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**"I am Adonai your God"**  
**Beth Janus**

**Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
Requirements for Ordination**

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

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Advisor: Dr. Michael Chernick**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at the phrase "I am Adonai your God" and studies the commentaries on it throughout Jewish history.

There is an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. The first chapter examines certain *midrashim* from the *Mekhilta of R. Ishmael* and the *Mekhilta of R. Shimon bar Yohai*. The second chapter examines the Babylonian Talmud and excerpts from *Exodus Rabbah*. The third chapter examines the medieval period. It looks at Maimonides' listing of the first commandment, Nachmanides' commentary on Maimonides, Nachmanides' commentary on Exodus 20:2, and Meiri's commentary on *Horayot* 8a. The last chapter examines the Hasidic period. It looks at *Kedushat Levi*, *Zera Kodesh*, and *Sefat Emet*.

The contention of this thesis is that this phrase will be interpreted in a different way depending upon the historical and cultural context of the time when it was written. The goal was to look at certain time periods and see examples of how this phrase was interpreted, and to see if there were any patterns in that.

As this is a textual thesis, primary sources were the main resources used. My own commentary was provided for each text. Secondary material was used for historical and cultural background.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Ten Commandments remains as one of the most famous passages in the Bible. It is the moment of Revelation; the moment when the Jewish people as one community encountered God and became the Jewish nation. Revelation begins the covenanted relationship between God and the Jewish people.

The first commandment according to Jewish tradition is "I am Adonai your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2). This verse has inspired Jewish commentators for centuries to elaborate on its meaning. Specifically the first phrase, "I am Adonai your God" has been interpreted in countless ways.

This thesis will study the commentators throughout the ages who have examined these words. This work is not exhaustive; there are far too many commentaries for this to be possible in a thesis. Instead I have taken samples from different times in Jewish history that exemplify that period.

Jews look at these three words (in Hebrew) with different lenses depending upon the historical and cultural context where they are living. Therefore the texts will be studied in light of those particular realities.

This work will specifically study *tannaitic*, *amoraic*, medieval, and Hasidic texts. Within these historical time periods, texts were chosen that seemed to represent a typical interpretation of the period. Because many Jewish texts build on other existing texts,

passages that were repetitive were not chosen. For the most part, major works from each period were chosen, as opposed to lesser-known texts.

The translations for the Biblical texts are taken from the *New Jewish Publication Society* translation. If a different translation made more sense in context, then I used my own. Within the translation if more of the Biblical verse was needed in order to understand the passage, then I added the rest for the sake of clarity. In those cases I used round parentheses to show that this was not from the original commentary. When words were needed in order to make the English translation understood, I added my own words using square parentheses.

Although each of these commentators would argue that God has no gender, in their works they referred to God in the masculine form. In keeping with the theology that God has no gender and in light of feminist methodology, I have translated "He" in relation to God as "God" or "Adonai."

## Chapter 1

### Tannaitic Material: Mekhilta and Mekhilta of R. Shimon bar Yohai

#### INTRODUCTION

Both the *Mekhilta of R. Ishmael* and the *Mekhilta of R. Shimon bar Yohai* are early *tannaitic* collections of *midrash* on the book of Exodus. These works are called *halakhic midrashim*. This means that one of their primary purposes is to derive *halakhah* from biblical text. However, both works are also exegetical. They contain *midrash* on both the legal sections of Exodus, as well as the narrative sections. So while they are *halakhic*, they are also *aggadic*.

Neither collection has *midrashim* for the entire book of Exodus. The *Mekhilta of R. Ishmael* begins with Exodus 12, and does not go through the entirety of the rest of Exodus. The *Mekhilta of R. Shimon bar Yohai* begins with Exodus 3:2. It continues with various pieces throughout the remainder of the book. It is unclear whether either *Mekhilta* used to contain commentary on the whole book of Exodus and the parts that are available today are simply the only ones that survived, or if the collections were never full commentaries.

While the dating of either text is difficult, *Mekhilta of R. Ishmael* seems to be the older text. Although B.Z. Wacholder dates it as late as the eighth century<sup>1</sup>, most scholars date it

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<sup>1</sup> Strack, H.L. and Gunter Stemberger. *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*. Trans. Markus Bockmuehl. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996, p. 255.

much earlier. H.L.Strack and Gunter Stemberger date it as early as the end of the third century.<sup>2</sup>

The *Mekhilta of R. Ishmael* was so named because the beginning of the collection quotes R. Ishmael. In addition, most of the *baraitot* are attributed to the school of Ishmael. Ishmael himself was a third generation *tanna*. He lived from approximately 80 – 110 CE. D. Hoffman divided these *midrashim* into the school of Ishmael and the school of Akiba. This *Mekhilta* was, of course, from the school of Ishmael, and the *Mekhilta of R. Shimon bar Yohai* from the school of Akiba. This distinction comes from the names of the rabbis that are mentioned in each collection, as well as method and terminology found in each work.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars, such as C. Albeck dispute this distinction, and argue rather, that the differences may be due to the redactors rather than the older schools of thought.

The *Mekhilta of R. Shimon bar Yohai* was likewise named because the mention of Shimon bar Yohai in its opening sentence. Some scholars attribute this collection to Shimon bar Yohai, because many of the anonymous sentences in the *Mekhilta* follow Shimon's other teachings.<sup>4</sup> However, many of those anonymous passages are quoted in the Talmuds and attributed to R. Hezekiah, which is why others assume he is the redactor.<sup>5</sup> Yet others, as mentioned before, attribute this work to the school of Akiba.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 247.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

While dating again is difficult, scholars date this *Mekhilta's* final redaction from the fourth to the fifth century.

Since the majority of scholars believe that both *Mekhiltas* were redacted in the third to fifth century in *Eretz Yisrael*, this will be the working assumption of this paper. Certainly almost all scholars consider these works *tannaitic*. This is not because they were redacted in the *tannaitic* period, but because the majority of the material was probably composed in the *tannaitic* period. The language is similar to *Mishnaic* Hebrew, and the rabbis cited are either *tannaim* or first-generation *amoraim*<sup>6</sup>.

Romans were ruling the land of Israel during this time period. In 313, Christianity became the dominant religion of the Empire. This was a major change in the culture where Jews were living. While different pieces of each *Mekhilta* were written at different periods of time, the redaction surely took place under a Christian Empire. And while pagan emperors were often oppressive, in general Christian emperors were less tolerant of foreign peoples, which included the Jews.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the majority of the writing of the individual *midrashim* took place when the Jews were living under a pagan empire. All of this is the general backdrop to the writing and redaction of the *Mekhiltas*.

As an attempt to examine the texts in chronological order, *Mekhilta of R. Ishmael* will be examined first, followed by *Mekhilta of R. Shimon bar Yohai*. The individual *midrashim*

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 250.

<sup>7</sup> Rabello, Alfredo Mordechai. "Roman Emperors." In *Encyclopædia Judaica*. Volume 14. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1974, p. 230.

in both *Mekhiltas* will be translated, followed by a commentary to better put the *midrashim* in historical and theological context.

**MEKHILTA OF R. ISHMAEL**  
**Bahodesh 5 Yitro (Exodus 20:2)**

**TEXT:**

"I am Adonai Your God." Why was it said [this way]? For the following reason: God was revealed on the sea as a mighty person making war, as it is written, "Adonai is a man of war" (Exodus 15:3). God was revealed on Mt. Sinai as an old man full of compassion, as it is written, "They saw the God of Israel..." (Ex. 24:10). And when they were redeemed what did God say? "Like the very sky for purity" (Ex. 24:10). And it says, "As I looked thrones were placed (and the Ancient of Days took the seat)" (Daniel 7:9). It continues, "A river of fire streamed forth before God. (Thousands upon thousands served God.)" The reason for this is so the nations of the world will not have a chance to say that there are two dominions. Rather "I am Adonai Your God." I am in Egypt. I am at the sea. I am at Sinai. I am of the past. I will be in the future to come. I am in this world and in the world to come. As it is said, "See now that I, even I, am God" (Deut. 32:39). And "Until you grow old I will be the same" (Isaiah 46:4). And, "Thus says Adonai King of Israel their Redeemer, the Lord of Hosts: I am the first and I am the last" (Isaiah 44:6). And "Who has wrought and achieved this? God who announced the generations from the start - I am Adonai who was first and will be with the last as well" (Isaiah 41:4).

## COMMENTARY:

The Gnostics were a sect of pagans that flourished during the first and second centuries. Their theology included the belief in two gods. One was the god of goodness and light, while the other was a god of evil and darkness. The God of Israel was the god of evil. While they used the Hebrew Bible as part of their own sacred literature, they inverted many of its stories. Because Yahweh was the god of evil, they rejected all of the laws from the Bible. The Gnostics believed that Yahweh was deceiving people into believing that laws were good and just. Besides the gods of good and evil, the Gnostics believed that there were many angels and demons associated with each god.<sup>8</sup>

This *midrash* could be a polemic against the Gnostics, or another sect of pagans. This *midrash* was an answer to the claims that there was more than one god ruling over the earth. 'I am Adonai Your God' is the prooftext used. While it may appear that there are many gods, each fulfilling a different purpose, it is truly only Adonai. Adonai plays many roles, but is the same God in all those different situations.

In particular the passage from Daniel was chosen because it relates to all the nations of the world. Daniel has a vision. In it God is omnipotent and is served by thousands. The creature that does not follow God is destroyed (7:11), but the one that does, is presented with power and glory (7:14). In this vision, God is all-powerful over all nations, not just Israel. This also denies the claim that Adonai may be a god, but only the god of the Jews.

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<sup>8</sup> Flusser, David. "Gnosticism." In *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Volume 7. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1974, p. 637.

This *Mekhilta* passage may have also been answering the Jews who doubted the power of Adonai. When reading the Bible, as the Biblical quotes here show, God takes on so many different roles, that some Jews may have found it difficult to believe that this was all the same god. The *midrash* shows that the purpose of the different roles of God is that for different circumstances, God needs to take on different characteristics. For example, when God is saving the Jews from Egypt, God needed to be a warrior, fighting the Pharaoh and his troops. But when God was "sitting" with the elders, God was compassionate, as an old man. There, God is about to give the Torah, so the image of a "wise old man" is more appropriate than a "man of war." But to make sure that the Jews understood this, God explains according to our *midrash*, "I am Adonai Your God:" I am consistently the same God in different manifestations.

TEXT<sup>9</sup>:

R. Natan says: from here comes an answer for the heretics, who say that there are two dominions. When God stood and said, "I am Adonai your God," who stood and protested against God? If you say that this event took place in secret [so that nobody had the opportunity to come and protest], was it not already said, "I have not spoken in secret (in a place of the land of darkness)" (Isaiah 45:19). To these [the stock of Jacob, i.e., believing Jews] I give this [message], rather "I did not say" to them "Seek me out in a wasteland" (Isaiah 45:19). That is, I did not give it without reward, Scripture says, "I am God who speaks righteousness and tells it straight" (Isaiah 45:19).

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## COMMENTARY:

This is really part of the last *midrash*. It is simply R. Natan's addition to the question of what to say to the heretics. Since he refers specifically to the claim of two dominions, he is probably referring to the Gnostics. The passages from Isaiah seem also to be refuting pagan claims that there is more than one god. In Isaiah 45:7 it says, "I form light and create darkness. I make weal and create woe - I Adonai do all these things." This is proving that the Jewish God has the power to do all these things, and that it is not necessary to have multiple gods, in order for these things to happen.

The quotes from Isaiah 45 were probably also chosen purposely to console the Jews. In other parts of the chapter, Isaiah is comforting Israel. At the time that this *midrash* was written, the Second Temple had been destroyed, other nations were prospering, and Israel was suffering greatly. Isaiah reassures Israel that it is she who will triumph in the end. This *midrash*, Attributed to R. Natan, was composed in the century after the destruction of the Second Temple. The Jews were grappling with the meaning of the destruction. How could their god have allowed the destruction to take place? Perhaps another, more powerful god destroyed their Temple? R. Natan lived during and after the Hadrianic persecution. The Jews were wondering about the omnipotence of their god, and whether that god told the truth. This *midrash* is Natan's response: Adonai is righteous, tells the truth, will give the faithful of Israel their reward, and is all-powerful. In the words of Isaiah, "Only through Adonai can I find victory and might. When people trust in God, all

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<sup>9</sup> This translation is based on *Mechilta D'Rabbi Ismael*. Edited by H.S. Horovitz and I.A. Rabin. Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1970, p. 220, n. 9.

their adversaries are put to shame. It is through Adonai that all the offspring of Israel have vindication and glory" (45:24,25).

#### TEXT:

Another interpretation of "I am Adonai your God." When God stood and said, "I am Adonai your God," the land trembled, as it is written, "O Adonai, when You came forth from Seir, advanced from the country of Edom, the earth trembled..." (Judges 5:4) and it says, "The mountains quaked before God" (Judges 5:5). And it says, "The voice of God is power, the voice of God is majesty... while in God's Temple, all say Glory" (Psalms 29:4,9). And even their houses were filled with the glory of the Shekinah. At that time all the kings of the world entered the place of Balaam the evil one. They said to him, "Perhaps a flood is coming to the world." He said to them, "God already swore that God would not bring a flood, as it is written, 'For this to Me is like the waters of Noah, as I swore that the waters of Noah nevermore would flood the earth'" (Isaiah 54:9). They said to him, "Perhaps a flood of water God will not bring, but rather a flood a fire." He said to them, "Not a flood of water nor a flood of fire God brings, rather God wants to give Torah to God's people, as it is written, 'God gives strength unto God's people' (Psalms 29:11). And once they heard this thing from his mouth, all of them turned and left, each person to his/her place.

