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THE HOMILIES IN NUMBERS RABBAH

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## CHAPTER I

### THE BOOK

Numbers Rabbah or Bemidbar Rabbah is one the series of homiletical midrashim on the books of the Bible. It is "a running commentary of an imaginative, didactic and homiletic nature on the book of Numbers".<sup>1</sup> Replete with aggadic material, rich in homilies, full of excellent sermons and sermonic fragments, it is a valuable source for the study of the development of Jewish preaching; moreover, it gives the reader a keen insight into almost every aspect of the life of the generations that produced it.

Bemidbar Rabbah in the editio princeps of Constantinople (1512) is also referred to as Bemidbar Sinai Rabbah,<sup>2</sup> and in some older works even as Wayyedabber Rabbah.<sup>3</sup> The Venice edition (1545) of this book was called Sepher Rabbot.<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly the latest of the Pentateuchal midrashim, it was probably composed in the twelfth century, and seems to be the work of more than one author. "The original work belongs already to the younger Midrashic literature."<sup>4</sup> Zunz in his Die Gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden holds that "this work is hardly older than the twelfth century" although it is mentioned for the first time in the thirteenth.<sup>5</sup>

The book consists of two heterogeneous parts.<sup>6</sup> A certain disproportion is readily evident. Part I is commentary on

Numbers I-VII, or on the Pentateuchal parashyot Bemidbar and Naso. Of the two, Naso is treated more elaborately than Bemidbar, inasmuch as three times as much space is devoted to it. Part II deals with the remaining eight sidroth of the book of Numbers.

The reason for this disproportion is "that beneath the present structure there is an underlying framework, which has been filled in, enlarged and embellished by two or more writers to form the somewhat ponderous and uneven edifice that we now possess. This framework...was the ancient Midrash known as Tanhuma of which there seems to be three successive editions. The earliest dates to as far back as the fifth century C.E. before the completion of the Babylonian Talmud; the second, known as Yelammedenu, and now entirely lost, is extensively quoted in the Yalkut and various Rabbinic authorities; while the third, still current edition, is an emended edition of these with supplementary passages by later authors."<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the Tanhuma midrashim and homilies figure prominently in the text of Numbers Rabbah as we know it today. Not only does the latter make mention of excerpts from the earlier editions of Tanhuma but it refers to Pesikta of<sup>8</sup> R. Kahana, Pesikte Rabbati, and also to French rabbis. The style of the homilies in Numbers Rabbah resembles that of Tanhuma, inasmuch as the introduction to the homilies very often start off with an Halachah.<sup>9</sup> Waxman points out that Bemidbar Rabbah contains quotations from the Babylonian

Talmud and from other aggadic collections, and that the author of "Numbers (Rabbah) was already acquainted with the poems of Eliezer Kalir, later mystic teachings, and the later books of the Kabbala..."<sup>10</sup>

The first part of the book dealing with the first two parashot of Numbers (Bemidbar and Naso) contains a stream of newer aggadic material. It is "characterized by frequent repetition and a confused arrangement of unconnected subjects."<sup>11</sup> In Naso itself, "in room of the brief explanations or allegories of the ancients, instead of their constant appeal to authorities, we read here compilations from halakic and haggadic works, intermixed with artificial, often playful applications of the Scriptures and for many pages we find no source named."<sup>12</sup>

There seems to be greater unity in style and content in the second part of Numbers Rabbah. Fewer liberties are taken with the original text. Whereas "the writer of the first part has revised, amplified, interpolated and modified the groundwork to such an extent as to obliterate almost entirely all traces of the underlying source"<sup>13</sup> the second part adheres most closely to the original with "the text of Tanhuma...followed almost verbatim, though chapter XVIII shows signs of elaboration in the spirit of later commentaries."<sup>14</sup> Midrash Tanhuma is reproduced almost word for word in the second part of Midrash Rabbah Numbers.<sup>15</sup>

(In his introduction to Midrash Tanhuma published in 1895 in Lemberg, Buber designates every portion of Numbers Rabbah

not to be found in Tanhuma as דגדג.<sup>15a</sup>)

As to the authorship, it is unlikely, in view of the two heterogeneous parts, that it is the work of one author. According to Epstein, some author wrote the midrash on the parashah Bemidbar in order to complete the Sifre; another then continued it with the commentary on Naso, and in order to complete the work for the remainder of Numbers, the commentary for the remaining parashot was drawn from Tan-<sup>16</sup>  
huma. At all events, the first part of Bemidbar Rabbah

"shows all the marks of the late haggadic age; there is much which can be referred to R. Moses ha-Darshan, and  
which reveals a connection with Midrash Tadshe."<sup>17</sup>

So much for the nature, the content, the structure and the origins of the book. We will now proceed to examine it for its style and language, as well as the homiletical and literary forms employed in its writing.



## CHAPTER II

### THE HOMILIES

#### A. Exegesis

The basis for the entire book of Numbers Rabbah is the Pentateuchal book of Numbers. The verses of Numbers are the central cores of the midrashic homilies contained Numbers Rabbah. Thus, by and large, the writers of the Midrash were concerned with the exposition and explanation of Scriptural verses. That they introduced other biblical verses not part of Numbers, as well as Mishnaic and Halachic material, does not belie the fact that their main sources, their essential points of departure are verses from Numbers.

When examining the methods of exposition and explanation of those Biblical verses -- in other words, when one observes the exegetic techniques -- one is amazed at the large variety of methods used by the ingenious preachers to get their messages across to their congregations. We shall examine some of the methods and techniques utilized in presenting a few of the many homilies contained in the book.

The most frequent method of presenting an homily was not to begin with the subject of the homily or its derived implication; that would have been too simple,

too didactic, would have indicated no originality or ingenuity on the part of the preacher, and besides, would have given no Scriptural sanction or authority to the preacher's message. Accordingly, the preacher would begin with an extraneous verse, introduce the homily, and eventually establish some relationship with the main verse. That these relationships were often far-fetched or tenuous, or that the preacher would introduce other verses to "prove" incidental points in the body of the proem did not matter; that he might have meandered all over countless by-paths before he got to his main point was incidental. All resemblances, thoughts, after-thoughts, incidental ideas which he would muster could be incorporated into the proem. Thus, these homilies reveal a phenomenal acquaintance with the Bible as well as unusual skill in spinning homilies for the edification of those whose privilege it was to listen to him. In addition, "aside from weighing and probing the significance of every word and phrase, (he) relates stories, weaves legends and allegories, invents parables and fables, all that he may make the ideas deduced from the text luminous and impressive, and thus gain highest sanction for his own religious outlook." <sup>1</sup> (Italics mine.)

In other types of sermonic exposition the preacher would employ a "prefatory statement of a legalistic nature" -- for instance, a passage from Mishnah or Halachah -- as a point of departure. It enabled him to introduce more variety into his preaching, acquaint the people with im-

portant passages of non-Biblical literature, and derive sanction almost as valid as the Biblical for his religious outlook. Thus, in examining Numbers Rabbah, one discovers that the most common method of textual exposition is the use of the extraneous verse; frequently, however, there are sections with Halachic introductions<sup>2</sup> which later are tied up with the Biblical text.

Many different types of texts are employed by the preachers. The transparent text, the obscure, the allegorical, the relative and the pictorial texts are all readily evident in the homilies of Numbers Rabbah. (See listing and classification in Bettan: Studies in Jewish Preaching — Chap. I) It is not within the scope of this thesis to analyze each and every homiletical text and show the method of its development. It will suffice merely to present certain outstanding examples of textual development, commenting briefly on each, and showing how each is representative of the exegetical techniques of the preachers.

An example of the transparent text is the following: "And I will bless thee." The idea is apparent. However, the preacher expounds it further to relate it to the idea of travel. Inasmuch as travel reduces a man's procreative activities, diminishes his ready money, and obscures his fame, Abraham is not so affected even though he is to travel much, because God tells him: "I will make of thee a great nation; I will bless thee; and make thy name great."<sup>3</sup>

This is but one example chosen at random. A better example is the text: "Shall one man sin, and wilt Thou be wroth with all the congregation?" (Numbers 16.22) This text is likewise very clear; it needs no explanation, merely elaboration. Thereupon God's action in ferretting out the sinners is contrasted with the action of a king in similar circumstances. The inference is that God is not wroth with the whole congregation since He generally succeeds in singling out the sinner, and thus the whole congregation does not have to suffer for the malefactions of a few individuals.<sup>4</sup>

The best instance of an obscure text is the first part of the priestly benediction: "May the Lord bless thee and guard thee." It is shown by the preacher that the first part of the verse really refers to the sons of Israel, and the latter part refers to the daughters of Israel, because they -- being women -- were a constant source of anxiety.<sup>5</sup> Or when the preacher is confronted with the text, Numbers 2.34, he comments on the absence of Aaron's name, which normally should be coupled with that of Moses. Whereupon, he explains that Aaron's status in the congregation -- the people despised him for certain of his actions -- was the reason for the omission of his name. However, when God saw that the people were treating Aaron with disrespect, he mentions his name first in the following verse, which happens to be the first in chapter three.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it would

appear as if the text were an obscure one at first, and then is afterwards employed as a relative text.

In the first chapter of Numbers the expression ח'אל ח'אל is seemingly superfluous; hence, the text is obscure, and the preacher feels it incumbent upon himself to explain it.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in Numbers 7.1, the use of the term לכא to characterize God needs explanation; accordingly, the preacher shows how that term denotes hardness<sup>8</sup> -- which goes a long way towards explaining the text. The explanation of the word לכא follows use of an obscure text -- Numbers 3.2f.<sup>9</sup> Finally, another obscure text is Ecclesiastes 12.11 -- "as nails well fastened (עץ חַי) -- which puzzles the preacher momentarily because of a mixture of two figures of speech.<sup>10</sup> However, he solves this problem with consummate skill. These are simple examples chosen at random to illustrate the exegetical skill of the preacher in the use of the most common text -- the text that demands explanation rather than mere elaboration -- the obscure text.

The relative text in Numbers Rabbah, though not so frequent as the obscure text, is utilized fairly often. Genesis 17.26 which tells that Abraham was circumcised and 18.1, immediately following, which tells that God revealed Himself to Abraham, are linked together, and the position and proximity of the verses are equated with the proximity and position of those two incidents. Accordingly, a relation<sup>11</sup> between those two incidents is derived.

Two opposite texts, contradicting each other, Numbers 3.15 and Numbers 1.49 (though not located too close to each other) are reconciled by the preacher in a very ingenious manner. Thus one sees the possibilities inherent in the use of relative texts. Instead of using relative texts, one preacher takes one section dealing with the leper and relates it to the section following immediately -- dealing with the unfaithful wife. In skillful fashion he develops his particular theme -- merely on the basis of the relationship of two sections of the book of Numbers.<sup>12</sup>

The pictorial text appears in this book as follows:

2902 | 412 2226 -- "Thy navel is like a round goblet."

(Song of Songs 7.3) The preacher's thought revolves around the navel, and so he comments that it is the Sanhedrin that is referred to in that phrase: just as the navel is in the center of the body, so Israel's Sanhedrin is located in the center of the Temple; the phrase -- "Thy belly is like a heap of wheat" -- is treated in the same way: it is really Israel that is referred to since it is numbered and counted on every occasion.<sup>13</sup> There are many other types of this kind but this one is chosen merely to illustrate the nature of its use. The main test of such a text is whether "the thought of the preacher revolves around some graphic word or phrase, which it is the aim of the preacher to trace in vivid colors with impressive effect."<sup>14</sup>

Finally there is the allegoric text. Such a text,

providing much mental grist for the preacher, is Psalm 92. 13f. "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree." How does the preacher expound the idea of comparing Israel and/or the righteous with a palm tree? He points out that "as the palm tree yields juicy dates, nicalaos dates, and inferior dates as well as thorns, so it is with Israel: there are scholars among them, and plain people (שליח נח) and boorish people." Or "as the palm tree contains no waste matter: the dates are for food, the branches for the Succoth Hallel; the twigs for covering the top of the Succah, the bast for ropes, the leaves for sieves, the planed trunks for the roofing of houses, so it is with Israel -- they contain no worthless matter: some are masters of Scripture; some of Mishnah, some of Haggadah; some devote themselves to the performance of pious deeds while others devote themselves to charitable acts." <sup>15</sup> Such is the manner in which the allegorical text is used to the best advantage.

So far we have indicated how each of these types of texts have been put to good use by the writers of Numbers Rabbah. Now we shall consider other forms of exegetical development which do not fall strictly in the above-mentioned categories, but should be examined for the picture they give us of the varied and ingenious exegesis of the midrashists. An example of one form used frequently is the following: God is compared to a mortal king; whereupon follows a list of ten resemblances, each one supported by a

different Biblical verse.<sup>16</sup> The main characteristic or distinguishing feature of this form is that it is eclectic in nature; it is a systematic gathering of certain relevant data. In order to prove that there were no lame people among the Israelites in Sinai, the preacher marshals a list of five verses and derives significant inferences from each of the five relative to his main thesis.<sup>17</sup> This is also eclectic in form.

Some preacher who was well acquainted with the Bible when examining the text -- "And the Lord spoke unto Moses and unto Aaron" -- recalled that there were eighteen such references of God speaking to Moses and Aaron together. From this fact he puts two and two together and obtains a splendid homily on the nature of prayer and especially the Eighteen Benedictions.<sup>18</sup> And this was only another of the multifarious devices employed in the book.

For anyone believing that the preacher would bend his opinions to square with exegetical technique, in other words, knowingly sacrifice truth on the altar of cleverness, he can peruse the textual development of Proverb 29.23 -- "A man's pride shall bring him low, but he that is of a lowly spirit shall attain to honor." The preacher's premise is that Joseph, considered by Jewish tradition as a saintly man, was an arrogant, ostentatious person, and that Judah, who certainly was a lesser individual, took precedence in presenting his offering at the Tabernacle and received honor from the other tribes.<sup>19</sup> Thus, in the preacher's sermon



development Joseph comes out second-best -- and the preacher's integrity is preserved intact!

