselves in things identified with the women's realm, or if women were to present themselves in the men's realm, then this would create an imbalance in the communal social construction, dangerously tipping it into a place where statuses could be questioned and changed.

## D. Conclusion

Cross-dressing, feminizing, and the like are all acts that are on the margins of classic rabbinic society, as they even are today. When a man wears a dress or trims his pubic hair, it is interpreted as a womanly act; it is far from an expression of masculine might. The Rabbis successfully shifted the definition of a *gibbor* from the biblical warrior to the rabbinic scholar. For them, to possess *g'vurah* is tantamount to being a learn-ed man. The rabbinic *gibbor*, as is the biblical *gibbor*, is a man who has status in the community, and status is more than just the internal qualities that define the man. Certainly, the clothes make the man, as well. Society institutes physical markers for an

[170] Lorber, "Social Construction," 279.

[171] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 114.

individual's status, which become defined as the norm for a person who is of that type. If the man desires to be taken seriously as a *gibbor* in his own time, society calls upon him to fit into its *gibbor*-construct. Thus, we find legislation throughout the halakhic literature, secular legal codes, and unwritten communal norms that regulate clothing and grooming. To understand masculinity is to understand the telling public markers along with the internal qualities and characteristics of the man in question.

Today, we speak of the 'metrosexual' man, someone who is well groomed and well dressed. He is concerned about his clothes being coordinated, his nails trim, and body hair well kept. The metrosexual man may be spoken about derisively, saying something along the lines of, *You are such a girl.* The gender roles that we maintain in society today--both within the Jewish world and in the secular world--are firmly established through the history of dozens of generations that have come before us. Our society's taboos have deep roots, long established in the rabbinic tradition, in the biblical tradition, and from other Western sources.

To be a *gever* is to be a man engaged in strong action. In one reading *klei-gever* could be translated as an 'object that embodies might.' Possessing this might enables the individual to assert his dominance within society. He, therefore, will also do what he must to maintain that dominance. This is the same message of the Kings when they speak of how they display their *g'vurah* during their reign. Rules and regulations further the maintenance of the status quo in society, and protect it from the dangers of imbalance. What one feels internally driven to do--whether that be cross-dressing, trimming one's hair, or to be engaged in anything else that is counter-cultural--is shuned, especially in public. It would be dangerous to the nature of the community. This conclusion, though not surprising, and may strike some as obvious, needs to be

emphasized so we can determine our reaction to it. We then have the choice to embrace the societal norm or reject it as being flawed. We can express our inner identity or continue to hide it publically.

# Conclusion

"Who is a *gibbor*?" asks Ben Zoma in *Pirkei Avot* 4:1. "One who suppresses his evil inclination," is the answer given, for it is "better to be forbearing than mighty, to have self-control than to conquer a city."[172]

There are downsides to possessing *g'vurah*. It can be a dangerous enterprise. One's own strength can be the fuel for the evil inclination. But the positive side is that a truly mighty individual can reject that inclination. True might lies in heading down the correct path when presented with a choice of direction. Risk of transgression is no reason to turn away from one's own mighty inclinations, for their rewards are great. Mighty acts open the door to what our lives can become.

*G'vurah* is a precious commodity, not bestowed on everyone. We see it in our most esteemed biblical leaders, people like Moses and Gideon. *G'vurah* is also a quality found in powerful natural acts, such as the Flood, in which the water overpowers the land. There is something divine about *g'vurah*. God's messenger Gabriel's name indicates might. And, in God's own being, we see *g'vurah*. With a strong hand and an outstretched arm, God is present for Israel. In both the warrior commander and nurturing father, God's might is made known.

We human beings can acquire abilities and attributes given our experiences and age. According to the rabbinic tradition, the five year old learns to read, the 13 year old takes on the *mitzvot*, the 30 year old finds strength (*koach*), in the 50th year we have the ability to offer counsel, and the 80th year is for *g'vurah*.[173] We develop during our lives. And this development offers us different skills and qualities that define ourselves. *G'vurah* is not shared by the inexperienced. Gideon for example is surprised when God's

---

[172] Proverbs 16:32.

[173] M. *Avot* 5:23.

angel addresses him as a *gibbor chayil* before he has done anything deserving of such a title. And Boaz, in his calm resolve, knowing how to act mightily, to do what should be right for Ruth and for himself, builds for himself a position in the community beyond his years.

In an effort to know who we are, and who we can be, we need these models of true might from whom we can learn about our own potential. We are drawn to know the source of this might, and we find it within God and within ourselves. We need to understand that this attribute is one not to be taken lightly; *g'vurah* has its source in the Divine and it is an attribute that is available to anyone who turns his or her awareness to it. A *gever* is just a man, but a *gibbor* is someone who experiences that power. The *gever* has potential, while the *gibbor* is the realization of that potential.