Therefore, the nations of the world were asked about Torah, in order that they would not have a chance to say something against the Shekinah, namely, "If we were asked we would have taken it." Behold, they were asked and they did not take it upon themselves.

As it is written, "He [Moses] said: Adonai came from Sinai. (God shone upon them from Seir. God appeared from Mt. Paran, and approached from Ribebboth-kodesh)" (Deuteronomy 33:2). God appeared to the people of Esau the evil and said to them, "Will you accept the Torah?" They said to God, "What is written in it?" God said to them, "Do not kill." They said to God, "That is the inheritance that we inherited from our father, as it is written, 'By the sword you will live'" (Genesis 27:40). God appeared to the people of Ammon and Moav and said to them, "Will you accept the Torah?" They said, "What is written in it?" God said to them, "Do not commit adultery." They said to God, "All of us commit adultery, as it is written, 'Thus the two daughters of Lot came to be with child by their father' (Genesis 19:36). So how could it be accepted?" God appeared to the people of Ishmael and said to them, "Will you accept the Torah?" They said to God, "What is written in it?" God said, "Do not steal." They said to God, "This is the blessing that our father blessed us with, as it is written, 'He shall be a wild ass of a man' (Genesis 16:12). And it is written, 'For in truth I was kidnapped...'" (Genesis 40:15). And when God came to Israel, "Lightening flashing at them from God's right" (Deuteronomy 33:2) all of them opened their mouths and said, "All that God said we will do and listen to." And thus God said, "When God stands, God makes the earth quake. When God glances, God makes nations tremble" (Habakkuk 3:6).

#### COMMENTARY:

Both these *midrashim* are dealing with the chosenness of Israel. Not only did God choose the people of Israel, but Israel chose Adonai. In the first *midrash*, the nations all witnessed the giving of Torah. The "pomp and circumstance" that accompanied the

giving, may have occurred so that the other nations could know what was going on. This was a public ceremony. It became so obvious as to what was going on, that even Balaam, the evil one, knew of God's intent. As an aside, the *midrash* also validates the word of God. The situation may look like a flood is about to come, but this would be impossible, because God promised never to bring another flood. The aside teaches that God's word is truth.

The line "And even their houses were filled with the glory of the Shekinah" again says that even the gentiles were touched by God's power. Specifically they were affected by Revelation. Even though, they may not accept Adonai as their god, Adonai is so majestic that they cannot help but to be influenced.

The second *midrash* is mocking the peoples of the world. They could have had this powerful covenant with Adonai, but they could not give up their evil ways in order to make the covenant. This also shows the moral superiority of Israel. The other nations each had their own sin that they were known for and that was integral to their identity. Israel is not attached to any sin, and could therefore accept the Torah and all its laws. It was not simply by chance that Israel was chosen. If that were the case, then other peoples could claim that Israel was no better than other nations, she just happened to be picked. Instead Israel was chosen, because she was greater than they.

Again the Jews are not the dominant power during this time period. They are seeing other nations prosper. The spiritual leaders of the Jewish people especially have to justify why

being a part of Israel is superior to being a part of the other nations that appear to be doing better. Moral superiority is one argument.

These are both based on Deuteronomy 33:2 that says that God came from different places before God came to Sinai.

TEXT:

Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said: If the people of Noah were unable to keep the seven mitzvot that they took upon themselves, then certainly they would be unable to keep all the mitzvot of the Torah. This is like a parable of a king who appointed two guardians - one guarded the treasury of straw and one guarded the treasury of silver and gold. The one that guarded the straw was suspected - and he complained that he did not get to guard the treasury of silver and gold. The one who guarded the silver and gold said to him, "Good-for-nothing! In the case of the straw you denied responsibility, with silver and gold, all the more so." Is this not an *a fortiori* argument? With the seven mitzvot that the people of Noah were commanded, they were not able to stand by them, all the more so, (they would not be able to stand by) all the mitzvot of the Torah. And for what reason was Torah not given in the land of Israel? So the nations of the world could not say, "If Torah had been given in our land, we would have accepted it."

Another interpretation - in order not to stir up fights between the tribes. One could not say, "In my land, Torah was given." And another, "In my land, Torah was given."

Therefore Torah was given in the desert, in a place without ownership. With three things

was Torah given, with the desert, with fire, and with water, to say to you, these things were free for all the beings of the world. So too the words of the Torah are free for all the beings of the world.

#### COMMENTARY:

While it seems that this could be directed at any other nation besides Israel, this probably was a direct polemic against the Christians. Shimon ben Elazar lived in Tiberias during the second century. The "people of Noah" were people that believed in the power of Adonai, which is why they would agree to follow some of Adonai's laws. But they did not agree to the entire Torah and its laws. This *midrash* is again putting the Jews above other peoples and arguing for its moral superiority. The Jews are in charge of the "silver and gold" while the non-Jews are in charge of the "straw." Even this is too much responsibility for the non-Jews, according to this *midrash*.

This *midrash* also continues the theme that Torah had been available to all peoples. This *midrash* furthers that earlier idea by saying that Torah is still available to all peoples. It invokes the halakhic concept of "ownerless property," for the place in which Torah was given because Torah is ownerless, it is obtainable. With the proselytizing that the early Christians were doing at this time, perhaps this *midrash* is a form of Jewish proselytizing. It certainly invokes the idea that Israel is more religiously capable, more loyal to God, than other peoples.

**MEKHLITA OF R. SHIMON BAR YOHAI**  
**Yitro 20:2**

**TEXT:**

"I am Adonai your God." I am God and whoever has the power, let him come and object.

R. Shimon remarks about the matter of the destruction of the world as it is said, "I will blot out all that I have created" (Genesis 7:4). I am God and whoever has the power, let him come and object. Similarly you say, "I have not spoken in secret in a place of the land of darkness... I am God that speaks righteousness (and tells it straight)" (Isaiah 45:19). I am God and whoever has the power, let him come and object.

**COMMENTARY:**

Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai lived during the middle of the second century of the Common Era. He therefore lived through the Hadrianic persecutions. He also was one of the surviving students of Akiva and lived through his martyrdom. Shimon had animosity towards the Romans, and gentiles in general, because of these negative experiences. He supposedly said, "Slay the best of the gentiles" (*Mekhilta*, B'shallach 2).

This particular *midrash* is a polemic against the pagan notion that there is more than one god. Shimon is proving monotheism. If there were another god, then that god would have spoken out against Adonai. But because no other gods came forward to object to anything that Adonai had done, then there must not be any other gods. In particular when God destroys the entire world in the flood story, no one objects to it. If there were other gods

with any amount of power, then surely they would have spoken out against Adonai's plan to destroy their world.

The Isaiah piece that is quoted is taken from the chapter that is speaking of the singularity of God. Earlier in the chapter it says that God is the one that "forms light and creates darkness," "makes weal and creates woe" (45:7). This entire section is refuting other nations, who claim that they have different gods. God says that the other nations will eventually admit to there being only one god. Egypt, Nubia, and the Sabaites will in the future "reverently address you: Only among you is God. There is no other god at all" (45:14). In particular the quote that is used is also used as proof that no other gods came and objected to Adonai's power. Adonai has always spoken in public. Lest someone claim that other gods did not speak up, because they did not know that Adonai had spoken, this passage makes it clear that Adonai speaks in public, so that all can hear. This is very similar to the *midrash* attributed to R. Natan in the *Mekhilta of R. Ishmael*.

This *midrash* is one of hope, written during a time when there was much reason to despair. The Jewish people are only living approximately one hundred years after the destruction of the Temple. Additionally, they are now living after their failed attempt to overthrow the repressive government of Hadrian. The Jews are struggling with the meaning of all of this destruction and death. Shimon himself is probably struggling with the death of his beloved teacher, Akiva. Shimon attempts to resolve these questions by alluding to a Messianic time when the world will admit to the truth of the Jewish belief. He also emphasizes God's power. It probably seemed to the Jews of that time that God

did not have much power to protect them. Certainly the Jews did not have power. This *midrash* reassures the Jews both that God does have power, and that they will too eventually.

#### TEXT:

Another interpretation of "I am Adonai your God." I am God over all the creatures of the world. You might have thought that you were similar to them, [therefore] Scripture says, "your God." It is possible I would be for you alone, [therefore] Scripture says, "I am Adonai." I am [also] the God over the entire world. How could this be possible [that I am both your God and the God of the entire world]? I am the God of all the creatures of the world, but My name is connected specifically to you.

Similar to the matter, you say, "Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Sovereign Lord, God of Israel" (Exodus 34:23). I am Lord over all the creatures of the world. You might have thought that you are similar to them, [therefore] scripture says, "God of Israel." You might think I am for yourself alone, [therefore] scripture says, "Sovereign Lord, God of Israel." How could this be possible? I am Lord over all the creatures of the world, but My name is connected specifically to you.

Similar to the matter you say, "Thus spoke the Lord of Hosts, God of Israel... Behold I am Adonai, God of all flesh," (Jeremiah 32:15, 27) I am the God of all the creatures of the world. You might have thought that you are similar to them, [therefore] Scripture says "God of Israel." It is possible to only think I am for you alone, so Scripture says, "I am

Adonai, God of all flesh." How could this be possible? I am the God of all the creatures of the world, but My name is connected specifically to you?

#### COMMENTARY:

All of these *midrashim* are struggling with the notion that God is both God of the world and God of the Jewish people. Judaism in general balances the beliefs of universalism and particularism. Within the Bible there is disdain for the other nations, but there is also the belief that Israel was put on the earth to guide other nations and lead them to salvation.<sup>10</sup> There is a major part of Judaism that is inwardly focused. It is concerned with what Jews do and how Jews believe. But there is another part of Judaism that looks outward and is concerned with other nations' belief and moral systems are. During this time, the "other nations" are predominantly pagans.

Paganism has many gods. Each group may have a different god or gods that it believes in. One group does not necessarily pay attention to another group's god. They may even believe that a specific god only has sovereignty over a particular people or location. Judaism posited that Adonai was the most powerful god. Later there was the belief that Adonai was everyone's supreme deity. This later belief, of course, runs counter to paganism.

These *midrashim* reflect that tension between particularism and universalism. Does Judaism or the Jewish god have anything to do with other peoples? If Adonai is

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<sup>10</sup> This idea is discussed in The Anchor Bible Dictionary, edited by David Freedman, Doubleday, New York, Volume 4, p. 1037.

omnipotent, then Adonai has power over everyone, not just the Jews. But the Jews are chosen, and are the only people to receive Torah.

Besides the pagans, this time period also includes the small, but growing sect of Christians. This makes the questions more difficult, because the Christians agree that there is only one god. From the Jewish perspective, they are not God's chosen, but they do recognize God. Ultimately all of these *midrashim* end with the same question of, "How could this be possible?" Is Adonai everybody's god? Or is Adonai only the chosen people's god? The answer is both. Adonai is the god of the entire world, but the Jews do have a special relationship to the god of the entire world. This is represented by the name of the Jewish people itself: Israel, which contains the name of God. This symbolizes that unique relationship. In terms of gentile Christian claims to being the "true Israel" or Israel's replacement, this *midrash* reinforces God's special relationship to Jewry.

#### TEXT:

Another interpretation of "I am Adonai your God." Why does the text say "your God?" God said, "If you do My will, behold I am Adonai (your God) as it is written, 'Adonai Adonai mighty and merciful' (Exodus 34:6). If I am not your God [because you do not accept My will, then], I will punish you." The text will only say "your God [in that case]," for "your God" is the terminology used for a judge.

#### COMMENTARY:

This *midrash* is responding to the seemingly redundant double naming of God at the beginning of the first commandment. The reason for the double naming that is given in

this *midrash* is that Adonai will always exist. It is up to the Jewish people whether they will choose to have Adonai be their god. This means that they can choose whether God will be merciful to them, or whether God will act as judge and will inflict punishment on them.

The proof text from Torah appears in the giving of the second set of Ten Commandments. The people had sinned through making the Golden Calf. Moses responded in anger, by smashing the first set of Ten Commandments. God is now giving the people (and Moses) a second chance. God is merciful, which is shown by God's giving of a second set of commandments, but God is also mighty. The passage goes on to say that God does not pardon all sins. In fact certain sinners will be punished for four generations (Exodus 34:7).

This was again written at a time when the Jews were trying to make sense of the destruction of the Temple and the Hadrianic persecutions. They were trying to figure out why God was being unmerciful. The belief system reflected in the *midrash* makes sense of the events. It is the Jews who have sinned, which is why God must act as judge and punish them. It is, therefore, up to the Jews to correct what has been happening. If the Jews follow in God's ways, then God can stop being "mighty" and again act with "mercy."

Although this particular *midrash* was not attributed to Shimon bar Yohai, traditionally the entire collection is attributed to him. This *midrash* would conform to Shimon's personal

theology as reflected elsewhere. He was a strong believer in mitzvot. He said in *Shabbat* 118b that if Israel kept just two Shabbats, then they would be redeemed. The power of salvation, like the relationship between God and the Jewish people, is up to the Jewish people. Jews control their own destiny by their actions and by their adherence to the mitzvot. This must have been an empowering belief in an age when Jews felt powerless in the midst of the Roman Empire.

The two attributes of judgement and mercy that are found within God are reflected in two different names of God. Traditionally, the name "Adonai" was thought to represent God's mercy and "Elohim" represented God's judgement. This *midrash* uses both names to represent those traits. God will be "Adonai" when the Jews follow God's will. God will be "Elohim" when the Jews do not.