The writers of Numbers Rabbah as well as the writers of other midrashic works were essentially Biblical critics. They felt it incumbent upon them to resolve contradictions, to explain discrepancies, to solve obscure passages. Their method was one, however, of bloodless surgery. They could not tamper with the text of the Bible or remove interpolations, or extirpate obviously redundant words or dittographies, for the body and the soul of the Bible were sacred. The Bible could be expounded, explained; ideas could be developed from it; concepts could be derived from its verses. Reality had to be adjusted to the sacred words; the sacred words could not be touched or altered or corrected -- merely to suit reality.

Accordingly, the midrashists developed methods and techniques of their own. Already we have examined a few of them. Another one of their techniques was to take a word or a word in a certain position, and explain it. For example R. Levi said: In every instance where 'd'1 is used, it can only signify distress, as in: Esther 1.1; Ruth 1.1.; Genesis 6.1, etc. In like manner, the use of the word 3d/c indicates <sup>20</sup>superlative. The double appearance of the word k12 in Deuteronomy 9.3 invites similar comment. <sup>21</sup>Repetition, juxtaposition, and unusual use of Biblical words and phrases are explained away and expounded through the entire book. It is not necessary to go into other examples of this technique.

To make this examination of midrashic exegesis complete, it would be of value to note other observations. One tendency of textual development possesses a strong pilpulistic flavor, not at all unlike Talmudic reasoning. An example of this tendency is seen in the following poem:

How shall a man make a fence around his own affairs? In the same way as the Torah has made a fence around hers? Behold as it says: And thou shalt not approach unto a woman... as long as she is impure by her uncleanness. (Leviticus 18.19) One might assume that he is allowed to embrace her and kiss her or in idle conversation with her. Scripture therefore states explicitly: Thou shalt not approach. It might be assumed that she may sleep with him in her garments on the same bed. Scripture therefore states: Thou shalt not approach, etc. (Italics mine.)

Another tendency that should be noted -- but necessarily briefly -- is the frequent play on words in midrashic exegesis. The word חַיִּיב in Psalm 68.7 is broken down into two words: יב and חַי, and from each of the new words is developed a new thought.<sup>22</sup> The classic play on a word (incidentally not peculiar to Numbers Rabbah) is the reading of חַיִּיב (engraved) as חַיִּיב (freedom).<sup>23</sup> Similarly, when the book compares the words of the wise to goads, it breaks down the various synonyms for goads: חַיִּיב<sup>24</sup> to חַיִּיב; חַיִּיב to חַיִּיב; and חַיִּיב to חַיִּיב. Or, in the case of Delilah, a pun is obtained from her name. (Judges 16.4) Rabbi says: "Even if her name had not been Delilah, she deserved to be called by such a name. She weakened (חַיִּיב) his (Sampson's) strength, his actions, his determin-

ation."<sup>25</sup> This thesis cannot cover the entire gamut of such usages; suffice it to say, these are but samples of one type of exegetical development.

Finally, mention must be made of similar devices. Numerology -- the counting of the numerical value of certain letters in certain words, equating them with other words, and deriving thereby certain homiletical conclusions -- probably delighted many a congregation, but the study of such devices would add little to the understanding of midrashic exegesis. Also, rebuses and acrostics,<sup>26</sup> were other forms of word play used in connection with preaching. The rarest of the rare is the examination of a letter -- for example, the yod in one word of a Biblical text -- and inferring that since that letter is abnormally small (a copyist's error that had been immortalized and hence sanctified)<sup>27</sup> the sinner weakens the hand of the Designer (God).

This, in brief, is an exposition of the exegesis that typifies the composition of the homilies in Midrash Rabbah Numbers.

## B. Literary Style

The literary style of the homilies in Numbers Rabbah is distinguished by vigorous and direct language. Simple and direct, the homilies tell fine stories, impart religious and ethical ideas with a minimum of words, all well chosen.

There are no verbal excesses -- inasmuch as the material in the book was prepared for popular consumption. It is a book for the people, with its homilies directed to the intelligence and understanding of even the simplest housewife.

Since the book is composed of sermons, sermonic-fragments, and homilies, much illustrative material is used. There are endless examples, analogies, proverbs, parables, allegories, fables and legends adorning the sermons. All of these forms will be recognized readily in Chapter III, where the material is carefully classified. Therefore, it is unnecessary to chose examples of the illustrations of the preachers.

It is the purpose of this section to point out the best examples of literary value. Good writing and distinctiveness of style shall be our only criteria. The reader must be warned that this listing is not exhaustive, but merely an honest attempt to chose the most representative examples of good writing that would pass muster today in the critical evaluation of any literature.

One of the most novel literary gems in Numbers Rabbah, distinguished by its keen, realistic observation of life and its unusual approach, is the following dissertation presented in the name of R. Meir:

As there are varying temperaments in regard to food and drink, so there are varying temperaments in regard to people: There

is the type of person who, if a fly falls into his cup, flicks it out and drinks the content of the cup. This is the case with the ordinary man, who, if he sees his wife gossiping with her neighbors and relatives leaves her alone. You have the type...who, should a fly flutter over the surface of his cup, will seize the cup and pour out its contents without tasting it. This is an evil quality in people, for such a person has concentrated on divorcing his wife. You have a type...who, if a fly should settle on the surface of his cup, takes it and puts it down untouched. Such was Judah b. Pappus who bolted the door in his wife's face. (Git. 90a) (He was rebuked for an act which might drive his wife to immorality and sow dissention) You have the type of person, who, if a dead fly falls in his cup takes out the fly and sucks it and then drinks. Such is the wicked man who sees (without protest) his wife being intimate with her servants, going out into the market place with her head uncovered, garments slit on either side and bathing in a spot where men bathe.

28

One of the chief characteristics of the midrashic literary style is the adaptation of the language of one sphere of activity into the language of another sphere. Here is such an example based upon I Samuel 16.18: "Skillful in playing means the ability to ask pertinent questions; a mighty man of valor means the ability to reply to such questions; a man of war means the ability to give and  
29  
take in the battle of the Torah. Thus, in the course of history, when military prowess had given ground to scholarly excellence, the language and terminology of military science <sup>are</sup> is transferred to a less sanguinary medium.

Generally, the heroes and villains of the Bible are

portrayed as such by the preachers, but on certain occasions they are portrayed even as human beings, with either human failings or virtues. In one instance, Pharaoh is given dignity and status, for he showed honor to God by going forth to meet Him at the head of the retinue. (Exodus 14.10)<sup>30</sup> Conversely, Joseph, than whom there was hardly a saintlier man, is portrayed as a hero with certain short-comings.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the preachers were conscious of the need of good characterization in their sermons, as they presented the dramatis personae of the Bible to their people.

One of the most interesting stories in Numbers Rabbah is very much akin to the Greek legend of Narcissus. Either it was borrowed bodily from the Greek source, or the story was derived from a source common to both. Simon the Just once said: "In all my life I have never eaten of the guilt offering of a nazirite except once. On a certain occasion there can <sup>me</sup> up to me someone from the South, who, I saw, ~~to~~ <sup>he</sup> have a fair complexion with beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance, and his locks were arranged in rows of curls. I asked him: 'What made you destroy all this lovely hair?' He told me: 'Master! I was a shepherd in my native town. I went to fill a trough from the fountain and beheld my reflection in the water. My evil inclination surged up within me and sought to destroy me. So I said to it: 'Wretch! Do you take pride in a thing that is not yours? It is of dust and worms! I shall dedicate the locks to

heaven and shave them to the glory of heaven." ' " <sup>32</sup> The resemblance to the Greek story is unmistakable, and indicates that the selection of material by the preacher was, in many instances, not parochial or narrow.

More parochial in content, but imaginative in approach, is the midrashic description of the ordeal of a woman taking the test of sotah. <sup>33</sup> The rich imagination of the preacher transforms as if by magic the sketchy Biblical account of instructions in regard to the sotah into an every-day, earthy account, elaborating it for the ready understanding of the people.

The popular sayings and proverbs of the people are utilized by the preacher in the text of the midrashim. Such a formula is as follows: אם נתת לחם לילד, תספר למת <sup>34</sup> "If you give a piece of bread to a child, inform its mother!" <sup>34</sup> Another folk-saying, rhythmic in style, concise and clever, appears in this form: אם נתת לחם לילד, תספר למת <sup>35</sup> "There is a popular proverb: If you have acquired knowledge, what do you lack?" <sup>35</sup> The Mishnaic influence is definitely stamped in the structure of that aphorism.

The text of Numbers Rabbah is otherwise enriched by other devices: besides the parables and the proverbs, the analogies and the examples, the preacher occasionally personified animals and inanimate objects. For instance, Elijah is made to apostrophize a bullock -- and an intelligent conversation between the two is carried on. <sup>36</sup> Or in another homily, the palm tree of Hammethan, endowed with a per-

sonality of its own, experiences definite sexual longings. <sup>37</sup>

The rich, earthy language of the people, of the hoi polloi, is incorporated into the homilies of the rabbis. The characters of the homilies appear very life-like by virtue of the natural and human character of their everyday speech, as reproduced by the preachers. In the story of the matrona (Roman lady) who chides R. Jose by saying: "Your God brings hear to Himself (indiscriminately) whomsoever He pleases." He brought her a basket of fruit and she carefully selected the best and ate. He said to her: "You know how to select but the Kodosh Boruch Hu doesn't?" <sup>38</sup> (Italics mine.) Note the not so delicate irony of R. Jose's speech.

In a similar story dealing with the somewhat obstreperous and doubting matrona, concerning her ability to mate couples as against that of God, R. Jose says to her: הבבר קדם קל הוא ר' יוסי אומר קודם קדוש ברוך הוא <sup>39</sup> הוא ר' יוסי אומר קודם קדוש ברוך הוא. The clever irony of his speech is more evident in the Hebrew text than in the English translation.

In one section Joseph is likened in many respects to his father Jacob. <sup>40</sup> This section is characterized by crispness of language, economy of words, and terseness of style. Although its literary style is not necessarily unusual, the form of the language arrangement merits careful perusal by the reader.

More literary in style, but almost epigrammatic in



form is the following model of concise language. It deals with a man who discovers a tree in the wilderness, partakes of the conveniences that it affords him, and then begins to apostrophize the tree. He says to the tree: "What blessing can I give you?"

[illegible]

This is indeed a masterpiece of concise, succinct language of definite literary value, inasmuch as it casts the highest emotional feelings into the mold of the poetic voice of the people!

There is nothing squeamish or effete about the preachers of the midrash. Though in certain instances they may show a puritanical deference to the conventions and codes of morality of their day, nevertheless, in the vigor of their language and the power of their expression and the choice of their subjects and words, they have no peers. An indication of this is to be found in the preacher's description of the sotah when she would drink of the bitter waters. "The water had strange effects on her. If she was white it turned her black; if red, it made her green; her mouth would emit an evil odor; her neck would swell; her flesh would de-

cay; she would be afflicted with gonorrhea; she would feel inflated and lackadaisical.<sup>42</sup> For vigor of expression, what can compare to the following illustration? "Scarcely does resin begin to ooze out before it is collected, so with Jochebed, her mother was pregnant with her..."<sup>43</sup>

No false compunctions of good taste deterred the preacher who gave a lurid description of the trade methods of the Moabite "ladies of pleasure": how they used to lure Israelites into their shops (which were really "blinds") and entice them to sin.<sup>44</sup> The language is forthright, and there is no attempt to beat around the bush with euphemistic niceties. Thus, the explanation of Numbers 25.1f by the preacher must have proved to be a delectable, pleasant experience for his auditors.

Finally, one must take cognizance of the pleasant, little stories that are Rabelaisian in their nature. The preacher ventured occasionally to enliven his discourse with an occasional bon mot, a spicy anecdote, or a juicy tale. An incident is told of a certain woman to whom a man made approaches. She designated their trysting place. What did she do then? She went and told his wife. His wife proceeded to that place and he had intercourse with her. Afterwards he repented and prayed for death. His wife said to him: "You have eaten of your own bread and drunk of your own cup. (Euphemism) The cause of your trouble is that you are presumptuous. Be just the equal of other men!"<sup>45</sup> Were it not for the ethical and moral im-

plications that perforce must give it point, one might think that this story were lifted bodily from the Decameron of Boccacio!

But the cleverest and most ingenious story of this type is the one about the woman who came to Rabbi and said to him: "I have been outraged!" Said he: "But was not the experience pleasant to you?" Said she: "Supposed a man dipped his finger in honey and put it in your mouth on Yom Kippur, would not the act displease you -- yet, after all, could you say that it did not taste sweet?" The story is concluded simply by telling us that the great Rabbi was forced to acknowledge the logic of the woman's argument.<sup>46</sup>

This, then, is a brief examination of the literary style, form, and contents of Numbers Rabbah. Only a few selected examples have been chosen -- with a whole treasure of literature lying hidden and unexposed within the pages of that book. At all events, the great variety and high literary calibre of the midrashic homilies must in some small measure be conveyed by the wide range of sample passages indicated within these pages.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE CONTENTS

##### A. Revelation

##### Torah

The basis for Midrash, in fact the basis for the life of the Jewish people throughout the centuries, was the Torah. Without Scriptural sanction or authority, there could have been no Midrash, No Mishnah, no Talmud, nor the great commentaries of the medieval period. It is no wonder, then, that the Torah was itself the subject of Midrashic comment.