In our day in the United States, we have experienced a revolution in women's liberation. This revolution is far from over. The patriarchal and hierarchical status quo continues to be challenged by those who are classified as 'other' under that system. Yet, there is a group who stands on the inside of this system since birth. This group is made up of men born into the system, but who recognize that its rules as they are taught, emulated, and enforced, are not as they should be. These men are the allies of anyone classified as 'other,' and they now need to break down the artificial barriers that exist in our society. For those of us who have been placed in that inner circle since birth, it is imperative for us to develop a model for how we might stand as strong individuals in absolute equality next to other strong individuals, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender identity. For those of us who identify as male--straight or gay--we need to know what it takes to be strong men who stand in partnership with strong women.

This thesis is my attempt to create a model out of our Jewish tradition of what it means to be a man of might who relates to others. I wish I could claim that the Jewish tradition is brilliant in its prefiguring of this type of man, but anyone who has a cursory knowledge of Jewish literature knows that it constructs a society that is essentially patriarchal and hierarchical. And, the subject of this study--the *gibbor*--fits directly into that structure as a rank among the men within the society.

Still, the qualities of a *gibbor* which we have garnered from a variety of biblical and rabbinic texts, instruct us as to how we can fulfill our potential, by being patient, wise, and willing to do what is necessary when called upon.

When Moses and the Israelites go into battle against the Amalekites, they need God's presence to prevail. Moses's arms upheld indicate that God is indeed with them. Whenever we are confronted by danger, we need *g'vurah* to prevail. The Jewish tradition teaches that God is the source of that might. Looking to God in times of need is a timeless act that can bring comfort and confidence. If we are to realize our own inner might in tenuous circumstances, we just might find it in our own ongoing pursuit of God.

We also need to learn from models like Boaz. To be a *gibbor chayil* is to provide for those in need. His economic success, along with his instinct for charity and justice, characterize him as a mighty man of valor. While family systems are no longer defined by the male bread-winner, a masculine might is certainly derived from being able to offer a considerable contribution to the financial health of one's family and society at large.

Gabriel calls us to acts of justice, but justice as defined as something more than fierce sentencing of the guilty. Gabriel's justice first involves the weighing of the scales, and seeing to it that the judge has all available information to exact the correct decision. We are all part of a complex legal system, and the non-legal choices that we make always

impact others. Gabriel's message is one of patience and dedication to doing the absolute just thing. We should mirror such a powerful model.

The model of might that emerges from all of this also needs to take into consideration the lessons taken from Gideon and from Solomon. Ego can be the mighty man's downfall. A good dose of humility and doubt puts hubris in check. The *gibbor* holds a significant place in any society, but he is also called to recognize the talent, importance, and humanity of everyone else around him. Recognizing the *gibbor*'s limitations keeps us from glorifying him; it ensures that we keep him real.

The Rabbis in their own might teach us that we need to continue to study. David was made to be a mighty man of valor because--as the Rabbis saw it--he was talented with a page of Talmud. One cannot get very far in our world without an education. An aspect of masculine might is the accumulation of wisdom, based on learning and self-reflection.

In constructing the new Jewish man, we must also look to the outer symbols of masculinity. These outer symbols are always a societal construction, and we are now presented with a need to reconstruct them. Rabbeinu Asher ben Yichiel's own version of sumptuary laws maintains established norms in his society. Contemporary society equally has set up rules and regulations for behavior and appearances. We look at someone strangely if they appear to be different from us. Today's mighty man of valor though would know better, would have the ability to look beyond the differences, and only see another individual, created in the image of God.

Modeling the new Jewish man in our world is a process far from complete. Our world is complex, where any and all norms are now called into question. We have explained away our experiences as nothing more than social constructions, though this

presents us with an opportunity and not a burden. We are indeed free to be whoever we are. Yet, we serve many roles throughout our lifetimes. A man is a *gibbor* at times, but he is also a son, a father, a loving partner, among other classifications as well. All of these roles require different skills, different mindsets, and possess unique challenges. Our experiences are varied, and we need to deeply consider the different personalities that we take on at different points in our lives.

The *gibbor* is only one model among a multitude. What we have explored within this thesis is only a selection on all of the available texts and perspectives on masculine might; this thesis is far from a comprehensive study of the subject matter. As we have noted, the Hebrew language uses many words to talk about men. A similar study of *ish*, *eh-nosh*, *zachar*, among others, would certainly yield new insights in this enterprise. Likewise, *g'vurah* is only one aspect to an individual's personality. A look at other qualities, such as *chokhmah* (wisdom), and its gender implications seems a worthy endeavor as well. Biblical and rabbinic literatures have much to teach us about *g'vurah*, but medieval and modern texts could only further nuance our understanding. Studies of masculinity are ongoing, and further work needs to be done in the intersection of Jewish Studies and Men's Studies.