#### TEXT:

Another interpretation of "I am Adonai your God." It teaches that God brought God's Torah to all the nations of the world, and they did not accept it from God. God went back to Israel and said, "'I am Adonai your God that took you out from the land of Egypt.' Even if I only had over you the fact that I took you from the land of Egypt, it would be sufficient [for you to accept Me and My Torah]. 'From the house of slavery.' Even if I only had over you the fact that I redeemed you from the house of slavery, it would be enough [for you to accept Me and My Torah]."

## COMMENTARY:

The beginning of this *midrash* again grapples with chosenness. It is theologically problematic for one people to have a special relationship with the god of the entire world. Non-Jews, especially Christians have had a problem with this, but perhaps Jews also had a problem with this concept. This *midrash* answers this by giving all the nations the chance to have that relationship with God. God came to all the nations of the world, but they each rejected God. It is the nations' fault that they did not choose God.

This also paints a picture of God that is somewhat tragic. God is not portrayed here as powerful. God has offered Torah, and has been rejected over and over. In what seems like desperation, God returns to Israel. God does not offer Torah to Israel at this point. Instead God places on the Jewish people a sense of obligation for the good God has done for them. They should accept the Torah, not because a covenant with God would be spiritually fulfilling or would create a better future, but because of acts that God already performed. God is asking for a "payback," because no one else will accept God.

Typically it is thought that the Jews have a lasting covenant with God. If they uphold the covenant, then God will be their God. But this *midrash* counters that the Jews have an obligation to God forever, even if God does not do another deed for the Jews. Taking them out of slavery and redeeming them was sufficient enough for the Jews to be indebted to God forever. The Jews' special relationship stems from this one great act from God.

Perhaps this is to implore Jews not to leave Judaism. It may seem as if God is not doing anything for the Jews currently, but they need to remember back to when God did. The Jews in the early centuries of the Common Era were not redeemed from their oppressors. However God had redeemed them from their Egyptian oppressors before. This is a reminder to the Jews that they are obligated to their god.

## CONCLUSION

These tannaitic *midrashim* deal with a variety of themes. The time period that they cover is over several hundred years. During this time the Jews confronted the destruction of the Temple, which was the central sacred place of the religion and, for them, the House of God. The Jews also confronted the Hadrianic persecutions and the loss of the Bar Kochba Revolt against Roman rule in 135 CE.

The changes that were taking place in this area of the world at this time were monumental. It was a generally tumultuous time. Some leaders of the local and broader government were more merciful and some less. It was ever changing, and the Jewish community was vulnerable to each new political leader that arose. One way that the Jews of this time handled such oppression and flux was through text, and specifically through *midrash*.

Many of these *midrashim* address the non-Jewish world around them. There are *midrashim* here, which are geared towards pagans, Gnostic pagans, and Christians.

Whether these groups ever read these *midrashim* or not, they were important for the Jewish audiences to whom they were directed. Many of the rabbis were defending the Jewish belief system against these other systems. Especially for the Jews that only saw oppression in being Jewish, and saw the other sects apparently succeeding, these *midrashim* reassure the Jews that their system is valid and correct.

Also because of the great turmoil, many of these *midrashim* were written as “comfort *midrashim*.” They are full of hope that the Jews will one day again be successful and powerful. In a future messianic time, all the peoples of the earth will also come to worship the Jews’ one true god. There is also the positive message that Adonai does have power, and that Adonai does tell the truth. The scriptures say that the Jews will prosper, though they were not prospering during this time. Many Jews therefore believed that God was a liar. These *midrashim* attempt to confront this fear.

Another positive and reassuring message for the Jews of that time was that the Jews may be less powerful, but they are morally superior to the non-Jews around them. They are the only ones that are capable of having this type of relationship with God. The Jews are the chosen ones, and have a unique tie with the god of the world.

On the other hand the problematic aspects of being chosen are also addressed. The rabbis grapple with the theological difficulty with the chosenness concept. They wonder how the god of the entire world can pick one people and have a special covenanted

relationship with just that people alone. Within this context they wrestle with both the particularism and universalism inherent in Judaism.

When the Temple was destroyed a religious revolution had to take place in order for Judaism to continue. Besides the practical questions of how to practice Judaism once the sacrificial system was annihilated, theologically Judaism had to change as well. These *midrashim* explore the evolving nature of the relationship with God. God can be different things to the Jews depending on the circumstances. Although the examples given are biblical, the implication is that the relationship with God in the present will also change according to the new situation. The idea that what the relationship will look like is in the hands of the Jewish people is also a theological idea that begins to take root at this time.

Finally a theological idea that is formulated here is that the relationship with God is one of obligation. God has done acts of redemption for the Jewish people in the past, namely in the form of the exodus from Egypt, and therefore the Jewish people are forever indebted. No matter what God is currently doing for the Jews, the Jews are obliged to serve. This acts as a form of defense for eternal covenanted responsibility.

## Chapter 2

### Amoraic Material: Babylonian Talmud and Exodus Rabbah

#### INTRODUCTION

The next set of material is generally considered *amoraic*, and therefore is presented in this chapter following the *tannaitic* material. However, some of the rabbis quoted in these “*amoraic* works” are *tannaim*. Any division of this material into a time period is problematic, but the Talmudic material and the *Exodus Rabbah* *midrashim* will be considered after the *tannaitic* material due to the assumed final redaction of the material.

The dating of the Babylonian Talmud is complicated and disputed. There is no clear beginning or ending to what is now called the Talmud. Traditionally the material in the Talmud was thought to have been written from the beginning of the third century to the end of the fifth century. It is possible therefore, that the writing of the *Mekhiltas* overlap somewhat. The Talmud contains *amoraic* material, although they often quote *tannaim*.

The final redaction may have taken place at one time, as Jacob Neusner argues.<sup>11</sup> Neusner claims that the Talmud is too uniform and consistent to have been edited at different times or by different people. On the other hand, scholars have noticed that five of the tractates in particular differ in style and grammar from the rest. This was noted even by the *Tosafists*. Because of this, scholars like J. Epstein argue that the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud took place by many people at different times.<sup>12</sup> Others believe that

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<sup>11</sup> Strack, H.L. and Gunter Stemberger. *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*. Trans. Markus Bockmuehl. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996, p. 194.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

there was never a final redaction of the Talmud. Instead the Talmud kept expanding and expanding with each new generation. Finally, the writing simply stopped.

Traditionally it is believed that Rav Ashi, who died in 427, and Ravina, who died in 499, began the redaction of the Talmud. In the century after their deaths, the redaction continued and was completed.

While the Babylonian Talmud was written in Babylonia, there was open communication and travel between that community and the Jewish community in Palestine. Therefore there are rabbis quoted in the Babylonian Talmud that are from Palestine. The culture of Babylonia was very different from that of Palestine. The Jews of Palestine were living under pagan and then Christian rule. The Jews of Babylonia were always living under pagan rule.

There were many different academies in Babylonia during the time of the Talmud. Different academies would rise and fall according to the scholar of the time, or due to political situations. For example, when the city of Nehardea was destroyed, the academy collapsed as well.

Until the middle of the fifth century, the Jews enjoyed a relatively peaceful time in Babylonia. They were allowed a fair amount of independence and flourished academically. In 440 however, Jezdijird III assumed power, and towards the end of his reign in 456 began to persecute the Jews. He instituted bans on Jewish practice including

the prohibition of Shabbat observance. When his son Firuz took over in 457, he was more oppressive than his father. During this time Jews were imprisoned and killed. There was also forced conversion to the Persian religion. After Firuz's reign, Jews were once again allowed to open academies. Probably due to this insecurity of the future caused by this persecution, the Jews began to redact the Babylonian Talmud.<sup>13</sup>

The dating of *Exodus Rabbah* is even more complicated. Many scholars divide the work into two parts. The *midrashim* in this paper will come solely from the latter half (*Exodus Rabbah* II), which covers Exodus 12-40. Because of the language and the use of the Palestinian Talmud, but not the Babylonian Talmud, M. D. Herr dates the latter half older than the first half. However, he does not give it a precise date.<sup>14</sup>

*Exodus Rabbah* II contains homiletical *midrashim*, particularly of the *Yelammedenu-Tanhuma* genre. The *midrashim* typically end with references to redemption.<sup>15</sup> These may therefore, also be characterized as *nehamta midrashim*. The dating of *Exodus Rabbah* II's final redaction is thought to be the ninth century, although more research needs to be done to be more certain.

In studying *Exodus Rabbah* in this paper, individual *midrash* passages will be dated according to the rabbis that are cited within each passage.

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<sup>13</sup> Graetz, Heinrich. "The Last Amoraim." In *Essential Papers on the Talmud*. Edited by Michael Chernick. New York: New York University Press, 1994, p. 79.

<sup>14</sup> Strack, p. 309.

## BABYLONIAN TALMUD

Horiyot 8a:

The school of Rabbi taught that scripture says, "that God spoke to Moses," (Numbers 15:22) and it is written "that God commanded you through the hand of Moses" (Numbers 15:23). Which commandment was spoken by God and commanded through Moses? I would say, this is [the prohibition on] idol worship. Rabbi Ishmael said, "I (am Adonai your God)" and "You shall have no (other gods before Me)" (Exodus 20:2,3) were heard [directly] from God's mouth.

## COMMENTARY

The school of Judah Hanasi (Rabbi) lived after the Hadrianic persecutions, which took place in the first half of the second century. Although the time they were living in was peaceful, they were aware of the persecutions that took place in their immediate past history. The dominant culture of the Roman Empire at this time was pagan. Christianity was forming, but it was still a small minority, whereas paganism was pervasive.

Therefore the threat to Judaism would have been from paganism. This would explain why the school of Judah Hanasi would emphasize the commandment against idol worship, as the one that God spoke through Moses.

Ishmael lived before the school of Judah Hanasi. He died right before the Bar Kokhba Revolt of 132. He was a boy when the Romans destroyed the Temple and was imprisoned

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<sup>15</sup> Herr, Moshe David. "Exodus Rabbah." In *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Volume 6. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1974, p. 1068.

during that time in Rome. For him then, the Roman Empire and their idol worship was even more pervasive and oppressive. The commandment prohibiting the worship of other gods was crucial. He wanted to stress the importance of this to his fellow Jews who were confused. For them, it appeared that the idol worshippers were succeeding, because of the power of the pagan Roman Empire. Some may have wondered why they should remain being Jewish. To stress the importance of not worshipping idols, Ishmael would have emphasized this commandment. He did this by saying that every Jew heard the commandment directly from the mouth of God. This reading concurs with the Hebrew text of the Ten Utterances. In the first two commandments, God is in the first person, whereas in the rest, God is in the third person.

There is also another theme underlying the simple meaning of these texts. Rabbi was the Patriarch of the Jews in Palestine.<sup>16</sup> There was always tension between the Patriarch and the rabbinic class. Judah Hanasi was a rabbi, but he was a rabbi with immense power. He had connections to the Roman Empire. He also had connections to the Jewish aristocracy and to the rabbinic class, from which he had come. Tension arose from struggles over who had more power. Judah Hanasi in particular was the first Patriarch to change the position into one that carried weight. Here he (or his school) is writing that the words of the Torah do not come directly from God to the people. Instead they are mediated through Moses. This may have been a subtle way of asserting elite power. Perhaps Rabbi's school was saying that the teachings of Torah and Judaism need to be mediated through great rabbis, like Rabbi. They are not meant to be given to the people straight

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<sup>16</sup> The following information was based on Lee Levine's *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine in Late Antiquity*. Jerusalem and New York: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi and JTS, 1989.

from God, or even straight from rabbis of lesser stature. Rabbi's school may have been using this text to justify its own position of power and the hierarchical system.

Ishmael or his school, on the other hand, is arguing the opposite. He is saying that God sometimes does speak directly to the people without any mediation. He is arguing for a more egalitarian form of Judaism. During this time, there were many forms of Judaism. Rabbinic Judaism is the branch that is most known today because it is the one that eventually dominated. Rabbinic Judaism was not monolithic though during this time. This dictum may be evidence of the power struggles that were happening even within rabbinic Judaism.

Shabbat 105a

Rav Yohanan stated his own opinion. "Anokhi" is an acronym, "I myself wrote and gave." The rabbis say, "A pleasant word was written and given." Some say, "anokhi" backwards is "A writing was given, the sayings are trustworthy."

#### COMMENTARY

The rabbis are grappling with the meaning of the word "*anokhi*" used in the Ten Utterances. It is used as opposed to "*ani*," and they believe that that distinction is meaningful. Here they read theological meaning into it. Yohanan is responding to a debate over whether God wrote the Torah, or whether humans wrote it, with God dictating it. Yohanan believes that God wrote the Torah and wants to emphasize that belief.

If humans wrote the Torah, even if dictated by God, then the theological question would arise as to the binding nature of the Torah. With human authorship comes human fallibility, and one would need to justify why Jews should be obligated to follow the Torah's words. If God wrote the Torah, then the question as to why to follow the Torah would be more obvious.

Yohanan was known to have studied all subjects of Judaism, including mysticism. However, he is most known for expounding Torah. Perhaps he felt most drawn to Torah because it is the text that was written directly by God. He uses this statement to defend the time he spent studying it.

The anonymous group of rabbis emphasizes the "pleasantness" of the words of Torah. This is probably responding to the Gnostics and the Christians. The Gnostics, as mentioned before, believed that the laws laid out in the Bible were meant to deceive the Jews. They came from an evil god, rather than the god of goodness. The Christians also were against the laws of the Bible. Paul expresses that the laws of the Bible were too onerous. They actually got in the way of true relationship with God. He was preaching against following the many laws of the Bible. "The promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should inherit the world did not come through the law but through righteousness of faith. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression" (Romans 4:13, 15).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha Revised Standard Edition*. Edited by Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 1365.