For example, it is likened to a fig-tree: while the fruit of most other trees -- the olive, the date trees, and the vine -- is gathered all at once, that of the fig-tree is gathered little by little. It is the same with the Torah: one gathers a little learning today and much tomorrow, for it cannot be all "gathered in" in a year nor in two years.<sup>1</sup> Another homily compares the Torah with fine flower which floats on the surface of the sieve (since it is so rich.) "Mingled with oil" alludes to the Torah, the study of which was to be mingled with good deeds.<sup>2</sup>

Still other figures are employed. The words of the Torah are likened to goads: just as a goad directs the cow along the furrows in order to bring life to the world,

so the words of the Torah direct the heart of those that study, and take them away from the paths of death and along the paths of life!"<sup>3</sup> Or, to illustrate the interconnection and interdependence of verses and sections of the Torah, R. Huna in the name of Bar Kappara said: As pillars have wreathes above and pedestals below, so are the sections of the Torah; for they can be expounded by reference to what precedes as well as by what follows<sup>4</sup> them.

The sovereignty of Torah in the life of the people can be readily seen in the use of the saying from Pirke Aboth concerning the crown of the Torah, the priesthood, and of sovereignty. The construction of the Ark of the Law is equated with knowledge of Torah, for if one acquires Torah, it is as though he had been fortunate enough to acquire sovereignty and the priesthood.<sup>5</sup> When is a land considered happy? asks the Midrashist. When the king studies Torah, is the categorical answer. Contained in the same passage is a pun on the word חֵירוּת, which is supposed to read חֵירוּת (freedom), because you find no man really free except one who is engaged in the study of Torah.<sup>6</sup>

T Torah is indispensable in the life of the people. This is indicated by the comparison of the world -- before the giving of the Torah and the erection of the Tabernacle -- to a camp chair with two legs that cannot stand firmly but wobbles; when a third leg is added to the chair, it becomes

steadied and stands firm. Accordingly, when the Tabernacle was constructed, the world was immediately set on a new foundation.<sup>7</sup>

Scholars are made out to be free men in this world because of their preoccupation with Torah. Torah was given in the wilderness, for as the wilderness does not yield any tax from crops, and as one accepting the yoke of the Torah is relieved of the yoke of earning a living, anyone studying the Torah is a free man. It was also given in the wilderness in order that it should be common property and no one tribe would have boasted a prior claim to it.<sup>8</sup>

"As nails well fastened" (Ecclesiastes 12.11) is an apt characterization of the words of the Torah. They are well fastened in a man when their possessors (masters) are taken away: so long as the master is alive, one puts off things by saying: Whenever I require him, my master is available and I can ask him. When, however, the master dies, a man labors night and day to preserve his learning for he knows that he has no one whom he can ask. Therefore, the use of the figure "nails well fastened" is an apt one.<sup>9</sup>

The Torah was considered the source of life, a sort of spiritual life-buoy. This may be illustrated by the case of one who has been thrown into the water. The captain stretches out a rope and says to him: "Take hold of this rope with your hand and do not let go, for if you do you will lose your life!" In the same way, God said to

Israel: "As long as you adhere to the commandments, then:  
'Ye that did cleave unto the Lord your God are alive every  
one of you this day.'" (Deuteronomy 4.4)<sup>10</sup>

### Prophecy

Prophecy was a natural offshoot of Torah. Moreover, in the sense that the Midrash uses it, it was an integral part of religious revelation. The Midrashist is very much concerned about the spiritual quality of prophecy. Since the elders derived their prophetic spirit from Moses, they wanted to know whether Moses was deprived of any of his own spirit. And the answer is: no! This may be compared with a burning candle at which many candles are kindled. Still, the light of the original is not diminished. So it was with Moses: he lost nothing of his own prophetic light, as<sup>11</sup> is proved by Deuteronomy 34.10.

Great delight is taken in comparing Moses with other prophets -- Balaam being most often the antagonist par excellence -- with Moses coming out always the victor, the greatest of all prophets. Balaam is presented as a formidable opponent, and God did make him a great prophet so that the nations of the world might have no excuse for saying: "Had we possessed a prophet like Moses we would have worshipped the true God." Yet there was a subtle but important difference between the two. When God spoke to Moses, the latter stood on his feet (Deuteronomy 5.28) ; when He

spoke to Balaam, He only spoke when the latter lay prone on the ground (Numbers 24.4). He spoke to Moses mouth to mouth (Numbers 12.8); not so with Balaam (Numbers 24.4). With Moses He spoke face to face; with Balaam He spoke only<sup>12</sup> in parables (Numbers 23.7).

Further distinctions between the two are made. While Balaam knew who was speaking with him (Numbers 24.16), Moses had no idea of who was speaking. The reason for this apparently is that Moses' prophecy was of such a lofty nature that the human mind could not discern whether it was God or an angel that was speaking. Furthermore, Moses did not know when God would speak with him; Balaam knew exactly (Numbers 24.16) Balaam is compared to a king's cook who knows exactly what the king will eat; in the same way he knew what God would speak to him about. And finally, even though Moses could not speak with God whenever he liked, Balaam had attained a certain familiarity with the deity, speaking with him whenever he pleased, for it says: "fallen down and his eyes open", (Numbers 24.4) which indicates that he used to prostrate himself on his face and his eyes<sup>13</sup> were opened to anything that he inquired about. In spite of the recognized greatness of Balaam as a prophet, he, nevertheless, takes second place to Moses, the hero of Biblical prophecy.



## B. The Theology

The best indication of the nature of any given civilization is its God-ideas. The God-idea of the Midrash is a poetic, personal, warm and loving one. It is not too dissimilar to the God-ideas of other civilizations as reflected by their literature. There is one distinction however; although the composers of these homilies dealing with God allowed themselves many liberties -- ascribing human, anthropomorphic characteristics to God -- nevertheless, paramount is a deep, abiding respect for the deity; predominant is a warm, respectful love for God; all-pervading is a spirit of organic, intimate relation to the keystone of religious and theological belief.

### Conception of God

From the verse in Song of Songs (2.9), "My beloved is like a gazelle or a young hart", God is likened to that beautiful, spry creature. R. Isaac expounded: as the gazelle advances in leaps, so the Holy One came by leaps and bounds from Egypt to the sea, from the sea to Sinai.<sup>14</sup> Another explanation of the same verse is the following: as the gazelle leaps from place to place, from fence to fence, from tree to tree, so the Holy One travels by leaps and bounds from one congregation to another! Why all this alacrity? That God may bless Israel wherever they may be found.<sup>15</sup>

The relation of Israel to God was so intimate that Israel dares reason with God, and gently correct a wrong impression on the part of the deity without the least indication of lese-majeste or affront. One proem comments that many trifles were offered to God in the wilderness as evidenced by Numbers 7.13-17. This presented a problem to the preacher: how were these trifling gifts consonant with the greatness of God? Accordingly, the following example is adduced: A king was out on a journey, and his attendant brought him a meal, suitable only for the road and his temporary lodging. The king resented this fact. They said to him: "We are on a journey and have brought you food that is in keeping with the journey. When you finally enter the city and come into the palace, you will see how greatly we will honor you." In the same manner, God asked when the gifts were brought; "Is this consistent with My glory?" Said they: "We are in the wilderness and presented Thee with an offering in keeping with the wilderness. When Thou wilt enter Thy palace, then Thou wilt see how many sacrifices, how many bullocks, etc. we will offer you." Thus, even God can be reasoned with, and appeased by the irresistible logic of the Midrash.

#### God as King

The above is not the only reference to God as king. In fact, in this particular collection of midrashim, the

most familiar reference to the deity is God as king. All the midrashic books of this period emphasize the majestic qualities of God. Yet God is definitely considered as the King of Kings. R. Phinehas shows the difference between God and mortal kings: When God gave the Torah to Israel and said: "I am the Lord Thy God", the kings said: "He speaks as we do, for what king wishes that another should deny him recognition?" When He said: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me", they said: "What king likes to have an associate?" When He said: "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord Thy God in vain", they said: "What king could possibly consent that the people swear by him and yet speak falsely?" When He said: "Remember the Sabbath Day", they said: "What king would be satisfied that the people should not honor the day which he kept as a rest-day?" When, however, He said: "Honor thy father and thy mother", they remarked, "According to our laws any person who registers himself as loyal to the king must renounce his parents, whereas God does not demand such renunciation, rather on the contrary." Accordingly, these earthly kings rose from their  
16  
thrones and gave God praise.

In another proem the likeness of God to a mortal king (פרק רב) is enumerated and Scriptural verses are cited to substantiate the statements. A mortal king has army chiefs, commanders, and distributes donations to his legions, distributes garments and robes to his hosts, pronounces the death sentence, imposes fines, inflicts lashes, prov-

iding places of exile for sinners, etc. Such are also the prerogatives of God.

In a different manner, God is compared to a prince who entered a province whose inhabitants fled from his presence. He then entered a second province, and the same thing occurred. Finally, he entered a ruined city and all advanced to welcome him and to praise him. The three places visited by the king represent the Red Sea, the mountains, and the waste wilderness respectively, with Psalm 114.3, 4 and Isaiah 42.11 illustrating those places. The upshot of the matter is that God chose the wilderness -- over all other places -- as His place of abode.

The attempt -- or rather the natural inclination -- to portray God as essentially human is best indicated by the following story. A mortal king who built four palaces in four different cities. He went into one of them, and ate and drank without removing his shoes. The same occurred in the second and third palaces. When he came to the fourth palace, not only did he eat and drink and command his attendants to have all the prominent people bring food before him, but he took off his shoes as well. They asked him why this was different. He said: "When I entered the first palace, my mind was not at ease; it was the same in the second and the third palaces. Each moment I thought: 'When shall I see the hour in which I can enter the last one?' Now that I have entered, my mind is finally at ease."

It was the same with God. He made war against Pharaoh, Amalek, Sisera, Sennacharib, Nebuchadnezzar, Haman, the king of the Greeks (Antiochus) but His mind will not be calmed until He will Himself wreak vengeance against Ed-<sup>17</sup>om. In such a wise did God manifest Himself to the age of the midrashic writers.

Another story that will shed light on the preachers' view of God is the one about a king who was passing by a place where a group of young boys were standing. One of them cursed the king and the latter was filled with wrath against him. A certain citizen who was among them hit the boy. Thus was the king's wrath placated. Accordingly, God Himself turned back His wrath against the whole people<sup>18</sup> when He was placated by Phinehas (Numbers 25.9).

The above stories were invented and composed in order to explain certain Biblical verses. Our chief concern with them is to observe the nature of the writers' appreciation and understanding of the deity. In addition to this<sup>favorably</sup> technique of/ comparing God to mortal kings, there are a great many midrashim which are conscious of the short-comings of mortal kings and seek to emphasize -- by way of compensation -- the difference between them and God.

Such a proem is in the form of an adoration of the deity: Sovereign of the Universe! In the case of a mortal king, if a province rebels against him and rises and curses the king and his deputies, even if only ten or twenty of them have done so, he sends his legions there and carries

out a massacre, slaying the good with the bad, because he cannot tell who has honored the king and who has cursed him. Thou, however, knowest the thoughts of man and what the hearts and kidneys advise. Thou discernest the inclinations of Thy creatures and knowest what man has really sinned and which has not, who has rebelled and who has not. Thou knowest the spirit of each and every one. Accordingly, it says: "The God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and wilt Thou be wroth with ~~all~~ the congregation?" The Holy One said to them: "You have spoken well! I shall make<sup>19</sup> it known who has sinned and who has not."

Similarly, R. Abin said: The qualities of God are not like those of a mortal king. A mortal king enters a province and after the inhabitants thereof have accorded him praise and honor, he grants them public baths, and does some special favor for the province. The Holy One is not so. Before even Israel had made the Tabernacle, He gave them blessings. (Numbers 7.1)

Continuing in the same strain is the statement of R. Simeon. Observe now, says he, that the way of God is not like the way of a mortal. If a mortal king goes into battle, he goes accompanied by armies and legions, but when he goes on a peaceful mission he goes alone. It is exactly the opposite in the case of God. And the following verses: Job 25.2,3, Daniel 7.10. Exodus 15.3 and Isaiah 63.3 are cited for Scriptural proof.

Omniscience and Omnipresence of God

The Midrashist conceived of God as omniscient and omnipresent. His spirit pervaded all of life, and He knew the innermost workings of a man's mind. The following little stories demonstrate this aspect of God's essence. An architect was appointed collector of fines over a city which he had built. The inhabitants of the city began to hide their silver and their gold in secret places. Said the architect to them: "I built the city and I constructed the hiding places. Would you hide those things from me?" So it is with God and the adulterers. Says He to them: "Would you hide yourselves from Me? Is it not I who created the hearts, etc.?"<sup>20</sup>

The preacher gets a chance to demonstrate to his congregation the nature of God, remarkable for its rather advanced concept. He is confronted with a problem: in Exodus 26.25 it is stated that Moses was unable to enter the tent of meeting because...the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. How does this square with the idea that God's glory fills all the world? The preacher, ingeniously conjures up the figure of a cave situated near the sea shore. When the sea becomes stormy, the cave is filled without the sea becoming any the poorer. In the same manner the Tent of Meeting was filled with the spirit of the Shechinah without the world becoming any the poorer.<sup>21</sup>

But most beautiful in its simplicity and most effective

in demonstrating the inherent greatness of God is the story of the idolater who once asked R. Gamaliel: "Why did God reveal Himself to Moses out of a bush?" He answered: "If He had appeared on a carob-tree or on a fig-tree, you would have asked a similar question. I must not, however, let you go unanswered. It serves to teach you that there is no spot unoccupied by the Shechinah and that God would communicate with Moses -- even from a bush!"<sup>22</sup> It is precisely a story of this sort which embodies the marvellous spirit of the Midrash, which emphasizes its relationship to the religious longings, beliefs, and aspirations of the people, at the same time endowing the deity with one of the highest of all human virtues -- humility -- without impairing one whit any of His power and glory.