The essential experience of all people is one that moves toward freedom. We all are on a journey to live our lives fully. Might is required as we take up battles against the Amaleks of our own lives. Harnessing our own *g'vurah*, as one attribute among a multitude that we experience in our lifetimes, assures that we will prevail in such battles.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

## 1. PRIMARY WORKS

*Babylonian Talmud*, Schottenstein edition. Brooklyn, NY: Mesora Publications, 1997.

Braude, William and Israel Kapstein, eds. *Pesiqta Rabbati: Discourses for Feasts, Fasts, and Special Sabbaths.* 2 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968.

____. and Israel Kapstein, eds. and trans. *Tanna Debe Eliyyahu: the Lore of the School of Elijah*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981.

____., trans. *The Midrash on Psalms*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.

*Esther Rabbah*, Machon HaMidrash HaMevo'ar edition. Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 2002.

Finkelstein, Louis, ed. *Sifre on Deuteronomy*. New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969.

Freedman, Dr. H. and Maurice Simon, trans. *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*. 2 vols. New York: The Soncino Press, 1983.

Friedlander, Gerald, trans. *Pirke Rabbi Eliezer*. New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1981.

Friedmann, Meir, ed. *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah v'Seder Eliyahu Zuta/Tanna D'bei Eliyahu*. Jerusalem: Bregman et V'ahrman, 1960.

Hager, Michael., ed. *Massekhtot Z'eirot*. New York: Hotzeit Blokh, 1929.

Horovitz, Hyman S., ed. *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael*. Jerusalem: Wehrmann Books, 1970.

____., Hayim S., ed. *Sifrei D'bei Rav: Sifrei al Sefer Bamidbar v'Sifrei Zuta*. Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1966.

Israelstam, J. and Judah J. Slotki, trans. *Midrash Rabbah: Leviticus*. New York: The Soncino Press, 1983.

Kravitz, Leonard and Kerry M. Olitzky, eds. and trans. *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics*. New York: UAHC Press, 1993.

Lauterbach, trans. *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976.

Lehrman, S.M., trans. *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus*. New York: The Soncino Press, 1983.

Leiberman, Saul, ed. *Tosefta Ki-Fshutah: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta*. New York: Louis Rabinowitz Research Institute in Rabbinics at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1955.

*Midrash Rabbah ha-Mevo'ar*. Jerusalem: Mekhon ha-Midrash ha-mevo'ar, 1983-1990.

*Midrash Shocher Tov/Midrash T'hillim*. Jerusalem, 1959.

*Midrash Tanchuma*, Hotzeit-Choreb edition. Germany, 1923.

Nelson, W. David, ed. and trans., *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 2006.

Neusner, Jacob, trans. *Pesiqta deRab Kahana: An Analytic Translation*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987.

____., trans. *Ruth Rabbah: An Analytic Translation*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989.

____., trans. *The Tosefta*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002.

Slotki, Judah J., trans. *Midrash Rabbah: Numbers*. 2 vols. New York: The Soncino Press, 1983.

Visotsky, Burton L., trans. *The Midrash on Proverbs*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

## 2. SECONDARY WORKS

Botterweck, G. Johannes and Helmer Ringgren, eds. *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1975.

Buber, Martin. *Eclipse of God*. New York: Harper Torchbook, 1957.

Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966.

Friedan, Betty. "Twenty Years After the Feminine Mystique." In *The New York Times*, February 27, 1983. http://www.times.com/books/99/05/09/specials/friedan-20.html (accessed January 25, 2010).

Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. *Reading the Women of the Bible*. New York: Schocken Books, 2002.

Kates, Judith A. and Gail Twersky Reimer, eds. *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1994.

Lorber, Judith. "The Social Construction of Gender." In *The Inequality Reader*, edited by David B. Grusky and Szonja Szelenyi. Boulder CO: Westview Press, 2007.

Muzzarelli, Maria Giuseppina. "Reconciling the Privilege of a Few with the Common Good: Sumptuary Laws in Medieval and Early Modern Europe." *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 39:3 (Fall 2009).

Pearson, Carol S. *The Hero Within: Six Archetypes We Live By*. New York: HarperOne, 1998.

Person, Hara E., Carolyn Bricklin, Owen Gottlieb, and Melissa Zalkin Stollman, eds. *The Gender Gap: a Congregational Guide for Beginning the Conversation about Men's Invovlement in Synagogue Life*. New York: URJ Press, 2008.

Steinbeck, John. *Of Mice and Men*. New York: Penguin, 1965.

U.S. Department of Education. Fast Facts, http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=51(accessed January 25, 2010).