The rabbis had to defend and support their position that the Jewish people should follow the Torah's laws. Besides the argument that God wanted people to follow the laws, the laws also brought a pleasant way of living.

The last statement, which was also made by a group of anonymous people, represents the theological struggle about whether Adonai is a trustworthy God. Although it is not attributed, so exact dating is impossible, this time period in general was one of great turbulence for the Jews. The Temple destruction, the Hadrianic persecutions, and the Bar Kochba Revolt were all devastating for the Jews. They were wondering if Adonai was powerful at all, and if the promises given in the Torah could be trusted at all. Torah promises that the Jews will inherit the land of Israel, but Israel is in the hands of the Romans. This statement is trying to assure the people that God does not lie; the Biblical promises to Israel will eventually be carried out.

#### Makkot 23b-24a

Rav Hamnuna said: What is the text? [that shows that there are 613 mitzvot] "Moses commanded us (to do) Torah, (it is) an inheritance (of the congregation of Jacob)" (Deuteronomy 33:4). "Torah" in gematria is 611. "I (am Adonai your God)" and "You shall have no (other gods before Me)" were heard [directly] from God's mouth.

## COMMENTARY

Rav Hamnuna lived in the fourth century in Babylonia. He resided in Baghdad. There is not much else that is known about him.

This midrash is again representative of the theological question of whether God gave us the Torah and the commandments, or whether it was Moses who gave us the commandments from God. The text shows that it is Moses who gave us the Torah, even though it is clear that God gave it to Moses.

The Jews however also needed a god that was not mediated through a human being. Therefore, according to R. Hamnuna, the first contact with God was direct. The Israelites needed to experience God themselves, in order to establish a relationship. From this, they could agree to follow God's commandments. Once, this relationship was established, then the people would be willing to hear the details of the covenant through Moses.

## EXODUS RABBAH Yitro

TEXT: Parsha 29:1

"I am Adonai your God." Here it is written, "Has any people heard the voice of Elohim (speak out of a fire and survived)" (Deuteronomy 4:33)? The heretics asked Rabbi Simlai, "Are there many gods in the world?" He said to them, "Why?" They said to him, "Behold, it is written, 'Has any people heard the voice of Elohim...' [Elohim is a plural form in Hebrew.]" He said to them, "'Speak' is not written in the plural form, rather it is

written in the singular form.” His students said to him, “Rabbi, you have thrown these [heretics] off with a broken reed, but what answer will you give to us?”

Rabbi Levi replied and explained to them, “‘Has any people heard the voice of Elohim...’ What does it mean? If it was written, ‘the voice of God with [all of] God’s power,’ the world would not have been able to stand. Rather ‘the voice of God is with power’ (Psalms 29:4) – with power according to each individual. The young men according to their strength, the elders according to their strength, and the little ones according to their strength. God said to Israel, ‘Just because you heard many voices, do not think that there are many gods in the heavens. Rather, know that I am God, Adonai your God, as it is written, ‘I am Adonai your God.’”

#### COMMENTARY

The first part of this *midrash* has a familiar theme that was seen in the *tannaitic* material. It is disproving the pagan belief that there are many gods. A common word for God, Elohim, is itself plural. While today, scholars may argue that this is proof that during the Biblical period there was no true monotheism, this would not be an acceptable argument for the rabbis. However, even in the *tannaitic* and *amoraic* period, this troubled them. Simlai’s response is that the verb following is singular which proves by Hebrew grammar that the noun must be singular as well. While the heretics received a response, R. Simlai’s students sought a deeper meaning for the Torah’s usage of Elohim.

Rabbi Levi gave R. Simlai's students the deeper response they were seeking. He noted that according to Psalms there were many voices heard from Adonai. Lest one think there were as many gods as there were voices, God proclaimed, "I am Adonai your God." The many voices had been used by God to speak to each Israelite according to his or her capability.

Underlying the argument for one god, is the theological view that individuals can each have his/her own relationship with God. Rabbi Levi is contending that each person is different and has different needs. What Moses can handle in his relationship with God would be impossible for anyone else to handle. Anyone else might be overwhelmed by the power of God that Moses was able to endure. It is the same with each individual Jew. What is the right relationship with God for one is not right for another. Perhaps this is an internal argument about why some Jews (rabbis) can seem to be closer to God than others. Rabbi Levi is explaining that it is not who is closer, but who is able to withstand God's power. Despite different relationships and ways that people hear God's voice, there is still a single god.

Rabbi Simlai lived during the second half of the third century in Palestine, while Levi lived in the fourth century also in Palestine.

TEXT: Parsha 29:4

Another interpretation of "I am Adonai your God." R. Abahu told of a parable about a king of flesh and blood who rules, and he has a father or a brother or a son. God says "I

am not that way." "I am first", and I do not have a father. "I am last," and I do not have a brother/son. "Besides Me, there is no other god," and I do not have a son/brother.

#### COMMENTARY

Perhaps because God is so anthropomorphized, this midrash may have been written to make sure that Jews knew that God was not human, and did not have the same beginnings as humans. God, in the Bible may have similar characteristics, such as anger and compassion, but it does not mean that God shares all characteristics with humans.

Rabbi Abahu is known to have debated often with heretics, usually Christians. So while this midrash could be addressed to Jews, it may have also addressed Christian claims about "God become man." In Christianity, the god has a mother, a father and siblings. Judaism is different in that Adonai does not have anything like a human family. God is, in that respect, Other.

#### TEXT: Parsha 29:6

"I am Adonai your God." A king of flesh and blood builds a palace. Is it possible to move it [the palace] from its place? [No!] With Me, it is not the same, as it is written, "I was the Maker and I will be the Bearer; And I will carry and rescue" (Isaiah 46:4). "I was the Maker," as it is written, "The Lord God made for Adam and his wife..." (Genesis 3:21). "And I will be the Bearer," "The Lord God bore the man..." (Genesis 2:15). Another interpretation of "I was the Maker," "For I regret that I made them" (Genesis 6:7). "I will bear Noah," as it is written, "God shut him in" (Genesis 7:16). "I will carry" as it is

written, "God went down to see the city and the tower" (Genesis 11:5). "And I will rescue" Abraham, as it is written, "God said to him, I am Adonai who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans" (Genesis 15:7). Another interpretation of "I was the Maker" of Israel, as it is written, "God who made you and made you endure" (Deuteronomy 32:6). "And I will bear," as it is written, "I will bear you on the wings of eagles" (Exodus 19:4). "I will carry" the calf. "I will rescue" as it is written, "God said I forgave, as you asked" (Numbers 14:20).

#### COMMENTARY

The destruction of the second Temple was a devastating blow to Judaism. The entire theology of connecting with God through sacrifice was impossible to continue. The Temple was the place where Adonai dwelled. If the Temple was destroyed, the Jews wondered if that meant that Adonai was destroyed.

This *midrash*, therefore, would have been a crucial one, in that it contained a new theology, or at least the revival of an old theology. The theology here, is that God is portable. God will go with the Jews wherever they go. God was not destroyed with the Temple. The main prooftext is from Isaiah, but the rest of the texts are from Torah. This proves that God has always been with the Jews throughout their travels. God was with Abraham, from Ur to Canaan, with Noah, and with all of Israel in the wilderness.

This theology was also prominent after the first Temple's destruction. Again there, Judaism was built on the belief that one brought sacrifices to God at the Temple, which is

the place where God dwelt. When the Jews were predominantly exiled to Babylon, they created a theology in which God was there with them. But the Temple had been rebuilt for six centuries, and the theology once again was based on a sacrificial system at a specific place.

Most of the images from the texts are nurturing comforting images of God. God is carrying Israel on eagles' wings, God is making garments for Adam and Eve, and God is forgiving. This is clearly a *nehamta midrash*.

## CONCLUSION

Many of the themes that are found in the *tannaitic* material are found in the Babylonian Talmud and *Exodus Rabbah* as well. This is due to the fact that although the redaction of the Talmud and *Exodus Rabbah* may have occurred after the *tannaitic* material, the time period when individual pieces were written certainly overlapped.

During the time that these texts were written, Christianity became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire. This is a major change, and differs from the historical context of the *tannaitic* material. Also, a significant Jewish community developed in Babylonia. It eventually overshadowed the Palestinian community in importance

The rabbis writing these works are predominantly surrounded by a rising gentile Christianity in Palestine and paganism in Babylonia. Therefore, these texts try to disprove

the claims of both religions' worldviews. They are used to show that there is only one god, and that god is Adonai. Along with this theme, they are trying to comfort the Jews that only see that the Christians and pagans are succeeding. The rabbis attempt to show that the pagans only appear to be succeeding. In time they will fall, and it will be the Jewish people who will survive.

These texts also show the struggle between rabbis over who had power. Did the rabbis have more power than the average Jew? Did Torah have to be mediated through the rabbis or could a more egalitarian form of Judaism be valid, where all Jews had access to the tradition? Different rabbis had different answers to these questions. Similarly, the rabbis debated whether the commandments were all mediated through Moses, or whether any of them came directly from God.

These texts also deal with the authorship of the Torah. They debated whether it was written by God directly or whether it was created by human beings. If it were written by human beings, then another theological question of why Jews were obliged to follow it would have to be addressed.

In response to Gnosticism and Christianity, the Talmud explains that the words of Torah are "pleasant." Both the Gnostics and the Christians were arguing that the laws of Judaism were oppressive or false, and should not be followed. The rabbis wanted to counter that by saying that living a Torah based life was better than not following the Torah; in fact, it was a good life.

During this tragic and theologically challenging time for the Jews, they were figuring out their relationship with God. The fact that each individual can have his/her own relationship with God was discussed here. It may look like there are many different gods, because each person sees God in a different way, but for Judaism only One God exists but S/He relates to each individual person in a specific and individual fashion.

It was also during this time of turmoil that the rabbis needed to reassert the belief that God was portable. When the Temple was destroyed, Jews feared that God was destroyed as well. The fear was that Adonai was not strong enough to stand up to the Romans. Biblical texts were cited to show that God was not limited and would be with the Jews wherever they were.

While several of the themes in this material are similar to the *tannaitic* material, there are some that are new. As the religious and historical context changed, so did the interpretation of the phrase, "I am Adonai your God."

## Chapter 3

### Medieval Commentary: Maimonides, Nachmanides, and Meiri

#### INTRODUCTION

Between the eighth and tenth century a work was written called the *Halachot Gedolot*. This was the first time that someone specifically named the 613 commandments. While the number of *mitzvot* had been set since Talmudic times, the detailed list of *mitzvot* had never been compiled. Once this list was written many people, especially Jewish poets (*payyatan*), used it as the basis for their own liturgical poetry or writings.<sup>18</sup>

Moses ben Maimon, or Maimonides, who lived from 1135-1204, highly objected to the *Halachot Gedolot*'s rendition of the enumeration of the *mitzvot*. He objected for many reasons. One of the reasons was the *Halachot Gedolot* did not seem to have an organized, objective system which it followed in laying out the laws or grouping the laws. Another objection was that the author of *Halachot Gedolot* counted rabbinic ordinances as part of the 613. Maimonides believed that only commandments from the Torah should be counted in the sacred list of 613.

Because of this, Maimonides set out to write his own list of the 613 commandments. As a legalist, he thought that it was important to first set up criteria for which commandments he would count and why. This would then explain to readers why he chose to formulate his list the way he did. It also attempted to make the list objective.

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<sup>18</sup> *The Commandments Sefer Ha-Mitzvoth of Maimonides*. Trans. by Rabbi Dr Charles B. Chavel. New York: Soncino Press, 1967, p. ix.

Maimonides starts his book of *mitzvot* with a listing of fourteen principles. The inclusion or exclusion of each of his *mitzvot* is based on this list. For instance, one of his principles states that he will leave out all rabbinic ordinances. Another principle states that the reason for the commandment is not to be counted as part of the commandment.

After this introduction, Maimonides lists and explains the 613 commandments. This work was originally written in Arabic. During his lifetime several people translated the work into Hebrew. In Hebrew it is called *Sefer Hamitzvot*. This paper uses a Hebrew version of this.

Whether Maimonides developed a correct enumeration or not, he certainly sparked a heated discussion; many works were written objecting to his list or defending it. The first to comment on it was R. Moses ben Nachman, or Nachmanides. Nachmanides was born in Spain and lived from 1194-1270. He primarily defended *Halachot Gedolot* against Maimonides' criticism.

Although Nachmanides did not agree with everything that Maimonides said, he generally held Maimonides in high esteem. In the Maimonidean controversy of his time, he tried to mediate between the different sides. The sides were arguing whether or not to allow Jews to study philosophy and other secular subjects. He tried to compromise by requiring a minimum age in which one had to reach in order to study these subjects. In the end he failed with this strategy.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Gottlieb, Efraim. "Nachmanides." In *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Volume 12. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1974, p. 1068.

Nachmanides was the first commentator to bring Kabbalah into his works. He believed that Torah was the source of all knowledge, and that it foresaw the future. Certainly the Torah was the word of God for him.

King James made Nachmanides participate in a disputation. Disputations were common in medieval times. Jews and Christians would debate about which religion was correct. Leading Christians set them up, and Jews were forced to participate. Generally, the Jews lost. Although Nachmanides won this disputation, he was still pursued by the law and had to escape to Israel. This is where he spent his last years.

Another critic of Maimonides that will be examined is Menachem ben Solomon, or Meiri. Meiri lived in Provence his entire life from 1249-1316. Meiri was a Talmudist. He was one of the few rabbis to study the Palestinian Talmud and compare it to the Babylonian Talmud. Provence in his lifetime was a center of Talmudic creativity, and Meiri was a primary figure. He also had great interest in philosophy and other secular sciences.