### God's Light

God as the embodiment of light and as the source of all light is a common theme for the midrashist. God is self-sufficient, hence self-luminous, and when He commands the lighting of lamps, it is not because He requires them but only in order that Israel may acquire merit. (In certain instances the concept of light is equated with that of Torah.) The difference between the light of mortals and that of God is stated in the following: When a man builds a house, he makes it with windows that are narrow on the



outside and broad within, so that the light may enter from the outside and illuminate the interior. When Solomon built the Temple he constructed the windows in an opposite manner: so that the light might go forth from the interior and shine outside (I Kings 6.4). This serves to inform you that God is all light and does not really need Israel's light.<sup>23</sup>

And even though God is all light and does not need Israel's light, yet He delights in Israel's light and orders them to prepare candlesticks for Him. This is likened to the case of a king who wished to dine with a friend and ordered him to make preparations to entertain him. His friend prepared an ordinary couch, candlesticks and table. When the king arrived, his minister preceded him in pomp with a golden candlestick. The friend, ashamed, put away all that he had prepared. The king inquired as to the reason for that, and the friend answered: "Seeing all the pomp accompanying you, I felt ashamed and put away all that I had prepared because they were common utensils." "By your life" said the king, "I shall discard all the utensils I have brought, and for love of you, I shall use none but yours!"<sup>24</sup>

The same theme of God not needing Israel's light is embodied in still another parable: A blind man and a man who could see were walking on the way. Said the man who could see to the blind man: "When we enter the house, go and kindle this lamp for me and give me light." The blind

man replied: "Will you be good enough to explain? When I was on the road you supported me. Now ~~you~~<sup>you</sup> tell me: 'Kindle this lamp for me and give me light.'" The seeing man answered him: "The reason why I asked you to give me light is in order that you might not be under obligation to me for having accompanied you on the road." This story is interpreted as God not actually requiring Israel's service, but in His great wisdom allowing Israel to reciprocate a great kindness. Just as I have given you light, says God, so may you give me light. Thus shall you rise in the estimation of the nations, who will say: "See how Israel gives light to Him who gives light to the whole world!"<sup>25</sup>

#### Other Attributes and Aspects of God

Most of the midrashim dealing with God are paeans of praise to His greatness. Revealing the great respect and awe of the writers of the Midrash for God is the following: R. Abin the Levite explained a Biblical verse (Genesis 39.3) to mean that Joseph used to offer a benediction to God over each thing that he did, and his master would see him whispering with his mouth. When asked the reason, Joseph would answer: "I am offering a blessing to God." His master would say: "I would like to see Him." Joseph replied: "Behold the sun is only one of his ministers and you cannot look at it --<sup>26</sup> then how can you look at God Himself?"

Similar in construction to the midrash on prophecy (see

footnote no. 11) is the one on the inexhaustible nature of God's spirit. The same figure is employed: a man lighting one candle with another, and the former candle burns while the latter loses nothing. In addition, God's spirit is compared to the fragrance of a citron. A person can inhale and enjoy its fragrance, yet the citron itself loses nothing. <sup>27</sup>

In the various parts of Midrash Rabbah Numbers God is endowed with the virtue of modesty, as for example, God speaking to Moses indoors and privately in the Tent of Assembly -- in the manner that best exhibits חִנּוּט (modesty). From <sup>28</sup> this the writer infers: חִנּוּטוֹ כִּי הוּא הוּא. God also exhibits great forbearance and tolerance. There is the case of a king whose son associated with robbers. They were apprehended and his son was with them. The king could not execute the robbers because his son was in their number. "For my son's sake I shall acquit them." God was confronted with the same problem in regard to the Levites; He could not kill Korah and his group because they were mixed in with the <sup>29</sup> others who were righteous.

God's power and wisdom are seen readily in the following: a matrona asked R. Jose b. Halafta: Everyone admits that in six days God created the world. Since those six days what has He been doing? The answer: "He causes people to ascend ladders and descend ladders. So and so who was rich shall become poor, and vice versa." R. Berekiah added: "He arranges marriages and says: 'So and so shall marry so and so, and vice versa' and He causes them to dwell in houses." She

said to him: "I can pair off a thousand couples in one day." She then paired them off in marriage. When they came to their partners at night, there was strife among them, and they rose and beat each other. In the morning they went to her, one with his head bruised, the other with his hand bruised, etc. She told R. Jose what had happened, and with customary Jewish wit he answered: למה דא דא דא דא דא דא פ' דא דא דא דא דא דא. And finally, in the same vein, R. Jose has another encounter with this same matrona, who said to him: "Your God brings near to Himself whomsoever He pleases." (She tried to show that God plays favorites.) He brought her a basket of fruit and she carefully selected the best and ate. He said to her: "You know how to select, but God doesn't? The one whose actions He perceives to be good, him He chooses and brings near to Himself."<sup>30</sup>

Thus, from the above stories we derive a fairly good understanding of the attitude of the Midrashic writers towards God. True, they do personalize Him, apostrophize Him, endow Him with human virtues, and occasionally suggest human failings in Him; nevertheless, the underlying and predominant approach is one of love and respect and awe. And therein lies the greatness of these midrashim, greatness inasmuch as the simplest literary forms, unembellished by wordy dissertations, serve as the vehicles for conveying the spirit and the nature of God to the God-hungry people of many generations.

The Greek writers and philosophers speculated on what was God and what was good. The Jewish writers of the midrashic period, on the other hand, did not have to speculate. The maase was their main consideration. And through these maasiyoth, they conveyed to the Jewish masses a feeling for their religion -- a feeling that was not at all devoid of understanding, but rather buttressed and supported by the faith of reason. And it was this feeling that no doubt preserved their religion even to the present day.

#### Reward and Punishment

Essential to any religious creed is the idea of retribution. Incorporated in Numbers Rabbah is this idea, expressed in different ways throughout the entire book. One of the preachers asks: If a sinful person's soul is taken from him on account of sin, does it not follow that to one performing a mitzvah, his soul shall be granted to him. <sup>31</sup>  
Here is a clean-cut religious doctrine: there is no hazy pettifogging of an intellectual nature. Good is rewarded by good, evil is recompensed by evil.

The righteous are destined to go up to the mountains, the wicked are to be cast in the depths. To demonstrate this idea Hezekiah, son of R. Hiyya, said: "With what does one cover a cask? With a lid of earthenware: the material from which the cask is made. As the cask is of earthenware, so the lid covering it is of the same material." It is like-

wise with the wicked: like is attracted to like. Accordingly, the wicked descend to the netherworld, the righteous ascend to the heights.<sup>32</sup>

### Punishment of Wicked

In the Tanna debe Eliyahu Rabbah quoted in Numbers Rabbah, Elijah says: "When one magnifies the glory of heaven and minimizes his own glory, then both are magnified; if vice versa, then the glory of heaven remains the same, and his own glory is diminished." In further elaborating this ambivalent nature of retribution, it continues with the story of a man and his son who were standing together in the synagogue, and the son was uttering flippant remarks. When this was called to his attention, he said: "What can I do to him? He is only a child, let him enjoy himself." This went on for eight days. In the course of the next few years, the man and his wife and his son and his grandson, etc. -- altogether fifteen people -- died as a result of this incident.<sup>33</sup> Not only does this story indicate the way a person may suffer for minimizing the glory of heaven, but it definitely points out the responsibility of each Israelite for the other's conduct.

Not only death, but exile was a powerful punishment feared by the people. In commenting on II Kings 17.24 -- "And the king of Assyria carried Israel away...", the preacher tries to show that this befell the Ten Tribes because they were steeped in debauchery with married women,

cites Amos 6.4 as proof, and indicates that they befouled their beds with semen that was not theirs, for they were accoustomed to exchange their wives one with the other.<sup>34</sup>

Another characteristic of God's punishment is that He used a small instrument to effect it. The story of Titus who defiled the Holy of Holies and the Torah is repeated here. He died violently as a result of a tiny mosquito that entered his brain through his nostril. From this it is inferred that this is the way of God: He achieves His purpose by means of small things, especially against those who display pride towards Him, and towards the nation.<sup>35</sup>  
(Isaiah 7.18)

#### Reward of Righteous

Yet as gerrible is the punishment of the wicked, so wonderful is the reward of the righteous. In English literature, a Galahad is made to say: "My strength is the strength of ten because my heart is pure." The righteous in Israel are likewise girded in strength and clothed in invulnerability. Just as the palm produces dates and thorns -- and anyone trying to gather the dates is liable to be hurt by the thorns -- so it is with the righteous: anyone trifling with them or not guarding himself against them, discovers that their bite is the bite of the fox, their sting is the sting of the scorpion, their hiss is the hiss of the serpent,<sup>36</sup> and their words are like fiery coals.

The stately palm tree is used often to describe the righteous. Just as the palm tree throws its shade only in the distance (apparently because of the length of its naked trunk) so the reward of the righteous is far away -- as far as the olom habah.<sup>37</sup>

Implicit faith in the judgement of God, perfect knowledge that He would not deprive any individual of his reward is "proved" by the following instance: Solomon built the Temple, yet David had labored heart and soul in the promotion of that great project (Psalm 132.1ff). God did not deprive him of his reward. He associated David's name with the Temple, not Solomon's (Psalm 30.1)<sup>38</sup> It was faith of this sort that fortified the people in their religious belief.

Even more impressive is the reward of an ignoramus who rued the fact that he had never read Scriptures nor studied Mishnah. In the synagogue when the reader reached the Kedushah, he raised his voice over the multitude, crying: "Holy, holy holy!" They asked him why he raised his voice. He answered: "I never had the privilege of reading Scripture or of studying Mishnah, and now that I have the opportunity, shall I not raise my voice so that my mind can be at rest?" In the course of years he was rewarded by being made a general in Palestine in charge of all the castles. He built a city and was called coloni, a position affording<sup>39</sup> him many privileges.



In the t                      Prayer

In the theology of Judaism as revealed by the Midrash prayer was the powerful medium whereby the course of events could be changed. Only the preacher puts it a little differently. R. Simeon b. Lakish asks: "Why was the prayer of righteous men compared to a pitchfork? To inform you that just as the pitchfork turns the grain in the storehouse from one place to another, so the prayer of righteous men turns the attribute of cruelty into the attribute of mercy." Here is a visual, dynamic picture that explains the power of prayer better than any learned, philosophic dissertation on that subject.

The liturgy practiced in the synagogue is derived from the verse: "And the Lord spoke unto Moses and unto Aaron." It was found that there were eighteen such references in the Bible of God speaking to both of them together. This, accordingly, corresponds to the Eighteen Benedictions. Furthermore, the attempt is made to show how the three patriarchs instituted the custom of prayer three times a day. But it is Moses and Aaron who are credited with the institution of  
40  
the Eighteen Benedictions.

Merit of the Fathers

The concept of אבות ואמהות figures largely in the theology of Judaism. Numbers Rabbah illustrates the importance

of this doctrine in the following story: A king had a friend whom he promised a present if he would go with him. He went with him and died. The king said to the friend's son: "Although your father is dead, I will not go back on my promise ~~of a present~~ of a present I made to him. You come and take it." In this case the king is God and the friend is Abraham. Furthermore, God said to Moses: "Although it is to the patriarchs that I made a promise to give them the land and although they are dead -- I will not retract my promise" ....but "the word of our God shall stand forever!"<sup>41</sup>

### The Spiritual vs. the Material

Throughout the Midrash the spiritual is extolled over the material, the religious over the irreligious. Its writers realized the duality of the spiritual and the material and how they complement each other in religion and life. Yet they were conscious of the priority of the spiritual -- without neglecting the importance of the material. This remarkable understanding prevented Judaism from getting lop-sided in one direction or another. It preserved a delicate balance in its theological system, making it a warm, living religion for a warm, living people.

The extent to which the spiritual is extolled is shown in the following: Three gifts were created in the world:

wisdom, strength and wealth. If a man is privileged to possess one of them, he can claim as his own the most precious things in the world. If he is privileged to possess either of them, he has attained everything. When does this apply? When there are gifts of heaven and come through the force of the Torah, but the strength and wealth of mortals are as of naught. (Ecclesiastes 9.11; Jeremiah 9.22) These gifts are all right per se. But when they do not come from God they will ultimately fail a man. And in proof, the midrashist cites two wise men -- Ahitophel and Balaam, -- two strong men -- Sampson and Goliath, and two rich men -- Korah and Haman, all of whom, in spite of their talents and gifts, were destroyed from the world. It was exactly the same in the case of the children of Gad and Reuben, who were fabulously wealthy, but they were the first of the tribes to go into exile, because they loved their money more than they did their brethren, and accordingly settled outside of the land of Israel.

### C. The People

#### Nature of Israel

A considerable portion of Numbers Rabbah is vitally concerned with the people. It seeks to show Israel's distinctiveness in comparison with the other nations of the world. And yet, even though the Midrash does lean over backwards in portraying God's Chosen People, it is still conscious of the faults and shortcomings even of a chosen people. It shows in high relief the virtues and vices of Israel. From the midrashim in this book one derives a fairly accurate insight into the nature of the people and especially Israel.

The palm tree is employed once again as an example of the intrinsic worth and nature of Israel. As the palm tree yields juicy dates, nicolaos dates, and inferior dates as well as thorns, so it is with Israel: there are scholars among them and plain people (קלד'נד) and boorish people. Or another example: just as the palm tree bears fruit that will never enter the storehouse and fruit that will, so it is with Israel: having been in the wilderness, some of them entered the Promised Land and some did not. Objective in their approach, the preachers tried to show up the people for what they really were.

Yet more chauvenistic and partial is the following: as the pam tree contains no waste matter -- the dates are for food, the branches for the Succoth Hallel; the twigs for cov-

ering the top of the Succah, the bast for ropes, the leaves for sieves, the planed trucks for roofing houses -- so it is with Israel: they contain no worthless matter: Some are masters of Scripture; some of Mishnah, some of Haggadah; some devote themselves to the performance of pious deeds while others<sup>45</sup> devote themselves to charitable acts.

Other figures are employed to describe Israel. For example, the people are compared to stars -- when referring to their place in the hereafter; just as the stars sparkle in the heavens, so they will sparkle in the olom habah. Also, just as the stars show respect for each other, and peace reigns among them, so it is with the righteous -- they love each other; and<sup>46</sup> they do not quarrel one with the other.