Meiri was involved in a controversy involving Maimonides. Solomon ben Abraham Adret wrote a polemic against Maimonides that Meiri signed. In the end Adret wanted to excommunicate those that studied philosophy at an early age. Meiri eventually took his name off, because he could not agree to this last point.

Meiri wrote a book, *Magen Avot*, in his later years that defended the traditions of Provence, as against those held in Spain. Specifically he challenged the authority of Nachmanides.

The time in which Meiri lived in Provence was a tumultuous one. On the one hand, Talmudic activity was flourishing. On the other, it was a time of intermittent anti-Semitism, depending on who was ruling. In 1294 Charles II promulgated several anti-Jewish laws that limited the freedom of the Jews. Although they were not expelled as they were in France, they were required to wear a badge, pay high taxes, and were prohibited from participating in public functions.<sup>20</sup>

## **MAIMONIDES'S SEFER HAMITZVOT**

### **COMMANDMENT ONE:**

The first commandment: The commandment that was commanded to us is the belief in the Divinity, and to have faith that there is Cause and Reason. Adonai creates all of existence. God said, "I am Adonai your God." At the end of Gemara *Makkot* they said, "613 commandments were said to Moses at Sinai." What is the proof-text? "Moses commanded Torah to us." There is a difficulty in the counting of "Torah." They say Torah in gematria is 611, [not 613]. This is the proof that, "I (am Adonai you God.)" and "You shall have no (other gods besides Me.)" were heard from the mouth of God. Here this clarifies that "I (am Adonai your God.)" is included in the 613 *mitzvot*, and this commandment is the belief in the Divinity, as we explained.

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<sup>20</sup> Blumenkranz, Bernhard. "Provence." In *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Volume 13. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1974, p. 1260.

#### COMMENTARY:

Every since Rabbi Simlai stated in *Makkot* 23b that there were 613 *mitzvot* (248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments), there has been a debate as to what the specific 613 *mitzvot* are. Here Maimonides states very clearly that the first commandment is "I am Adonai your God." But in fact, from a straight grammatical reading, this is clearly not a commandment; it is a statement. Maimonides argues that the commandment is implied from the statement in *Makkot*. There, the rabbis are discussing how they know that there are 613 commandments. In the discussion, they count "I am Adonai your God" as a commandment.

The larger debate going on in relation to the counting of the *mitzvot* is a debate about the necessity in believing in God. Maimonides plays many roles in his life. He is a physician, an astronomer, a philosopher, and a legalist. When he is writing different works, he takes on different roles. Here, in his *Sefer Hamitzvot*, he is writing as a legalist. While he addresses the philosophical questions of whether one can disbelieve in God, but still practice the rest of the *mitzvot* in other works (*Mishneh Torah* and the Thirteen Principles), here he is simply crafting the correct list of *mitzvot*, according to his fixed set of criteria. From *Mishneh Torah* and the Thirteen Principles, one can see that the belief in God is central to the entire *mitzvah* system. Here he is just listing the belief in God as one of the 613 *mitzvot*.

Maimonides the legalist is interested here in listing all the commandments as equivalent to the others. If one did not believe in God, then it was just one commandment that one was not following, and one could presumably still be a good practicing Jew.

## **NACHMANIDES'S COMMENTARY ON MAIMONIDES'S SEFER HAMITZVOT**

### **COMMANDMENT 1:**

The belief [contained] in this utterance "it is not too hard for you, nor is it far off (Deuteronomy 30:11) and also in the words of our rabbis –is accepting God's sovereignty; this is the belief in God.

They said in Mekhilta, why was "You shall not have other gods besides Me.," said because Scripture [already] said, "I am Adonai, your God?" It is comparable to a king who entered a land [to conquer it]. His servants said to him, "Decree decrees over them." He said to them "No, when they accept my sovereignty I will decree decrees over them. For if they do not accept my sovereignty, how will they fulfill my decrees?" So also God said to Israel, "I am Adonai your God" "You shall not have other gods besides Me." "I am God whose sovereignty you accepted in Egypt." They said to God, "Yes." [God said] "Just as you accepted my sovereignty, accept my decrees: 'You shall not have (any other gods besides Me).'"

And despite all of this, I saw that the Master of Halachot did not count this *mitzvah* [the belief in God] among the 613 *mitzvot*. And with the utterance "You shall not have (other gods besides Me.)," there are many restrictions: "You shall not have," "You shall not

make (for yourself a sculptured image)," You shall not bow to them," and "You shall not serve them." If so, five came from the mouth of God and from Moses [came] 608, not the gematria of Torah [611]. It appears that the opinion of the Master of Halachot is that the 613 are only God's decrees that God decreed for us to do or prohibitions which we should not violate. But the belief in the existence of the Exalted One that God made known to us with signs and miracles and the revelation of the Shekinah before our very eyes – this is the essence and the root from which the *mitzvot* were born. Therefore, it does not count in the counting of the *mitzvot*. And this is what the sages said: (They said to God, "Decree over them." God said to them, "No, when they receive My sovereignty, I will decree over them decrees.") They made the acceptance of the decrees a matter unto itself, and the *mitzvot* that were decreed from that matter [something else]. And further, there is no difference between this utterance and what the Exalted One said in justifying Israel's obligation [to observe the Torah, namely:] "I am Adonai your God who took you out from Egypt," (Leviticus 19:36) and that means to say that since you accepted My sovereignty from [the time of] leaving Egypt, accept My decrees. And if, nevertheless it [the belief in God] would be a *mitzvah*, then God would have said "Know and believe that I am Adonai that led you out from Egypt and do my *mitzvot*." Despite all of this, it will not be counted with the *mitzvot* for this [the belief in God] is the essence, and [only] the derivatives shall be counted as I explained. And according to this opinion, how do they explain the question [generated by this dictum: "In gematria] Torah is 611? - 'I (am Adonai your God.)' and 'You shall not have (any other gods besides Me.)' were heard directly from the mouth of God." They would say that within the utterance "You shall not have" are two *mitzvot*, which completes 613, namely, the prohibition on images: "You

shall not make" and "You shall not have" is one subject, and the prevention of their worship: "You shall not bow down to them" and "You shall not serve" is another *mitzvah*. The verses themselves are telling us that until now, the utterances were from God's mouth, understood by everyone, in a formulation indicating that God is speaking about God-self [They are in the first person.], "I am God" and "before Me." The rest of the utterances are in the language of a prophet [Moses] who mediates between them. But the intention [of the rabbis in answering the question of the counting] is that the *mitzvah* of the second commandment completes the count. And thus the Master of Halachot counts, in his negative commandments, idol worship as one, and in his count of negative commandments, punishable by lashes [he counts] "You shall not have (any other gods besides Me)" as a prohibition on images. He does not mention any other negative commandment regarding making idols. I found support for his words in what the Sages said in Mekhilta, "You shall not have other gods. Why was it said? Since it was said, "You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image or any likeness....," if something was already made, how would I know that I could not keep it? [Is the prohibition only about making idols? If one obtains one, can one keep it if she did not make it?] Torah teaches us, "You shall not have." This is the opinion of the writer of Halachot Gedolot, and it is a possibility, but when I deal with the negative *mitzvot*, I will explain that which seems more reasonable to me.

#### COMMENTARY:

Nachmanides's commentary on Maimonides does not reveal his own opinion on Maimonides's belief. Instead he explicates the opinion of the author of *Halachot Gedolot*.

Perhaps the implication is that he concurs with that belief. The last sentence of his commentary says that Nachmanides thinks that this opinion is a strong one, but that he will explain his own view elsewhere

Nachmanides wants to defend *Halachot Gedolot* against Maimonides's harsh critique. Maimonides strongly disagrees with the enumeration of *mitzvot* in *Halachot Gedolot* because there are many commandments listed that are clearly rabbinic, among other reasons. Therefore Maimonides dismisses the entire list, and writes his own list in order to correct it. Nachmanides therefore takes the opportunity to defend the *Halachot Gedolot*, instead of articulating his specific belief about the first commandment. Whether he agrees or not with Maimonides, he wants to defend the method that *Halachot Gedolot* follows. He believes that the earlier sages should always be respected, because of their wisdom. Nachmanides repeatedly defends earlier rabbis in other places, so this is to be expected from him here.

The author of the *Halachot Gedolot* disagrees with Maimonides. He agrees with Maimonides in that he believes that the belief in God is critical, and that all *mitzvot* flow from that, but he does not think that it should be counted as part of the *mitzvot*. Because belief in God is so critical, he thinks that this must be the precondition before even looking at the *mitzvah* system.

There is a difference between why one should follow the commandments and the actual commandments. Likewise one must differentiate between the substructure upon which

the structure must lay. Belief in God is the reason to follow the commandments. This belief is the substructure, and the structure is the *mitzvot*.

The author of *Halachot Gedolot* is also disagreeing with the talmudic statement in *Makkot* that two *mitzvot* were heard directly from the mouth of God. He cites a midrash from the Mekhilta that seems to support that the belief in God is the base, and that all *mitzvot* come from this belief. He instead counts the prohibition of idol worship as two *mitzvot*, in order to end up with 613 *mitzvot*. One is the prohibition of making idols, while the other is the prohibition on having idols.

#### **NACHMANIDES'S COMMENTARY ON EXODUS 20:2:**

This utterance is a positive commandment. God said, "I am Adonai," to teach and command them, so that they would know and believe that there is Adonai and He is God to them, as it is said - God is the originator. Everything comes from God's will and power and Adonai is God to those that are obligated to serve God. And God said, "who took you from the land of Egypt." For taking you out from there taught about the existence and about the will [of God]. For with [God's] knowledge and with providence, we left from there. And it also teaches about creation, because [for those who believe in] the eternity of the world, nothing can change from its natural state [but the Exodus overturned natural norms]. And this teaches about the power and power teaches about unity, as it is written, "in order that you will know that there is none like Me in all the land" (Exodus 9:14). And this is the reason "that I took you out," so they would know and be witness to all of this. And the reason for "from the house of slavery" is that they were standing in Egypt in

the house of slavery, captives of Pharaoh. God said to them that they are obligated [to accept] the great, honored, and awesome Name as their God - that they will serve God because God redeemed them from servitude to Egypt [based on the] reason, "They are My servants, that I brought from the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 25:55). And I already hinted further, before, the reason for two holy names [mentioned here] is the path to Truth [Kabbalah]. This is the *mitzvah* called in the words of our rabbis - "acceptance of the Sovereignty of heaven," for these words that I mentioned - they are as a king addressing the people.

And thus they said in Mekhilta, why was "You shall not have other gods before Me." said? Because God [already] said, "I am Adonai your God." There is a parable about a king that entered a land [to conquer it]. His servants said to him, "Decree decrees over us." He said to them, "No, when you accept my sovereignty I will decree over you. For if you do not accept my sovereignty, how will you fulfill my decrees?" So too does God say to Israel, "'I am Adonai your God' and 'You shall not have.' I am God. You have accepted my sovereignty over you in Egypt." They said to God, "Yes." "You accepted my sovereignty, accept my decrees." As to say, after you accept over you and acknowledge that I am Adonai, I am your God from the land of Egypt, receive all of My *mitzvot*. All the utterances were said in singular language, "Adonai your God that led you [singular] out..." and not, as God began. "You all saw that I spoke to you [all] from heaven." "Follow this." [This was said] to warn that each individual is responsible for all the *mitzvot*. God spoke to each one individually, so that one could not think that God would judge according to the majority, and that an individual would be saved with them

[the majority - even if she did not follow a specific commandment]. Moses explains to them this intention at the end of Torah in the parsha "Netzavim."

#### COMMENTARY:

Here, Nachmanides writes about his own belief of the counting of the first commandments. It is now clear that he disagrees with Maimonides that "I am Adonai" is the first commandment. Nachmanides agrees with the author of the *Halachot Gedolot* that the belief in God is the base and the prerequisite for following all the other *mitzvot*.

He believes that within the statement "I am Adonai your God," many concepts are communicated. There is the simple belief in God, but there is also the philosophical idea that God is the source of everything. Because of this it follows that God would be set apart from the system. God cannot be a mere part of the *mitzvah* system, because all *mitzvot* stem from God.

Nachmanides is also coming from the tradition of Kabbalah. He even alludes to Kabbalah by using the word "truth." The God concept in Kabbalah is complex. God is constituted of ten *sefirot*, which each represent an aspect of God. However, there is a part of God (*Ein Sof*) that is outside the *sefirot* system and cannot be reached by humanity. This also correlates to the belief that he is propagating here. God is other, or at least part of God is other. And that part is outside, because it is the substructure, or the base.

Nachmanides uses the same *Mekhila* passage that he used to explain *Halachot Gedolot*. Again, it is proving that belief in God is the base, and all other commandments must come from this.

According to Maimonides, if one did not believe in God, then one would be violating a commandment. That person could still follow the other commandments though.

Nachmanides and the author of *Halachot Gedolot*, however, will not allow a person to even enter the *mitzvah* system and attempt the other commandments. For them it makes no sense to do anything within the system if one does not believe in God.

Nachmanides is not a legalist, as Maimonides is. He does not have to adhere to a clearly legalistic point of view. In fact, Nachmanides does not ever create his own list of the 613 commandments because that is not his primary interest. He is interested in philosophy. He wants to explore the meaning of believing in God and what the implications are. He is trying to figure out, as a Kabbalist would, what God is and how God is related to people's lives and the commandments.

#### **MEIRI'S COMMENTARY TO HORAYOT 8a:**

One who denies idolatry is as one who agrees to all the Torah. For this [denial] is the basis on which all [else] hangs. The Sages have clearly stated this [in the following midrash]: "When they erred and did not do all these *mitzvot*" (Numbers 15:22) - Scripture speaks about idol worship [in this verse]. For which *mitzvah* equals all the other *mitzvot*? I would say idol worship. And what we are saying here [in *Horayot*], namely, "Which

*mitzvah* is the first? This is idol worship." It is not that the utterance, "You shall not have (any other gods besides Me)" is the first, as many have supposed. Rather the utterance "I (am Adonai your God)" is also a warning about idol worship. The denial of God's existence and the belief in another [god] is all idol worship. And similarly the denial of God's existence is the reason to serve the celestial spheres and the other hosts of heaven.

#### COMMENTARY:

Meiri concurs with Maimonides that "I am Adonai" is not just an introduction to the commandments, but is the first commandment. However, Meiri thinks that "I am Adonai" is not commanding a belief in God, but rather, forbidding idol worship. He sees "I am Adonai" to be part of the commandment against idol worship.

Meiri thinks that idol worship is one commandment among the rest, but he also sees it as the first commandment upon which all others rest. It is a commandment, but it also functions as the substructure. It is a precondition to following the other commandments. Idol worship is a *mitzvah*, but it is not equal to the rest, as Maimonides would argue. Meiri claims that idol worship is equal in weight to the rest of the *mitzvot* combined. If one does not deny idol worship, then it does not make sense to adhere to the rest of the commandments.

Meiri views the prohibition on idol worship in two ways. First he differentiates between denying the existence of God and believing in other gods. One may be called atheism, and the other polytheism, but Meiri labels them both as idolatrous. Atheism for Meiri is

idol worship. Given his culture, Meiri probably could not conceive of someone who did not believe in any God. If ever there was an age of belief and philosophical "proofs" for God's existence, it was the medieval period. Hence, he saw atheism as a form of idol worship. If one does not believe in any sort of divinity, or omnipotent being, then ultimate power lies in the hands of human beings or the forces of nature. The best thinkers of all the monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, would have been unanimous in the view that such beliefs were idolatrous and heretical.

### CONCLUSION:

Many years passed between the *tannaitic/amoraic* period and the medieval period. Maimonides, Nachmanides, and Meiri lived from the twelfth century to the early fourteenth century. The historical context had completely changed. The Roman Empire had disappeared, the pagans had died out, and Islam had emerged as a dominant world religion. Naturally it would follow that these men would interpret the verse, "I am Adonai your God" in a different way than their predecessors.

Because of Islam, a major influence on the Jewish community of this time was the attempt to harmonize philosophy and religion. Islam was the first religion to merge the two subjects. Maimonides in particular looked at what was happening in the Muslim world and applied it to the Jewish world. But there is a philosophical bent in all the works we have reviewed as they interpret Exodus 20:2. This approach is new and specific in form to its time.

Also our authors are concerned with the counting of the *mitzvot*. They are each interested in listing which commandments are first, and which are commandments at all. There is a scientific feel to looking at the commandments that is new here. This approach is to a high degree influenced by Aristotle for whom the proper categorization of things was a major scientific and philosophical activity.

They are also concerned about belief. In the *tannaitic* and *amoraic* period, the rabbis were likewise concerned about belief, but the focus there was to disprove Christianity and paganism. In the medieval times, the focus is on the belief in God and how it fits into and affects the Jewish religion itself. It does not seem to be about disproving another religion or about convincing Jews to believe. Again this is more the style of philosophy than anything else.

There is also the new context of Kabbalah. Kabbalah develops in the twelfth century. Mysticism had been a part of Judaism for centuries, but the specific branch of Kabbalah was new. Nachmanides in particular is drawn to this way of looking at Jewish texts and Judaism in general, and, as we saw, it affected his understanding of whether "I am Adonai your God" was a *mitzvah* or not.

Again in these works, the historical and cultural context is critical to understanding how and why the commentators write what they do.

## Chapter 4

### Hasidic Material: Kedushat Levi, Zera Kodesh, and Sefat Emet

#### INTRODUCTION

In the middle of the 18th century a new religious movement was born within Judaism. Hasidism arose as a populist revival movement. Its founder, Israel ben Eliezer, known as the Baal Shem Tov, lived in the southeastern part of Poland-Lithuania. He was a charismatic well-loved leader, whose goal was to bring joyous Jewish practice to the Jewish masses. His message spread throughout the region.<sup>21</sup>

Hasidism came out of a turbulent time. In 1648 there was an uprising against the Jews in Poland called the Chmielnicki Massacres, which terrified the community. General political tension occurred throughout this time period and resulted in the breakup of Poland and Lithuania into two separate nations in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, hopes had risen and fallen hard when Shabbatei Tzvi and Jacob Frank each claimed to be the Messiah, welcoming in the Messianic Age. When they were proven wrong, many Jews were devastated.<sup>22</sup>

At this time, Judaism was generally thought of as an elitist religion. The focus of the religion was on study that took place in Talmudic academies that only the educated few could attend. In light of all of these historical realities, Hasidism was born.

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<sup>21</sup> Rubenstein, Avraham. "Hasidim." In *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Volume 7. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1974, p. 1391.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

The Baal Shem Tov taught that one did not have to be educated to be a good Jew. He emphasized joy in prayer and in everything that one does in serving God. He showed a Judaism that was accessible to the masses rather than just those that were fluent in Jewish knowledge. While his messages were mostly all found in earlier teachings of Judaism, his unique contribution was the way he brought these concepts together and transmitted them to the public.

After the Baal Sem Tov died, many of his disciples vied for power. In the end, the primary leader of this nascent movement was Dov Baer of Mazhirech.<sup>23</sup> Soon after this power struggle, the movement began having different centers with different leaders in a given geographical locales. Hasidism centered around these leaders. The *rebbe*, or the *tzaddik*, was the name given to the leader of a Hasidic community. Much of the focus was placed on the *rebbe*. While people may not have said this outright, the *rebbe* was certainly seen as being closer to God, and therefore holier than the average Jew.

The Hasidic movement attracted many opponents. The *mitnagdim* in particular strongly objected to many of the principle teachings of Hasidism. There was occasional violence between the groups, and sometimes the *mitnagdim* burned the books of the Hasidim.

There are many great works from the *rebbes* of Hasidism. Three major works will be examined in this chapter: *Kedushat Levi*, *Zera Kodesh*, and *Sefat Emet*.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 1392.

The author of *Kedushat Levi* is Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev. He lived from 1740-1810. He studied with Dov Baer of Mezhibezh and was a third generation Hasid. He was the rabbi of many communities before he finally settled into Berdichev as the rabbi there.<sup>24</sup> It was there that he became famous. He was known as a scholar and a great rabbi. He helped to spread Hasidism into the Ukraine and other parts of Poland. He was also involved in many disputations with the *mitnagdim*. Many times the *mitnagdim* drove him out of a community.<sup>25</sup>

Rabbi Levi particularly emphasized joy and *deveikut*.<sup>26</sup> *Deveikut*, a significant concept in Hasidut, is the idea that one should always try to join with God. In mysticism the boundaries between people and God are thought to be illusionary. The task for the Hasid is to realize and understand this. Rabbi Levi was extremely popular. He empathized with the Jews who were suffering, and always attempted to improve their lives. He was known for his compassion.

*Kedushat Levi* is his most famous work. It is a collection of his sermons. He gave sermons about the Torah portions, holidays, Talmud, and Midrash.

Naftali Tsvi Horowitz of Ropczyce is the author of *Zera Kodesh*. He lived from 1760-1827. Not much is known about this man, although he did become one of the main leaders of the Hasidic movement in Galicia. Much of what is known about him is through

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<sup>24</sup> Dresner, S. H. "Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev." In *The Encyclopedia of Hasidism*. Edited by Tzvi M. Rabinowicz. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996, p. 285.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

folktales. In these tales he is completely idealized, which makes it more challenging to create a realistic portrayal of whom he was.

Naftali was fearful of the rise of Napoleon.<sup>27</sup> He believed that this would be bad for the Jews. He thought that Napoleon would force Jews to serve in the army and to study in secular schools.

He believed that Torah study was important, as well as *Musar*. In fact he said that a man should not study Hasidism until the age of 25, so that he would be reasonably learned in Torah before he studied Hasidism.<sup>28</sup>

*Zera Kodesh* was his first work. Part I consists of his commentaries on the Torah. Part II contains commentaries on the holidays and *aggadah*. He wrote several other books as well after this. All three of his sons and one son-in-law succeeded him as Hasidic rabbis.

Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter wrote the last work, *Sefat Emet*. Because of the book, he also became known as the Sefas Emes. Alter lived from 1847-1905 and became the *rebbe* of the Gerer Hasidic dynasty at the unusually young age of 24. Because of his appointment at such an early age, he was able to be the Gerer *rebbe* for over three decades.

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<sup>26</sup> Rubenstein, Avraham. "Levi Isaac ben Meir of Berdichev." In *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Volume 11. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1974, p. 104.

<sup>27</sup> Wilensky, Mordecai. "Ropczyce, Naftali Tzvi Horowitz." In *The Encyclopedia of Hasidism*. Edited by Tzvi M. Rabinowicz. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996, p. 409.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Alter came from a learned family. His father and grandfather were both Hasidic rabbis; his grandfather was especially well-known as a Talmudist and Halachic authority. Alter began studying Torah full-time as a young boy. He had natural talent for the studies. After his father died when Alter was 8, his grandfather began encouraging him to study more and more.<sup>29</sup>

He had a reputation for being very learned and constantly engaged in study or prayer. His wife's financial support allowed him to be fully engaged in study.<sup>30</sup> He was also known to be unusually ethical. Even though he struggled financially, he did not accept gifts from his followers, though many were wealthy.

The *Sefat Emet* is a collection of the *rebbe*'s sermons that were delivered during holidays and Shabbat. The passages in the book summarize in Hebrew the talks given in Yiddish. This work today remains one of the most popular Hasidic texts.

## KEDUSHAT LEVI

### Part II, "Yitro"

#### TEXT

"I am Adonai your God who brought you out of Egypt from the house of slavery"

(Exodus 20:2). The subject that Rashi addresses is "from the house of slavery." It appears that God gave Torah to Israel after leaving Egypt - God did not give them the Torah

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<sup>29</sup> Braun, Moshe A. *The Sfas Emes*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1998, p. 20.

before, and afterwards bring them from Egypt. For the general principle is that one who serves out of fear is called a slave, and one who serves out of love is called a child. Thus if God had given [the Torah] before bringing them from Egypt, then Israel would have received the Torah out of fear. For if, God forbid, they did not accept the Torah, then God would not have brought them out of Egypt, and they would have been slaves. Therefore God brought them from Egypt first, and afterwards they received the Torah. Of course, Israel received the Torah out of love, for they are the children of God. And this is [the meaning of] "who brought you from the land of Egypt." And now I give you the Torah, and have brought you from the house of slavery so that you would not be slaves, but rather [My] children.

"I am Adonai your God." Our rabbis z"l said "A pleasant word was written and given" (Shabbat 105a). The general principle is that a person needs to fulfill, "Set Adonai before me continually" (Psalms 16:8). But [surely] it is impossible for a person to continually cleave in his/her thought to God. Rather the general principle is this: a person should serve in order to bring sweetness and pleasure to the Creator, be blessed, and this pleasure itself awakens him to cleave with his thoughts to the Creator, be blessed. And this is "word" -- that is to say, speaking, and this cannot occur at all times. (In other words, when someone says something, it happens at a particular moment.) But what God wrote in the "writing" -- this is for all times. This is hinted at with "a pleasant word." A person serves the Creator, be blessed, in order to bring God joy, for "pleasant" is in the

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<sup>30</sup> Bromberg, A.Y. "Alter, Yehudah Aryeh Leib." In *The Encyclopedia of Hasidism*. Edited by Tzvi M. Rabinowicz. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996, p. 21.

language of joy. "Was written and given" -- to him, in order to always awaken himself, at every moment, to cleave in thought to the Creator, be blessed.

Or one can explain "I am Adonai your God." [this way.] Rashi cites *Pesikta Rabati* 21, "At the sea God was revealed as a young man. And at the giving of Torah, God was revealed to them as an old man." The general principle [is taught] by way of a parable. A father loves his son. When the father does something, and the son says to his father, "Do it this way for my sake," because of his great love for his son, he does the will of the son. Because of love, he does it in the manner of the son; that is to say, as the son wants. But if he studies with him intelligently, then [the father] does what is right, so that the son understands; [the father does] not [simply do] what the son wants.

Thus God created everything and created the sea. But Israel was saying that they needed for the sea to be dry, and needed for the Creator to show God-self, as it were, in the manner of [a parent to] a child, as the child wants, which is just what they said when God appeared to them "as a young man," that is to say, in the manner of a son. But at Mount Sinai when Israel stood at the receiving of the Torah, the Creator needed to give the Torah to Israel. God needed to do it, as God wanted, as mentioned earlier. That is to say, "as a old man." God appears to them as an old man and sits as a teacher. This is easy to understand.

## COMMENTARY

Levi Yitzhak of Bertichev is concerned here with the relationship between God and the Jewish people. In the first part Levi is analyzing the different types of relationship that are possible between the Divine and human beings. Since it is difficult to imagine God at all, and therefore what a relationship would look like with God, Levi uses models that people can envision. Levi uses examples of relationships that humans have with each other.

Since God is clearly not equivalent to a human being, Levi gives us two different models of unequal relationships that are often used in Hasidic texts. The first is the relationship between a master and slave. In this case, of course, the master is God and the slave is the Jewish people. Slaves will typically follow the master's rules, because they live in fear of the consequences. If they do not do as the master wants, then the master will use his power to punish. The master cares about the slave, typically, only in relation to what the slave does for the master. The master cares about how much benefit he will get from the slave. There is no affection between the two.