More personal and more incisive is the story of a man who was skilled in three crafts: he was a goldsmith, a potter and a glazer. Anyone who loved him would call him "son of a goldsmith"; one who hated him would call him "son of a potter"; and one who neither loved nor hated him called him "son of a glazer". Thus, Moses who loved Israel compared them to stars (Deuteronomy 1.10); Balaam who hated them compared them to the dust (Numbers 23.10); and Hosea who neither loved them nor hat-<sup>47</sup>ed them compared them to the sand. (Hosea 2.1)

In spite of Balaam's hatred for Israel, it is pointed out in explanation of למה יפה לך ישראל that Balaam was impressed by the array of Israelites, tribe by tribe. And so he orates: "Who can touch these people? They know their ancestry and<sup>48</sup> their families." Does this indicate the beginning of Jewish pride in their superior family life? Especially when a heath-

en like Balaam observes it and comments so elegantly on it.

Besides their beautiful family life, the people who listened to all these sermons were complimented on the gifts that God presented to Israel. Three gifts made them merciful (Deuteronomy 13.18), bashful (Exodus 20.17), and charitable (Genesis 18.19).<sup>49</sup> As if these virtues were not enough, Israel is extolled and praised as a treasure -- a peculiar treasure -- in the eyes of God. The story is told of a man who possessed stocks of glass beads which he was accustomed to take to the market without bothering to count them. He had a stock of fine pearls, however, which he used to take up and count before taking out and counting them also when he put them back. So it was with God: "I did not state the number of the other nations of the world -- because they are of no value in my<sup>50</sup>sight." Perhaps this is the most outspoken, honest expression of chauvenism on the part of the preacher. Yet it must be said to the credit of the midrashists that it was seldom that they allowed themselves the luxury of such swelling of pride. The above poem is rather an extreme expression and cannot at all be considered typical.

### Community of Israel

Even in the days of the Midrash the need for forging unity in the community of Israel must have presented itself to the leaders in a very urgent manner. The story of the palace built upon boats is cited. As long as the boats are

joined together the palace that rests upon them stands. In the same way, "It is He that buildeth His upper chambers in heaven" (Amos 9.6) His throne is established on high when Israel form one band! Thus, the upper chambers are built <sup>51</sup> only when He hath founded his agudah (Band) on earth.

There is some slight inkling of another interpretation. That before heaven can be established, a solid basis of love and brotherhood -- heaven on earth -- must first be attained.

### Distinctiveness of Israel

The peculiar merit, the greater obligation, the distinctiveness of Israel are highlighted in the Midrash. One might find the reason for this is in the lowly position of Israel especially at the time of the writing of Midrash. But there is something more than that. It is the consciousness of a people of true distinctiveness. It is the awareness of a superior philosophy and way of life. It is the cognition on the part of an unusual people of its religious preeminence and spiritual superiority. A keen consciousness is exhibited, not an unhealthy self-consciousness, in the book, Numbers Rabbah.

No matter the vicissitudes of the Jew, he retained a mighty faith in God, trusted in Him, looked eagerly forward to the day of final reckoning and justification. This is illustrated by the parable of the lady who had an Ethiopian maid, and whose husband went to a country beyond the sea. All night the maid said to her mistress: "I am fairer than you and the king loves me more than you." The mistress answered: "When

morning comes, we shall know who is fairer and whom the king really loves!" In the same way, the nations of the world say to Israel: "Our deeds are commendable and God delights in us!" Accordingly, Isaiah said: "Let the morning come and we shall know in whom He delights" -- as it says, "The watchman said: 'The morning cometh and also night.'" (Isaiah 21.12) He meant: When the time of the World to Come comes, which is called morning, then we shall know in whom He delights.<sup>52</sup>

An inquiry into the distinctiveness of Israel is made in the comparison of Israel to dust and sand. As the dust of the earth is trodden down, so is Israel trodden down by the nations of the world, but on the other hand, just as dust is indispensable for agricultural growth, so Israel is indispensable for the existence of the world. And in the days of the Messiah Israel will be as sand; just as that substance spoils the teeth, so Israel in the future will spoil those nations persecuting them. This little sermon must have delighted the people who listened to it -- for, after all the indignities they had suffered, the very thought or promise of revenge was indeed sweet to them. Especially, when they were assured that anyone who robs and plunders them will have his teeth loosened, must they have felt some degree of comfort. This gritty people getting into the teeth of their oppressors were reassured that just as it is the nature of sand if it is put into fire to come out as glass, so in the future when Israel and all the nations go into Gehinnom (for judgement) Israel alone will come out unscathed. (Isaiah 41.13)<sup>53</sup>



Besides its role as grit in the teeth of the nations, Israel is proved indispensable in the existence of the other nations. The Jewish people are compared again to sand, and the other nations are compared to lime. "You need sand in lime for it to have solidity. So without Israel, the other nations could not survive."<sup>54</sup>

The superiority of Israel is emphasized in simpler manner, Israel is likened to the palm and cedar. Just as those trees are bigger than all other trees, so is Israel greater than all the nations. Esther 9.4 and II Samuel 5.10 are cited as proof.<sup>55</sup> Or, just as one climbs to the top of a palm and cedar, and if one does not watch himself, he will fall and die, so for all who come and join issue with Israel -- their end is to receive their due from Israel. The case of Sarah and Pharaoh is the case in point. (Genesis 12.17)<sup>56</sup> R. Joshua b. Levi said: Had the nations of the world realized what a boon was the Temple, they would have erected fortifications around Israel's sanctuary ~~of~~ to safeguard it. After this statement there is a discourse emphasizing the difference between Israel and the gentile. This difference is further expounded to show that Israel is dealt with more stringently, because of the greater obligation devolving upon them through their possession of Torah.<sup>57</sup> With greatness and leadership and superiority goes responsibility; and the writers of the Midrash were very cognizant of this truth.

Religious and ritualistic distinctiveness of Israel over all the other nations is apparent in the difference in their plowing (Deuteronomy 22.10), in their sowing (Leviticus 19.19),

in their reaping (Leviticus 19.19), in their sheaves (Deuteronomy 24.19), in their threshing (Leviticus 25.4), in their granaries (Exodus 22.28), in their shaving (Leviticus 21.5), and in their counting (Nu. 1.2)<sup>58</sup>. Even in their economic life, Israel was supposed to exhibit a marked superiority.

### Sinfulness of Israel

Throughout the Bible emphasis is laid on the sinfulness of Israel. It is therefore natural that certain sections of Numbers Rabbah should deal with this same subject. There is no effort to cover up shortcomings. Mingled with the passages extolling Israel are a few which stress the sins and transgressions of Israel. In explanation of Isaiah 17.11: "In the day of thy planting thou didst become debased", and the about-face of Israel in regard to the incident of the Golden Calf, R. Hama b. R. Hanina tells the story of a king who had a garden full of fine and excellent cabbage. He entered it one day at twilight. He said: "How lovely and excellent! Tomorrow morning I shall sell it...and shall fill my pockets with gold pieces." He came the next morning and<sup>59</sup> found that it had all gone to seed. An almost identical story is told in regard to a field of flax.

More grievous than Israel's sinfulness is Israel's unfaithfulness. Moses became heart-broken at their faithlessness. There is the parable of a king's daughter who, having adorned herself for the purpose of entering the bridal chamber...was discovered misconducting herself with a stranger,

and so her father and her relatives lost heart. It is the same with Israel. At the end of forty years they camped at the Jordan to cross over to the Land of Israel....and there they gave way to harlotry. The courage of Moses failed him as did that of the righteous men with him.<sup>60</sup>

### Love of Israel for Land

The affinity of Israel to the land of Israel is indicated by a few passages. These passages do not exemplify a strong political Zionist urge but rather a warm, sentimental love of the land, inspired by the Bible. For example: it sometimes happens that a man is himself handsome but his clothes are unbecoming, or he himself is ungainly while his clothes are becoming. In the case of Israel, however, they are suited for the land and the land is suited to them. Accordingly, it is written, "I have a good heritage" and in the same strain it says: "I put on righteousness and it clothed itself within me."<sup>61</sup> (Job 29.14)

As the people Israel is a distinctive people, so the land that is theirs is equally distinctive. The land is particularly suited to them. This is shown in the case of a king who married his men-servants to female-servants of another estate and vice versa. He reasoned: The men servants are mine and so are the women. It is far better that I should marry my men-servants to my female-servants, my own to my own! Similarly God said: The land is Mine. (Psalm 24.1 and Leviticus 25.23); Israel is also Mine. (Leviticus

25.25) Therefore it is much better that I should give My  
land as an inheritance to My servants." <sup>62</sup>

### Relation of Israel to God

The relation of God to Israel has been expressed in the poetry of the Song of Songs as the love of a man for a woman. In other parts of the Bible God is characterized as the father and Israel as the son, with mutual love existing between the two. These are personal, warm, familial relationships -- which are further expounded from out of the pages of the Bible into the pages of the Midrashic commentaries. Israel is precious to God (Deuteronomy 7.8), and inasmuch as the land of Israel is also precious to Him (Deuteronomy 11.12), God says, "I shall bring Israel who  
are precious to Me unto the Land that is precious to Me." <sup>63</sup>

The most intimate expression of God's love for Israel is bared in the exposition of R. Eleazar b. Jose. He said: Perhaps you have heard from your father an explanation of the text: "Even upon the crown wherewith his mother has crowned him"? The matter may be compared to a king who had an only daughter whom he loved inordinately. He went on loving her until he called her his sister. He went on loving her until he called her his mother. So the Holy One loved Israel and called them: "My sister, my love, my undefiled" (Song of Songs 5.2). He went on loving them until He called them His mother (Isaiah 51.4) (This is based upon a pun -- from אִלֵּל to אִלֵּל.) There is evidence of a desire to av-

old anthropomorphic references; however, as this instance might prove, there is no corresponding attempt to avoid expressing an intimacy with God bordering on the sexual.

The extent of God's love for Israel is again revealed in his numbering of the children of Israel according to the houses of their fathers. This is likened to a man who has a great treasure of which he is very proud and which he counts and counts many times to make sure of the number and to derive pleasure from each counting. It is the same with God.<sup>65</sup> This apparently accounts for the frequent census of the Israelites mentioned in the book of Numbers.

Or in a more reproachful mood, God shows Israel how much He loves them -- such love being all the more remarkable since Israel always seems to be provoking their Benefactor. God says: How long shall I bear with this evil congregation?" (Numbers 14.27) A man...buys a slave for himself in order that the slave may hold a lantern and give light for his master. I take the lantern and give light to you. Usually a man buys a slave so that the slave might precede him and prepare for him safe and well-supplied quarters. I prepared safe and well-supplied quarters for you. (Numbers 10.33) Usually a man buys a slave so that he may bake bread for him. But I did not do so. You are my servants, yet I bake bread for you in heaven."<sup>66</sup> (Psalm 78.25)

Just as in ordinary life a good act is construed very often as its opposite, and acts of love are possibly interpreted as acts of hatred, so the children of Israel said: "Because the Lord hated us." (Deuteronomy 1.27) but God said:

"I have loved you. (Malachi 1.2) Still Israel persisted in believing that the Lord hated him., The Israelites reasoned in the following manner: There is positive proof that He hates us. If a mortal king has two sons and possesses two fields -- one dependant on irrigation and the other on rain-- will not the king give the irrigated field to the son whom he loves, and the other to the one he hates? The land of Egypt is a land dependant on irrigation, the land of Canaan on rain. We were in the land of Egypt and he brought us here! <sup>67</sup>

Notwithstanding Israel's waywardness and backsliding, God does derive some degree of pleasure out of the people whom He has chosen as His own. The story is told of a rich man possession storehouses full of wine which turned into vinegar. He found only one barrel of good wine. Thus, God created seventy nations and only in Israel did He find pleasure. <sup>68</sup> Similar in content is the story of the king who had many granaries all of which contained much refuse and were full of rye grass. He was not particularly concerned about the quantity of the contents, He had one particular granary, however, which he knew to be an especially fine one. In regard to his one, he said: Ascertain how many kors, how many sacks, etc. it contains. This interest in the quantity of good produce is translated as God's loving concern <sup>for</sup> in the <sup>69</sup> numbers of the children of Israel.

### Israel's Longing for God

The relation of a people to its God must be reciprocal; otherwise it is not permanent and enduring. Simply, directly,

and pithily, that relation is expressed in the following comparison: As the heart of the palm tree shoots straight up, so is Israel's heart directed to their Father<sup>70</sup> in heaven. The palm tree is personified and imbued with emotions. There was once a palm tree in Hammethan which would bear no fruit. They grafted it and still it would bear no fruit. A palm gardener said: "She sees a palm in Jericho and longs for it." So they brought a part of it and grafted it and immediately it bore fruit. Similarly, the longing and hope of the righteous are for the Kodosh Boruch Hu!<sup>71</sup>

### Israel as Son

There is not too much elaboration on the part of the writers of Numbers Rabbah to show the father-son relation between God and Israel. Just as a father is obliged to circumcize his son, teach him Torah, redeem him, teach him the mitzvoth, marry him off; so God acts in a similarly<sup>72</sup> fatherly manner for Israel.

A very human account of this relationship is found in the explanation of Moses' disquietude over the repeated rebellious conduct of the people (Numbers 16.3). There was a king's son who had offended his father, and for whom the latter's friends had effected a reconciliation, once, twice, and three times. When he offended the fourth time, the king's friend lost courage. "How many times can I trouble the king?" he thought. It was the same with Moses. When Israel sinned once (Exodus 32.2) and twice (Numbers 11.1) and thrice (Numb-

ers 14.13) Moses had interceded for them. When the Morah affair broke out, Moses said: "How many times can I trouble God?" Consequently, when Moses heard about it, he fell on his face.<sup>73</sup>

### Israel's Unfaithfulness & God's Forgiveness

Very often when Israel is characterized as unfaithful to God, he is personified as a none too responsible wife or as an unreliable minor. There is the story in Numbers Rabbah about the king who was angry at his wife and swore that he would divorce her. However, he went to the market and came upon a goldsmith. He ordered jewelry for her. So it was with Hosea: he rebukes and rebukes Israel, indicating all along the possibility of a divorce, and then he finally says nice words to them. (Hosea 1.2f)<sup>74</sup>

Or, there is the story of a king who had a wife and used to say lovely things about her. וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמַע הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּחַדּוֹת הַבַּיִת "In truth, someone discovered her disreputable; her house, untidy; the beds, unmade. He said to her: "Would that you could hear your husband praise you in public! You are not deserving of such praise." Then he thought to himself: if the king lavishes such praise on her under such circumstances how much the more so if she were tidy. It was the same with Jeremiah.<sup>75</sup>

In one instance Israel is compared to a king's son, who is sent off to school. Now what is the height of a child's dereliction? Playing hooky, of course! When the father dis-



covered what his son had done, he scolded him. But then he said to him: "Wash your hands and come and eat with me!" So it was with Isaiah. He scolded his people: "אִלֶּכֶם פְּדוּ 'אֶתְכֶם מִיָּד הָרַב" <sup>76</sup> and then he says: "Wash you, make you clean."

In more serious vein is the story of a king who secured for his son a wife who possessed great beauty, "yichus", and wealth. The son wanted to go in and see her. For he did not believe his father. His father, placed in quite a predicament, became angry. Said he to himself: "What shall I do? If I tell him 'I will <sup>not</sup> show her to you' he will think she is ugly: that is why he does not show her. At last he said: "See her and you will know whether I lied to you. But because you did not have faith in me, I swear that you shall never see her in your own home, and that I will give her to your son!" Similarly, God told Israel that the land of Canaan was good, but they had no faith and said: "Let us send men before us that they may search the land for us." Said God: "If I will prevent them, they will say 'He doesn't show it to us because the land is no good. Better let them see it. However, they shall not one of them enter the land' <sup>77</sup> (Numbers 14.23), but I shall give it to their children."

### The Women

Of greater interest is the manner in which women are treated in Numbers Rabbah. The prevalent conception of woman throughout history -- the weaker sex, the inferior vessel -- characterizes for the most part those sections of

the book which deal with women. Perhaps if some women had written some of these midrashim, an altogether different approach to the problem would have been evident. But as is, the male in Israel seems to have exercised the prerogatives of his superior position in society. And the ensuing examples seem to bear out this point.

### Status of Women

The superiority of the male is best illustrated by the following bit of advise to a man. The Torah teaches you that you must be indulgent in your own home. If wine has been spilled, be indulgent. The same with oil. And also if your garment has been torn. But if you hear anything against your wife, rise like a man! Be a man --show your authority -- to her over whom you have the authority of a man.

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What could be a more positive and definite clue to the understanding of the position of woman in society?

But if the above seems much too severe, consider, then, the comment on 22 10 ("every male") in Numbers 3.15. The question is asked: Why "every male" and why does there not appear any mention of "every female"? And the answer is: because the glory of God springs from the males! And if that is too harsh on the weaker sex, then there is the story of the matrona, who asked the famed R. Eliezer a question which he did not answer, but commented rather: "Woman has no wisdom except at the distaff." Said Hyrkanus: "Because he

did not answer one thing from the Torah she deprived him of 300 kor of tithe annually. Said the other: "Let the words of the Torah be burnt rather than be entrusted to women."<sup>80</sup>

Likewise, the explanation of the verse: "May the Lord bless thee and keep thee." The first part -- the blessing -- refers to sons; the second part -- the guarding -- refers to women, because women were a constant source of anxiety.<sup>(81)</sup>

Most vitriolic in language is the description of the punishment of the inconstant woman. More draconic than the punishment meted out to any male and more lurid in detail is the account of the punishment of a sotah (as provided for in Numbers 5.18). She spread beautiful clothes on her head -- therefore the priest takes the cap from her head and puts it beneath the soles of her feet. She made up her face for him -- therefore her face turns pale. She painted her eyes for his sake -- therefore her eyes bulge. She plaited her hair for his sake -- therefore the priest dish-vels her hair. She beckons to him with his fingers -- and so her finger nails fall off. She puts on a fine girdle for his sake -- and so the priest brings a rope and ties it above her breasts. She extends her thigh to him -- and therefore her thigh falls away. She receives him on her womb -- and therefore her belly swells. She feeds him with the finest foods -- therefore her offspring is the food of cattle. She gives him choice wine in exquisite containers -- therefore the priest gives her to drink the water of bitterness in an earthen vessel. She acted in secrecy -- therefore God

who dwells in secret places on high formed a face (embryo)  
82  
to expose her. Thus, in strong language, the status of the sinful woman is set forth. It indicates on the part of the writer strong, almost personal, male bias. Perhaps it might be unfair to suspect him of being a misogynist.

### Merit of Women

To assume that woman is considered throughout the Book of Numbers Rabbah as a second-rate, degraded individual would be unfair. There are several references of a complimentary nature. For example, the coupling of two words וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁכַּח in Numbers 5.6 indicates that women are to be placed on the same footing as men for all sins and for  
83  
restitution of damages mentioned in the Torah. This is indicative of a fair attitude towards women. The weaker sex is also in possession of some merit. The people were supposed to have been redeemed because of the merit of the beautiful and pious women; women are deemed meritorious by dint of the fortuitous use of the word אִשָּׁה in Psalm 68.7,  
84  
which otherwise would have defied interpretation.

Even in the sin of the Golden Calf, the women were considered blameless since they did not participate with their husbands in that sin. They refused to break off their golden earrings. The same was true in the case of the spies and their evil report: the men were hesitant about entering the

land, but the women showed none of the vacillation and hesitation that was supposed to characterize their sex.<sup>85</sup> The highest compliment paid by the book to women is the forthright statement: For it is the way of the daughters of Israel to be neither noisy, nor haughty of gait, nor immoderate in laughter.<sup>86</sup>

### Proselytes

The attitude of Numbers Rabbah towards proselytes is liberal to a remarkable extent. Every opportunity seems to be afforded newcomers into the faith of Israel to adjust to their newly acquired beliefs, and no impediments are strewn before the,. Proselytes are considered as important and worthy as full-fledged Israelites.<sup>87</sup> As the olive tree yields olives for food, for drying and for oil; and while the oil it yields burns brighter than all other oils, and its leaves do not fall off either in summer season or rainy season, so do the sons of proselytes turn out well: some are masters of Scripture, some of Mishnah, some are business men, sages and men of understanding. Moreover,<sup>88</sup> they will possess seed that will endure forever. Not only are the proselytes accorded parity with the Israelites, but they are given the promise of even surpassing them.

Proselytes are compared to the righteous in the interpretation of Psalm 146.8f -- "The Lord loveth the righteous". To what can this be compared? To a king who had a flock

which used to go out into the field and come in at eventide. Once a stag came in with the flock. He associated and lived with the goats. The king was told about this incident. He felt a great deal of affection for him. He gave orders that the stag should have good pasturage, and that no one should beat him, etc. The servant asked him: "You possess so many flocks of different animals, and you never question us about them. Yet you give us instructions every day about this stag!" Said the king: "The flock have no choice; whether they want it or not, it is their nature to graze in the field all day and to sleep in the fold. It is the reverse with the stag." In a like manner the proselyte has left behind his family, his father's house, his people, and all the peoples of the world, and has chosen to come to us. Therefore, Deuteronomy 10.19 commands us to love the proselyte, and Exodus 23.9 and Leviticus 19.33f commands us not to oppress or persecute him.

Parity of the proselytes with the Israelites is also established by a comparison of identical term applying to each group. The term love applies to Israel in Malachi 1.2 and to the proselyte in Deuteronomy 10.18, etc.

### The Workingmen

There is comparatively little mention of the worker and his treatment in Numbers Rabbah. The one mention of

workersrisonconcerning the disabilities which they had incurred and the compensations they enjoyed. When Israel came out of Egypt, most of them had blemishes. Why? Because they used to work in clay and bricks, and they used to go up to the tops of buildings. Those who were engaged on buildings became maimed through climbing to the top of layers of stone; either the stone fell and cut off his hand or the beam or clay entered his eyes and he was blinded. On the day they came to the wilderness of Sinai, God said: Is it fit for the glory of the Torah that I should give it to a generation of maimed people? And if I wait until others take their place -- behold I should be delaying revelation." What did God do? He summoned the angels to come down near Israel and<sup>91</sup> heal them.

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### The Leaders

In the sections of Numbers Rabbah dealing with leadership Moses is taken as the prototype of all leaders, as the leader par excellence. In him are to be found the characteristics of the best leader -- his good points as well as his shortcomings. In the light of Biblical accounts of Moses, the Midrash does not portray him as a superman -- rather does it glorify him as a strong human being, gifted by God. At Sinai, out of six hundred thousand people, including the priests, Levites, and elders, only Moses was addressed by God! How fortunate was Moses! the book rhapsodically comments.<sup>92</sup>

Yet as fortunate was Moses, he was not destined to lead his people into the Promised Land because of personal shortcomings. However, he tries to exact from God a promise that Joshua as a leader will be treated better than he. This is likened to the case of a king who saw an orphan girl and wanted to marry her. He had to ask her seven times before she finally consented. After a time the king was angry with her and wanted to divorce her. Said she: "I did not ask to be married to you. It was you who asked me! Seeing that you have actually decided to divorce me and to take<sup>93</sup> another, do not do to this other as you did with me."

There is no glossing over the shortcomings of leaders in Numbers Rabbah. The reason for Moses' incurring divine wrath was that he had boasted to the people: "The cause that is too hard for you ye shall bring unto me, and I will hear it." (Deuteronomy 1.17) Because he uttered that statement, God diminished his mental powers. It is like the case of a money-changer who said to his apprentice: "If you are brought sela'im to exchange into small coins, exchange them, but if pearls come, bring them to me!" A bead of glass was brought to him and he took it to his master. His master, however, went to consult someone else. Thus it was with Moses when he brought the case of the daughters of Zelophedad to God.<sup>94</sup> (Numbers 27.7)

Most important is the description of the characteristics of real leaders. Moses again is hailed as the shining example of leaders. It points out that Moses gave his life



in pursuit of three things and they were called by his name: Justice, Torah and the Tabernacle. In regard to the latter, Moses was continually going around to the craftsmen to teach<sup>95</sup> them how to do the work, etc. This poem intimates that it is the nature of real leaders to be intensely concerned with the details of the work of their subordinates; the humblest of workers is not to be ignored or despised by the leader.

Joshua is singled out for special mention. He deserved being appointed as leader over all the people because "Joshua served you much and he showed you great honor. It was he who rose early in the morning, and remained late at night in your house of assembly; he used to arrange the benches and he used to spread the mats. Seeing that he has served you with all his might, he is worthy to serve Israel, for he shall not lose his reward."<sup>96</sup> Thus, leadership entails great service to the people one serves.

The onerous responsibility resting on the back of leaders is dramatically illustrated by the comment on Numbers 11.16, "Gather unto me (the elders)" Were there no elders from aforetime? Then why did God say to Moses: "Gather unto me seventy men (seemingly new one)" To convey a lesson. When Pharaoh said: "Come let us deal wisely with them" (Exodus 1.10,11), he took a basket and a trowel and set an example for the Hebrew slaves. On that day he set the pace -- and that day's production was set as the standard for ensuing days. When, on those subsequent days, the

quota was found deficient, the task masters smote the Hebrew officers. The officers allowed themselves to be smitten for the rest of the people and did not hand them over to The task masters, thinking: It is better to be smitten and it is better that the rest of the people should not be exhausted. For such self-sacrifice on their part, for such concern with the people, for such consideration, they were placed on a par with Moses and shared the leadership with him. From this you can infer that whoever sacrifices himself for the sake of Israel attains to glory, greatness and the Holy Spirit. <sup>97</sup> (Italics mine.)

#### D. Ethical Concepts

The entire book of Numbers Rabbah is chock full of ethical preachments, derived from Biblical injunctions and commandments, as well as from observation of the life of people. These ethical concepts are dramatized by the homilies and parables and the examples in much the same manner as the concepts of God, Torah and Israel. In the last analysis, the essential worth of preaching are the ethical values which the preacher wishes to convey. Hence the importance of this aspect of the Midrash.

#### What Is Considered Sinful?

The code of morality as preached in Numbers Rabbah does not differ much from the Biblical code. It is merely an elaboration of the Biblical code. For example, the preacher comments that when David saw the famine begin to make its appearance, he said to himself: "Rain does not descend because of the transgression of five things: For the transgression of those who serve idols; of those who practice immorality; of those who shed blood; of those who publicly subscribe to charity but do not pay up; of those who do not give their tithes in accordance with the regulations. (Verses of the Bible are cited for each of those offenses against the general weal.)<sup>98</sup>

Or, the reasons for leprousy, according to R. Judah the

Levite, son of R. Shalom are: cursing of the divine name; immorality; bloodshed; ascribing to one's fellow a fault that is not really in him; bauntiness; encroaching upon other people's domains; a lying tongue; theft; perjury; profanation of the name of heaven; idolatry.<sup>99</sup> From these lists one can readily discern that this listing of "sins" indicates a moral code more progressive than that of the Bible.

### Adultery

Of all the sins enumerated in the Bible and in the Midrash, the sin of adultery is given most prominence by the commentators. The reason for this is obvious. Obviously, people who used to listen to the sermons of their day were not much different from people today -- and the sensation<sup>1</sup> and sex-tinged caught the rapt attention of the people.