On the other side is the example of a parent with a child. Here, although the parent has more power than the child does, the parent will usually try to do as the child wants. The parent loves the child and wants the child to be happy. But if the child wants something that the parent knows is not good for that child, then the parent will explain as best as she can that what the child wants is not good for him. The parent will then, whether the child

ends up understanding or not, use her power to do what is right for the child. Both the child and the parent love the other.

Levi argues that the relationship that the Jewish people have with God is like that of parent to child. Levi proves his point by using the story from Exodus. God frees the Jewish people from slavery before God offers them the commandments and asks them to accept them. The Jewish people are therefore free when they stand at Sinai and make the decision to obligate themselves to God's commandments. Since they are already free, they do not have the fear that if they do not accept God's commandments, they will end up as Pharaoh's slaves. They know that if they do not accept God's commandments, then they will still be a liberated people, free to settle where they please.

Levi believes the relationship with God to be one of complete choice. There is love on both sides of the relationship. The Jewish people must love God; otherwise they would not have accepted the commandments. And God must love the Jewish people; otherwise God would not have a relationship with them based on the model of parent and child. Levi is clearly making a judgment on which type of relationship he finds holier.

Hasidism was founded on the fundamental belief that Judaism should be a way of life based on joy. For many Jews, Judaism had been a religion that was based on fear. If one did not follow the mitzvot, then one would be punished. Those Jews followed the commandments because of this fear. This is similar to a master/slave relationship. Hasidism was putting forth a different model, and Levi is demonstrative of this.

Another fundamental belief of Hasidism is that a Jew's ultimate goal is to cleave or merge with God. This is called *deveikut*, and was one of Levi's most important principles, although he understands that this is difficult to do and sometimes impossible. He addresses the human problem that one cannot cleave to God at all times, as the Psalmist commands. Levi brings in a passage from the Talmud that speaks of the moment at Sinai when God is first addressing the people. Levi distinguishes between speaking and writing. Speech is something that occurs in time. Someone says something, and then, on the simplest level the speech is over. Writing, on the other hand, is more permanent. When someone writes something down, then it stays written down, and does not occur "in time." Both writing and speaking are evoked in the Talmudic interpretation of Revelation. This is to represent the constant struggle that humans have in wanting to cleave to God at all times, in a permanent way like writing, and knowing that their cleaving will occur in discrete moments, like speech.

What can be more permanent than *deveikut* is *nachat ruach*, or bringing joy to God. A person can do this by remembering at all times that one is serving God for the sole purpose of gratifying God. It is more realistic to have that thought in one's mind at all times, than it is to actually cleave to God at all times. Hasidism in general tries to push people to new heights, while recognizing human limitations.

The relationship between God and the Jewish people is what Levi emphasizes and explores in this passage. He delves into the different ways in which Jews can have a

relationship with God. He uses the *midrash* that acknowledges that Jews have a dynamic relationship with God. At one moment it is appropriate for the relationship to be one way, but in another situation, the relationship should look a different way. This is also similar to a parent and child relationship. Sometimes it is appropriate for the child to be told what to do, and at other times, it is appropriate to do as the child wants.

## **ZERA KODESH**

### **Part II, Shavuot**

#### **TEXT**

In the *midrash* "I am Adonai your God" the scripture reads, "Face to face God spoke to you" (Deuteronomy 5:4). R. Avadumi from Haifa said, "22,000 (angels) descended with God to Sinai" as it is written, "God's chariots are myriads upon myriads, thousands upon thousands; God is among them as in Sinai in holiness" (Psalms 68:18). "God is among them" is not written with the four-lettered name of God, rather with "Adonai." Adonai of the whole world is with them. [Another interpretation. "Adonai is with them" R. Levi said that there was a tablet with the name of God written on their hearts (Exodus Rabba 29:2).] It appears to me along the way I heard from R. Mendl of Romynov, may his name be for a blessing, an interpretation of the verse "One thing God has spoken; (two things I have heard)" (Psalms 68:12). It is possible that we only heard the letter "*alef*" of "*anokhi*" from the mouth of God: Oh, what sweet words does the wise man say (Ecclesiastes 10:12). And to understand his (Mendl's) holy words, the words of the living God, because his words are "as a hammer that shatters rock" (Jeremiah 23:29). Also to

understand how it can be written "Face to face God spoke with you" (Deuteronomy 5:4). Is it not written, "For you saw no image (when Adonai your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire)" (Deuteronomy 4:15)? All that was heard was a voice, and it is possible to understand this by way of the sweetness of the language. Our ancestors, may they be remembered for a blessing, said, "I put God before me always" (Psalms 16:8). This is a great principle in Torah. To understand the sweetness of their language --this is a great principle in Torah. Pay close attention: They did not say (this phrase in relation to) worship of God or something similar. But the matter (is to be understood like this) that it is known that the books of *Musar* write that the four-lettered name of God is hinted at with the letter *alef*. This is in the form of two "*yods*" and a "*vav*" in the middle. The *gematria* is 26; the name of God is also 26. This is hinted at in the face of every human. Two eyes exemplify the shape of two "*yuds*" and the nose exemplifies the letter "*vav*." This signifies *alef*. And therefore it is written, "In the image of God, God created him" (Genesis 1:27). For in the form of the human, was engraved the form of the letter *alef* which teaches about the four-lettered name of God, as mentioned before. And here it is known that the image is the light that surrounds the form of a person. We are a holy people with this aura around us. We should always project before us this image in order to know that the seal of God is on our face and to liken ourselves to the image to the Creator. [Human beings reflect their creator, God.] And this is what they, may their memory be for a blessing, said -- this is a great principle in Torah. That when we merited that chosen place (Sinai) and heard a voice calling out -- (it was) the letter *alef*. Then it was completed and revealed in us - the image of the letter *alef*. As it is written, "And all the people saw the voices" (Exodus 20:15). They saw the sound. We saw the image of the

*alef* that teaches about the four-lettered name of God. And they saw and understood that this is also the image of their faces. Therefore it says, in order “that the fear of God may ever be with you, so that you do not go astray” (Exodus 20:17). For when a human goes always with this thought, she will not quickly go astray. And the beard that is under the face, teaches about the vowel that is under the *alef* that is in the image of the face of people, and that God revealed to us with the letter *alef* of *anokhi*, with the vowel *kamatz*. They, may their memory be for a blessing, said that it appears as a old man full of compassion and the *alef* is the head and father of all the letters. This is hinted at when we have an old man that is revealed to us on Mount Sinai, “as an old man.”... Also, they did not see an image besides Me; one voice, and this is the *alef*. This is the meaning of “face to face God spoke with you.” The sound is the *alef* in the form of the faces with the (God’s) seal in the faces. And also the vowel that we see is as the seal of our faces. Behold, face to face God spoke with us. If all of this is so, we did not see any image, God forbid, besides Me – the sound of the letter *alef*.

#### COMMENTARY

As with the rabbis in the Talmud, Naftali believes that each word in the Torah has a particular purpose and meaning. Specifically when the Torah chooses one name of God over another, there is a reason for that choice. Naftali is exploring the reason that Adonai is used in the first commandment.

In Psalms 68:18 Adonai is also used, as opposed to the four-lettered name of God. Naftali brings in a *midrash* from *Exodus Rabbah* that addresses this question. The *midrash* states

that Adonai is used to represent that the God of the entire world is there. It is always the same God, but sometimes God is acting as God of all the world, and sometimes God is acting as the God of the Jewish people. This *midrash* is expressing the belief that Torah is open to all peoples of the world when they are ready to accept it.

Rabbi Mendl of Romynov has a different interpretation for why Adonai is used at Revelation. He is specifically looking at Exodus 20:2. From as early as Talmudic times, there has been a debate as to what exactly was heard at Sinai. Some believed that the first two commandments were heard directly by the people, because of the grammar in the Torah. Others believe that all ten of the commandments were heard directly by the people, while the rest were mediated through Moses. Rabbi Mendl may have been the first to say that only the *alef* of *anokhi* was heard directly by the people.

Naftali takes Rabbi Mendl's teaching and greatly expands it. He says that the *alef* represents God, since that was the only sound that was heard by all of the Jewish people straight from God. The reason that this was what God wanted everyone to hear directly was that there is an *alef* in every person's face. The shape of an *alef* is made up of two *yods* and a *vav*. (He proves this not only by the shape of the letter, but also because the *gematria* for two *yods* and a *vav* equals the four-lettered name of God.) Human faces contain two *yuds* in the shape of two eyes, and a *vav* in the shape of a nose. When anyone looks into the face of another she can see the imprint of God, by recognizing the *alef* that was sounded at Mount Sinai. This is what is meant by the phrase "In the image of God, God created them" (Genesis 1:27). "The image of God" is the *alef*.

Naftali also tries to resolve the difficulty in having two seemingly contradictory verses in Torah. In one part it is written that God spoke to the Jewish people "face to face." In another part it is written that the people did not see any form when God spoke to them. Naftali explains that the people did not really see God at Sinai. What they saw was the *alef* imprinted on each of their faces. They realized that this was the "seal of God." When they saw the *alef*, this was as if they were seeing God, because the *alef* represented God.

Naftali goes farther with this by adding the symbolism of the vowel under the *alef*. Because the *alef* is a silent letter, no sound can be really made without a vowel under it. The *alef* of Sinai was therefore uttered by God with a *kamatz*. This *kamatz* represents a beard and mustache, since it is the same shape. This represents an old man who is full of compassion.

He uses the same *midrash* that Rabbi Levi uses where God appears to the Jewish people in many forms. At Sinai God appeared as an old man, in order to symbolize wisdom and compassion. This was what was appropriate for the giving of the Torah.

Naftali also addresses the difficulty with the verse, "And all the people saw the voices" (Exodus 20:15). He resolves this by explaining that what the people were seeing was the *alef* in each other's faces.

The Hasidic leaders strove to make God more accessible. As they were mystics, they wanted to be closer to God, or to realize that God was already close. This commentary tries to do that. Having God's seal on every human face is bringing God to everyday human lives. Not only does each person have a face, but most people are constantly surrounded by faces. Each time one sees a face, this is an opportunity to see God and understand that God is in every human being.

Jewish history has had its share of tragedy. The Hasidic movement arose after a time in Eastern Europe when there had been massacres of Jews and general political turmoil. This was the way that this group of Jews showed hope that God was still there, and that Jews could have an intimate relationship with that God.

## **SEFAT EMET**

### **Part II, "Yitro"**

TEXT: 5635, paragraph 2.

The saying "I am Adonai your God," (Exodus 20:2) stands forever. For we are not commanded (anything particular with this statement) as with "You shall not have" (Exodus 20:3) and the rest of the utterances. For in this utterance of God, be blessed, God is simply set apart to be the God of Israel. And therefore it is written, "You shall not make for yourselves other gods besides Me" (Exodus 20:3). This means - since in every way I am your God. Therefore they really need to guard themselves, as it is written, "They anger Me to My face" (Isaiah 65:3). And the sovereignty of God is delivered

through [the belief of] the children of Israel. This means- according to what they themselves received - the yoke of God's sovereignty; likewise, the glory of God's sovereignty was revealed to all creation. God's divinity was to be extended to all through [the commitment of] the children of Israel. This is what was meant by the saying, "I am Adonai your God..." And the verse, "You will be for Me a nations of priests..." (Exodus 19:6) means that they appointed God, be blessed, as sovereign. This is like a story of some great princes who appointed the king. As it were, the children of Israel appointed God over all the creatures. Similarly just as the children of Israel took upon themselves - the yoke of the sovereignty of heaven by receiving the Torah. Therefore they were included [in the act] of creation. As it is written in *Gemara*: that the nations also know that God ruled over all and was called the God of gods. And therefore all the creatures were repaired. Only Amalek, may his name be erased, did not submit himself. And he will have no revival in the future. All the nations will be a spark and a connection to holiness. And this is what is written, "A leading nation is Amalek. (But its fate is to perish forever)" (Numbers 24:20). Interpretation - God took the head to atone for the rest, in essence. And therefore the last will be witnesses for the lost. What they said here is the remainder of the nations, as mentioned earlier. And therefore they need to hate Amalek. If it were not for him, everything would be repaired as it should (be) in the future. Because of him, there is no complete throne.... Therefore "I will blot out (the memory of Amalek from under heaven)" (Exodus 17:14).

## COMMENTARY

The Sefas Emes is addressing several issues with this passage. First, he is struggling with the issue of universalism verses particularism. The Jews are certainly chosen, but that

does not mean that Adonai is just the Jewish God; Adonai is the god of all of creation.

With that belief, the concept of chosenness needs to be defined.

Jews have a special role in the world. Jews are the only nation commanded to follow all 613 mitzvot. They accepted this role at Mount Sinai. But Sefas Emes is not arguing for a completely exclusive religion, where non-Jews have no role to play in the world and no relationship to the divine. Non-Jews still have access to God and God's glory. They are still a part of the natural world and can use, appreciate, and participate in that world. Even farther, "All the nations will be a spark and a connection to holiness."

While Sefas Emes seems like he is open to the non-Jewish and is not isolationist, any Jew has to grapple with the fact that many non-Jews have participated in anti-Semitism (or other horrible acts). One cannot have a sophisticated philosophy without acknowledging that there has been much hatred towards the Jews. Eastern Europe proved to be no exception.

Amalek symbolizes for Sefas Emes, as he has for many Jews before him, to be the ultimate anti-Semite. Whenever his name is written in traditional Jewish texts, it is followed by, "May his name be erased." Sefas Emes writes that Amalek is the only nation that will not be revived, because he rejected the Torah at the time of Sinai. He refers earlier in this section that was not examined to a *midrash* that states that Amalek tried to destroy the very act of giving the Torah.