The Midrash comments on excursions on the sea of matrimony: "Many are those who go to sea, and the majority of them return. Few are those who go and do not return. So there are many who take wives. Most of them are successful but a few come to grief."<sup>100</sup> Adultery is not always construed in its strict legal sense by the rabbis/ They said: "When a woman is having intercourse with her husband and at the same time her heart is with another man whom she has seen on the road, there is no adultery greater than this; for it says, 'The wife that committeth adultery, taketh strangers<sup>101</sup> while under her husband.'" (Ezekiel 16.32)

As a whole the Israelites were considered especially moral and abstemious. They were redeemed, presumably, because of their having kept themselves away from immorality.<sup>102</sup> And in spite of the high moral tone of the entire people, adultery is presumed occasionally to have raised its ugly head.

Cited in Numbers Rabbah are a few instances dealing with the adulterer. "The adulterer thinks, 'No human being knows about me' because all his actions are only in the dark! 'Even God doesn't know.' He says, 'No eye shall see me --not even the heavenly eye.' " Yet the adulterer is discovered. The verse "עַל עֵצוֹ יִשְׁכַּח" (Job 24.15) indicates that God (who dwells in secret) will set the features of the adulterer on the offspring. For the adulterer and the adulteress desire that there should be no conception but that they should<sup>103</sup> merely gratify their lust.

The child born out of adultery figures largely in the homilies on that subject. "The features of the infant resemble those of the adulterer even though the mother may have conceived from her husband -- God transforms the infant's features into those of the adulterer."<sup>104</sup>

There is no doubt that the cardinal sin is adultery. An adulterer and an adulteress are said to transgress all of the Ten Commandments through their one transgression. Even the Sabbath Commandment is broken -- and R. Huna gives the reason: The wife of a priest has had illicit intercourse with a layman. The resultant child -- really illegitimate--

is presumably a priest. When he goes to perform the Sabbath<sup>105</sup> burnt offering in the Temple, he thereby profanes the Sabbath. There is no restitution for adultery or rectification of its consequences: "That which is crooked cannot be made straight."<sup>106</sup> (Ecclesiastes 1.15)

A double unfaithfulness is committed by the adulteress. As if the sin against her husband were not heinous enough, she is found to be unfaithful to his money, having brought<sup>107</sup> strangers (children not his own) to take money from him. For this unfaithfulness a woman was subjected to the test of sotah. In commenting on the passage in Numbers 5.17 concerning this matter, R. Meir expounds: "She (the sinful woman) had given him to drink wine out of exquisite cups and so the<sup>108</sup> priest gives her to drink the bitter water out of earthenware!"

An interesting homily showing the ability of God to ferret out the adulteress and to render punishment unto her is about two sisters who looked alike; the husband of one grew jealous of her and demanded she drink the sotah water in Jerusalem. Since she really had "sinned", she had her sister go in her stead. The sister was found to be clean. When she came home, her "harlot" sister embraced her and kissed her. As they kissed, the harlot smelled the bitter water of sotah<sup>109</sup> and instantly died!"

#### Miscellaneous

The rabbis showed the implications of not observing even the most minor ritual precept. For instance, they taught

that washing the hands before a meal is optional; after a meal it is obligatory. To illustrate their point they cite a story about an Israelite shop-keeper during the period of religious persecution (Hadrianic) who used to cook ritually clean meat as well as the flesh of swine -- so that he would not be suspected of being a Jew. A man came into his shop and did not wash his hands. He was therefore mistaken by the shop-keeper for an idolater -- hence, he received swine meat which he ate. When he complained about the price, he discovered that it was swine's flesh that he had eaten. Then his hair stood on edge, he fell into a fright, and said under his breath: "I am a Jew and you give me swine flesh". Said the shop-keeper: "A plague on you!" When I saw you eating without having first washed your hands and without a blessing I thought you were an idolater!" Hence the sages have taught: "The (neglect of) water before the meal led to his eating the flesh of swine; that of water after the meal killed his soul."<sup>110</sup>

### What Is Considered Virtuous?

Much of Numbers Rabbah deals with the negative aspects of morality. And yet the preacher has an opportunity to emphasize the positive features. An Halachic quotation is incorporated into one part of the book: "Our rabbis taught: Israel was redeemed from Egypt by merit of four acts: they did not change their names; they did not change their lang-

uage; they did not disclose their secrets; they did not break  
loose in unchastity."<sup>111</sup> In addition, observance of the comm-  
 andments and legal statutes and abstention from sin constit-  
 ute the main essentials of virtuous living.

### Humility

The humility of a great man before God is a virtue ex-  
 tolled to the highest by the writers of Numbers Rabbah. David  
 a mighty man in Israel is hailed as the outstanding example.  
 The Midrash comments: No man abased himself for the Command-  
 ments more than David. (Psalm 131.2) Just as the infant is  
 not ashamed to remain uncovered before its mother, so did  
 David expose his soul before God. Likewise, just as the  
 baby is not proud to suck at its mother's breast, so was his  
 soul within him, for he was not ashamed to learn Torah from  
 the least of Israel.<sup>112</sup>

Even the mountains are personified -- and possess within  
 themselves the vice of pride and the virtue of humility. Tabor  
 and Carmel proclaimed boastfully: "We are high and God will  
 give the Torah to us" , but in accordance with Proverb 29.23:  
 "He that is of a lowly spirit shall attain to honor", Sinai,  
 which humbled itself by saying, "I am low", was privileged to  
 be honored by having God's glory placed on it and having the  
 Torah given thereon.<sup>113</sup>

In discussing Proverb 25.6: "גומל ה' עוֹלָם וְיִשְׂרָאֵל יִגְדַּל בְּהִימָה"  
 the Midrashist says: "If a man should behave himself with hum-



ility in the presence of a mortal king, how much the more so before God?"<sup>114</sup> Thus, the ordinary Israelite is enjoined to display humility before his superiors, in the same manner as the priest, even when he swept the altar and removed the ashes, put on fine garments -- all of which proves that pride has no place with God.<sup>115</sup>

### Peace

No people of the world appreciated peace more than the Israelites. Their country, for many generations, was the cockpit of wars; they could appreciate the blessing of peace. Accordingly, their liturgy and their literature extols in lofty terms this concept. One section of the book is devoted to a eulogy of peace -- based on the priestly benediction and buttressed by Biblical verses.<sup>116</sup> An analogy by inference is derived from Job 25.2: "He maketh peace in His high places." "If peace is necessary in a place devoid of hatred and enmity,<sup>117</sup> how much the more so in a place where there is?"

The importance of sholom baith is also emphasized by the story concerning R. Meir who used to hold discourses in the synagogue every Friday evening. A certain woman was there who made it a habit to listen to him. On one occasion he spoke quite late. Her husband was angry with her and promised she would not enter the house until she spat in the face of the preacher. R. Meir saw it all by means of the Holy Spirit. He pretended to be suffering from pain in the eyes and made known that he was waiting for a charm-whisper-

ing woman. She "fell" for this deception and he made her spit seven times. Said he: "Go tell your husband: 'you bade me do it once; see, I have spat seven times!'" R. Meir's disciples were disturbed at this indignity. They would have whipped the man and forced him to become reconciled with his wife. Said he: "The dignity of Meir ought not be greater than that of his divine Master. If Scripture orders the Holy Name to be blotted out in water (in case of sotah -- Numbers 5.23) in order to bring peace between a man and his <sup>118</sup> wife, should not the dignity of Meir be of still less account?"

### Democracy

Strong elements of democracy find expression in various midrashim. The only real aristocracy recognized is the aristocracy of learning, of intellect. Such a statement as: "a sage takes precedence over a king of Israel -- for if a sage dies there is none to replace him. But if a king dies <sup>119</sup> anyone is fit for the kingship," testified to the strong democratic inclination of the midrashic preachers. Even "if a bastard be a scholar, he takes precedence over an ignorant high priest!" <sup>120</sup>

Discussing the text: "The Lord loveth the righteous; the Lord preserveth the proselytes." (Psalm 146.8f), the preacher shows a deep sympathy with the democratic ideal. He points out that if a man desires to be a priest he cannot be one; neither can he be a Levite (for his father was none of these). But if a man, even a Gentile, desires to be right-

eous, he can be so. Thus the Lord greatly loves the right-  
eous.<sup>121</sup> From this, the reader can infer that not only is wisdom a prerequisite condition for true aristocracy -- but righteousness as well.

The only true basis for democracy is respect for the individual. "God of the spirits of all flesh" (Numbers 27. 15f) is the jumping off point for a discussion of the individual. Ber. 58a provides the following Halachah in the proem: If a man sees great multitudes of people, he should say: "Blessed art Thou O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who knowest their innermost secrets." For as their faces are not like each other, so every individual has a temper-  
ament of his own."<sup>122</sup>

### Mutual Aid

One of the most advanced and progressive of ethical concepts is mutual aid. Therefore, it is somewhat surprising to find such a reference in Numbers Rabbah. The problem under consideration is that of Moab speaking to Midian (Numbers 22.4) which is unusual since both of them had been enemies of long standing. (Genesis 36.5) It is like the case of two dogs that were fighting with each other. A wolf attacked one of them. The other thought: If I do not come to his aid the wolf will kill him today and tomorrow he will attack me.<sup>123</sup> Had the preacher been living in post-Munich days, he could have used this homily to even great<sup>r</sup> advantage.

### E. The Psychology of the Preachers

From the style of writing in Numbers Rabbah and more particularly from the nature of the content of the material treated by the preachers, one can observe important clues to the thinking and psychology of the generations in which this book was written. Already we have learned their concept of God, Torah, and Israel, as well as their theological and ethical beliefs. Their attitudes towards women and proselytes, towards democracy and individuality have likewise been examined. And now we come finally to the phenomenon of their thinking -- which is basically a product of the medieval mind.

#### Their View of Natural Phenomena

The preacher evidently kept his finger on the pulse of mankind. Strange to say, in one instance his concept of the world is not typically medieval. It smacks of modern cosmogony. For instance, the question is asked: "How do we know that the sea is made in the shape of a dish, and the world is constructed like a ball?" (The globular nature of the earth was guessed at by the rabbis at a time when the prevailing concept was of the flatness of the earth.) R. Jonah said: Alexander of Macedonia, when he wished to ascend into the air, used to rise higher and higher until he saw the earth looking like a ball and the sea like a dish. On this account they depict him with a ball in his hands.

Why not let them depict him with a dish in his hands? Because he had no dominion over the sea. God, however, has dominion over both; He delivers on both land and sea.<sup>124</sup>

Exodus 9.24 refers to a mixture of hail and fire. The midrashic commentator was disturbed by this apparent contradiction. How was this mixture possible? In true medieval fashion -- of referring to the authority of Holy Writ, and not to the more empirical method of scientific observation -- R. Adda provides the answer. He compares this to a king who had two regiments who were fiercely at odds one with the other, but when a war broke out, they made peace with each other, and came forward to fight the battle of the king. So fire and hail are mutually, but when God commanded war on Egypt, "There was hail and fire flashing up amidst the hail."<sup>125</sup>

In the folk-lore of all peoples there are legends explaining the four cardinal directions. Jewish folk-lore is no exception to this rule. God is credited with having created four directions, with His favorite being the East, from whence goes forth light into the world. The West is where there are storehouses of snow and hail and from whence heat and cold go forth; the North is the source of darkness, while the South is the direction from whence dews and rains that bring blessings come.<sup>126</sup>

The concept of heaven took on a special aspect in the minds of the preachers. They conceived of a series of graduated paradises -- an idea of seven heavens. When Adam sinned, the Shechinah moved to the first sky; when Cain

sinned, it moved to the second sky; and so on, with the subsequent sins of the generations of Enosh, of the Flood, of the eddom, of the men of Sodom, and of the Egyptians. The wicked caused the Shechinah to depart upwards. Correspondingly, the righteous brought it down to earth. Step by step, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Levi, Kohath, Amram brought it finally from the seventh heaven to the first heaven. And it was Moses who brought the Shechinah down to earth. <sup>127</sup>

The same primitive attitude towards physiology prevailed. It is more picturesque and fanciful than scientific. Nevertheless, it deserves our studied consideration, for it gives us an insight into the mind of the writer. Intelligence was considered to be distributed in four parts of the body -- two parts in the reins, one in the mouth and one in the heart. The Bible "verifies" this through Job 38.36, Psalm 51.8, and Psalm 49.4 Thus, drunkenness is achieved when a man drinks one cup, for he loses one fourth of his intellect, etc. If he drinks three cups, he takes leave of three parts of his intellect and ~~he~~ gets confused and he talks at random. With a fourth cup he has no reason at all, <sup>128</sup> his mind is confused and his tongue is made dull.

More fanciful and imaginative is the medieval explanation of why the water of the eyes are salty, the fluid of the ears is greasy, the liquid of the nose foul, and the saliva of the mouth is sweet. The water of the eyes is salty, because, if a man would weep for the dead continually his eyes would soon be blinded. Owing to the fact that the water is salty, he stops and weeps no more. The fluid of

the ears is greasy, because, when a person hears bad news, if he would retain it in his ears, it would form a thick substance and he would die. Owing to the fact that it is greasy, he takes the news in one ear and lets it out the other. The liquid of the nose is foul, because, when a person inhales an evil odor, if it had not been for the foul fluid of the nose which arrests it, he would instantly die. The saliva of the mouth is sweet, because sometimes a man eats food that does not agree with him, and if the water of the mouth were not sweet, he would never recover.

### Personal Attitudes

One bias of one of the preachers is a scatological distaste for certain functions of the body. One example is the assumption that the children of Israel had no need of evacuating their bowels and that this "gift" was proof that God distinguished between them and the nations of the world. As if that natural function were something unholy or unbecoming, he infers further that the manna did not go through the ordinary process of digestion and assimilation, but merely dissolved into the limbs of the eaters. This great distinction put them in the category of God-like beings.

The preacher's attitude towards dancing is derived from the Biblical account of Michal taunting David for dancing before the Ark in the presence of the people like a comm-

oner. Concerning dancing, R. Abba b. Kahana was quite opinionated: A (professional) dancer is the lowest of the low, for there is none more neglectful of religious duties than he, and like him David danced before the Ark. Michal is then made to compare David unfavorably with her own family -- "All the members of my father's house were modest and saintly!"<sup>132</sup> These are but a few of the personal attitudes creeping into the pages of Numbers Rabbah. In opposition to these views, there are other discourses and homilies which indicate a more non-ascetic approach and an unusual joie de vivre.

### Political and Economic Views

Many hints as to the reaction of the preachers to the political and economic situation of their days are exposed in the writing of Numbers Rabbah. Most of them are oblique since any direct references or criticisms would have been unwise. Necessity dictated a cautious approach.

In the familiar interpretation of Exodus 32.16 concerning the pun on וְיָצַח which is to be read וְיָצַח, three rabbis commented on this pun. Freedom from what? The more theologically minded R. Nehemiah and Rabbi felt that it meant freedom from the Angel of Death, and from suffering. But the more politically minded R. Judah felt that it referred to freedom from foreign governments.<sup>133</sup>

The political oppression suffered by the Jews under



foreign governments was a subject for one preacher's sermon. He comforted the people as follows: Why does it say: "Envy not the man of violence! Because it is manifest that Israel is destined to be enslaved under Edom (Rome) and will be crushed and oppressed in their midst, and sometimes Israel will raise angry protests at this and say: "It is vain to serve God." (Malachi 3.14) Hence, God says: "Envy not the man of violence." (Envy not the peace enjoyed by Esau.)<sup>134</sup>  
Look to the end of the matter! Thus, it is evident that the preacher tried hard to counteract the hopelessness of his people, and their lack of faith in the ultimate triumph of their ideals in the face of temporary set-backs.

Some insight into the economic life of the people is given in the comment on Numbers 13.17 dealing with the itinerary of the spies. The instruction to go up first in the south (the worst part of the country) and then go up to the mountains is likened to the manner in which merchants show<sup>135</sup> their inferior wares first and afterwards display the best."

### Superstition

For some strange reason, the chief superstition of the Israelites was the fear of numbering and counting. Being counted or numbered very often entailed a misah meshunah. In one comment, God is supposed to have kept the Levites apart from the numbering, so that when those who are counted are to be slaughtered in the desert by the Angel of Death,<sup>136</sup> the Levites will be saved.

Belief in demons played its part in the psychology of the people and the preachers. The word keteb in Psalm 91.6 is interpreted as a demon. R. Abba b. Kahana said: Because he breaks into the daily study from the beginning of four hours of the day to the end of nine. (10AM to 3PM) R. Levi said: Because he robs pupils of their noonday lessons from the end of four hours to the beginning of nine. He holds sway neither in the shade nor in the sun, but between the shade and the sun." Thus, the mischievousness of the demon keteb is commented on, revealing a serious concern on the part of the rabbis and the preachers.<sup>136</sup>

### Derech Eretz

Etiquette, or the forms required by good breeding and social conventions, is considered seriously by the preachers. Their comments on the subject are valuable for our study, since we get to know what they considered should be done and should not be done.

The preacher deals with the passage, Numbers 29.35, relative to the eighth day, when the number of sacrifices is reduced. What was the reason for reducing the number of sacrifices each day? The Torah teaches you etiquette from the sacrifices. If a man puts up somewhere and is received by a friend, on the first day the host entertains him generously and gives him poultry to eat; on the second day, meat; on the third day, fish; on the fourth day, vegetables; and so on, until the fare is reduced to pulse on

the eighth day.<sup>137</sup> By inference, one arrives at the understanding that even the Kodosh Boruch Hu was a master of the intricate niceties of etiquette.

From Leviticus 18.6 the preacher developed another sermon on etiquette. The Sages inferred from this passage that a man should not seclude himself with a woman in an inn; not even with his sister and not even with his daughter and his mother-in-law, because of what people might say. A man should not converse with a woman in the market-place; not even with his wife, needless to say with any other woman, because of what people might say.... Keep away from unseemliness and what resembles unseemliness. For thus have the Sages said: Keep away from a small sin lest it lead you to a grievous one!<sup>138</sup> Thus we see that in formulating this rather harsh code of conduct, the rabbis considered the all important factor of "what people might say" -- the factor of public opinion.

Respect for old age is an integral part of a code of etiquette, and especially in a Jewish code of etiquette. The question is raised as to how close must one be to rise in the presence of an old man. And forthwith is presented a set of rules of conduct towards old men: "One should not stand in his habitual place; one should not contradict his statements; when one asks him a law, it must be in reverence; one must not be hasty in answering him nor break in on his conversation." And this set of rules is accompanied by a warning: He who shows no respect towards his teachers

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(old men) is deemed wicked before God; his learning slips his memory; his years are shortened." Furthermore, "one is duty-bound to give a teacher precedence over all other people permitting him to enter first and to depart first." R. Abba went one step further, in order not to inconvenience any young people. He said: "Whenever I saw a group of people I used to take a different route so as not to put them to any trouble; I mean, so they might not see me and stand up for me." <sup>139</sup> Finer sensibilities, the acme of good etiquette, are thus displayed by R. Abba.

This "something" that is superior to etiquette -- noblesse oblige -- is explained by R. Tanhum, son of R. Abba in his comment on Job 41.3: "Whoso hath anticipated Me, I will repay him." If one who has no property of his own practices charity and benevolence; if one who has no children pays fees to Bible and Mishnah teachers; if one who has no tallith makes tzitzith for others; if one who has no children circumcizes those of other people and prepares books and lends them to others -- of such a one God says: "This man has been quick to perform my commandments before I gave him the wherewithal to fulfill them. I will <sup>140</sup> repay him by giving him wealth and children..." Herein is stated the summa bonum of ethical conduct -- as such an interpretation gives us a clear view of the preacher's mind.

An unusual insight into the nature of the slanderer is derived from Numbers 13.26ff concerning the spies who began their speech recounting the glories of the Land -- "it floweth with milk and honey" -- but end up by saying -- "howbeit

the people that dwell in the land are fierce." The preacher comments that "such is the way of those who utter slander. They begin by speaking well and end up by speaking ill."<sup>141</sup>

Finally, there is one aspect of derech eretz that has always been a keystone of Jewish tradition. It is hospitality -- and especially hospitality to the scholar. R. Jose used to say: "If the ark which had not eaten nor drunk, was honored only for the two tablets that were in it, through which the house of Obed-Edom was to obtain blessing (I Chronicles 26.4f), how much the more so is it that God will recompense him who welcomes scholars and students with food and drink and good beds!"<sup>142</sup>

Such, then, is a brief insight into the minds of the scholars who produced Numbers Rabbah for the edification, the entertainment, and the moral instruction of their people.

## CONCLUSION

Much already has been written about the contents of the book, Numbers Rabbah. In the preceding chapters an attempt was made to acquaint the reader with the origins of the book, its historical antecedents, and its distinguishing characteristics. Furthermore, the exegetic methods and techniques of its writers are examined and re-examined for an understanding of the spirit that motivated its composition.

In Chapter III which comprises the bulk of this thesis, an examination of the contents is presented in the hope of conveying the wide diversity of material, the tremendous scope of religious experience, and the superior quality of spiritual inspiration to the reader. These various examinations have been made; the material has been analyzed and selected carefully. All this has been done in the light of a modern approach to a very old work. Only in this manner could we appreciate its great vitality and significance as a great Jewish book.

Let it be said that the attitude of your writer in studying Numbers Rabbah was a catholic one. With the saying of Terence in mind -- "nothing human is foreign to me!" -- this writer was pleasantly surprised by the great humanity that seemed to have coursed through the

veins of the preachers -- those great forerunners of the modern rabbis -- that humanity which found living expression in the collection of midrashim known as Midrash Rabbah, and especially Numbers Rabbah.

The book, Numbers Rabbah, remains a wonderful storehouse of vital, living human material, the stuff that great history and culture is made of. Any thesis such as this one must perforce be incomplete and partially successful, for it is most difficult to capture the essence of the book -- its basic character, its distinguishing characteristics, its inner soul. At times the experience is comparable to chasing the elusive Will o' the wisp. Nevertheless, out of trying to master the entire book comes a deep feeling of understanding of one great scholarly work -- albeit one small link in the mighty chain of Jewish literature and scholarship.

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\*This book was used as the underlying basis of this thesis, and all homilies quoted were from its pages.



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2. idem
3. Der Midrash Bemidbar Rabba, A. Wuensche, p. 142
4. Die Juedische Literatur, J. Winter and A. Wuensche, p. 510
5. Die gottesdienstlichen Vortraege der Juden, L. Zunz, p. 272
6. Introduction to the Talmud and the Midrash, H. Strack, p. 214
7. Soncino, op. cit., p. viii
8. Winter and Wuensche, op. cit., p. 510
9. idem
10. A History of Jewish Literature, M. Waxman, Vol. I, p. 138
11. Wuensche, op. cit., p. 142
12. Zunz, op. cit., p. 272
13. Soncino, op. cit., p. viii
14. idem
15. Jewish Encyclopedia, Vol. II, p. 669
- 15a. Zum Erklaerung des Midrasch Bemidbar Rabba Abschn. 6 in Festschrift z. 70 David Hoffmans, p. 293
16. Jewish Encyclopedia, Vol. II, p. 670; quoting Beitrage zur Juedischen Altertumskunde, p. 70
17. Jewish Encyclopedia, Vol. II, p. 671

### CHAPTER TWO

1. Studies in Jewish Preaching, I. Bettan, p. 15
2. Numbers Rabbah 20.21 and 21.2 contain good examples of this method
3. N. R. 11.4
4. " 18.9
5. " 11.3
6. " 2.20
7. " 2.7
8. " 12.1
9. " 3.3
10. " 14.13
11. " 12.10
12. " 9.2
13. " 1.4
14. Bettan, op. cit.
15. N. R. 3.1
16. " 7.3

17.	N. R.	7.1
18.	"	2.1
19.	"	13.5
20.	"	10.11,12
21.	"	5.1
22.	"	33.4
23.	"	10.21
24.	"	14.2
25.	"	9.25
26.	"	9.4
27.	"	9.1
28.	"	9.8
29.	"	13.11
30.	"	8.3
31.	"	13.5
32.	"	10.20
33.	"	9.14
34.	"	19.20
35.	"	19.3
36.	"	23.9
37.	"	3.1
38.	"	3.2
39.	"	3.4
40.	"	14.16
41.	"	2.11
42.	"	9.20
43.	"	3.8
44.	"	20.23
45.	"	9.2
46.	"	9.6

### CHAPTER THREE

1.	N. R.	12.11,21.16
2.	"	13.15
3.	"	14.11
4.	"	10.41
5.	"	4.14
6.	"	10.21
7.	"	12.14
8.	"	19.15
9.	"	14.13
10.	"	17.7
11.	"	15.15
12.	"	14.34
13.	"	14.34
14.	"	11.3
15.	"	11.3
16.	"	8.4

17.	N. R.	14.2
18.	"	20.26
19.	"	18.9, 5.3
20.	"	9.1
21.	"	12.4
22.	"	12.4
23.	"	15.1
24.	"	15.6
25.	"	15.4
26.	"	14.10
27.	"	13.19
28.	"	1.3
29.	"	5.6
30.	"	8.2
31.	"	5.5
32.	"	1.1
33.	"	4.21
34.	"	9.4
35.	"	18.8
36.	"	3.1
37.	"	3.1
38.	"	12.11
39.	"	4.21
40.	"	2.1
41.	"	16.3
42.	"	22.6
43.	"	3.1
44.	"	3.1
45.	"	3.1
46.	"	2.2
47.	"	2.7
48.	"	2.3
49.	"	8.4
50.	"	4.2
51.	"	15.14
52.	"	16.14
53.	"	2.2
54.	"	2.17
55.	"	3.1
56.	"	3.1
57.	"	1.3
58.	"	10.3
59.	"	7.4
60.	"	20.25
61.	"	23.5
62.	"	23.11
63.	"	23.7
64.	"	12.10
65.	"	2.8
66.	"	16.17
67.	"	17.6
68.	"	2.2
69.	"	4.1

### CHAPTER THREE (CONT.)

70.	N. R.	3.1	118.	N. R.	9.19
71.	"	3.1	119.	"	6.1
72.	"	17.1	120.	"	6.1
73.	"	18.5	121.	"	8.2
74.	"	2.5	122.	"	21.2
75.	"	2.15	123.	"	20.4
76.	"	2.15	124.	"	13.13
77.	"	14.6	125.	"	12.10
78.	"	9.2	126.	"	2.9
79.	"	3.6	127.	"	13.4
80.	"	9.44	128.	"	10.21
81.	"	11.3	129.	"	18.18
82.	"	9.23	130.	"	7.4
83.	"	8.5	131.	"	13.13
84.	"	3.4	132.	"	4.21
85.	"	21.11	133.	"	16.15
86.	"	99.8	134.	"	11.1
87.	"	8.1	135.	"	16.9
88.	"	8.10	136.	"	12.3
89.	"	8.2	137.	"	21.23
90.	"	8.2	138.	"	10.22
91.	"	7.1	139.	"	15.13
92.	"	1.6	140.	"	14.6
93.	"	21.16	141.	"	16.11
94.	"	21.12	142.	"	4.21
95.	"	12.11			
96.	"	21.15			
97.	"	15.16			
98.	"	8.4			
99.	"	7.5			
100.	"	9.2			
101.	"	9.43			
102.	"	9.12			
103.	"	9.1			
104.	"	9.1			
105.	"	9.8			
106.	"	9.3			
107.	"	9.5			
108.	"	9.12			
109.	"	9.5			
110.	"	20.20			
111.	"	20.21			
112.	"	4.21			
113.	"	13.5			
114.	"	4.21			
115.	"	4.21			
116.	"	11.16-20			
117.	"	11.18			