Amalek simplifies the concept of good and evil, or good people and evil people. Either a non-Jew is from the line of Amalek, and therefore evil, or from another line, and is therefore good. This allows Sefas Emes allows non-Jews a positive place in his theology, without having to embrace all non-Jews.

The last theme in this passage is about the relationship between God and the Jews. God is fully in relationship with the Jews according to the Sefas Emes. By stating "I am Adonai," God was communicating that God is the Jews' God forever. And God is fully in relationship with the Jews, which is why the Jews do not need to have other gods. God can fulfill every part of that divine connection. But with this comes the responsibility that the people have in following God's laws. This is what it means to be in a covenanted relationship.

TEXT: 5639, p. 89<sup>31</sup>

In the verse, "All the people saw the voices" (Exodus 20:18), the interpretation is like that which is written for, "I am Adonai your God" (Exodus 20:2). The children of Israel each saw his/her living root and they saw with their own eyes that a part of the soul of God on high, was in each of them. They did not need to "believe" the utterances - they only had to "see the voices." That is the way when God speaks.

## COMMENTARY

Sefas Emes addresses the difficulty in the verse, "All the people saw the voices." Clearly people cannot see voices, so commentators throughout the ages have interpreted this verse to mean different things. Sefas Emes understands this passage in conjunction with the beginning of the first commandment.

The usual more typical way to contemplate God is to think of God as distinct and above humanity. Contrary to this, many of the Hasidic leaders instead believe that God and humanity are not separate entities. Separatism is just an illusion. The reality is that humanity and God are part of the same. There are no boundaries, but for the majority of the time most people are unaware and unable to understand this concept. This misunderstanding is a part of the human condition. But at the moment of Revelation, the Israelites were able to understand -- they were a part of God, and God was a part of them.

This was a moment that was completely extraordinary. The Israelites "knew" they were part of God in a way that went beyond normal senses. They understood this on the deepest level. That is what saying that they "saw" voices represents. This mixing of senses is the way that the text tried to convey that what the Israelites understood was beyond normal sense perception. This was knowledge on a different level than the intellectual one.

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<sup>31</sup> *Sefas Emes*, Judah Leib Alter of Ger, s.v., "Yitro,".

## CONCLUSION

The Hasidic movement addresses many of the same issues that Jews before them had addressed, but also addresses new issues that are relevant to their particular philosophy and historical context.

All of these rabbis are particularly interested in the relationship that God has with the Jews. It is common for the Hasidic writers to think of the relationship in terms of slave and master verses child and parent. Rabbi Levi also uses this analogy to discuss the relationship between the Divine and humanity. He argues that the Jewish model is one of a parent to a child. God loves the Jewish people, they have chosen to be in a covenanted relationship with God freely, and God tries to do for the Jews as they want, when it is prudent. This follows the model of a parent/child relationship.

Both Rabbi Levi and Naftali use the *midrashic* image of God appearing as an old man as God gave the Ten Commandments. This same *midrash* acknowledges the evolving nature of the sacred relationship and understands that the image of an old man is only appropriate at certain times. Whereas in earlier times, this concept was used as a way to disprove that there may be more than one god, in Hasidism it is used to show the dynamic relationship between God and people.

Joy is emphasized in this relationship as well. The Jews should serve God in order to cause God joy, which is called *nachat ruach*. And God will cause the Jews joy by trying to do what pleases them. The mutuality of the relationship is stressed here.

On the other hand the whole traditional notion that there are boundaries between the Divine and humanity is challenged. The texts are writing as if there are boundaries, but in *Kedushat Levi* and *Sefat Emet*, they are also acknowledging that there may really be no boundaries. Rabbi Levi understands that it is impossible to understand this at all times, and therefore tries to be realistic about how a person can still serve God.

Both Naftali and the Sefas Emes study Exodus 20:2 in relation to 20:15, and the difficulty in comprehending the meaning of "seeing voices." Naftali interprets this as the people seeing the imprint of God in every person's face, while the Sefas Emes interprets this as expressing knowledge that the Jews obtained beyond the normal sensory realm.

All of the Hasidic leaders are attempting to have a closer relationship with God. Naftali does this by bringing God to the people in a concrete way. God is in every face. God is real and present in every person at every moment. Rabbi Levi does this by understanding God to be a parent-like figure; this is a metaphor that everyone can understand. Sefas Emes does this by writing that at Revelation, all peoples understood that God was in them.

Sefas Emes addresses the question of universalism verses particularism. This was addressed also in the earlier *midrashim* in relation to this verse. Sefas Emes believes that the Jews do have a unique relationship to the God of all the entire world, but also believes that non-Jews also have a relationship with God.

Sefas Emes also addresses the concept of evil in his commentary of this verse. He uses Amalek to represent all evil peoples in the world. While non-Jews may have a place in the world and relationship with God, there is no place for Amalek. This is the Sefas Emes's way of grappling with evilness.

On the whole in keeping with the mystical tradition, the Hasidic writers focus on the relationship that Jews have with the Divine.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout Jewish history the first three words (in Hebrew) of the Ten Commandments have inspired the writing of many commentaries. Depending on the historical context, these words had different meanings for those that were interpreting them. While each text has a different approach to the verse, there are certain themes that run throughout.

In the *tannaitic* and *amoraic* material, paganism and Christianity are both significant influences. In each time period the *midrashim* seem to be using the verse to disprove both religious traditions. Rabbinic Judaism during the *tannaitic* and *amoraic* time was a new form of Judaism. With the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, Jews were forced to redefine Judaism. As is the case with any new religion or religious strand, rabbinic Judaism needed to define itself as opposed to the other more dominant religions that it felt was threatening its survival. The texts of the *tannaitic* and *amoraic* period interpreted the words, "I am Adonai" predominantly as a proclamation of monotheism. They then used this as a way to refute paganism's polytheism, or Christianity's interpretation of monotheism.

By the time that the medieval commentators were writing, Judaism was well established and less in need of defining itself as opposed to other religions. There was still some emphasis on the prohibition on idol worship, but the focus was much less on this than in the earlier writings. By the time of the Hasidic period, that focus was no longer there at all.

During the *tannaitic*, *amoraic*, and hasidic periods the Jews were living under oppressive conditions. The *tannaim* and *amoraim* were living under Roman rule which was often difficult, whereas the Hasidim were living under various governments in Eastern Europe, which was often a place of extreme anti-Semitism. During each of these times, many of these texts served as *nehamta* texts. The writers wanted to reassure the Jews that life would not always be oppressive, that there was a God, and that the Messiah would someday come. They each interpreted that from the beginning of the first commandment.

On the other hand, by and large, the Jews were flourishing during the medieval times. This was the "Golden Age" of Judaism. The Jews were living under Muslim rule and were given more freedom than they had had previously. There was a cultural and intellectual exchange between the Jewish and non-Jewish communities, which greatly influenced the philosophy of Judaism. Therefore these words were not seen as "comfort" words because the historical situation did not warrant it.

Chosenness is a theme that is addressed by the *tannaim* and the Hasidic leaders. In the *tannaitic* material the rabbis wrote that every nation had the chance to accept God's Torah, but that only the Jewish people chose to accept it. Therefore the choosing was by Israel and not by God. There is also an element of moral superiority with this choice. According to the *Mekhlita of R. Ishmael*, the other nations decided that they could not abide by the rules of the covenant because they were too difficult. Each nation had a particular "sin" that they were unwilling to give up. Only Israel was morally strong enough to accept the covenant. This piece was directed at the pagan nations, whereas

later in the *Mekhilta*, it is directed at the Christians. There it says that the "people of Noah," who were presumably the Christians, could not even keep the seven Noahite laws. This is why it was known that they would be unable to keep the 613 laws, and therefore unable to be the "chosen people."

The Hasidic texts also have a sense of superiority with chosenness. The Sefas Emes believes that the people of Israel are the "princes of the world." They are closest to God and are the ones with the authority to appoint God as the Sovereign of the entire world. He believes that it was not happenstance that led Israel to be the chosen people. This was not an opportunity given to all peoples. Israel did choose God to be the God of the world, but God had already chosen Israel to be in God's royal court.

The relationship between God and the Jewish people is a topic reflected in almost all of these periods. The *tannaim* believed that the Jews could choose what type of relationship they would have with God. They could choose whether God would act out of mercy or out of judgment depending on whether they followed God's laws or not. They believed that the Jews had an eternal obligation to serve God because God freed them from slavery. They also believed that God appeared in different forms according to what was appropriate for the particular situation.

The *amoraim* thought that each person had a unique relationship with God. God uses a different voice to address each person because of the specific relationship. Therefore it appears as if there are many gods, even though there are not.

The medieval commentators do not concern themselves with the relationship between God and the Jewish people. This may reflect the more "scientific" Muslim influence of the time. The Hasidic rabbis on the other hand, concentrate on the relationship more than any other time period, because it is such an integral part of their theology. Each of the Hasidic writers have a different philosophy about the relationship between God and the Jewish people.

Rabbi Levi likens the relationship to a relationship between parent and child, as opposed to slave and master. With parent and child, both parties love each other, although the parent clearly has more power. He also sees the relationship between God and the Jewish people as an ever changing one. Levi's ultimate goal was to achieve *deveikut* where there are no boundaries between God and the Jewish people.

Naftali believes that God is in each person. This is symbolized by the "*alef*" in every face. God is not transcendent in his theology; rather God is immanent. Likewise Sefas Emes does not think that there are boundaries between God and the people. Most of the time this is forgotten, but at Sinai, the people all understood this truth.

From the *amoraic* period on, the commentators were interested in which commandments were heard directly by God and which were mediated through Moses. This represents the theology of whether people had direct access to God or whether they needed to go through a prophet, rabbi, or some other important person. The *amoraim* had a debate over

which commandments were heard directly, which probably indicates a power struggle between rabbis who wanted a rabbinic elite where powerful rabbis mediated, and those who wanted a more democratic Judaism.

Maimonides and the author of the *Halachot Gedolot* each had a different answer as to which commandments were heard directly. Maimonides takes what the Talmud says in *Makkot* as truth and agrees that only the first two commandments were heard directly. The author of the *Halachot Gedolot* thinks that the first five were heard directly. It is unclear what significance this had for each of them.

The only Hasidic commentator who addressed this question was Naftali of Ropczyce. He quoted Rabbi Mendl's statement that only the *alef* was heard at Sinai. Since this is the *alef* that is the seal on every person's face, God is very intimate to every Jew. This leaves a lot of interpretation for what actually was heard by each Jew at Sinai. Since the *alef* is only a sound, then one person may derive a completely different meaning than someone else.

There are many other interpretations that were specific to each time period. This may have been due to the particular situation of the commentators.

The *tannaim* wrote about the different reactions of the non-Jews to the giving of the Torah. In the *Mekhilta of R. Ishmael*, the other nations were scared at the time of Revelation. It was Balaam who had to reassure them that God was not out to destroy the

world. The important concept was that Revelation took place in the open, so that all nations could see what was going on. This symbolized the fact that the Torah was open to all people, not just the Jews. This may have been important for them in order to assert that the Torah was the ultimate truth and not just the specific truth of the Jews. Likewise God is the God of the entire world and not just the God of the Jews.

The *tannaim* and the *amoraim* were dealing directly with the loss of the Temple and restructuring the religion. This is a theme that comes up during both time periods. Specifically in *Exodus Rabbah*, a *midrash* expounds on the notion that God is portable. God is not like a king who cannot move his palace (the Temple). God is more powerful and has the ability to be with the Jews even when their major structure is destroyed. This was an important theological shift that needed to occur if Judaism was to continue post-Temple. This historical reality would obviously not need to be addressed by the medieval and Hasidic commentators.

Both the *tannaim* and the *amoraim* addressed the rise of Christianity through their interpretations of Exodus 20:2, but "the rabbis" of the Talmud directly addressed the claim that Christians made that the Torah/law was a burden. The rabbis saw "anokhi" as an acronym proving that Torah was "pleasant." This directly countered the Christian claim that the new covenant would get rid of the "shackles" of the law of Judaism.

The medievalists, as mentioned before, were highly influenced by Islam. They began the serious discussion of the belief in God. They were the first to really grapple with the

significance of that belief to being a good practicing Jew. For the author of the *Halachot Gedolot* and Nachmanides, the belief in God is not one of the 613 commandments, but is the base for the commandments. One has to accept God in order to follow all the rest of the commandments. For Maimonides and Meiri the belief in God is simply one of the commandments.

Due to Aristotle's influence Muslims and Jews were interested during the medieval time in the proper categorization of things. The Jews applied this to their own religion by categorizing the 613 *mitzvot* and spelling out for the first time what those *mitzvot* were. This gave Nachmanides an opportunity to defend the *Halachot Gedolot's* counting against Maimonides. Nachmanides always defended the older rabbis, because he thought they deserved more honor. Maimonides not only defined what the 613 *mitzvot* were, but created a scientific method for categorizing the *mitzvot*.

The Hasidim were most concerned with the relationship with God and the Jewish people. They used mystical traditions as the filter in which they looked at these words. They questioned if there were boundaries at all between God and people. They did not necessarily see God as a being that was separate from humanity.

The Sefas Emes also used the interpretation as a way to discuss evil in the world. He claimed that other nations each have a role to play in the world, except for Amalek. Amalek comes to represent evil in the world. This is the way that Sefas Emes can include non-Jews in his theology without denying the reality of evil.

Each commentator looks to these three words through the lens of their own theology and their own context. Just as they believe that the relationship with God is a dynamic one that is constantly developing, so too are these words dynamic and constantly being reinterpreted.

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